

# **Olive wood artisans in Bethlehem carry on a Holy Land tradition**

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BETHLEHEM, West Bank (RNS)—Thirty years ago, Bassem Giacaman—whose large extended family has lived in Bethlehem for generations—immigrated to New Zealand with his parents and siblings in search of a life far away from the turmoil of the Middle East.

They left behind a small shop and olive wood factory, one of a few dozen olive wood enterprises in and around the town Christians around the world revere as the birthplace of Jesus.

## **Lack of tourism hurts artisans**

Christian families who carve religious items such as crosses, rosaries and Nativity scenes own most of the businesses.

Today, these families struggle because tourists are staying away from Bethlehem, thinking it unsafe. Since Dec. 6, Palestinians have held sporadic demonstrations to protest President Trump's announcement that the United States would recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the American Embassy would be moved to that city from Tel Aviv.



After living in New Zealand more than two decades with his family, Bassem Giacaman returned to his hometown of Bethlehem so his father would not have to close the family business, which was founded by Bassem's grandfather in 1925. (RNS Photo / Michele Chabin)

Seven years ago Giacaman moved back to Bethlehem, a mixed Christian-Muslim town separated from adjoining Jerusalem by the towering security wall Israel built more than a decade ago to keep out terrorists.

"I came back to take care of the family business and because I'm a Christian," Giacaman said in the store and factory his grandfather founded in 1925.

Giacaman decided to come home after his father, Jiries, 72, said he no longer could manage the family business from afar.

"I just couldn't let that happen," Giacaman said. "First, because of the church. There are so few Christians left here, and I felt it was important to strengthen the community. But also because my grandfather created this factory, and he and my father worked so hard to keep it going."

The number of Christians in the Holy Land has declined dramatically due to emigration. Today, Christians comprise less than 2 percent of the Palestinian population.

## **Ancient art form**

Mahmoud Hawari, director of the Palestinian Museum in the West Bank, says olive wood carving has been a livelihood for Holy Land Christians in Bethlehem since the fourth century A.D., the Byzantine period.

“This art form goes back millennia, and its traditions have been developed over the centuries,” Hawari said. “It is part of the Palestine national heritage and also important from an economic point of view.”

The Bethlehem region long has been synonymous with olive wood carving, Hawari said, but the industry really began to flourish in the late 19th century, when large numbers of tourists began to flood the Holy Land.

“To this day, it is a niche industry for craftsmen in Bethlehem, who create their own motifs based on the life of Jesus,” he said.

The artisans, both Christian and Muslim, are world-renowned for their intricately carved Mother and Child statues, as well as their Nativity scenes, some small enough to fit in the palm of a hand, others large enough to display in a cathedral. They also produce rosaries, crosses and, for those into more practical items, salad spoons.



The Blessings Gift Shop owned by the Giacaman family and located just around the corner from Manger Square in Bethlehem employs five carpenters. (RNS Photo / Michele Chabin)

Since 1971, the Hosh family has been carving olive wood items in a small factory in a residential neighborhood in Bethlehem. The family's company, the Bethlehem Star Olive Wood Factory, employs 14 carpenters, some of them relatives.

## **Absence of pilgrims**

"We export 95 percent of what we make, to holiday and art fairs in Europe, and to stores including Neiman Marcus," said Tony Hosh, the assistant manager. "There aren't enough pilgrims to sustain the industry."

The uncertain political and security situation in the West Bank makes tourism unpredictable, Hosh said, and that affects the livelihood of local artisans.

That's been especially true since Trump's Jerusalem declaration, he added, because of the clashes between Palestinian protesters and Israeli security

forces.

Although some have taken place on the outskirts of Bethlehem, the town center, which is filled with Christmas lights and a soaring tree, is peaceful and quiet.

Actually, it's too quiet, given that Christmas is fast approaching.

"When there are problems at checkpoints, when there are travel advisories, tourists are afraid to enter Bethlehem. The souvenir shops can't function," Hosh said.

The absence of pilgrims was evident at St. Michael's Store, a large retail shop co-owned by more than 55 Christian families in the area.

"Bethlehem is a tourist city, and without tourists we would not have jobs," said Naoum Bassel, a salesman. More than a week before Christmas the store was completely empty save for a half-dozen idle employees.

"Many of our young people leave because they can't find work. And there is no freedom here," Bassel said.

## **'This is holy work'**

In his store, the Blessings Gift Shop, at the end of Milk Grotto Road, just around the corner from Manger Square, Giacaman showed off his work and that of his five craftsmen.

"Sets like this take a year to make and cost up to \$20,000," he said, pointing to a magnificent manger scene several feet wide. Much simpler items cost between \$40 and a few hundred dollars.

Walking into the courtyard, where hundreds of olive branches were piled high, Giacaman said he buys the wood from local farmers soon after the

October olive harvest.

“Otherwise we can get ants,” he explained. “The branches come from pruning the trees, never by cutting them.”

Stepping into the adjoining factory—really a small workshop—carpenters surrounded by sawdust chiseled delicate features into the fragrant wood.

“Each piece is unique. If you find two pieces the same I will give you the shop,” Giacaman said with a smile.

Growing serious, the Palestinian Christian described his profession as “an expression of my Christian faith.”

“The Bible mentions the olive tree many times, and Jesus prayed among olive trees on the Mount of Olives,” he said. “So our work is part of our religion. For me, this is holy work.”