



The Restoration of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem

An interview with
H.E. Ziad Al-Bandak

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Conducted by *Elias Rizek and Sani Meo*
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Since at least the second century AD, people have identified the location of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem as the place where Jesus Christ was born. One particular cave, now below the Church, is traditionally revered as the birthplace itself and marks both the beginnings of Christianity and one of the holiest places in Christendom. The original church of 339, the basilica of St Helena - remnants of which survive below ground - was built above the birthplace grotto and arranged so that its octagonal, eastern end surrounded the cave and allowed it to be viewed. The present Church of the Nativity was built by Emperor Justinian in 533 above the ruins of its predecessor that had been partially demolished during the Samaritan revolt. It is the oldest Christian church in daily use.

Today, the grotto is accessible via two flights of stairs located in the western end of the church. A silver star marks the spot where Jesus Christ was born, and a nearby manger is believed to be the place where Mary laid her child. Since early medieval times, the church has been more and more incorporated into a complex of other ecclesiastical buildings, most of which are monastic and overseen by members of the Greek Orthodox Church, the Custody of the Holy Land, and the Armenian Orthodox Church under the provisions of the Status Quo of the Holy Places, as established by the Treaty of Berlin in 1878.

Since its construction, the Church of the Nativity has undergone various changes and restorations. In 1160, a general restoration of the Church took place and between 1161 and 1169, a complete restoration of the wall mosaics was carried out by monk Ephraim. By

1461, the roof timbers were rotting and the structure was falling into ruin, especially above the choir of the church; thus in 1480, they were renewed with wood brought from Venice and lead given by King Edward IV of England. In 1671, the roof was repaired again; and the earthquake of 1834 necessitated immediate repairs.

The current restoration project aims to implement a comprehensive restoration to all the parts of the Church of the Nativity. It is implemented by the Palestinian Presidential Committee for the Restoration of the Church of the Nativity in agreement with the three Churches present: the Greek Orthodox Church, the Custody of the Holy Land, and the Armenian Orthodox Church. This interview with His Excellency Ziad Al-Bandak, the head of the Presidential Committee for the Restoration of the Church of the Nativity, gives insight into the different aspects of the project and was conducted in October 2015.

How was the Presidential Committee founded and what is its role in the restoration of the Church of the Nativity?



Artisans working on the restoration of the wall mosaics. Photo by Nada Atrash.



Restoration of the wall mosaics. Photo courtesy of the Presidential Committee for the Restoration of the Church of the Nativity. Photo courtesy of CCHP.

The Presidential Committee for the Restoration of the Church of the Nativity was founded in 2009 through a presidential decree by His Excellency President Mahmud Abbas in order to carry out a thorough restoration of the church according to modern, scientific principles of renovation. The committee has played a pivotal role in ensuring the approval of the Churches for this restoration endeavor and has coordinated with them the smooth implementation of all the work, aiming to assure that no disturbances are caused to the daily activities that take place inside the church and include prayers and visits of visitors and pilgrims. In addition to its responsibility for securing and managing the funds, the committee is responsible for the overall management of the project and follows up with the consultants and contractors on a daily basis.

It is worth noting here that, while the intention to renovate was taken during the preparation to celebrate the year 2000 in Palestine, a number of obstacles had to be overcome before work finally was able to start in September 2013. Until 2009, these obstacles were mainly related to the lack of a body able to manage the

restoration work and to coordinate with the various stakeholders, among them the custodians of the church, as well as the lack of a comprehensive program for the execution of the project. But the committee has gained the trust of the custodians of the site and the restoration program we presented eventually convinced them to give their approval and blessing.

How did the Presidential Committee prepare the restoration plan and what was its main purpose?

An international bid for this project, as a joint venture with a local Palestinian firm, was posted and from eleven bids a team of six international institutions, experts in the field, was selected based on technical and financial criteria. Next, a comprehensive study was undertaken to conduct an assessment of the various parts of the church. The decision to include a local firm was taken to involve local experts, allow for the exchange of knowledge between these and the international experts, and to ensure a smooth implementation of the works. The same considerations were applied to the selection of the contractor.

