

## Christian Profiles in the Holy Land

## Mr. Costas Canavati

*Editor's note: In order to become more familiar with the local thinking of Christians living in the Holy Land, both laity and clergy as well as religious, we will be having interviews with resident Christians to better inform you of their concerns and interests. Our first interview is with a local Christian businessman living in Bethlehem, Mr. Costas Canavati. Mr. Canavati is a well known resident of Bethlehem, who owns and operates an olive wood handicraft shop called the "Herodium Store", specializing in jewelry and religious articles. Mr. and Mrs. Canavati are pictured below.*

*Could you give our readers a bit of your personal background?*

I was born in Bethlehem, one of thirteen children with six brothers and six sisters. I was baptized in the Greek Orthodox Church but have great ties and admiration for the Roman Catholic Church. Due to the illness of my father, I took over the store when I was 14 years old back in 1956 and have been here ever since. All three of my children eventually left the Holy Land and are now living in San Francisco. My wife, Georgette, and I miss them terribly, but when we think of the way of life over here, we are happy for them. We do get a chance to see them every so often.

*I am sure you could write a small book on the life here in Bethlehem. Could you share some thoughts on that?*

Well, like Americans say, it has been a 'roller coaster ride'. Before 1986, we certainly had some differences with our Israeli counterparts but not to the extent that occurred after that year. It's important to mention that ever since the UN partition of Palestine in 1947, the War of 1948, and then the 1967 Six Day War, feelings of mistrust between the two peoples really emerged yet they were still able to live in relative peace. But when the first Intifada began in 1986, relationships greatly deteriorated between us. It continued downward with the second Intifada in the fall of 2000. Now the Separation Wall seems to be the 'final nail in the coffin'.

*What effects has the Separation Wall had on you and the community in Bethlehem?*

I guess I am one of the lucky ones as I presently have a permit to travel to and from Bethlehem, but that could be cancelled and taken away at any time. The wall has taken away the basic freedom of movement for the people of Bethlehem. They can no longer go freely from one place to

another. Many of the people had jobs in Jerusalem but now have lost them because the military will not permit Palestinians to pass through the checkpoints. Residents of Bethlehem are permanently separated from some of their families and are not even permitted to attend a funeral of a loved one. That is not right.

Sometimes it feels like a virtual prison, but thank God, from time to time buses filled with pilgrims do come over to Bethlehem and have an opportunity to shop at our store before returning to Jerusalem. That is a blessing to us.

*As a Christian living among a large Muslim population, have you had any difficulties practicing your faith?*

None at all! Although I am Greek Orthodox by baptism, I do attend Roman Catholic Mass at the Church of the Nativity. There are from time to time some isolated incidences where discrimination of Christians occurs, but as I said, they are isolated. We have to remember that both Christians and Muslims are Palestinian by nationality and that both of us suffer when Israeli military incursions take place. I remember when an American Franciscan priest expressed the fact that the Israeli military does not differentiate between a Christian Palestinian and a Muslim Palestinian even though it is stated on our ID cards. Because Christians are Arabs we are automatically suspect.

*Do you think there will ever be peace in the Holy Land?*

It will depend on the goodwill of both peoples to allow peace to blossom. As long as there are fanatics and radicals on both sides who are constantly affixed on hatred and mistrust of one another without anyone in the middle to intervene, then peace will not have a chance. We still have men and women of goodwill on both sides and we pray that something positive will eventually happen. Like the Bible says, we are knocked down from every side, but we get up with God's help.

*Any concluding remarks that you would like to express?*

I would like to tell the American Christians not to be afraid to come to the Holy Land. Many Christian pilgrims ask us ... what can we do for you? And we say, tell your other friends about your pilgrimage and ask them to come. By coming over, you are giving us both a moral and spiritual boost. Please do not leave us alone! Who do we have to turn to except you ... our own brothers and sisters in Christ?

Remember, God is our Protector and Defense. If you are a person of faith, you should not be afraid of coming over on a pilgrimage to seek the Lord. God is in charge, not man. He always has us in the palm of His hand. Why be afraid?

