

By H.E.  
Ambassador  
Issa Jamil  
Kassissieh



# Bethlehem Reborn

## The Wonders of the Nativity

**I**t all started in the Vatican Museums where the Embassy of the State of Palestine to the Holy See exhibited the cradle of Christianity, the birthplace of our Lord Jesus Christ. The exhibition *Bethlehem Reborn* shows the fruit of the rehabilitation works at the church – the beauty of the mosaics, the columns, and the various types of tiles and crafted wood. The most precious part of this exhibition, however, is the spiritual message of the Church of the Nativity that was delivered on December 6, 2019, in the presence of the Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin and Italian dignitaries, along with the accredited ambassadors to the Holy See. This special, one-day event was meant to be held during the Christmas season to remind us of the spiritual message that emanates from the birthplace of Jesus when new life and new hope arise.

There was no better moment or place in which to bring the newly refurbished Church of the Nativity than Vatican City and its prestigious museums. That unique event encouraged us to highlight the success of the church's works in other places in our small world, as this church is the jewel of humanity and the cradle of civilization and, in its essence, belongs to our human community. The painstaking rehabilitation process that continued over a period of more than ten years was entrusted to the state of Palestine by the Presidential Committee for the Rehabilitation of the Church of the Nativity and executed by Piacenti, in full coordination with the three churches in charge of the Status Quo (the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, and the Armenian Orthodox Patriarchate). President Mahmoud Abbas was determined to preserve Christian heritage and highlight the Christian dimension as an essential element of the Holy Land.

The Rimini meeting was the next destination to exhibit the discoveries of the new archeological excavations and restoration works while showing the different layers of the church from the time of the first Christians to the age of the Byzantine emperors who built the most magnificent basilicas of antiquity, to modern times, as the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem has been restored to its original beauty for the first time in 600 years. It goes without saying that there were enormous challenges in exhibiting the wonders of the church,

Actually, against all odds, the meeting took place from August 18 to 23 in Rimini, Italy. Visitors arrived at the exhibition in the thousands, and social media was the primary means through which the story of Jesus's birthplace was told. The main message of the *Bethlehem Reborn* exhibition is that life should overcome death and humans should always seek new life and new hope. Our aim is to keep in the minds and hearts of visitors the meaning of rebirth illustrated through the cradle of Christianity in the Holy Land.



The Church of the Nativity, photo by Matteo Piacenti.

COVID-19 being the most obvious among them. As Pope Francis put it while commenting on the pandemic: "We have realized that we are in the same boat... all of us called to row together."

An idea emerged from the experience of the pandemic and the ensuing travel restrictions: the Church of the Nativity could tour various cities and states, narrating the spiritual message of the mother of all



The Church of the Nativity, photo by Matteo Piacenti.

churches. This would remind the world that Bethlehem, the town of the Nativity, and Jerusalem, the city of the Resurrection, the centers of spirituality, are the bearers of a unique heritage and a must-see destination for millions of pilgrims, tourists, and visitors. In other words, until COVID-19 is defeated and tourism is back to normal, we intend to continue to tour the world with the exhibition *Bethlehem Reborn: The Wonders of the Nativity*. It offers the faithful an opportunity to live a moment of spiritual pilgrimage to the city of Bethlehem with its message of hope, justice, peace, tolerance, and joy.

As we approach the Christmas season, we hope to see *Bethlehem Reborn* be welcomed into several cities: Assisi in Italy, as the city that first depicted a nativity scene; Amsterdam, as the city with Saint Nicholas as its patron; Vienna, as the city that launched the first-ever "December Christmas Market" in 1294; Berlin, as the birthplace of the Christmas tree tradition started

by Martin Luther; and, Rovaniemi, Lapland, in Finland, as the official home town of Santa Claus.

We further envision *Bethlehem Reborn* to be part of the Christmas-choir festival program organized alongside the Christmas markets. Yes, COVID-19 and its ongoing implications are burdensome, but we should not surrender to the darkness. Christmas is the moment to assert that life and hope are stronger than disease and darkness. We should keep our eyes on the star which led the Magi to the grotto shortly after Jesus's birth. Here in Palestine we are filled with hope that the coming days will be better and that humanity will defeat the pandemic just as we believe that Palestinians will prevail and the occupation will be defeated, giving victory to justice and peace in the Holy Land.

*H.E. Issa Jamil Kassissieh is Ambassador of Palestine to the Holy See.*



The Church of the Nativity, photo by Alessandro Fichera.