THE ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AND CHURCHES OF BEIT JALA

By Heba Hrimat

This city of Beit Jala, where olive oil is equally expensive to gold, and the origin of its name is as old as history, meaning 'grass carpet' in Aramaic, is located only 1.8 km away from Bethlehem the town of the nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, and belongs to Bethlehem's governorate (Source: ARIJ institute).

Beit Jala has five main districts: al-Sama'na, al-Sarar, al-Iraq, al-Deir, and al-Kneis with approximately 15,000 residents. The most densely inhabited is Al-Sarar. Father Yousef al-Hodali, a well-respected Orthodox Priest in Beit Jala, says that the Orthodox community there is the largest, with around 8000 people, followed by the Latin Catholic community with 1500-1700 people, and about 500 of Anglicans, while the rest of the residents are Muslims.

The numbers of Christians in Beit Jala are undoubtedly among the largest in the West Bank. However, these numbers could have been hundreds of thousands more, but due to the high migration rate this city witnesses, which perhaps precedes any other Palestinian city, their numbers have come down to only 10,000. If we track the history of migration, we find that it had begun years back, in the 1870s, during the times of the Ottoman rule on Palestine, and has lasted to this day. Political instability, weak health services and the unemployment have majorly contributed to migration. Almost half a million people from Beit Jala have chosen to migrate to Chile. This trend however, seems to have shifted recently more towards Australia, Canada and the United States of America.

Despite the ongoing migration, Beit Jala is quite stable and rich when it comes to associations and institutions. There are 26 active charitable institutions in the city, the most prominent of which are:

- 1. Arab Orthodox Benevolent Society (al-Ihsan association): It is a religious association that initially emerged from the Church. It was founded 111 years ago and it is considered to be one of the oldest charities in Palestine and the largest in Beit Jala. The current president is Mr. Fakhri Ghneim and the administrative body consists of 11 elected members representing the five districts of the city. Its charity works include all people of Beit Jala, and it mainly focuses on providing and caring for the poor, the sick and orphans.
- 2. The Orthodox Cultural and Educational Center*: It is headed by Father Yousef al-Hodali and was established in 2002. It aims to explain and deepen the Orthodox beliefs and knowledge to both children and young people of the community, and discourage the emigration of the younger people. Some of the significant activities the Cultural Centre in Beit Jala provides are:
 - The Byzantine Music Choir: It was formed about three years ago, and currently has 22 members. They were initially trained by monk Simon of Mount Athos and now they attend religious events and Liturgies, where they perform according to the Byzantine music, which is a novelty in Palestine.
 - Youth Centre University level: This is exclusively for young men and women who are university students. A variety of social and religious activities are held successfully, including: the 'Children's Week Camp' where children have religious games and competitions, the number one Easter Festival in cooperation with the Orthodox Sports Club, they also hold the '1000 Presents'

festival where Christmas presents are distributed to all children of the city.

- Sunday school: Every Sunday after the Divine Liturgy, children up to the age of 12 attend the Sunday school where they meet and learn religious and recreational activities.
- 3. The Arab Orthodox Group (The Scouts): This group of 350-400 young people is led by Khaled al-Qasis, who is also the Head of the Orthodox Scouts in Palestine. Scouts attend several events including certain festal Liturgies, they also contribute to the young people's education by organizing educational courses in the city. The Scouts are very popular, especially to children who can barely wait to reach the appropriate age to start training and become members of the group.
- 4. The Arab Orthodox Sports Club: Founded in 1923, it mainly supports sports and the youth in the city. It has held a number of sports and entertainment festivals.
- 5. Nikolaos Care Association for Elderly: This charity centre was founded in 1976 and is responsible for sheltering and caring for the elderly.

There is also an ongoing housing project to establish a residential complex for newly married couples and young families from the Orthodox community in Beit Jala, on a land property (estimated around 37000 m²) offered by the Jerusalem Patriarchate to encourage the people to create such a project.

In addition to providing the land for the housing project, there are quite a few activities and support the Patriarchate of Jerusalem provides for the Arab community in Beit Jala such as:

*The aforementioned Orthodox Cultural and Educational Centre, is a subsidiary of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem. The services it provides and the activities it holds are services and activities of the Patriarchate itself.