It is worth noting here that Consolidated Contractors Company (CCC)

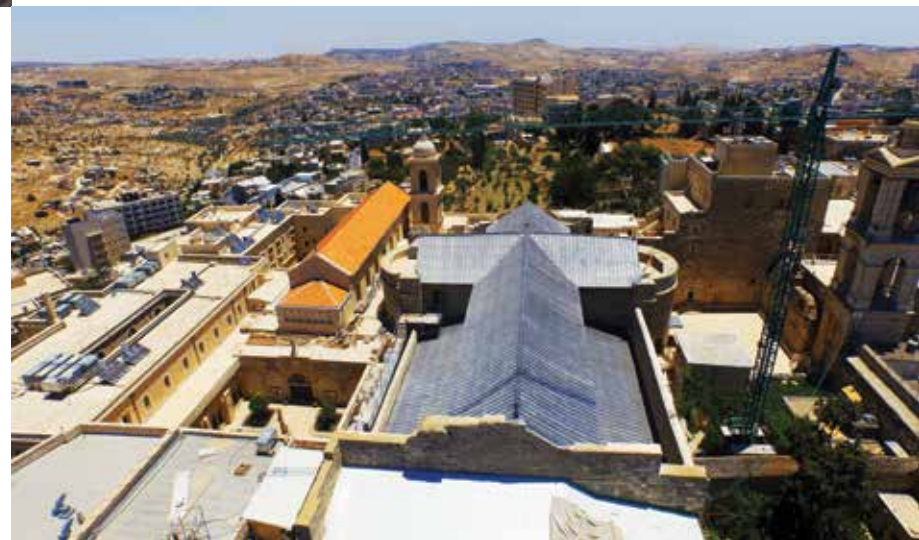
volunteered to assess the eleven bids in order to recommend the winning bid to the Presidential Committee. CCC has also volunteered to prepare the tender documents for the implementation of the first phase of the restoration works. It is further worth noting that during this phase, the custodians of the church have played an important role by facilitating the work of the various teams and granting them access to the church during night hours, after the doors were closed.

The assessment phase of the restoration program has revealed that while the church is stable, the infiltration

restoration of the roof and the windows.

Can you brief us on the restoration plan and on the tasks that have been accomplished?

When we were approaching the last stages of the first phase, we took the decision to proceed with all the tasks that required scaffolding inside the church and to let the second and third phase of the project overlap, since both phases require the use of a scaffold. This decision was made in order to save both, time and the extra cost required for removing and installing a scaffold, also considering the additional disturbance for both the custodians of



The newly restored roof of the Church of the Nativity. Photo by Tarek Khawaja.

of water through the dangerously deteriorating roof and windows was severely affecting the mosaics, wall paintings, and wall plaster of the church, causing irreversible damage to these elements. Moreover, the narthex that had been severely damaged due to the earthquakes of 1834 and 1926 was in dire need of repair. The assessment also indicated those restoration works that need to be implemented separately, indicated a cost estimate for each action, and listed the priorities in the implementation of the repair work. As a result, it was decided to start with the

the church and visitors. An exception to proceed with the same contractor was obtained from the Palestinian president.

The second phase of the project has been dedicated to consolidating the structure of the narthex. A temporary wooden scaffold had been installed during the British mandate era to prevent mortar from falling on people while entering the church. This phase has also included the restoration of the wooden door that separates the narthex from the church and dates back to the Crusader period: it was donated by Constantine,

Interior view of the Church of the Nativity in 2012.
Photo by Philip Hibi. CCHP Archives.



King of Armenia, in 1227. The carved panel shows an arabesque display of floral engravings, four crosses, and an interesting inscription in both Arabic and Armenian. The Arabic inscription reads: "This door was finished with the help of God (be He exalted) in the days of our lord the Sultan Malik al-Mu'azzam in the month of *muharram* in the year 624H." And the Armenian inscription reads: "The door of the Blessed Mother of God was made in the year 676 by the hands of Father Abraham and Father Arakel in the time of Hethum son of Constantine, King of Armenia. God have mercy on their souls."

