

Christian Arab in the Holy Land

Part 1 of 4

Personal Reflection: Rev. Fr. Imad Twal
Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem

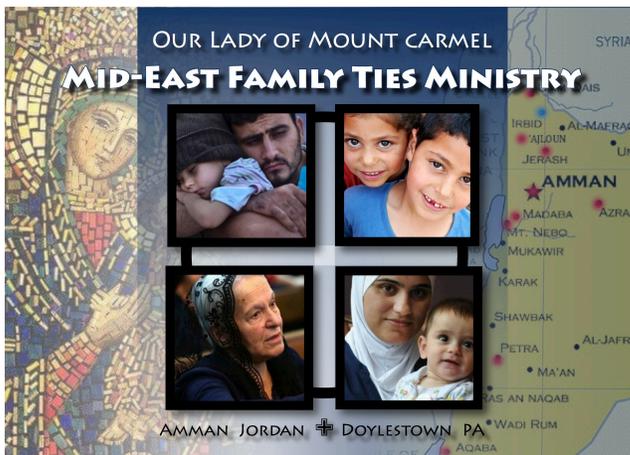
The term “Christian Arab” could be considered an oxymoron to the Western mind wherein the terms seem mutually exclusive. This seeming contradiction is rooted in an ambiguous understanding of what it means to be Christian or Arab.

What then, does it mean to be Arab or Arab Christian? The term Arab does not exclusively apply to Muslims but includes a significant Christian population as well. Additionally, not all Arabs are Muslims nor are all Muslims, Arab.

Christian Arabs struggle with the Western mind and media as they try to explain the difference between a Muslim and an Islamist (it lies in ideology) or the fact that the Arab Christians are the original church extant continuously since the 1st century. This church has survived through history coexisting with a diversity of communities and denominations.

“The Church of the Incarnation: Our Land is blessed, because it is the cradle of divine inspiration and the history of salvation... It is the Land of the Divine Incarnation... “The word was made flesh and lived among us” (Jn 1: 14)...To this day, the Jerusalem Church, which Christian tradition came to call” the Mother of all Churches””. (Assembly of the Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy land, 2001) (To be continued)

Helping Christians keep the face of Christ alive in the Middle East



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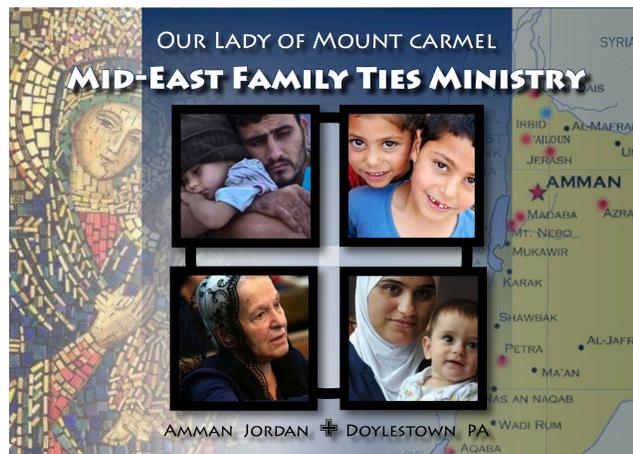
Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem

The disciples of Jesus in the Holy Land belong to a number of different traditional families. The Orthodox churches are Greek, Armenian, Copt, Assyrian and Ethiopian. Additionally there are six Catholic Churches: Roman “Latin”, Greek “Melkite”, Maronite, Armenian, Assyrian and Chaldean. There are Protestants: Anglican and Lutheran with other denominations. All 13 traditional churches have ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the same three countries: Israel, Palestine (occupied territories) and Jordan. *“A church of diversity: the Church of the Holy Land is characterized by its broad ecclesial diversity. It is composed of various Churches, each one having its own history, thought, spirituality, language, rite and tradition”* (Assembly of the Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy land, 2001)

The total number of Christians in the Holy Land is approximately 400,000, half of whom live in Jordan, with the other half living in Palestine and Israel. There are 170,000 Catholics. All of these Christians are Arabs, and they belong to the Arab culture and share Arab history. (We make a distinction here of the Christian Hebrew- speaking communities or foreign Christians who are working and living in the Holy land). *“Numerically speaking, the Church has been a minority for eighteen out of the Twenty centuries of its history. It had a majority from the 5th to 7th centuries, after which its majority status began to decline. Some historians put the number of Christians at the beginning of the Crusades at 50 percent of the population. At the turn of the 20th century it was 20 to 30 percent. Today’s Statistics are in agreement that only 2.5- 3 percent of the Population”* (Bishop Maroun Lahham).

