

**A Bridge to Hope**  
**An Update on Holy Family Hospital, Bethlehem**  
**By Order of Malta Ambassador Michele B. Bowe, GCM**

Bethlehem is the heart of Christmas. Not that of the North Pole and elves, but the authentic Christian celebration of the birth of the Christ Child. Each December, Manger Square hosts a life-size nativity scene, illuminated by stars and a three-story Christmas tree. Liturgical choirs perform most nights, and the Christmas market draws visitors—Christian and Muslim alike— from all over the region and around the world.

This year is different. Bethlehem is locked down behind the Israeli separation wall and many additional manned checkpoints. Most of the workforce has no salaries or work because of the closure and the absence of pilgrimages. While the war is over 40 miles away, Bethlehem suffers not from fighting or bombing, but from the halted economy. In response, providing meals for the children demands precedence over exchanging gifts and treats.

This year in Bethlehem, there will be no Christmas tree, choirs, lights, or decorations. The 100 plus year-old traditional Christmas parade composed of marching bands and bagpipers from the parish scout troops will now be a more solemn religious procession. The Patriarch of Jerusalem will leave on foot from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. As always, thousands will line the way in anticipation of the birth of the Christ Child. He will make his traditional entry through a special gate in the separation wall and make his ceremonial walk along the path taken by the Magi. The Procession will end at the Church of the Nativity. After midnight Mass the Figurine of the Baby Jesus will be placed in the manger where he will remain throughout the days of Christmas. This year Christmas will be very much like that first Christmas 2000 years ago. No gifts, no celebrations, no fireworks, or festivities— just a babe born on a deep winter night under a bright star.

The families of Bethlehem will celebrate Christmas with Mass, prayer and sacrifice as requested by the Patriarchs. Christmas will be sombre, reflecting on the recent events in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank.

But Christmas will not be without hope. Just as Mary and Joseph found shelter in the manger, the Order of Malta Holy Family Hospital, 1,500 footsteps from the birthplace of Christ, will provide refuge to mothers delivering their babies without regard to financial need or religious creed. Each and every baby born in this nighttime of war will remind us that babies are a sign from God of his unconditional love for us all. What could be more hopeful than a newborn baby?

Just as the Church is the center of community life, the Order of Malta's Holy Family Hospital is the heartbeat of Bethlehem. The Hospital lights stay on all night long every day of the year. The halls are warm and welcoming even in the piercing cold of the darkest nights. The midwives, nurses and doctors stand ready to care for the most complicated deliveries and the mothers know to expect the very best care delivered without regard to need or creed.

Some mothers, because of travel restrictions due to the war 40 miles away, are not able to reach the Hospital to deliver their babies as travel is dangerous at night. They will deliver at home, without medical care. Sana recently delivered her baby at home because she could not reach the Hospital. In the morning Sana and her husband took the baby to the Hospital. The baby was cold and infected because homes in Bethlehem do not have

central heating and they were not prepared for a home delivery. Both Sana and her baby were admitted for follow-up care.

As the war wages on in Gaza, the shutdown of Bethlehem continues to mean very few have salaries and the small savings people were able to amass after Covid are quickly disappearing. Our Hospital is one of the very few employers continuing to pay full wages on time. Our construction project is a bright spot of hope as the work continues, employing a great variety of tradesmen. We were even able to add a few new employees to the site. Despite the closures, we are finding supplies and making steady progress.

Fewer families can contribute to their care as a medical bill competes with a bag of groceries. Our contracts with the UN and the government of Palestine normally cover a fraction of the cost of some deliveries and NICU care for refugees and state employees. In normal times, this helps cash flow. Today these funds have all but dried up. Holy Family Hospital Foundation is redoubling efforts to meet this funding gap to maintain full salaries and full services until the resumption of peace.

For over thirty years, the Order of Malta has committed to improving lives in the greater Bethlehem region. Babies we delivered are grown up and working for the church, for the universities, for the government and for our very own Holy Family Hospital. A new generation of doctors and nurses who drew their first breaths at our Hospital are now working in service to the mothers and babies of Bethlehem.

The circle of life and the circle of hope are deeply intertwined in Bethlehem. Over 70% of the population was born at Holy Family Hospital. Today we are the largest employer and trainer of medical professionals. **The Order of Malta Hospital is a touchstone of the community and a veritable factory of hope.**

**If you wish to support the work at Holy Family Hospital, gifts of \$2 and more to the Order of Malta Australia Emergency Relief Fund are tax deductible for Australian taxpayers. Donations can be made online at [www.orderofmalta.org.au](http://www.orderofmalta.org.au) or with cheques made payable to 'Order of Malta' and sent to Holy Family Hospital Appeal, Order of Malta, PO Box 79, Caringbah, NSW 1495**

Kind regards, Michelle

