

Editorial: Christmas at its roots

As we celebrate Christmas this year, perhaps the world can draw some hope from the goings-on in Bethlehem. We're not talking about the nativity of Our Lord that took place in that holy city 2,000 years ago. We're talking about what is happening there today.

Two recent "good news" items brought modern-day Bethlehem to our attention. One story involves the Church of the Nativity – the ancient church built over the cave where Jesus is believed to have been born – which is nearing completion of its first renovation in centuries. The Associated Press notes that the project began in 2013, after UNESCO designated the church as a World Heritage site. With a price tag of \$17 million, "Roughly half of the funding has come from the Palestinian Authority and local Muslim and Christian businesses, and the rest from foreign donors," AP reported.

Over the course of five years, the neglected church has been "transformed," with its roof, windows and other structural elements repaired, and its mosaics cleaned and mended. The deeper one delves into the story of this project, the more rewarding it becomes: It's a story of interreligious harmony for a region of the world beset by endemic violence. It reflects cooperation between different Christian churches, who historically have also had fraught relationships in their shared stewardship of Christian holy sites.

To see a church that dates back to the sixth century (with its oldest parts going back to the fourth century) restored to its former glory is a gift, not only for the little town it inhabits, but for Christian believers the world over.

Which leads us to the second good news story: Bethlehem is

reporting its busiest Christmas season on record for tourism. Per Reuters, hotels are fully booked for the holiday season, and the Palestinian minister of tourism asserts that they have “never received this number of tourists.” The result is a wave of commerce boosting the local economy.

Conflicts in the Holy Land and throughout the Middle East have made it difficult for ancient Christian communities to stay in their homelands. And while Catholics in the United States have been able to assist these fellow believers with the help of numerous organizations and efforts for funneling aid, there’s something to be said for the immediacy of assistance that comes in the form of traveling afar at Christmastime to stay in someone else’s town, to visit another’s shop, to exchange conversation in a real, if brief, human encounter.

And when this connection between people is forged through pilgrimage, it’s even more powerful. More than merely seeing the world and buying souvenirs, the pilgrim experience is one of opening oneself to God and neighbor. It puts one in a context of readiness to recognize the shared reality of being created and loved by God. Pilgrimages bridge actual distance and foster interior closeness.

And at Christmastime, all Christians are interiorly close to Bethlehem and its people, whether consciously or not, and whether one travels there or stays close to home. Christmas is not a nebulous spirit of good will or a meditation on a remote God, off in eternity. Christmas has a fixed point in time and space, reminding us that there is an incarnated reality – the God who became man – at the heart of our faith. There is a necessary concreteness to the love that this faith calls us to reflect out into the world.

Even today, the little town of Bethlehem reminds us that this is true.

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