

Room at the Inn: Holy Family Hospital of Bethlehem



Te all know the story of the Nativity. Mary and Joseph, exhausted from an arduous journey, sought shelter for the night. Yet, everywhere they turned, they were told the same thing: “There is no room.” Until finally, Mary could wait no longer and gave birth to *love’s pure light*, the Savior of the World and the most important human being of all time in a grimy stable surrounded by animals, hay, and dirt.

Today in Bethlehem, only 500 yards away from the site of that first Christmas, one door is open to make certain that unlike Mary, no expectant mother ever has to hear “there is no room.”



“Holy Family Hospital offers the love and support Our Lady and Our Lord should have had. It’s the Christian Inn offering the inclusive love Our Lord has for all,” says Kathryn Abell, a volunteer who has worked tirelessly on behalf of the hospital since 1996 and helped to form the Holy Family Hospital of Bethlehem Foundation [see sidebar].

In 1989, at the request of John Paul II, the Order of Malta, a lay religious order, took over the hospital facilities, which had been operating as a general hospital for a century under the French Sisters of Charity. The Order transformed it into a modern, high-tech maternity unit, complete with the region’s only Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.

Since then Holy Family Hospital has been caring for women and babies in the war-torn West Bank and is the only medical facility in the region capable of dealing with high-risk cases. Today it delivers 60 percent of the babies born in Bethlehem, 15 percent of which are premature.

While the hospital reaches a high level of medical standards comparable to any hospital in the West, its care is never conditional. No one, no matter their ability to pay, nationality or religion is *ever* turned away. In fact, the hospital is an international effort funded almost entirely by donations. Patient payments only cover 33 percent of the total cost of operation (the Bethlehem region has neither a social welfare system nor health insurance).



Kathryn has traveled to the Holy Land six times – first as a pilgrim and now annually to meet with the hospital board. She has been “awed by visiting the holy places where Jesus had actually walked and preached.” She has been



This child was born December 25 2007 in Bethlehem

Kate Wicker



moved to tears while sitting on a boat in the Sea of Galilee imagining Jesus taking in the same sights. She has joined in the breaking of the bread at the Church of the Nativity, the only major church in the Holy Land that survives intact from the early Christian period. As a part of the hospital's mobile clinical outreach program, she has journeyed into the Judean Desert to visit the poor, primitive communities of nomads who seldom receive health care of any kind.


In many ways, time stands still in Bethlehem. Kathryn refers to "a compression of centuries" taking place where you witness "people in ancient dress riding on donkeys on roads traveled by the most modern tour buses" or "peddlers squatting on the ground

hawking live fowl as business men hurry to their offices."

But perhaps the most striking similarity between modern day and the time when Christ walked the earth is that, for many, life is hard. "The majority of West Bank residents want the same things every mother or father wants for their children – enough food, a secure place to live, education, peace," says Kathryn. Yet, attaining these desires is a daily struggle. In the time of Christ, King Herod's government was hostile; Roman soldiers beleaguered ordinary citizens. Today the Israeli army occupies Bethlehem. "In its understandable desire to protect Israel from dangerous radical elements, [the Israeli military] harasses ordinary citizens who are just trying to lead normal lives," Kathryn says. "Because of the Israeli defense wall – a 30-foot solid stone barrier – it's impossible to travel outside the West Bank without permission. Residents are cut off from their traditional food sources, employment, and medical care. It can take several hours to travel 10 miles. Even if you're a woman in the pain of labor, you are told to wait."

Women, in particular, bear a heavy cross. "Women on the West Bank have a daily struggle to survive and to protect their children from danger," says Kathryn. "They have few educational opportunities, jobs, and, healthcare options. The typical woman marries at 16 and has four children before 21. She receives no prenatal care and delivers her baby alone on a desert floor. If she needs a Cesarean, she dies."

However, thanks to an oasis in a desert of abject poverty, there is hope. "Holy Family Hospital is a beacon of light in a dismal landscape. There are countless personal stories of mothers saved from dying, of newborns born prematurely whose lives were saved because the hospital intervened," says



The U.S. Holy Family Hospital of Bethlehem Foundation serves as a modern day Magi bringing this gift of life to the poor women and infants of the West Bank by raising the needed funds to meet the operational expenses of the hospital. Donations are tax deductible. For more information, please visit...

www.birthplaceofhope.org

Kathryn. "In the Church of the Nativity, I heard Pio Cardinal Laghi proclaim the Scripture, 'She wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger.' Today in the guise of a two pound, premature newborn baby, Holy Family Hospital is doing that every day."



Kate Wicker is a regular contributor to "Canticle" and a full-time mom to two beautiful girls. She resides in Georgia.

