



State of Palestine

The history of Palestine is the history of three monotheistic religions and of people who have lived in brotherhood over the years. The Palestinian people are a model of coexistence between all of its citizens, based on liberty, dignity and freedom.

Within this context, and despite the dwindling number of Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land, the Palestinian leadership has been determined to maintain the Christian heritage and to highlight the Christian dimension as an essential element in presenting the mosaic of the Holy Land, while strengthening the social fabric of the Palestinian people. The rehabilitation of the Nativity Church was always high on the agenda of the leadership. This church, that embraces the cradle of Christ and from which our Lord launched the teaching of Christianity 2000 years ago, was built in 326 AD. Since then, it has passed through challenging times as a result of natural disasters, invasions, or sabotage.

In our time, and as the Palestinian leadership went through the process of state-building, the renovation of the Church continued to be a priority on the agenda. Accordingly, and after reaching a common understanding with the church leaders in charge of the status quo, President Mahmoud Abbas issued a Presidential Decree in December 2008 to formulate the Presidential Committee for the restoration of the Church of the Nativity. The decree included the establishment of a fund to finance the restoration of the Church. After a journey of eleven years of diligent work and detailed planning and execution with our partners, the jewel of humanity, the Basilica of the Nativity will shine again on the eve of the midnight Holy Mass on 24 December, celebrating the birth of our Lord. The gift of the relic of the Holy Crib to Bethlehem will undoubtedly add to the joy of the believers celebrating Christmas in 2019.



THE
TREASURES
OF THE
NATIVITY
BETHLEHEM PALESTINE

HERITAGE OF HUMANITY

UNDER THE PATRONAGE OF HIS EMINENCE
CARDINAL PIETRO PAROLIN

VATICAN MUSEUMS - 6 December 2019

EMBASSY OF THE STATE OF PALESTINE TO THE HOLY SEE

THE CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY: HERITAGE OF HUMANITY

PROGRAMME

Welcoming statement – Dr. Khoulood Daibes, Palestinian Ambassador to the Republic of Germany and Member of the Presidential Committee for the Restoration of the Church of the Nativity;

“O Holy Night”, performed by Milad Fatouleh from Bethlehem, accompanied by Ornella Bartolozzi (harp), and Eugenio Falanga (violin);

Statement by Dr. Barbara Jatta, Director of the Vatican Museum;

Statement by H.E. Mr. Issa Kassissieh, Palestinian Ambassador to the Holy See and to the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, and member of the Presidential Committee for the Renovation of the Church of the Nativity;

Statement by H.E. Dr. Ramzi Khouri, Representative of HE President Mahmoud Abbas and President of the Higher Presidential Committee of Churches' Affairs in Palestine;

Statement by His Eminence Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State;

An honorary gift from the Church of the Nativity offered to Cardinal Pietro Parolin by H.E. Dr. Ramzi Khouri, and by H.E. Mr. Ziad Al-Bandak Chairman of the Presidential Committee for the Restoration of the Church of the Nativity. Followed by a photo opportunity with the delegation;

“You raise me up”, performed by Milad Fatouleh;

Statement by Giammarco Piacenti, CEO of Piacenti S.p.A. Restoration Firm;

Screening of the documentary entitled “Restaurare il Cielo”, produced by Piacenti S.p.A. Restoration Firm – 6.30 minutes;

Statement by Father Ibrahim Faltas, Custody of the Holy Land;

Screening of the documentary entitled “The Treasures of the Nativity”, produced by the Palestine Embassy to the Vatican – 7.20 minutes;

Gratitude message and closing remarks.

Attendees are cordially invited to a reception and gift ceremony to be held in the Gregoriano Profano Museum.

LA CHIESA DELLA NATIVITÀ: PATRIMONIO DELL'UMANITÀ

PROGRAMMA

Discorso di benvenuto – Dr. Khoulood Daibes, Ambasciatrice di Palestina presso la Repubblica Federale di Germania e Membro del Comitato Presidenziale per il Restauro della Chiesa della Natività;

“O Holy Night” eseguita da Milad Fatouleh da Betlemme, accompagnato da Ornella Bartolozzi (arpa), e Eugenio Falanga (violino);

Intervento della Dott.ssa Barbara Jatta, Direttrice dei Musei Vaticani;