The third phase has included the restoration of the parts of the external walls that require the use of a scaffold, restoration of the internal wall plaster, and the restoration of the mosaics that cover the upper walls of the aisle. The restoration of the wall mosaics has revealed that parts of the mosaic had been hidden under the plaster. While all of the restoration tasks are important, most notable to the visitors of the church is the wall mosaic, a truly amazing work of art that dates back to the thirteenth century. It has been cleaned and is now shining in gold and bright colours.



The recently restored, wood-carved door of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Photo by Nada Atrash.

If this amount of work has been accomplished, what else needs to be done?

There is much to be done. The coming restoration phases include the restoration of the architrave, the columns and their capitals, the icon paintings on the columns of the church, and the stone floors and floor mosaic. Systems for lighting, microclimate adjustment, and fire alarm need to be installed inside the church. The Churches shall carry out the restoration of the grotto, the holiest place in the Church of Nativity, in accordance with the Status Quo and in coordination with the management team of the presidential committee.

The restoration must cost millions of dollars; how did you manage to secure the funds?

The restoration of the Church of the Nativity is a Palestinian project that was initiated by the State of Palestine. In order to stress its dedication and sincerity, the State of Palestine contributed the first million dollars to start the work. In fact, the State of Palestine is the main funder of this project up to this date, which is a sign both of its seriousness towards the project and its strong will to ensure the project's completion and thus has encouraged several states, institutions, and individuals to also contribute to the project. But the renovation of the Church of Nativity requires a large amount of additional resources in order to complete all the works necessary and all members of the presidential committee are working tirelessly to secure the required amount. It might seem too risky to start work before securing the necessary funds, but we not only believe that this is a holy site, we are also strongly convinced of the importance of the work we are doing, and thus we know that things will definitely find a way to work out.

How is the project expected to contribute to Bethlehem?

For most of the last 1,500 years,



Project Contributors

Sorted in chronological order of commitment to contribute:

1. The State of Palestine
2. Republic of Hungary
3. Mr. Saeed Tawfiq Khoury (CCC)
4. Palestine Investment Bank
5. Republic of France
6. Russian Federation
7. The Holy See- Vatican
8. Palestinian Investment Fund
9. Palestinian Commercial Bank
10. Bank of Palestine
11. Republic of Greece
12. Mr. Alberto Kassis - Chile
13. Mr. Jose' Said - Chile
14. Russian Orthodox Patriarchate
15. Kingdom of Spain
16. Pontifical Mission
17. Armenian Orthodox Patriarchate
18. Republic of Italy
19. Federal Republic of Germany
20. Kingdom of Morocco
21. Republic of Poland
22. Patel Group – Palestine
23. Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency – TIKA
24. Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development

All project contracts and disbursement of funds are audited by Deloitte & Touche.

** the list of contributors was updated in September, 2015*



Pilgrims inside the church in 2012. Photo by Alessio Romenzi, CCHP Archives.

Bethlehem and the Church of the Nativity have been a destination for pilgrims, they are a focus of Christian belief and worship, and together with Jerusalem they are at the heart of the Christian world. The restoration in general, and especially that of features that are obvious to the eyes of visitors such as the wall mosaics and the icon paintings on the columns, are expected to attract visitors interested in art and cultural heritage, besides delighting the pilgrims. The work implemented to preserve and beautify the Church of Nativity, undertaken by the State of Palestine and showing its tireless efforts, send a clear message to the world that we Palestinians appreciate our cultural heritage, seek its protection, and extend our efforts to present it to the whole world in its best shape. We intend to emphatically communicate to the world that the birthplace of Jesus Christ and we as its inhabitants are seeking peace and justice - and we are showing this yearning through the restoration of the birthplace of the King of Peace.

What are the challenges that you faced during the execution of the project?

