

THE ROSARY PROGRAM

A favorite project of ours was the Rosary Program, an idea introduced to us by Patrick Powers, Western USA Lieutenancy (EOHSJ) intended to provide employment for Christian families in the Holy Land, and promote the appeal of Pope John Paul II for the greater recitation of the rosary. When we returned to Jerusalem in late 2003, we described the concept to Msgr. Shomali and he fully supported the idea and enlisted the cooperation of his brother, Michel Shomali, a member of a well-known, respected family in the Bethlehem area.

The Rosary Program was an undertaking of the Western USA Lieutenancy with the purpose to respond in a positive manner to the plea of Pope John Paul II and address the economic difficulty of Christians in the Holy Land. From the outset it was a joint cooperative effort of the Lieutenancy, Fr. Shomali and his brother Michel Shomali.

After exploring many options with Michel Shomali and Lieutenant Powers and mindfulness we would be offering olivewood rosaries made by Christians in the Holy Land that would have to have wide and spiritual appeal and provide economic assistance to Christians in the Holy Land. Considering the rosaries would be offered to a broad range of people, including young school age Catholics it was decided to offer a Rosary Packet which would be encased with a rosary in a clear plastic case displaying the Jerusalem Cross embossed on the case and include in the case a pamphlet titled *"How to Pray the Rosary"*, a diagram of the sequence of the mysteries and selected prayers. Lieutenant Powers provided a brief history of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem for inclusion to complete the rosary package.

A brief description of the background; for generations the primary occupation of Holy Land Christians has been carving olive wood religious articles made by families in their homes and offering them for sale to people on pilgrimages. Currently, there are virtually no pilgrimages; therefore, no source of income for Christian families. Additionally, the program has a salient and unique feature; it is a powerful means of communicating to our Christian brethren in the Holy Land that we support them, we have not forgotten them, and want to provide assistance so they can continue to live in the Holy Land and maintain the Christian presence.

During the latter part of October 2003, Michel Shomali and I met on several occasions to review the details of the program. The Shomali family has lived in the Beit Shour/Bethlehem area for generations and is well aware of the craftsmanship and quality of hand-carved olive wood religious articles. Michel had samples of olivewood rosary beads, crucifixes, etc. to select from and gave assurances he was aware of a number of needy Christian families skilled in making religious goods in their homes, and in the need of employment. A few weeks later Michel had a sample rosary and case with the Jerusalem Cross and forwarded it to Lieutenant Powers for his evaluation.

At this stage the center of activity of the program reverted from the Holy Land, Bethlehem to the Western USA Lieutenancy; we needed a sales force, promotional literature, procedures for distribution, pricing schedules, and a host of details to promote the project and make it a success.

The market for rosaries by the Lieutenancy encompasses Southern California, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, and Hawaii. Rosary Coordinators were established in each area and charged with the task of soliciting other members to promote sales of rosaries in their respective areas. Detailed marketing materials were provided describing the purpose of the Rosary Program, Catholic parishes were contacted and encouraged to procure rosaries: First Communicants, RCIA candidates, Confirmation, Bible study groups, and gift shops.

Other North American Lieutenancies of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher were advised of the program accompanied by an invitation to join the program. Rosary Coordinators did a splendid job of recruiting and training the newly formed sales organization, attentive promotional literature was available; notices were placed in church bulletins, Kris Seifert of the Lieutenancy office did a remarkable job of keeping records of receipts and shipment of rosaries. The first shipment of fifteen hundred rosaries was received, *they are beautiful!!*



During subsequent visits to the Holy Land Michel Shomali would invite us to visit Christian families making the olivewood rosaries. It was a joy watching the tremendous finger dexterity of these ladies as they carefully spaced rosary beads, crucifixes and medallions into rosaries for us to use in our prayers.



The picture on the lower left shows a family busy assembling rosaries in their home in Bethlehem, their sons are unemployed. Under normal conditions one of the sons was employed as a bus driver, driving those on pilgrimage to religious sites, the other son was employed at a tourist hotel in Bethlehem, but lacking pilgrimages they were unemployed. Both of the sons have families and have been unemployed for many weeks, and months.

Bassam Zablah is the person in the top pictures. Bassam is shown amidst a pile of olivewood logs, as he earns his livelihood by making olive wood rosary beads from these logs. Unfortunately, Bassam was without money to purchase olivewood branches to make the beads and he has a wife and five small, lovely children to feed and house. Msgr. Shomali was aware of his dilemma and advanced money to Bassam to purchase the precious olivewood; fortunately, two days later the Western USA Lieutenancy ordered 4,000 rosaries and Bassam was back in business making rosary beads. A quotation from Father Shomali to the Lieutenancy, *" All this makes them happy and makes them feel they are not forgotten by their brothers in the USA. I remember that we used to help Mr. Bassam with cash money in order to sustain his family during the past four years. For*

some months he relies on his work and not on charity, What a difference.” Friends, helping friends!

Note: Later while visiting Bassam and his family he took the opportunity to relate to me, with tears of joy and gratitude in his eyes, his appreciation to Father Shomali for loaning him money to purchase olivewood, and for orders from the Western Lieutenancy for rosaries so he could repay the loan, and provide income for his family, it was a touching moment. Now years later as I mentally relive in my mind the visit with Bassam and his family on that day when I experienced a sensation of joy and the wonderful feeling of the Goodness of God at work in our lives.

The Rosary Program continued with good success for a number of years, living up to its purpose: providing badly needed income for Christian families in Bethlehem and heeding the appeal of Pope John Paul II for greater recitation of the rosary is best attested to upon receipt of an email from Fr. Shomali on September 28, 2006.

” You have already ordered more than 16,000 rosaries during the past three years. This means thousands of dollars sent to the Holy Land to the people who work on this project. It includes the people who sell the olivewood, those who cut the beads from the wood, gather the beads, and make the rosaries ending with those who stamp the booklet and pack the boxes. A lot of people participate in this project. The boxes are made by a Christian family in Ramallah, the bead cutting, and rosaries are made by Christian families in Bethlehem, and Beit Shour, the printing is by the Latin Printing Press in Beit Jala. I seize this occasion to thank you and the coordinators who worked hard to market these rosaries. Besides that, there is a strong link between your people and the Holy Land, through them, the Holy Land is strongly present in your lives and houses”.

After a few years, a couple from the Western USA Lieutenancy (EOHSJ) assumed responsibility for the program, and in my ragged memory I believe ultimately in excess of thirty thousand rosaries were sold under the program and met the objective established for the program, namely :

***Respond to the Appeal of Pope John Paul II for Greater Recitation of the Rosary,
and
Provide Employment for Christian Families in the Holy Land***

End of Story