Intervento di S.E. il Sig. Issa Kassissieh, Ambasciatore dello Stato di Palestina presso la Santa Sede e presso Il Sovrano Militare Ordine di Malta, e Membro del Comitato Presidenziale per il Rinnovo della Chiesa della Natività;

Intervento di Sua Eccellenza Dr. Ramzi Khouri, in rappresentanza di Sua Eccellenza il Presidente Mahmoud Abbas, e Presidente dell'Alto Comitato Presidenziale degli Affari delle Chiese in Palestina;

Intervento di Sua Eminenza il Cardinale Pietro Parolin, Segretario di Stato;

Premio onorario dalla Chiesa della Natività offerto a Sua Eminenza il Cardinale Pietro Parolin da Sua Eccellenza Dr. Ramzi Khouri e da Sua Eccellenza Sig. Ziad Al-Bandak, Presidente del Comitato Presidenziale per il Restauro della Chiesa della Natività. A seguire foto con la delegazione;

“You raise me up” eseguita da Milad Fatouleh;

Intervento di Giammarco Piacenti, CEO of Piacenti S.p.A. Centro Restauri;

Proiezione del documentario “Restaurare il Cielo”, prodotto da Piacenti S.p.A. Centro Restauri – 6.30 minuti;

Intervento di Padre Ibrahim Faltas, Custodia di Terra Santa;

Proiezione del documentario “The Treasures of the Nativity”, prodotto dall'Ambasciata della Palestina per la Santa Sede – 7.20 minuti;

Conclusione e ringraziamenti.

A seguire, tutti i partecipanti sono cordialmente invitati al ricevimento e alla consegna di omaggi nel Museo Gregoriano Profano.



Sua Eminenza

Sua Grazia

Eccellenze;

Signore e Signori;

Gentili Ospiti;

Siamo qui per celebrare il completamento della grande opera di restauro della Chiesa della Natività a Betlemme in Palestina.

Durante la celebrazione del periodo delle festività natalizie a Betlemme, con l'accensione dell'albero nella piazza della Mangiatoia e a Gerusalemme solo pochi giorni fa, e come prezioso dono per la Palestina, il Custode di Terra Santa Padre Francesco Patton ha fatto il suo solenne ingresso a Betlemme portando con sé delle reliquie della Sacra Grotta della Natività provenienti dalla Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore a Roma. Il frammento di legno antico è parte della mangiatoia, dove il Messaggero della Pace, nostro Signore Gesù Cristo, fu depresso appena nato.

La storia della Chiesa della Natività è la storia della nascita del re della pace, la nascita della Cristianità.

È dalla Terra Santa che il messaggio di Pace si è rivelato al mondo.

Oggi, vi presenteremo i lavori di rinnovamento di questo gioiello patrimonio dell'umanità iniziati nel Settembre 2013.

Vi condurremo attraverso le diverse fasi del restauro eseguite con i nostri partners italiani.

Siamo qui per vivere la spiritualità di questo luogo sacro e per riflettere sul lavoro compiuto dalla leadership palestinese e dai suoi partners teso a conservare e preservare questo gioiello per il mondo.

Di fatto, nessuna grande opera è stata attuata sulla Chiesa per secoli. Con il benestare delle tre Chiese, ovvero il Patriarcato Ortodosso, i Francescani e il Patriarcato Armeno, Sua Eccellenza il Presidente Mahmoud Abbas ha emesso un decreto per istituire un Comitato Presidenziale che si occupasse di questo progetto.

Quando i lavori hanno avuto inizio, nessuno immaginava che un mosaico così meraviglioso, celato sotto il tetto della Chiesa della Natività, potesse essere riportato alla luce. Come il documentario mostrerà tra pochi minuti, potrete vedere gli interventi specialistici e le tecniche utilizzate per preservare la chiesa e rivelare la presenza del mosaico, che racconta la storia della nascita di nostro Signore Gesù Cristo.

Il rinnovamento della Chiesa è una grande conquista conseguita con perizia dai nostri partners. Siamo grati per i contributi offerti da vari paesi per coprire i costi necessari e noi continueremo a compiere ogni sforzo finché la missione non sarà compiuta.

Permettetemi di dire a voce alta e con orgoglio che lo Stato di Palestina è uno dei maggiori contribuenti finanziari all'opera di restauro della Chiesa. È mio grande onore darvi il benvenuto ancora una volta a questo evento speciale che fa luce su uno dei luoghi più segreti della Cristianità, il luogo di nascita di nostro Signore Gesù Cristo.