- The Patriarchate also provides scholarships to study in Greece for students who wish to study Theology and become Priests. The Scholarships are available not only for the students of Beit Jala, but also for all students from the cities and regions of the Patriarchate's jurisdiction.
- The Patriarchate also provides working permits [which are necessary to enter Jerusalem and Israel] to help providing an income for those who can't find employment opportunities in the West Bank, to prevent them from emigrating.

As for the Holy places in the city, there are four Orthodox Churches: the Church of Theotokos, the Church of St. Nikolaos, St. George's Chapel, and the Church of Archangel Michael. Churches that belong to the other Christian Doctrines are: the Church of the Annunciation for the Latin Catholic community, and the Anglican Church for the Anglican community. There are also two Mosques for the Muslim community in the city.

- The Church of Theotokos: This Church was inaugurated in 1862, it is located on the main street in the city centre, and it is considered to be one of the largest Churches in the West Bank. The Divine Liturgy is usually celebrated in this Church on Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays.
- The Church of St. Nikolaos: This Church provides a distinctive landmark in the city with its two high brass domes. It can be considered as a relatively modern Church if compared to the Chapel underneath. That Chapel was built in the 4th century; opposite the Sacred Altar there is a small cave with a low ceiling, containing a 4th century mosaic. The tradition suggests that when St.

Nikolaos came for pilgrimage in the Holy Land, he stayed in this Cave for a period of time. Although this Chapel relates most to St. Nikolaos, it is dedicated to St. George, like most Churches in the Holy Land, as this Saint is considered to be the 'guardian' of Churches. The Divine Liturgy is celebrated in this Chapel on Tuesdays, Thursdays and every second Sunday.

• The Church of Archangel Michael: This was inaugurated in 1908 and is located in the cemetery. The Divine Liturgy is celebrated there on Mondays.

Beit Jala is thought of as the 'hometown' of St. Nikolaos the wonder worker, who according to numerous testimonies has healed diseases and barrenness, helped the sailors and prisoners, and protected the city from missiles and military attacks during various war periods. There are quite a few holy traditions linked to some icons which are kept at the Orthodox Churches of Beit Jala, for example:

- There is a stone in the Church of the Virgin Mary (see photo 5): Tradition has it that our Lady Theotokos hid behind that stone when the Holy Family was attacked by a group of thieves upon their escape from King Herod.
- An icon of St. Nikolaos in the Church of St. Nikolaos (see photo 9): This was originally among stolen icons and antiques that were traded illegally. A week after a man had bought it at a very expensive price, returned it to the trader telling him that St. Nikolaos had appeared in his dreams several times and ordered him to return the icon. In his dream the Saint said "Return me to my house in Beit Jala. There may be many Churches around the world bearing my name, but my home is in Beit Jala. Bring me back there."
- A second icon of St. Nikolaos also kept in His Church (see photo 7): This icon was a present from a faithful Roman female pilgrim to the Saint after he appeared to her in a dream asking her to visit his house in Beit

Jala since she visited the Holy Land numerous times but never went to his Church in that city. It is said that this icon was impossible to finish and the painter had so much trouble trying to paint it, until Saint Nikolaos himself appeared to the painter in his dreams and asked him to draw him looking 'furious' just like he was during the First Ecumenical Council. After two days only, the icon was ready. The Church of St. Nikolaos also contains a piece of his relics and a small oil bottle which belonged to the Saint (see photo 8).

• The third icon of Saint Nikolaos is a miraculous one. According to Father al-Hodali, many people from all over the world come specifically to pray and ask for help in front of this icon of the Saint inside the sacred cave in the Chapel of St. George (see photo 12).

The caretakers of the previously mentioned Churches and for the community in Beit Jala are four Priests: Archimandrite Narkisus [the Patriarchal Vicar], Father George Shehwan, Father Yousef al-Hodali, and Father Paul al-'alam. Ministering is also Deacon Elias Zu'rab, who will be ordained a Priest soon.

Usually, on the Feast day of St. Nikolaos the wonder worker [December 6th/19th] His Beatitude our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos leads the Divine Liturgy, He also occasionally officiates the Feast of the Nativity of Our Most Holy Lady Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary [September 8th/21st] at the Church dedicated to her in Beit Jala, where cameras are installed for live broadcasting of the Divine Liturgy and the weekly Church services, for people to watch online.

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