



GRAND MAGISTERIUM – VATICAN
EQUESTRIAN ORDER OF
THE HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

The work of the Holy Child Program in Beit Sahour



The relationship between the Holy Child Program and the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre began several years ago. The **Mother General of the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, Mother Shaun Vergauwen**, would meet periodically with the **Grand Master of the Order, Cardinal Edwin O'Brien**, who took an interest in the activities of the community, and in particular, their work in the Holy Land. This relationship took on new impetus when a grant was submitted to the Order, for sustainability of the Holy Child Program. In 2016, the Holy Child Program became the beneficiary of an **endowment fund of Rev. Dr. William W. Hamischfeger**, through the generosity of the **USA Western Lieutenancy**, and a contribution from the **USA Middle Atlantic Lieutenancy**. Thanks to this generous endowment, the Holy Child Program has been able to be more self-sustaining and has had greater financial stability as it endeavors to support its local Christian staff, provide continuing education and training, and offer its vital service to the community. Grants such as this give increased hope to the staff and parents while they look at their and children's future.

Founded in 1995, by the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, the **Holy Child Program** is one of the very few centers in the Bethlehem area **serving children with severe behavioral and emotional problems** in a therapeutic day treatment setting. Located in **Beit Sahour** (the place of the Shepherds' Field), it was founded at the request of parents whose children were suffering from psychological distress, resulting from the first Intifada, or military incursion into the West Bank by Israeli forces. The Program began with four children and currently serves 35 children and their families.

It provides additional outreach programs in the West Bank, including being a training center for local universities and other agencies serving children and families in the region. The teachings of the Roman Catholic Church provide the framework for the services the Holy Child Program offers. Franciscan spirituality calls all who work with the Program to care for some of the most vulnerable and often alienated populations. The **mission is much like St. Francis "kissing the leper"**. It is the everyday experiences of the children learning, working, playing and celebrating together in a

school atmosphere that transform alienation and vulnerability into strength and joy. The students begin each day together in this Catholic milieu, with a time of prayer, **co-facilitated by a Catholic and a Muslim teacher**, where they learn the Catholic faith and the precepts of Islam that agree and support the message of love and of peace. Schools registered under the Palestinian Authority are required to teach Islam to their Muslim students. The HCP decided that instead of continuing the growing separation between the faiths, they would focus on unity and what is shared between the two faiths. The student population of the Holy Child Program is currently 50% Muslim and 50% Christian.

Students enrolled in this unique program attend regular classes in a therapeutic classroom environment, while participating in a variety of therapies, aimed at helping them to master their psychological and behavioral problems. In addition to providing each student with an individualized curriculum based on their strengths and needs, the Holy Child Program also offers the **Incredible Years Program**, which teaches problem solving skills, increases emotional and social competence as well as reducing aggressive and disruptive behaviors. The Holy Child Program is the first in the Middle East to implement this internationally renowned, evidence-based treatment program and takes pride that 92.5% of its graduates are engaged in productive community based programs such as attending educational/vocational programs or financially supporting their families through work. These graduates are productive, contributing members of their local community.

Iskander Khoury, the program director, comments: “In each child that comes here you see something; you see potential. You see a holy child. That is why we named the Holy Child Program as it is. We can see in this child, a dancer; in this child, a musician. But sometimes it is covered up. These children are a part of the Holy Land. They are a part of children all over the world. In each child, we should plant a seed of hope and peace. **In each child, we can promote change for all the world.**”

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