

HOLY LAND COMMISSARIAT

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To the people of the Church of Australia, on GOOD FRIDAY 2008 -

It comes as a surprise to many Australian Catholics to hear that there is a population of fervent Arab Catholics in Israel and the West Bank, whose ancestry dates back eight centuries. Out of a population of nine million living in Israel and in the occupied territories, there are only 160,000 indigenous Christians, or 2%. For a number of years, I have been in contact with one Micheal Zoughbi whose family has lived in Bethlehem for a very long time. Micheal wrote to me at Christmas in 2007:

“The situation of the Christians as the ‘living stones’ especially in Bethlehem is declining day by day due to the lack of work and the ongoing deprivation of their human rights and freedom. They see no hope for the present or for the future, for themselves or for their children and their children’s children. What bothers me most is that in the land where Christ was born there could be no Christians living here if the trend continues. There will be no Christians left to witness to His presence, and the Holy City will turn into a religious museum with no living and worshipping community to validate it. It is more important for us to preserve the ‘living stones’ than the stones themselves. Our main concern is to be able to remain here and continue to be witnesses of Jesus in the Holy Land.”

Retired Archbishop Francis Carroll of Canberra-Goulburn was quoted by *The Swag* after his visit to Israel. Referring to the suffering of Palestinians, he said: “We saw and heard evidence of systematic harassment, physical and psychological oppression, widespread unemployment, poverty, and economic deprivation, resulting directly or indirectly from Israeli military occupation of the West Bank”.

The Arab Catholics share all the deprivations of their fellow Palestinians. However, their deprivations are greater because of their tenacious Christian faith. They are caught between the Israelis who look upon them as Arab and Palestinian enemies while their more militant Muslim neighbours look upon them as pro-West traitors to the Islamic cause. The Arab Catholics are peacemakers, unlike the militant Muslims in this war-torn land.

Our mass media keep us up to date with reports on the latest political violence but provide no positive news about the contribution to the “Holy Land” of Christians, be they indigenous, expatriate, or people like us, overseas. Those who “stand tall” are the Franciscan friars who have not only maintained the Christian Holy Sites for eight hundred years but have provided care and ministry in the fields of health, education, housing and employment for the local Christians, the “living stones”! The Friars contribute to this invaluable apostolate together with many other religious Orders and Congregations, local bishops and diocesan priests, and laity.

The Church in the Holy Land depends hugely on the worldwide Good Friday Collection in order to survive financially and to maintain the stone fabric of over seventy Christian Holy Sites that commemorate the life of our Saviour. More importantly, the Collection supports the day to day life of the local Christians, our Arab Catholic brothers and sisters and their families. Those who work in the shrines and keep them open to the local Christians and to pilgrims must also be supported.

The Good Friday Collection in our Australian Church is vitally important to ensure the continuing presence of Christians in the Holy Land. The Church in Israel and the occupied territories desperately needs our generous financial support as well as our fervent prayers in order to survive in these perilous

times. Our generosity will give hope especially to the sorely tried Arab Catholics, whose continued presence will save the Holy Sites from becoming merely museums of the Christian faith.

The Franciscan Friars, as Custodians of the Holy Land and responsible for promoting the Good Friday Collection, and in the name of all who care for the Holy Sites in Israel and the occupied territories, thank you for your generous financial and prayerful support.

Signature

*Friar Carl Schafer OFM
Commissary of the Holy Land (Australia)*