

The valuable services of the Custody of the Holy Land within the multicultural community of Cyprus

History

In April of 1219, Francis of Assisi set sail from Ancona and headed towards Egypt to meet the Sultan Melek-el-Kamel. Before anchoring down at the port of Damietta, the ship had to pass by various islands. One of these islands was Cyprus and legend has it that two monks were left behind when the ship continued on its journey.

Cyprus became a site of interest for Terra Santa after the crushing defeat of the crusaders in 1291. After the Turkish victory in 1571, the Franciscans were granted permission to remain in Cyprus. They were the only religious group to firmly establish themselves on the island.

Cyprus was also visited by the apostles, and was the chosen place for Father Paolo's first journey working as a missionary.

"Above all else, it is a holy land, intertwining its people, religions and cultures. It is a country that has suffered terrible pillages from ancient peoples."

It is these ancient ties and significant occurrences that render Cyprus an area of sacred land. Caught between past and present, it possesses an incredible wealth of ancient ruins which perfectly capture the ancient civilization and mythical deities, the antiquated churches and Byzantine monasteries as well as unexpected medieval and gothic cathedrals.



The Latin-Catholic Church today

Cyprus has a small, tightly knit Catholic community of Latin and maronite followers. These people enjoy the same support of the brothers of the Franciscan order associated with the Custody of the Holy Land today as they have done for centuries, with the Latin community surpassing the authority of the patriarchs of Jerusalem. Their vicar is a young monk elected by a representative of the Pope based in Jerusalem. During the past few years, the catholic church has attracted many new followers from Asia and Africa, immigrant workers and the under-privileged. These people from over 50 different

nationalities regularly attend Church functions. Most of these people are women from Asian countries (The Philippines, India, Sri Lanka etc) who choose to undertake domestic work with families, the elderly, and young African students, especially those from Nigeria and Cameroon who attend host schools and universities. In the north of Cyprus, an area occupied by the Turks, a group of Nigerian Catholics reside in the Kyrenia and Famagusta districts.



Division

Barbed wire, walls, blockades and a buffer zone manned by UN soldiers provide a clear barrier separating the Republic of Cyprus (part of the E.U since 1st May 2004) from the rest of the northern territory of the island, which remains under the control of Turkey after the military intervention of 1974.

The painful, drawn out feud between Greek Christian Cypriotes and Turkish Muslim Cypriotes has had an alarming affect on the wealth of Christian cultural heritage that exists in the occupied northern territory, as well as causing great suffering to the local people. Hundreds of churches have been vandalized and looted, frescoes, mosaics and ancient icons have been removed and sold by art dealers worldwide leading to the neglect and degradation of the once extraordinary cultural offerings of this area.

"I take this opportunity to express my heartfelt gratitude and that of the catholic church to the brothers of the Custody for their continued efforts in these parts, for their loyalty to the charism of Saint Francis. Their generosity has ensured the spiritual and material well being of the Christian community and of the countless pilgrims who visit the Holy land each year." - Pope Benedict XVI

Placement and Activities of Custody of the Holy Land in Cyprus

✓ Nicosia, the parish and convent

The church of Santa Croce was first erected at the start of the 1900's, the convent followed later in the 1950's. The

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latest restructural works were carried out in honor of Pope Benedict XVI, the first Pope in history to visit the island. The convent also houses the offices of the various papal representatives.

The church and convent are situated on the buffer zone of the island under UN administration and border the area of the island occupied by Turkish military.

Mass, held every Sunday in several different languages, never fails to attract followers, often with crowds of over 1500 people. The convent grounds prove very useful as a meeting place for various groups as well as a general area for friends to convene.

The parish has a second branch in Kyrenia on the occupied northern coast where there is a small church dedicated to Saint Elizabeth of Hungary. It is here that the only weekly mass service in the occupied territory is held.

The Franciscan brothers of Nicosia support the 'Social Centre of St Joseph the Migrant', run by the Franciscan sisters of Sacred Heart. This organization is a centre offering assistance and training to foreign immigrants. In addition to first aid in cases of an emergency, the centre offers courses in English, Greek, computing, needlecraft, music and emergency first aid.

✓ Nicosia, Terra Santa College

This is the island's oldest school, founded by the brotherhood in 1646. The building dates back to the 1950's and are in desperate need of re-structural work to both improve it and increase its capacity. The school itself hosts around five hundred students who attend from the age of 5 to 18.

✓ Limassol, The Parish and Church

The church that stands here today was built in the 19th century. Limassol is a tourist hot spot and the parish is visited as much by tourists as it is immigrants. The Franciscans welcome people of all faiths and religions into their church. One of the most important things that is found here is the Saint Francis Refuge, offering health care to the poor and organizing recreational activities as well as religious meetings. The brotherhood of Limassol support the sisters of Sacred Heart who run the St Mary school. This school is one of the most sought after, offering an extremely high level of education to its 1000+ students. Several families receive contributions towards payment of tuition fees, albeit sometimes modest amounts.



✓ Larnaca, the Parish, the Convent and the Hospice

The church Saint Maria of Grace dates back to 1843 but Franciscan presence in the city dates back to 1593.



Like Limassol, Larnaca is an important tourist destination and as such, the church services often cater for immigrants and tourists. Adjacent to the church and convent you can find the 'Holy Land Rest House'. This is a home for the elderly, sustained by the Custody of the Holy Land in collaboration with the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart Santa Maria delle Grazie.

...We need your help to maintain a Catholic presence in Cyprus

It's important to stress that special care has been taken with regards to preparation of the sacraments. The Franciscans identify with the cultures of other believers, striving to embrace their way of life while guiding them with patience. An extra effort is made in creating moments of sharing and lasting friendship within communities, as well as the historical, biblical and spiritual teachings that take place.

The work of the Franciscans in Cyprus is sustained only through the support and donations of kind individuals. The support of everyone is greatly needed and enormously appreciated!

Support the Holy Places. Maintain the Christian Community in the Holy Land.
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ATS Pro Terra Sancta is the non-governmental charitable organization of the Franciscans in the Holy Land. The mission of the NGO is to serve the Custody of the Holy Land in its proper task of: maintaining and promoting the Holy Places, keeping up the Christian Community in the Middle East, advancing peace and dialogue.

Responsible for the activities of the Custody of the Holy Land in Cyprus: **Nicosia:** fra Umberto Baratto – Italy, fra Andrew Archin – Gana, fra Martin Zavaleta – Mexico. **Limassol:** fra Zacheusz Dulniok – Poland, fra Victor Peña – Spain, fra Gabriel Vormawah –



Gana. **Larnaca**: fra Wilhelm Fornal – Poland, fra Andrew Verdote
– Canada, fra Evencio Herrera – Mexico.