



HOLY LAND COMMISSARIAT

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To the people of the Church in Australia, for the Holy Land Collection 2020

For 800 years, Franciscan friars have shared the difficult lives of Christians in the often conflict torn countries of the Middle East. Since 2011, the ongoing civil war in Syria has inflicted huge suffering, and up till now, the Franciscan Friars have remained present, living among and working for the local population, including refugees. It is important to remember however that the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land embraces more than Syria and includes Israel and Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Rhodes and Cyprus. These countries' people face their own difficulties, particularly Christians due to their minority status. Among them, the friars offer pastoral care in various parishes as well as providing vital educational and charitable works. And in addition, there is the constant upkeep of the Holy Places of Christianity.

But 2020 is proving to be a year like no other. As in so many parts of the world, the COVID-19 Pandemic has thrown up enormous challenges for the people of the Holy Land particularly in terms of health and the huge drop of income due to travel restrictions preventing pilgrims, and the closure of all shrines. Pilgrimages to the Holy Land are a vital resource, and as the Custos of the Holy Land, Fr Patton explains: "Pilgrims are those who support us also, thanks to the offerings they leave during their journey. This allows us to carry out our mission: from the care of the Holy Places that give work to the local community, to the pilgrimages that give work to local Christians and schools and social works. The absence of the pilgrims and of the Good Friday collection, postponed by the Pope's will to September 13, represent two major obstacles for the Custody at this time. We hope that the solidarity of Christians throughout the world will not fail, while understanding the serious economic difficulties of all." And now more recently, the terrible explosion and destruction in Beirut has placed even more strain on the humanitarian resources of the Custody of the Holy Land within Lebanon.

Brothers and sisters, all this makes this year's Good Friday Collection, rescheduled by Pope Francis to **Sunday Sept 13th 2020** more needed than ever. The hope of many is that this rescheduling will go some way to offset the collection's cancellation on Good Friday and the closure of churches around the world, even until the present time in some countries. The Collection remains a vital contribution and act of solidarity that the whole Church is invited to make to support, through the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, the Christian peoples of the Holy Land. These often Arab Christians, who trace their faith back to Pentecost (Acts 2:10), still walk in the footsteps of Jesus and often experience a seemingly endless Way of the Cross.

The solidarity that we Australian Catholics can make is not only with the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, but also with the Latin Diocese of Jerusalem and with the six ancient Oriental Communities in the Middle East. Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, writes: "I am glad to transmit to all who work for the success of the Good Friday Collection, the deepest gratitude of the Holy Father together with my own gratitude and that of the Congregation for Oriental Churches."

Our Australian parishioners, Parish Priests and Bishops have always been most generous to the Holy Land (Good Friday) Collection. Our donation is a direct way to make a difference in the lives of those caught up in war, violence and instability, and now the pandemic, in the Custody of the Holy Land and elsewhere in the Middle East. I thank you all wholeheartedly on their behalf.

Mario Debattista ofm

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