

# Christian Events in the Holy Land\*

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# Personal Introduction

*“Hey Beni, what do you mean it’s Christmas Eve today ? We are already in January”.*

*“Welcome to the Holy Land 🇮🇱”* will be my answer.

With more than 10 Christian denominations using 2 calendars, praying in 12 languages and observing a variety of rituals and traditions, Christianity in the Holy Land has never been more diversified. For some, coming from a monolithic Christian society, this diversity might be overwhelming and confusing, for others, it only proves how successful Christianity has become.

Working as a Tour Guide in the Holy Land I often run into ceremonies and processions, some of events widely known while others being observed only by a local community. This documentary only covers events I have personally attended, thus neither all Christian events nor all variants of the same holiday are documented. Moreover, the events are presented from my personal “feet on the street” perspective, hence this documentary is neither a theological essay on Christian holidays nor a narrow-focused academic dissertation.

It is also worth mentioning that Christians are a small minority in the Holy Land (less than 2%). Most of them are Arab-Christians (e.g. a minority within a minority), living in their own communities in the Galilee, Jerusalem and Judea. For them, the holidays are a great opportunity to publicly express their Christian heritage and community pride. In the Arab-Christian communities Scouts play a major role, especially in large events. Established during the British Mandate years, some Scouts are associated with a specific denomination while others with public schools or non-religious institutions. Nevertheless, Christian processions will usually be led by Scouts of various denominations, making it a joint community happening.

All in all, Christian events in the Holy Land are lively and vibrant. They are important for the local communities, provide a great opportunity for visitors to learn about other denominations and offer all attending Christians a spiritual experience.

Happy Holidays 🇮🇱

Beni Salzberg

Haifa, December 2020

## Glossary – 1 of 2

The following terms are widely used throughout this documentary :

- **Calendars** – Following several changes in calendars over the centuries, the Christian World is divided nowadays between two calendars – **Gregorian**, used by the Catholic and Protestant Churches, and **Julian**, used by the Orthodox and Oriental Churches (with a 13-days difference between the two calendars). In the Holy Land, this duality leads to Christmas Eve being observed three times (24/12, 6/1 and 18/1\*), Easter once or twice (depends on the year) and so on, affecting pilgrimage and worship schedules in many Biblical sites. It also affects families of mixed couples (e.g. a Catholic married to an Orthodox, a growing phenomenon in the last decades), when trying to integrate the holidays into their family calendar.
- **Custos del Terra Sancta (Custodian of the Holy Land, in Latin)** – Title of the Head of the Franciscans\*\* in the Holy Land. Following the 13<sup>th</sup> century defeat of the Crusaders, the Franciscans were given the task to look after all Catholic sanctuaries in Biblical sites. Their mission, ratified by various Popes over the centuries, is not only keeping the sites in good condition but also run them as spirituality centers.
- **Denominations / Churches** – The following Christian groups are currently present in the Holy Land :
  - Armenian (follow the Catholicos of all Armenians in Etchmiadzin).
  - Catholic – Latin, Greek-Catholic\*\*\*, Maronite, Armenian-Catholic, Syrian-Catholic (all follow the Pope in Rome).
  - Oriental – Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopian (each follows its own religious leader).
  - Orthodox – Greek, Russian, Rumanian (all follow the Patriarch of Constantinople, titled "first among equals").
  - Protestant – Lutheran, Anglican, some other small groups (each follows its own religious leader).
- **Kavas (Archer, in Turkish)** – In the Ottoman empire non-Muslims were not allowed to carry weapons. Instead, officials, diplomats and religious leaders could have a personal Muslim bodyguard. Over the years the job has changed from security to ceremonial and is also fulfilled by non-Muslims. Nowadays, only the Patriarchs, the Custos and the Archbishops of the Oriental Churches are escorted by a Kavas, whose main task is to make way through the crowded streets. The Kavas will usually carry a staff which he uses to knock on the street floor, announcing the arrival of the distinguished person. For major events, the Kavas will wear solemn uniform, red tarboosh and carry a sword.

\* For various reasons, the Armenian Church in the Holy Land observes Christmas Eve on January 18<sup>th</sup>