Speriamo sinceramente che quest'impresa ci aiuti a far conseguire alla Palestina il potenziale necessario a diventare una delle mete internazionali più importanti, cosa che potrà realizzarsi in ultimo con la fine dell'occupazione israeliana.

Gloria a Dio nell'alto dei cieli e pace in terra agli uomini di buona volontà.

ISSA KASSISSIEH

Ambasciatore dello Stato della Palestina presso la Santa Sede

Special thanks to:

Event coordinator Mr. Taisir Masrieh Hasbun, CEO of "This Week in Palestine".
The Embassy team.

Your Eminence Cardinal Pietro Parolin,

Holy See's Secretary of State;

Esteemed Bishops;

Your Excellency Representatives of Government and Religious Organisations;

Ladies and Gentlemen;

We have come to you today from the land of Jesus Christ's birth and resurrection, the land where the fountain of love, freedom and peace, first overflowed. We stand before you vibrant with the spirit of the Prince of Peace, who by the will of God was born in the city of Bethlehem.

The city of Bethlehem is a source of inspiration, a cultural and spiritual city that radiates with the principles of human dignity. The only people on earth deprived of their basic human rights, Palestinians in Bethlehem and the Holy Land, still yearn for a dignified living. We are filled with hope and expectation that one day soon Bethlehem and Palestine will be free and human dignity will prevail, so that the Palestinians will have a normal life like all the peoples of the world. We convey to you from the land of Palestine the greetings of President Mahmoud Abbas and his best wishes to you, in supporting the freedom and human dignity of nations and disseminating peace and love among the peoples of the earth.

Once again Christmas spreads the seeds of joy from the land of Jesus Christ, and the visit of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Holy Land on 25 May 2014 is awake in our minds and hearts. It was a very special visit that His Holiness made soon after his election by the Council of Cardinals. His pilgrimage to the Holy Land, the cradle of the three monotheistic religions, was His first enterprise and this means a lot for the people of Palestine. We can still vividly recall how His Holiness stood before the Wall separating the city of Bethlehem that houses the birthplace of Jesus Christ, from the holy city of Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified, buried and resurrected. Both cities are a light to our hearts and a haven of salvation for the soul. We can still recall that visit with joy and cheerfulness. And the invocations and prayers of His Holiness to build bridges still reverberate in our ears and fill us with hope that the triumph of our Lord Jesus Christ over death will also be a beacon of hope for the triumph of justice and truth in the land of love and peace, and the realisation of fundamental human rights.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Based on the aforementioned, and in light of the hardships we have suffered and are still experiencing, and full of the hope and expectation that our people carry in their hearts, we extend our sincere gratitude and appreciation to Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Holy See's Secretary of State, for all his unwavering support to our just Palestinian cause.

Your Eminence Cardinal Parolin,

The crucial role your Excellency had in putting the final touches on the Comprehensive Agreement between the Holy See and the State of Palestine has had a deep impact in our hearts and our land. The agreement, signed in June 2015 and endorsed by His Holiness Pope Francis, recognises the State of Palestine. Your presence with us today as we celebrate the renovation of the mother of churches, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, demonstrates the sincere love and appreciation the Vatican has for Palestine and its people, and for the Church of the Nativity and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. God made a new covenant with His people, a covenant that is founded on redemption, love, and human dignity as the only way for salvation.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

A few days ago the city of Bethlehem and the rest of the world celebrated the lighting of the Christmas tree, marking the beginning of ecclesiastical, popular, and national Christmas celebrations and the advent of the Prince of Peace to the land that yearns for peace. But this year is unlike any other year because the Church of the Nativity, the bride of Bethlehem, is ready to wear its new costume. The Church's ancient mosaics and columns have been restored to their original glory for the first time in 600 years. The renovation would not have taken place had it not been for the tremendous efforts, generous donations, and spiritual support provided by the Holy See. On behalf of President Mahmoud Abbas, President of the State of Palestine, and from the bottom of the hearts of the Palestinian people in the Holy land and the diaspora, we humbly offer our deepest gratitude to His Holiness Pope Francis and the Holy See. We would also like to thank countries and friends from all over the world that have contributed to the accomplishment of this great feat.

