

## Colors of the Holy Land: Tent of Nations Peace Project



*The Holy Land enchanted me with its magnificent colors. In the Arab market of the old city of Jerusalem, bright quilts dazzled me with their diversity. Monochrome quilts could never convey the same brilliant beauty as these patchwork miracles of crimson, cerulean, emerald, orange, and amber. To remove a color or tear out stitches would be to severely limit the quilt. And yet the quilt of the Holy Land has been brutally ripped in two; countless threads have been broken and the master design has been damaged. A giant concrete wall separates Israeli from Palestinian, Jew from Arab. Spilled blood and fear separate their hearts. Repairing the quilt can seem a daunting and hopeless task. How does one start to heal lifetimes of pain?*

*–Hilary Meek, member of the Franciscan Peacemaking Pilgrimage to the Holy Land*



Daoud Nassar and his family live on a small, hilltop farm just six miles southwest of Bethlehem in the Occupied Territories of Palestine (the West Bank). From nearly all directions, they are surrounded by Israeli settlements. The Nassar's 100-acre farm belongs to them and they have legal papers to prove their ownership. Any yet, their land is under a threat of confiscation by the Israeli Military. On May 19, 2014, without any warning or valid justification, the occupying military forces brought in bulldozers and destroyed over 1,500 mature, fruit-bearing apricot and apple trees and grape vines on Daoud's farm. The terraced land on which the trees were planted was also destroyed and left in a state of rubble.

Yet, in the face of this, empowered by the example of the Prince of Peace, the Nassar family perseveres and resists the malice and injustice through love and their active nonviolent resistance. Rather than giving into despair and leaving their land, or responding with violence to protect their property, the Nassars have chosen another path – a path of peace. At the entrance to their farm, the writing on the rock announces their deep commitment to follow in the footsteps of

Jesus Christ: “WE REFUSE TO BE ENEMIES.”



Transforming adversity into opportunity, Daoud Nassar and his family created the Tent of Nations Peace Project. Palestinians, Israelis, and people from around the world come to the Tent of Nations to cultivate the land and sow the seeds of a profoundly religious vision. It is God's ancient dream of the beloved community in which diverse peoples and cultures – and the land itself – are restored and healed. Daoud's profoundly Christian stance challenges the disciples of fear that seek peace and security through brute, military force and the use of the Machiavellian politics that exploit and exacerbate people's fears. The prophetic witness of the Nassars shows that an authentic peace and security can only be achieved through nonviolence, solidarity, and love.

When the Israeli authorities denied the Tent of Nations' access to electricity, the Nassars, with the help of their friends from around the world, installed solar panels on their farm. When the Israeli authorities denied them access to running water, they built cisterns to collect rainwater. When they were prohibited from construct small structures on their own property, they built caves and turned them into classrooms and a chapel.

With an eye toward encouraging a new generation of peacemakers, the Nassars also host on their hilltop farm a camp for children. Every year, a group of Christian and Muslim children, scarred by the violence of military occupation, spend two weeks at the Tent of Nations. There, they become regenerated, learn to live in peace, and act with compassion and love, instead of with violence and revenge.

*At the end of our visit at the Tent of Nations, we climbed down into their chapel cave for a prayer service with Daoud Nassar and his family. While singing a song in Arabic and English that he taught us, I felt Christ incarnate in that Christian family and in all of the people at Tent of Nations. I have never before experienced such beauty and such love, or such unfathomable power. Prayer by prayer, stitch by stitch, they are piecing the colors of the quilt back together. —Hilary Meek*

Holy Name Province has had a long history of supporting the work of the Tent of Nations. Over the past seven years, many pilgrimage groups from the Franciscan parishes have visited the Tent of Nations. Hundreds of lay people and the friars from Holy Name Province welcomed Daoud into their churches when he visited the United States on his speaking tours. Last year, more than 100 parishioners from a Franciscan church in Silver Spring, MD made financial contributions to support the children's summer camp held on the Nassar's farm outside of Bethlehem. Even the Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops joined them in this effort.

Three years ago, the Franciscans of Holy Name Province received an urgent call that the Israeli military was about to demolish nine structures on the Nassar family farm. When people from around the world raised a collective voice, the demolition was halted, at least temporarily. According to Bill and Kay Plitt from the Friends of the Tent of Nations: *“One of the most critical and timely responses during that emergency was from the Franciscan friars of Holy Name Province, their lay partners in ministry and the Provincial leadership. A number of them sent letters to the Secretary of State, the U.S. Ambassador to Israel, and to their own members of Congress... We are not certain that this action taken by Holy Name Province was directly responsible for halting the demolition orders, but we do know that, at least up to now, those structures remain untouched. We are grateful for the many ways that the Franciscans have joined other faith communities in supporting the Tent of Nations Peace Project.”*



The challenge of restoring the beautiful quilt of the Holy Land is a daunting task. The voices of apathy and cynicism tempt us to throw up our hands in despair and resignation. However, in his Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis calls us to say “no to a sterile pessimism.” He insists that “people of faith are needed who, by the example of their own lives, point out the way to the Promised Land and keep hope alive.”

For many of us who have visited the Tent of Nations, Daoud Nassar and his family are the kind of people that Pope Francis refers to. We hope and pray that Franciscan-hearted people will join us in supporting and safeguarding the Tent of Nations Peace Project. It is on a journey of solidarity, alongside the suffering Palestinian Christians and the prophets of hope among them, such as Daoud Nassar, that we encounter the risen Lord.

### **What can you do to help?**



1. Spread the word about the Tent of Nations Peace Project: share this information with your family and friends through Facebook and/or Twitter.
2. Watch a powerful video featuring Daoud Nassar, **“Love Your Enemies:”** [www.vimeo.com/29677206](http://www.vimeo.com/29677206)
3. Write a letter to your local newspaper and/or your elected officials about the Tent of Nations Peace Project. Voice your concern about an unwarranted attack on the Nassar's farm (For a sample Letter to Editor and a few talking points when you call or write your elected official, visit [www.hnp.org/jpic/peacemaking.cfm](http://www.hnp.org/jpic/peacemaking.cfm)). Become a long-term Franciscan advocate for justice, peace and reconciliation in the Holy Land.
4. Visit the Tent of Nations on your pilgrimage to the Holy Land or invite Daoud Nassar to speak at your church. Contact Bill Plitt at [bill-kay@comcast.net](mailto:bill-kay@comcast.net).
5. Become a supporter of Friends of Tent of Nations Peace Project ([www.fotonna.org](http://www.fotonna.org)).