Compared to other projects of similar size, we consider the challenges that we faced and still are facing as minor, and they are met with the willingness of our team to find solutions and with our strong belief that the spirituality of this place shall help us overcome these challenges. The majority of them are related to additional tasks that surface as necessary during the process and progress of restoration. For example, during the assessment phase, we could

not excavate items that were hidden under the floors or inside the walls and accordingly, various issues came up unexpectedly, which has raised the cost of the project. But our committee members are working tirelessly to secure the funds required to let us proceed, and the results that we have accomplished so far further help us in achieving this goal.

During September of this year, we held a fund-raising activity at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. Upon completion of the ongoing second and third phases of the project, we are planning to hold an inauguration event with our various stakeholders, contributors, and potential contributors in order to show them the outstanding results of our efforts and labor that have been undertaken and implemented according to highest international standards. It is hoped that this event will encourage everybody to contribute to the remaining work. I would also like to add that we are reporting to UNESCO's World Heritage Centre on our endeavor and that our results are being appreciated internationally.

What do the restoration efforts mean to Palestinians?

The inscription of the Church of the Nativity and of the Pilgrimage Route on UNESCO's World Heritage list has represented an important step on the path of Palestinian state building; but most importantly, the efforts to achieve this inscription represent our recognition of the importance of our cultural heritage to humanity. The restoration of the Church of the


Nativity stresses our appreciation of this heritage. Moreover, it reflects our strong belief that Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and all Palestinian land are symbols of coexistence and tolerance.

Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem, he is Palestinian, and Christians are an important part in the Palestinian mosaic. Our willingness to follow through with the restoration until its full completion reflects the commitment of the State of Palestine to protect this human, religious, and cultural mosaic. We are restoring one of the oldest churches that, moreover, has been in continuous use since its construction; this church is part of our history and cultural heritage and thus a source of pride for all Palestinians. Several challenges face the Christian community in Bethlehem, not the least the latest start of the Israeli occupation authorities to build the Separation Wall around Cremisan, which entailed the confiscation of 3,000 *dunums* of land that belong to the Salesian community and to inhabitants of Beit Jala. In times of such turbulences, our work sends the important message to the world that we believe in peace and that we respect the diversity of our community.

On a personal level, what does this project mean to you?

I am a Bethlehemite and a Palestinian Christian. This project reassures the belief of all Christian Palestinians that we are an indispensable part of the Palestinian mosaic and that we are being protected by our state. On a more personal level, this project has become my passion, and seeing the results of the daily work accumulate to present the Church of the Nativity in its best appearance has made me pass up several other opportunities in order to follow up a dream coming true.

At this point, I would like to use the opportunity to thank H.E President Mahmoud Abbas for his support and follow-up of this project and I would like to stress that his Excellency, through



The State of Palestine made the first financial contribution to the project and donated one million dollars, which reflects its dedication and commitment and, together with the successful progress of restoration, has helped solicit other donors.

his support is giving a message that intends to strengthen the Christian presence in Palestine and to support them in their steadfastness until the end of the Israeli occupation. I would like also to extend my gratitude to the three Churches: the Greek Orthodox Church, the Custody of the Holy Land, and the Armenian Orthodox Church for their continuous support and commitment - and for their tolerance of our continual disturbances. Furthermore, I would like to thank the Presidential Committee for their irreplaceable efforts on following up on this endeavor. I also thank all our contributors, not only for their contributions but also for their belief in us; and I thank all the governments that have supported this project for standing with us side-by-side - and thanks to those who are supporting us towards the achieving of our independence and of the dream to live in peace and justice in an independent State of Palestine. Gratitude goes to the team of the consultants and contractors working at the site. Without all and any of these, the restoration of the Church of the Nativity would not have been accomplished.

Nada Atrash is the Head of Research and Training Unit at the Centre for Cultural Heritage Preservation and a researcher on Palestinian cultural and heritage art. She also prepared the file for the nomination documents and is the manager of the project to inscribe Bethlehem, Birthplace of Jesus: Church of the Nativity and the Pilgrimage Route on UNESCO's World Heritage List.