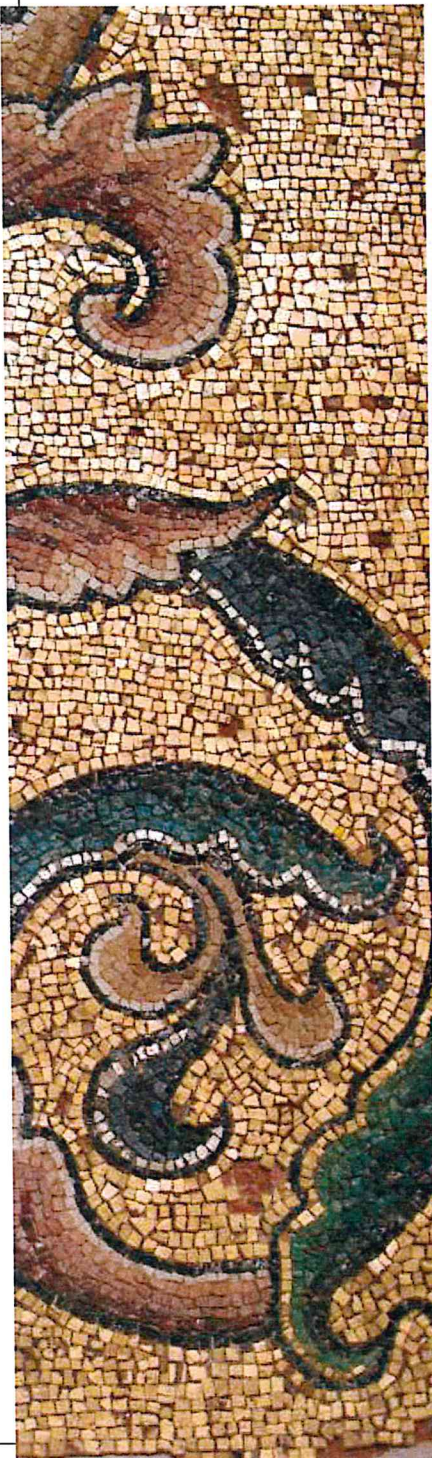
In that modest grotto two-thousand-and-nineteen years ago a new covenant came to light. We pray to God that our people will also witness a new covenant next year and, as the Church of the Nativity wears its new costume, our people will wear the costume of freedom, dignity, and independence in their homeland and independent State, with its East Jerusalem capital.

We would like to seize the opportunity provided by this brotherly and historic meeting to carry, on behalf of President Mahmoud Abbas, a special and personal invitation to His Holiness Pope Francis to visit Palestine next year to take part in the celebration of the occasion of the completion of the renovation works in the Church of the Nativity, the cradle of civilisation, humanity, and spiritual values. Let us celebrate together the launching of a new covenant, the essence of which is humanity.

Happy Christmas and a joyous New Year to all.

Dr. RAMZI KHOURY

Head of the Higher Presidential Committee of Churches Affairs in Palestine
General Manager of the Palestine National Fund



I represent a restoration workshop, I belong to the fourth generation since Vincenzo Piacenti, who founded it in 1875. Today the fifth generation is already in the business with my grandchildren. In the life of a conservator of cultural heritage, the dream is to meet an untouched work, never affected by restoration, full of history and sometimes not only earthly meaning: for us it was the dream of the Nativity!

We come from a family company with a Christian tradition and having had the opportunity to see and touch the place where our Creed originated did not leave our hearts indifferent.

Six years have passed since we met Bethlehem and we have become citizens in all respects. For those who have had the good fortune to live these years, I want to say that I am only remembering the moments, the smells, words that have marked so many moments. You can't tell everything, but in this meeting I want to share the "colour" and "harmony" of a beautiful, challenging, and full of responsibility but exciting project. And I want to share with you all, many of whom have walked together with Piacenti and the work group, the satisfaction that fills the heart with joy at the very thought of it.

We may seem crazy, but for us there is the "Bethlehem syndrome": a feeling, a state of mind that makes you miss the

city when you are not there and makes you taste the beauty and fullness when you walk on the stones of its streets, breathe the warm air, and fill the eyes with the colours of the sun that reflect on the white stones of the houses.

Birth, the moment of the coming of a God on earth, a unique event, announced and awaited by humanity: and it happened right there.

My life, like that of my brothers and that of our company, was overwhelmed and positively involved in this project. Fate, chance, or who knows what else has seen us, found us, and allowed us to live this adventure. An important chapter of the existence of each of us.

