In Bethlehem: “The Holy Child Program”

A mission at the service of children with serious behavioral and emotional problems

The *Holy Child Program* was founded in 1995, by the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist and is one of the very few centers in the Bethlehem area serving children with severe behavioral and emotional problems in a therapeutic day treatment setting. Located in Beit Sahour (the place of the Shepherds’ Field), it was founded at the request of parents whose children were suffering from psychological distress, resulting from the first Intifada, or military incursion into the West Bank by Israeli forces. The Program currently serves 35 children and their families. It provides additional outreach programs in the West Bank, including being a training center for local universities and other agencies serving children and families in the region.

As a day treatment program, children attend regular academic classes, as well as participate in specialized therapeutic activities, including personal counselling, land and animal therapy, and those centered on the arts. The *Holy Child Program* uses the “Incredible Years Program”1 as a framework for these creative therapies, aiming to help each child achieve mastery of their psychological and behavioral problems, as well as teaching problem solving skills, increased emotional and social competence while reducing disruptive and aggressive behaviors. Parents are expected to participate in family meetings, mothers’ programs and educational activities designed to foster strong family foundations and encourage a systemic change for both the child and the family.

The Grand Master met with the children of the Holy Child Program in Bethlehem during his trip to the Holy Land in May 2022.

The teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and Franciscan spirituality provide the framework for the services offered by the *Holy Child Program*.

The students and staff – both Christian and Muslim – begin each day together in this Catholic milieu, with a time of prayer.

The program monitors its graduates, who show a very high success rate for integration back into normal or trade school settings, as well as long term success in becoming responsible members of the local community. Some of our graduates are working in olive wood shops, cooking at quality hotels in Jerusalem and studying abroad.

Continued Relationships with the Order of the Holy Sepulchre

The *Holy Child Program* has been blessed with the support of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem and owes its continued existence to several Lieutenancies in the United States.

Actual visits from pilgrim groups of Dames and Knights to the Holy Child Program encourage and sustain the children and staff, supporting their therapeutic process in ways that equal the monetary support so vital for continuity of the program. A vivid memory of such a visit includes a child being shown on a map where the visitors came from in relation to the Holy Land. The child exclaimed, “You came here to see me?”. The knowledge and feeling of being loved and thought of offers opportunities for reconciliation and healing in their everyday lives. The importance of this cannot be underestimated.

The Holy Child Program works alongside the Palestinian population experiencing severe hardship and in need of healing and peace.

The relationship of the Co-Foundress of the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, Mother Shaun Vergauwen, with the Former Grand Master, Cardinal O'Brien, and the works of the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist in Jerusalem, paved the way for this relationship between the Lieutenancies and the *Holy Child Program*.

Mother Shaun was recently inducted as a Religious Dame of the USA Eastern Lieutenancy. She accompanied the Grand Master Cardinal Filoni for his Solemn Entrance into the Holy Sepulchre this May 2022. The *Holy Child Program* was privileged to receive the Delegation for a brief but joyful visit. The Cardinal Grand Master engaged the children in conversation in English, to the surprise of the teachers. The Program dedicated the meeting and prayer room of the school to the Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, presenting Cardinal Filoni with an olivewood plaque, a copy of which will be displayed in the room marking the dedication. Mother Shaun also addressed the children and staff. The *Holy Child Program* owes its existence to the support of Mother Rosemae Pender and Mother Shaun, CoFoundresses of the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist. To have the presence of one who holds the founding vision of the *Holy Child Program* and that of the Cardinal Grand Master who holds the body that helps sustain that vision was an incredibly moving and memorable event for the Program.

As the *Holy Child Program* completes its 27th year of providing therapeutic healing and academic progress to the holy children of the Bethlehem region, it continues its capital campaign to purchase the building and land which currently houses the Program. This will provide continuity and greater security for the program, as well as the ability and freedom to expand the program to meet the needs of a population in need of healing and peace.

Sister Naomi Zimmermann

Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist

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1 The “Incredible Years Program” is a series of interdependent programs intended for parents, children and teachers based on more than 30 years of research. With the objective to prevent and treat young people’s behavioral problems and to simultaneously promote their social, emotional and academic competence.