All of these Christians bear witness to Christ in the land where he walked. The mother Church of Jerusalem is a message and a witness that speaks to the heart of Christian belief. It’s a gift and call which is translated and incarnated into a physical reality: Nazareth, Bethlehem, Jerusalem. *(To be continued)*

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What Is It Like To Be a Catholic in the Holy Land?

Part 3 of 4

Personal Reflection: Rev. Fr. Imad Twal

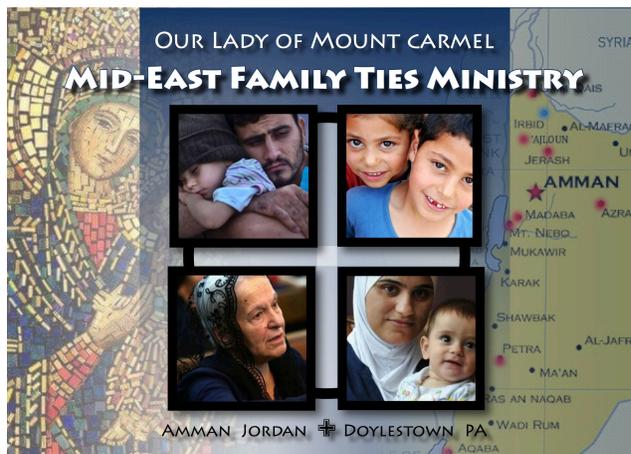
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What is meant when we speak of a Catholic identity? The word that most closely resembles the word “identity” is the word belonging. Someone’s identify is born of his /her belonging. The Catholic identity is not primarily a belonging to an abstraction, such as spirituality, an ideal or a doctrine, though this belonging may communicate all that and much more. It is, at its heart, a belonging to people. It is a belonging to a concrete, sociologically identifiable body in history, with its own form and face. This is called the Church.

The Church is that human place where we meet, in human relationship, Jesus Christ, the son of Mary, the Son of God. The Church is in fact his body. In the life of that community we build communion and communicate with others. In the first place, those gestures are the sacraments, the proclamation of his word.

Here in the Holy land, our Catholic identity means, first of all that although there are many challenges, we are a people, a united visible community that belongs to Jesus which makes us different. *“You will be my witnesses”* (Act 1:8). This witness is our vocation and mission as the disciples of *“the Mother Church”*. The Holy Land has been called the fifth gospel, and we *“the living stones”*- the Christians in the Holy land- are the sixth gospel. *“It was in this land that the “Church” was born- not the buildings or the stones but the congregation of faithful Christians- who make up the Sixth Gospel.”* (Mansour, 2004). *(To be continued)*

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The second pivotal point: we are Arab in identity and nationality. We are fully integrated into the national life in the Arab world, sharing the same mother tongue, struggles for peace and justice. We aim to protect our treasured language, admire our tradition, conserve our heritage and respect our customs. However, although we are Arabs, our being Arab is not the whole of us. *“As Arab Christian in the Holy Land, we are called to witnesses to Jesus in His Land, in our Arab Muslim society as well as in Israeli Jewish society. In order to do that, we must dialogue with both Muslims and Jews.”* (Sabbah, 2006). We understand who we are, who each other are, and what the world is through a perspective that goes beyond being Arab. Our belonging to the Church creates a subculture that is itself a challenge to the greater culture of our society. For example, as a Church community we often do charitable works that benefit, sometimes exclusively benefit, Muslims. Another example is our Catholic Schools. Many Muslim families very much desire that their children come to our schools. These Muslim parents feel that their children will be better Muslims for coming among us. Our scouts encounter the same dynamic. Our Catholic scouting group is known for welcoming all young people from different religions and churches. They find a home and a belonging there that helps them be themselves.

I often think about the birth of the Church at Pentecost. I see our identity being established. The Apostles and Mary, who had been educated to know about God, creator of heaven and earth and the God justice and truth, were gathered together. They had lived with Jesus and could not help but agree with him when he identified himself with God. Their experience affirmed what he said. No one looked at them; spoke to them as he did. After he left them this thing happened, this coming of the Holy Spirit and they started to have the same experience in being together that they had had when they were with him. Their communion became the place they met him. They recognized in what was happening among them the same life that they had known in him. So, with Mary, led by Peter, they started to propose to others exactly what he had proposed to them, life with Him, and through him, by the power of the Holy Spirit, communion with the Father. Our identity is formed by belonging to the people where this continues.

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