We are inside a game that we had neither foreseen nor intuited, but it allowed us to express all our knowledge, our know-how in the field of restoration, to help this Humanity Heritage to emerge from the danger of destruction. Until today it has been an intense work, full of sacrifice, sleepless nights, and hard days, to obtain a result that would mark the name of our company like those of the numerous sponsors and international supporters in history, and saved an important asset for millions of people. In our motto we say that, "the things you do well, try to do them even better", which spurs our operators to always improve. In this work, I have to say that all our men and women have worked with their brains, their hands, and above all with their hearts.

As president of Piacenti Spa, I thank them one by one for giving their all in this beautiful enterprise. And thanks also goes to the three Churches - the Greek Orthodox, the Latin Catholic and the Orthodox Armenian - and the Palestinian Presidential Committee that allowed the entire restoration project for the Nativity Church to start and continue successfully.

One last thing I want to share with you: my father Gianfranco, who died in 2015 on the night of December 31, could not see Bethlehem during his lifetime.

This work was the greatest gift we gave him and I know that he watches over us from up there.

Thanks Dad for everything you taught us: it served the Nativity.

GIAMMARCO PIACENTI

CEO of Piacenti S.p.A. Restoration Firm



A special thanks to Cardinal Parolin, and to the Vatican for welcoming us in this prestigious place, and for allowing us to share our strong bond with Bethlehem.

If today we are here to talk about Bethlehem and the important restoration work undertaken at the Church of the Nativity, it is thanks to the President of Palestine, Abu Mazen. His intuition, his support, and his sensitivity guaranteed the preservation of the holiest place in Christianity.

I would also like to thank the Palestinian Ambassador to the Vatican, Issa Kassisieh, for organising this event in honour of those who have taken part in the restoration of the Nativity. For giving to all of us the possibility to express our special gratitude to Pope Francis for the Vatican's beautiful gift: a relic of the Crib of the manger that will now return to its original place.

The Church of the Nativity is the oldest Christian place in the Holy Land and in the Middle East. Since its construction in A.D 333 by order of the Emperor Constantine, its history has been inextricably linked with the history of Bethlehem, as the heart and centre of the town. Throughout the centuries the town has suffered successive invasions and dominations, but the basilica has always been respected and protected.

At the beginning of the second Intifada, and for the first time, the basilica became the centre of dramatic events.

From 2 April to 10 May 2012, two hundred and forty Palestinians seeking protection from the Israeli army, took refuge inside the church. In those thirty-nine difficult days of mediation between the parties, we often feared that a massacre was inevitable. However, Pope John Paul II, whose words gave hope to all of us, never ceased to demonstrate the support of the Vatican to the Palestinian people. He stood by our side during those dramatic days, unceasingly appealing to deescalate the tense situation, thereby saving the church and hundreds of lives.

After the siege, the town of Bethlehem went through hard times due to the construction of the wall that separated it from Jerusalem. In the past years, however, we have seen a slow recovery and in 2012 the Church of the Nativity was declared a World Heritage Site.

In 2013, the restoration works started, bringing the basilica back to its true splendour. The restoration, initiated by the Palestinian Authority, saw the collaboration of all the communities attending to the church: the Greek Orthodox congregation, the Franciscans, and the Armenian community. These restoration works are important not only to Bethlehem, but to all humanity. They are a moving message of peace and respect for the Christian dignity and for the historic and religious significance of the Nativity to the whole world.

Today we Franciscans feel deeply moved by the renewed glory of the basilica and I would like to interpret this restoration journey by drawing attention to the mosaic of the Angels, who head towards the grotto where Jesus was born and from where a chant rises: "O Come, All Ye Faithful" (Venite Adoremus). The message given here is a message which puts the heart of the Christian faith right where everything started.

Saving the basilica with this restoration masterpiece, and enriching Bethlehem with the gift of the relic of Jesus' Crib, also means inviting every man, pilgrims and visitors alike, to rediscover the world of Christianity in its beauty and freedom.

The Custody of the Holy Land celebrates 800 years of the Franciscan presence in the Land of the Bible, and like Saint Francis we carry on our mission of dialogue and peace, reminding the world that Bethlehem is not just a town but a place of humanity. Saint Francis was guided in his mission by the "Star" which enlightens the path to follow, the path of Jesus born in Bethlehem.

I wish everyone in this special time of Advent, a good and safe journey to the native town of our Lord Jesus Christ.

FATHER IBRAHIM FALTAS

Custody of the Holy Land