

# From Bethlehem to the World



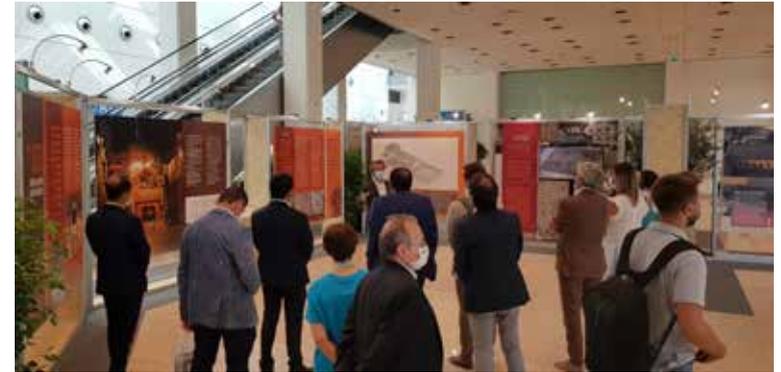
By Issa Kassissieh



NESCO's decision to remove the Church of the Nativity from its list of endangered sites was no doubt a significant step. It was taken in response to the rehabilitation that the church has undergone in the

last ten years, as the Presidential Committee for the Restoration of the Nativity Church and the three denominations in charge of the Status Quo engaged in joint efforts to carry out a major rehabilitation project in the church. As work was undertaken for the first time in decades, the long journey of reviving wall and floor mosaics, the columns, and woodworks, the cradle of Christianity, a place of admiration and spirituality, was restored to its original glory. An art exhibition held at the Vatican Museums in December 2019, entitled *Bethlehem Reborn: The Wonders of the Nativity*, presented with pride the various archeological discoveries made during this restoration. It was also a reminder that Palestine is the land of holiness and the cradle of Christianity.

■ The first and second of five sections of the exhibition in Meizlik Palace in Aquileia, northern Italy.



■ Giammarco Piacenti, CEO of Piacenti Group, explaining the various techniques used in the restoration process to a group of visitors at the exhibition in the Congress Palace in Rimini.

The COVID-19 pandemic has for two long years deprived pilgrims of visiting the Holy Land and prevented them from viewing the renovated Nativity Church and praying at its humble grotto where Jesus was born. Thus, the Presidential Committee for the Restoration of the Church of the Nativity – mandated by a presidential decree, with the blessing of the three churches (Orthodox, Roman Catholic – through the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, and Armenian) – considers it its duty to make the Church of the Nativity accessible to the faithful as a means to strengthen their sense of faith and hope. Hence, the committee has taken the exhibition to various

cities and capitals throughout the world. Today's advanced technology made possible its participation in the Rimini Exhibition in August 2020, in Italy, through a virtual tour of the exhibition that was created in Bethlehem. Even though the pandemic deprived us of being physically present, we were present virtually, and Bethlehem was connected to Rimini. Taisir Hasbun, the curator and general coordinator of the project, conducted the tour which took place in the halls of the Rimini Palace of Congress and was watched by participants in Palestine and Italy. We did not allow the pandemic to defeat us or prevent us from sharing the message of hope from the birthplace of Christianity.



■ President Mahmoud Abbas gifted His Holiness Pope Francis a specially designed catalogue of the *Bethlehem Reborn* exhibition, boxed in olive wood and crafted with Palestinian embroidery from Bethlehem.

A DVD was produced and distributed among the tour participants, documenting the stages of the restoration works that were carried out inside the church and implemented by Piacenti Spa, the Italian company in charge of the rehabilitation. The multimedia exhibition, through its website, Facebook page, and 3-D technology, ensured that all the exhibition's activities were covered.

On its spiritual journey, the exhibition was hosted for three months during the summer of 2021 by the Foundation and Municipality of Aquileia, a town in northern Italy famous for its archeological sites. The Latin Patriarch, His Beatitude Pierbattista Pizzaballa, attended the inauguration and gave his blessing in the presence of Italian dignitaries such as the mayor of the city, Mr. Emanuele Zorino, and the Palestinian ambassador to UNESCO, Mr. Mounir Anastas. With the peaceful message of the birthplace of Jesus, the art

exhibition is touring three towns in the Lombardy region (Desio, Muggiò, Abbiategrasso). Watching the eyes of the faithful, one can recognize the spiritual power that the Church of the Nativity holds. During the past twenty months of the pandemic, the exhibition has toured virtually in Milan, Ravenna, and Perugia through online presentations as well as through a specialized radio station. To date, more than 18,000 people have visited the exhibition in person and more than 40,000 virtually. Furthermore, a website was constructed to preserve the momentum and ensure that Bethlehem can be experienced through the glory of the Church of the Nativity: [www.bethlehemreborn.com](http://www.bethlehemreborn.com).



■ The Latin Patriarch, His Beatitude Pierbattista Pizzaballa, at the opening of the exhibition in Aquileia.

At the moment, all eyes are directed towards Cologne, Germany, where the exhibition will be installed in Saint Gertrud Church on December 7, within the enchanting atmosphere of the Christmas season. The exhibition will continue for one month, during which Christmas carols and Palestinian performances will be part of the program. It is important to note that Cologne and Bethlehem are celebrating 25 years of twinship.

The UNESCO hall will be an important venue in 2022 to exhibit the multimedia exhibition with all its components: panels, documentaries, videos, replicas, and sound-and-light effects. We go there to reflect the marvelous, complex process of restoration and renovation work done by the Presidential Committee. Yet, as His Holiness said: "All of you, with your projects and your activities, are part of a 'restoration'



■ Mr. Hani Abu Dayyeh, president of Bethlehem Development Foundation, a partner of the exhibition, and CEO Mr. Mazen Karam, addressing the audience in Aquileia in a video message from Manger Square in Bethlehem.



■ A group of visitors listening to the archeologist Alessandro Fichera discuss the recent discoveries in the Church of the Nativity.

that will enable the face of the Church to reflect visibly the light of Christ the Word Incarnate.”

The successful visits to different cities and capitals would not have been possible without various levels of support offered by our partners who assumed their social responsibility, including the (CCC) and its arm the Bethlehem Development Foundation (BDF), the Palestine Investment Fund, Bank of Palestine, and an individual private donor, Mr. Zahi Khouri. Their belief in the idea and message of the exhibition made it possible at a difficult time during the pandemic. The restorers of Piacenti Spa had the opportunity to live this unique experience together with us. In the end, Piacenti partnered with us to present the historical and archeological beauties of one of the most sacred Christian holy places.

As the culmination of these efforts and on the occasion of President Mahmoud Abbas’ visit to Vatican City, where he was given an audience with His Holiness Pope Francis on November 4, 2021, the president gifted the pope a specially designed catalogue of the *Bethlehem Reborn* exhibition. Boxed in olive wood and crafted with Palestinian embroidery

from Bethlehem, it shows the different parts of the church that have been restored to their original glory. President Abbas also offered a representation of the Grotto of the Nativity carved in amber and asked His Holiness to pray for the people of Palestine who are yearning for their freedom, dignity, and statehood.

*Bethlehem Reborn: The Wonders of the Nativity* art exhibition will continue its path, spreading the message of justice, peace, hope, and love from the Holy Land, Palestine. At the end of its journey around the world, and in partnership with the cities who hosted it, we hope to bring the exhibition back to its hometown to be exhibited permanently.

This is our gift to the world.

*H.E. Issa Jamil Kassissieh is the Ambassador of Palestine to the Holy See and the Sovereign Order of Malta.*

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