\*\* The Franciscans are a Catholic order, AKA **Order of Friars Minor**

\*\*\* AKA Melkite or Melchite

## Glossary – 2 of 2

- **Latin vs Catholic** – In the Middle East, the Roman-Catholic Church is called the **Latin Church**, referring to the Latin language used for prayers until 1964. The term **Catholic Church** refers to all Catholic groups following the Pope in Rome
- **Status Quo (The situation that existed before, in Latin)** – The term **Status Quo** is used to describe the relations between the various churches in the Holy Land, regarding some Holy Places which they share. These relations cover aspects of possession, rights, privileges and who can do what where and when. The Holy Places regulated under the **Status Quo** are the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Deir al-Sultan, Tomb of Mary, Sanctuary of Ascension and the Church of Nativity. The churches involved are the Armenian, Latin, Oriental and Orthodox (the Protestant Churches are not included in the **Status Quo** as they had no presence in the Holy Land in the 18<sup>th</sup> century). The **Status Quo** is based on an Ottoman **Firman** (Royal decree) issued in 1757, ratified by another **Firman** in 1852 and accepted as a binding international legal document in the 1856 Treaty of Paris (the term **Status Quo** in regard to the Holy Places was first used in the 1878 Treaty of Berlin). However, none of the above documents provides any details, other than referring to “The situation that existed before”. It was only the British, in 1929, who put in writing all details in a document composed by L.G.A Cust, the former District Officer of Jerusalem. This document is used as a benchmark for all discrepancies between the various churches regarding the above-mentioned Holy Places.

### Notes :

- Names and titles of religious leaders are only relevant for the time their pictures were taken
- For ease of use, this documentary is divided into 4 sections : Christmas time, Holy Week, Spring and Summer, Jubilees
- All Biblical quotes are based on the New Revised Standard Version
- The following abbreviations are used :
  - B. – Blessed
  - Fr. - Friar
  - St. – Saint
  - V. - Venerable

# Christmas Eve

## Bethlehem\*

**The Orthodox and Oriental Churches** observe Christmas Eve on January 6<sup>th</sup> (the Gregorian-calendar equivalent of the Julian December 24<sup>th</sup>)\*\*.

**The Orthodox and Oriental communities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem** celebrate the event at the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem. During the day, the heads of the various denominations arrive from Jerusalem to Manger Square, where they are welcome by their community members. Thereafter, the delegations proceed in solemn processions to the Church of Nativity, where each denomination will conduct its own traditional ceremony.

\* Bethlehem is part of the Palestinian Authority. Therefore, all activities are administered by the Palestinian Police without any official Israeli presence

\*\* Christmas Eve is observed by the Catholic and Protestant Churches on December 24<sup>th</sup>, and by the Armenian Church in the Holy Land on January 18<sup>th</sup>

# Christmas Decorations – Manger Square



Decorated Christmas Tree



Christmas Tree being erected in mid-November



Nativity scene

# January 6<sup>th</sup> 2020 – Bethlehem Timetable\*

\* Partial List

When	Who	What	Where**
08:30	Syriac	Arrival of the Syriac Archbishop	Manger Square
10:00	Coptic	Arrival of the Coptic Archbishop	Manger Square
12:45	Orthodox	Arrival of the Orthodox Patriarch	Manger Square
14:30	Coptic	Vespers	Church of Nativity – Armenian main altar
15:00	Syriac	Vespers	Church of Nativity – Armenian side altar
15:00	Ethiopian	Arrival of the Ethiopian Archbishop	Manger Square
16:00	Ethiopian	Vespers	Church of Eyesus***
22:40	Syriac	Midnight Prayers	Church of Nativity – Grotto
23:00	Coptic	Midnight Prayers	Church of Nativity – Grotto
24:00	Orthodox	Service	Church of Nativity – Grotto
24:00	Ethiopian	Midnight Liturgy	Church of Eyesus

\*\* All aspects of the Christmas ceremonies at Manger Square and the Church of Nativity are regulated by the *Status Quo*

\*\*\* The Ethiopian Church has no rights in the Church of Nativity, thus their ceremonies take place at the nearby Ethiopian Eyesus Parish Church

# Syriac – Procession through the Old City





# Syriac – Scouts Marching Band



## Syriac – St. Mary Parish Church\*

\* The delegation will first visit the Syriac St. Mary Parish Church, where they will be welcomed by their community members. Thereafter, the delegation will proceed to the Church of Nativity



Community leaders and clergymen



The procession arrives at the church

# Syriac – St. Mary Parish Church



Bethlehem Syriac Scout



**Archbishop Gabriel Dahho**  
Syriac Patriarchal Vicar of Jerusalem



Kavas of the Syriac Patriarchate

## Syriac – Church of Nativity



**Palestinian Policeman, Syriac Clergyman and Kavas**  
Last minute procedure discussion



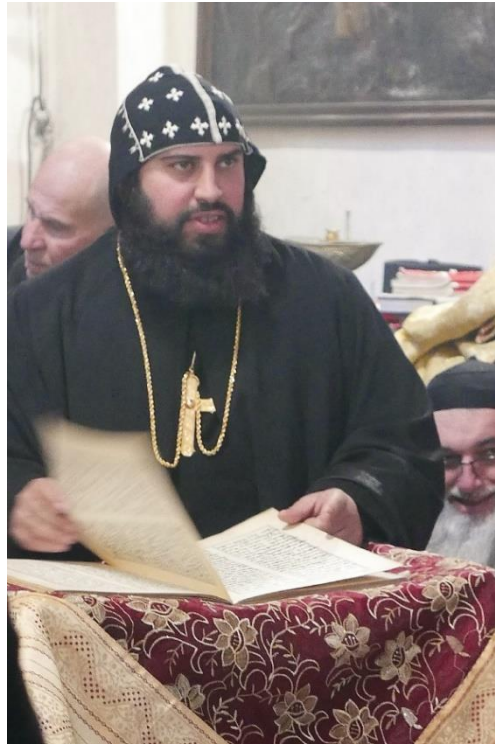
**Kavas of the Syriac Patriarchate in solemn uniform**  
(Embroidered vest, red tarboosh, sword and staff)

