



VATICAN | Fundraising Event to Support the Restoration of the Nativity Church in Bethlehem

On the evening of Tuesday, the 11th of December 2018, at the Palazzo della Rovere in the Vatican, headquarters of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher, the **Bethlehem Development Foundation (BDF)**, held a fundraising charity event under the patronage of Cardinal Leonardo Sandri - Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, to present the status of the restoration works of the Nativity Church in Bethlehem.

In the historic frescoed rooms of the Palace, notes from the string quartet *Le Archesse* and the vocals of the soprano *Elisa Cenni* played alongside speeches and videos exhibiting the precious restoration works completed by the Palestinian Presidential Committee with the support of BDF and several international public and private donors. The event included an exhibition of before/after works completed for the restoration of the Nativity Church and historic artifacts from the Nativity Church where displayed. The event was sponsored by Mr. Samer S. Khoury - President of Consolidated Contractors Company Engineering and Construction and Chairman of the Board of Trustees for BDF.

Mr. Mazen Karam illustrated the past, present and future projects of BDF and its history. Mr. Ziad Al Bandak outlined the historical background of the restoration works being undertaken for the Nativity Church and the remaining efforts still to be completed and thanked the Holy See and Italy for their generous donations. He pointed to how the restoration works encompass a peace reconciliation plan amongst the Christian communities of the Status-Quo (Roman Catholic, Jerusalem Orthodox, and Armenian-apostolic). The 2019 future plan was presented, which includes the completion of all remaining restoration works at the Nativity Church including the frescoed columns, the mosaic floor, the consolidation of the Southern wall, the stone floors and the Grotto - all in less than ten years from the start of the feasibility study to finish.

Rev. Dr. Jamal Khader gave a brief reflection on how the Middle East, the Holy Land, Palestine and Israel are often spoken of as a place of tension and conflict. Rev. Dr. Khader then moved on to highlight a different reality, another aspect often forgotten by people, where a Government, in this case the Palestinian Authority in a predominantly Muslim country, administers and finances the restoration of a Church; something we don't hear too often in the Middle East. BDF took their responsibility in consolidating the Christian and Palestinian Heritage. The three Churches: the Catholic, Orthodox and Armenian collaborated and worked together with the Palestinian Authority for the restoration of the Church of the Nativity. A light of hope shines on the future of inter-Church relations. Here is a great example where

Churches, The Palestinian Authority, Foundation, Associations, countries and individuals work together in a great project.

As part of Rev. Dr. Khader's speech he mentions the following: *"Where else in the world can we say, here Jesus was born. Where else can we say, here the face of God was revealed... We look forward to the completion of the works, to inaugurate a unique jewel of beauty and holiness, the Church of Nativity, when you join this project, you will be part of the History of Palestine and Christianity ..."*

-Rev. Dr. Jamal Khader

His Eminence Cardinal Sandri's speech was inspired by the restoration of the mosaic tiles, His Eminence portrayed us -God's people, as one mosaic tile, with our own color and inclination. Each of us, when we are alone we are nothing. It is only when we are together that we are able to form a beautiful mosaic, such as those of the aisles and floors of the Nativity Church, hoping we can reach the Grotto. His Eminence spoke about the purpose of our meeting together, which was to understand and appreciate the developments of the restoration of the Church of the Nativity, a World Heritage Site and a spiritual treasure. His Eminence mentioned that it is our duty to express our gratitude to the three communities of the Status Quo - the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, the Armenian-Apostolic Patriarchate and the Custody of the Holy Land of the Franciscan Friars, who together remain the guardians of the Holy Place according to centuries-old traditions that must be respected:

"I have been told that in the course of restoration work in Bethlehem, on one of the walls of the nave a seventh angel in mosaic has come to light, forming with the other six a sort of procession towards the place commemorating the mystery of the birth of the Word made flesh. This can lead us to reflect on how the face of our ecclesial communities can also be covered by "incrustations" as a result of various problems and sins. Yet your work must unfailingly be guided by the certainty that, beneath material and moral incrustations, and the tears and bloodshed caused by war, violence and persecution, beneath this apparently impenetrable cover there is a radiant face like that of the angel in the mosaic. All of you, with your projects and your activities, are part of a "restoration" that will enable the face of the Church to reflect visibly the light of Christ the Word Incarnate. He is our peace, and he is knocking at the doors of our heart in the Middle East..." -His Eminence Cardinal Leonardo Sandri

His Eminence Cardinal Sandri concluded his speech by saying: *"May peace and light of Bethlehem be a message of peace for the Palestinian people and for the whole world, and time will soon come when the Psalm will be realized "justice and peace will kiss. Salam, Shalom, Peace, Peace! Shukran jazilan"*

The Ambassador of Palestine to the Holy See Issa Kassissieh, recalled the recent visit to His Holiness Pope Francis by President Mahmoud Abbas where the topic of the restoration works for the Church of Nativity's completion by 2019 were discussed. Additionally, he presented President Abbas's aspirations for 2019 which included dedicating the Christmas prayers to peace, justice, love and equality where together we pray for the blessing of the renovated Church of the Nativity creating a bridge with the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, where tradition holds the relics of the Holy Cradle of Our Lord.

Lastly, Mr. Samer S. Khoury - President of Consolidated Contractors Company Engineering and Construction and Chairman of the Board of Trustees for BDF concluded the event with messages of peace and love, he referred to Bethlehem as the birthplace of Christmas and of Christ, where he hopes of peace amongst all faiths, among Palestinians and Israelis will

prevail. Mr. Khoury also discussed his hopes of completing the restoration works of the Church of the Nativity by 2019 and completing his late father's wishes, Said T. Khoury, of restoring and maintaining Bethlehem for generations to come, the blessed city, chosen by God to be the birth place of his messenger of love, peace and tranquility.

In addition to the guests and benefactors, part of the list of attendees included H.E. Cardinal Edwin Frederick O'Brien, Fr. Ibrahim Faltas- President of the John Paul Foundation, Fr. Humam Khzouz, Fr. George Ayoub, Mons. Ionut Strejac- Official of the Section for Relations with States of the Secretariat of State, Rev. Kuriakose Cherupuzhathottathil- Official of the Eastern Dicastery, Mr. Giammarco Piacenti- representative of Piacenti spa restoration contractor from Prato, Dr. Mai Alkaileh- Ambassador of Palestine to Italy, Mr. Suheil Sabbagh- Trustee of BDF, Mr. Hani Abu Dayyeh- Director of BDF, Mr. George Salem- President, American Friends of BDF, Mr. John Schlageter- Executive Director of the Bethlehem University Foundation, Mr. Michel Roy- Secretary General of Caritas International, Dr. Yousef Salman- head of the Palestinian community in Rome and Mr. Massimo Malone- director of RAU Vaticano amongst others all attended the event with great success.

About the Bethlehem Development Foundation:

The Bethlehem Development Foundation was established by the late Said T. Khoury, as the implementation arm of the Bethlehem Development Initiative that aims to transform Bethlehem into a vibrant international spiritual destination with a sustainable economy and infrastructure to make it more accommodating to the needs of its current residents, pilgrims and tourists. To implement this vision, a group of International and Palestinian philanthropists established a non-governmental organization called the Bethlehem Development Foundation (BDF) in May 2012.

For more information or interviews, please contact:

Mr. Mazen Karam

CEO of Bethlehem Development Foundation

Mobile: +972.59.952.9925 **Email:** MKaram@bethlehemdevelopment.org