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BETHLEHEM PREPARES FOR CHRIST'S BIRTHDAY

Holy Land Custos Makes Solemn Entry

BETHLEHEM, DEC. 3, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- In preparation for the celebration of Christ's birth, the Custos of the Holy Land led a traditional solemn entry into Bethlehem, expressing closeness to the people there.

Franciscan Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa made this visit to Jesus' birthplace on Saturday and Sunday, thus marking the beginning of Advent.

A press release from the office of the Custos explained that this entry "is characterized by its very formal nature and at the same time, it is convivial."

"The local population experiences it as a manifestation of the attention given to the people of Bethlehem by the custody for centuries, and through their presence, the people have the opportunity to thank the custody officially in the person of the custos," it continued.

Another communiqué noted that this procession traditionally takes place on the Sunday following the Nov. 26 feast day of St. Catherine of Alexandria, whom the Bethlehem parish is named after.

The Franciscan stopped at Mar Elias Monastery, where he was greeted by the mayors and representatives of two neighboring towns, Beit Sahour and Beit Jala.

The procession followed the "route of the patriarchs," bypassing the usual checkpoint to follow a traditional way in front of Rachel's Tomb.

In Manger Square, Father Pizzaballa met parish priest Father Samuel Fahim, as well as the local authorities.

The Custos greeted the Greek Orthodox superior and passed through the "door of humility" into the Franciscan cloister.

The guardian of the sanctuary, Friar Jerzy Kraj, welcomed the procession into St. Catherine's Church.

Advent light

In the evening, during Vespers, the first Advent candle was lit. The press release reported that this year's celebration has particular meaning, as the Franciscans are commemorating 800 years since their order's foundation.

The communiqué affirmed: "We want this light to shine like the sun so as to show us the way to our own sanctification, so that the gift of the Gospel, which is at the origin of our fraternity, might be offered to everyone."

Sunday Mass drew a large crowd, and after presiding over the liturgy, the Custos awarded the Grato Animo medal to two Polish Knights of the Holy Sepulcher who gave donations for the renovation of St. Catherine's Church.

Also in the line of tradition, Father Pizzaballa met with the president of the Palestinian National Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, during the week, to invite him to the Christmas Eve midnight Mass.

In this meeting, the president gave a "present" to the Custos for the Basilica of the Nativity. The press release explained that the basilica's roof is in disrepair, but restorations were stalled due to disagreements between the Churches.

Thus, Abbas, as the local civil authority, gathered all those involved in this decision and facilitated a unanimous agreement. The Franciscan Custody reported that the repairs are expected to begin in the next few months.