## Syriac – Church of Nativity



Procession to the Armenian side altar\*

## Syriac – Church of Nativity



Vespers at the Armenian side altar

## Orthodox – Church of Nativity



Solemn procession in the Nave (one of many during that day)



**Patriarch Theophilos III**  
Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem

## Coptic – Manger Square



Community leaders and clergymen



## Coptic – Procession through the Old City



# Coptic – Scouts Marching Band\*

\* The Coptic community does not have Scouts, thus their delegation is followed by the Catholic Don Bosco Scouts



## Coptic – Church of Nativity

**Kavas of the Coptic Patriarchate in solemn uniform**  
(Blue suit, red tarboosh and staff)



Solemn procession through the Nave to the Armenian main altar

## Coptic – Church of Nativity



Vespers at the Armenian main altar\*

## Coptic – Church of Nativity



**Archbishop Anba Antonius**  
Coptic Metropolitan of Jerusalem

## Coptic – Church of Nativity



Deacons proceeding to the Grotto

## Intermezzo – Church of Nativity



Moment of contemplation



**Muslim Palestinian Policewoman**  
On duty at the northern entrance to the Grotto

## Ethiopian – Manger Square



Delegation welcomed by Palestinian officials



## Ethiopian – Procession to the Church of Eyesus\*

\* The Ethiopian Church has no rights in the Church of Nativity, thus their ceremonies take place at the nearby Ethiopian Eyesus Parish Church



**Archbishop Aba Embakob**  
Ethiopian Archbishop of Jerusalem



Ethiopian harp



Pilgrims in solemn costumes

## Ethiopian – Procession to the Church of Eyesus



Traditional singing and dancing

# Baptism of the LORD

## Qasr al-Yahud\*

**The Catholic World** observes the Baptism of the LORD\*\* on the first Sunday following Epiphany.

**The Latin communities of Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria**, celebrate the event at the Qasr al-Yahud baptismal site by the Jordan river. The ceremony is led by the Franciscan Custos.

\* Qasr al-Yahud is under Israeli Military Sovereignty, thus all activities are administered by the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces)

