



GRAND MAGISTERIUM – VATICAN
EQUESTRIAN ORDER OF
THE HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

Parish sisterhood and how a Lieutenancy can support the Holy Land in its diocese



The Nunes Family of St. Mary's Parish (Massachusetts, USA) with the gifts collected to be sent to the Holy Land for Our Lady of Fatima Parish in Beit Sahour.

About two years ago, St. Mary's Parish in Holliston, Massachusetts USA began planning its 150th Anniversary. Parishioners stressed that the anniversary should be more than a celebration of their past and wanted it to be an opportunity to reach out to others in new ways. The Parish priest of St. Mary's, Fr. Mark J. Coiro, proposed the idea of adopting a "sister parish" – a Catholic community of faith somewhere in the world with which they could enter into a relationship of mutual blessing and support.

The Northeastern USA Lieutenancy opens contacts in the Holy Land for St. Mary's Parish During a 2016 St. Mary's Parish Pilgrimage to the Holy Land led by Fr. Coiro, both he and the parishioners who took part were shocked at how difficult life is for the Christian minority there. The parish therefore settled on the Holy Land as a worthy "sister parish" prospect. Fr. Coiro, a member of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, reached out to Gerry Foley, the Lieutenant of the Northeastern USA Lieutenancy, to request assistance in identifying a parish in the Holy Land. Lieutenant Foley reviewed the request at the June 2019 meeting of the North American Lieutenancies and Cardinal O'Brien, then Gran Master, was very supportive of the idea.

Fr. Coiro was able to connect with Dr. Sami El Yousef, the Chief Executive Officer of the Latin Patriarchate, who identified Our Lady of Fatima in Beit Sahour as a possible sister Parish. In January 2020 St. Mary's Parish Council agreed to invite Our Lady of Fatima Parish, and in February 2020, Fr. Issa Hijazeen, the Pastor of Our Lady of Fatima, accepted the sister parish relationship proposal.

Both parishes began by supporting each other in prayer. Fr. Issa pledged that each First Friday the Evening Mass at Our Lady's would be offered for the parishioners at St. Mary's in Holliston. St. Mary's is reciprocating with a monthly First Friday Morning Mass for Our Lady's parishioners. At St. Mary's, all of the weekend Masses include an intercessory prayer: "For Father Issa and the people of our Sister Parish, Our Lady's in Beit Sahour." Every Wednesday night, at Adoration, Fr. Issa prays for the people of Holliston.

Covid-19 does not stop work on the project

A March 2020 St. Mary's Pilgrimage to the Holy Land was scheduled to include a visit and Mass with Fr. Issa at Our Lady's. St. Mary's parishioners donated over 200 new English language books, educational DVD's, and colored pencil sets for the pilgrims to carry with them for the children of the Patriarchate School in Beit Sahour. When queried, Father Issa had indicated that these items would be the most useful – especially the books as the schoolchildren spend one hour a day in English reading.

Unfortunately, the pilgrimage was postponed due to the Covid 19 Pandemic, so the gifts had to be shipped over instead. Additional school items will be collected and carried over when the pilgrimage can safely take place, hopefully in March of 2021. "This initiative brings to life great energy and enthusiasm within the St. Mary's Parish community towards Our Lady of Fatima in Beit Sahour," comments with joy Gerard Foley, Lieutenant of the Northeastern USA Lieutenancy. "This personal awareness and zeal generate greater interest in the Order among young and old at St. Mary's. It's such interest that helps the Lieutenancy to grow with appropriate candidates and to increase funding to support the Catholic Church and Christian presence in the Holy Land," he concludes.

Looking ahead

The two parishes are also exploring the possibility of a St. Mary's sponsored Scholarship to fully fund the tuition of a Beit Sahour student each year. They are also hopeful that St. Mary's Boy Scouts of America Troop 14 will be able to form connections with the Boy Scouts of Palestine Troop at Our Lady's Beit Sahour. It will be interesting for the boys to learn what scouting is like in another land and culture.

St. Mary's is currently in the process of setting up an information bulletin board in its Parish Center to help people learn about their new sister parish. It will include the history of Our Lady's in Beit Sahour, updates, information on the challenges of Christianity in the Holy Land, and ways to get involved.

Everyone looks forward to seeing how this new relationship between fellow Catholics in Holliston, Massachusetts and Beit Sahour evolves. The hope is that this will lead to personal friendships, spiritual enrichment, and better understanding of the lives of Catholics in different parts of the world. As this new experience successfully develops, the Northeastern USA Lieutenancy will encourage other parishes in the Lieutenancy to consider other sister parishes in the Holy Land.

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