\*\* See Mathew 3, 13

## Qasr al-Yahud – Welcome Banners



↑  
**Fr. Francesco Patton**  
Franciscan Custos

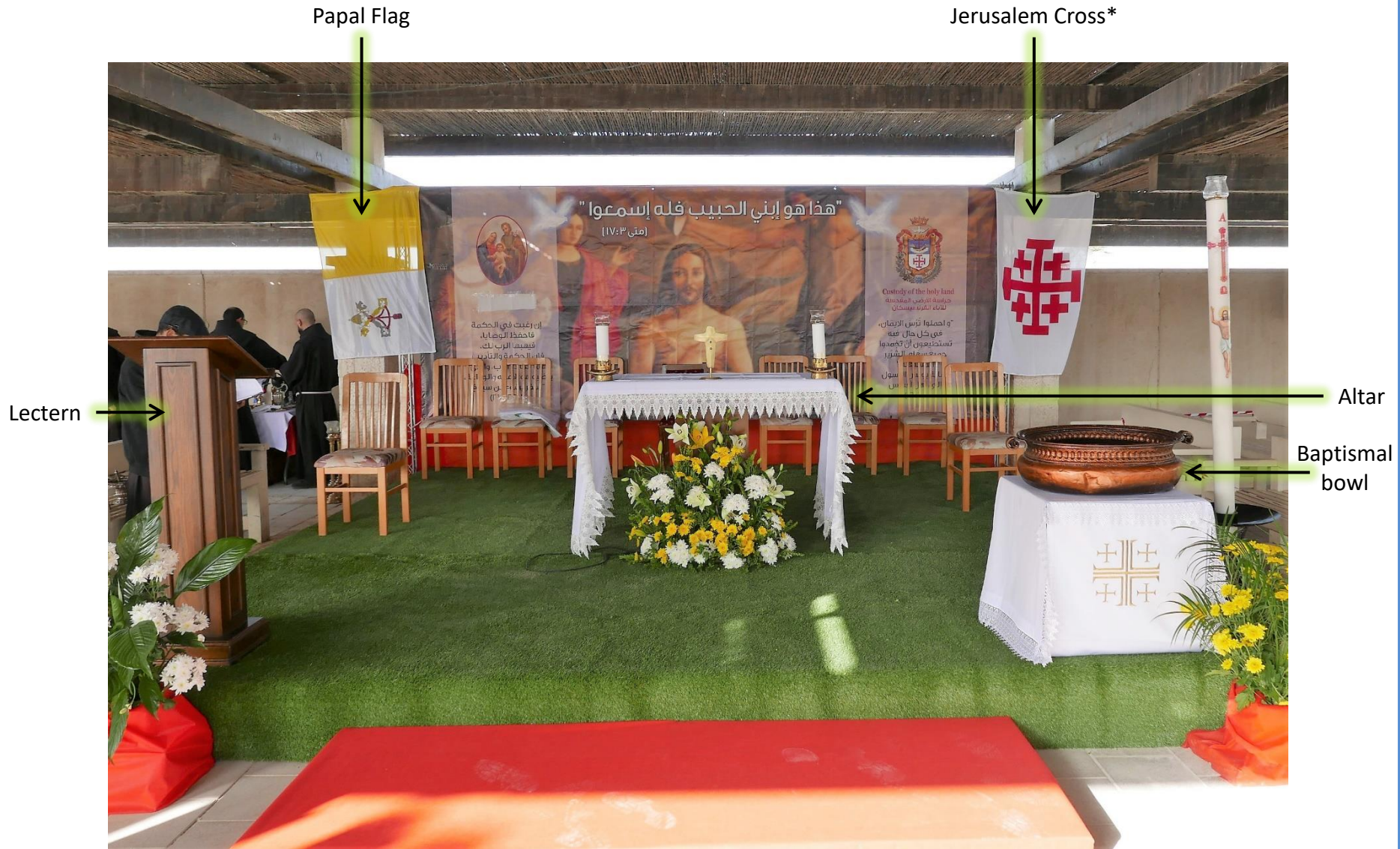
Franciscan banner in Arabic

↑  
Custody of the Holy Land  
Coat of Arms



Israeli banner in various languages

## Qasr al-Yahud – Temporary setup for the Ceremony



## 2. Baptism of the LORD

\* A Greek Cross in red on a white background with four smaller crosses, one in each quadrant. Used as the symbol of the Custody of the Holy Land

# Qasr al-Yahud – Arrival of the Franciscans and Invitees

**Fr. Francesco Patton**  
Franciscan Custos

IDF Officer



## Qasr al-Yahud – Down to the Jordan River



## 2. Baptism of the LORD

## Qasr al-Yahud – Solemn Costumes

**Kavas of the Franciscan Custos in solemn uniform**  
(Embroidered blue garment, red tarboosh, sword and staff)



**Franciscan friar**  
Swinging a thurible with burning incense



## Qasr al-Yahud – Nuns of various Catholic Orders



Rosary Sisters



Bridgettine Sisters



Sisters of the Immaculate Heart

## Qasr al-Yahud – The Choir\*

\* Participants are friars, nuns and laity



## Qasr al-Yahud – The Custos and the Holy Water\*

\* The water is taken from the nearby Jordan river and blessed by the Custos



Baptizing an infant in the Holy Water



Sprinkling Holy Water on the participants

## Qasr al-Yahud – Ceremony is over



# Theophany\*

## Capernaum

**The Orthodox World** observes Theophany on January 19<sup>th</sup> (the Gregorian-calendar equivalent of the Julian January 6<sup>th</sup>), commemorating the Baptism of the LORD by John the Baptist\*\*.

**The Orthodox communities of the Galilee** celebrate the event in Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee. The ceremony is led by the Orthodox Metropolitan of Nazareth and incorporates the Great Blessing of the Waters.

## Capernaum – Orthodox Church of the Holy Apostles\*

\* The participants proceed from the church to the nearby pier, where the ceremony takes place



Orthodox clergymen



**Bishop Kyriakos**  
Orthodox Metropolitan of Nazareth

## Capernaum – Orthodox Church of the Holy Apostles



Procession from the church to the pier

## Capernaum – The Pier



The procession arrives at the pier



## Capernaum – The Pier



Blessing of the Water

## Capernaum – The Pier



Dipping a bundle of Basil leaves in the Holy Water\*

## Capernaum – The Pier



**Setting free a white dove**

*...he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove (Mathew 3, 16)*

## Capernaum – The Pier



Num



Priest



**Monk Irinarchos**  
Superintendent of  
the Monastery of the Holy Apostles

## Capernaum – The Pier



Throwing the cross into the water\*



Volunteers trying to recover the cross



The successful volunteer is back

\* After the ceremony, the Bishop will throw a decorated cross into the water and volunteers may try to recover the cross. The first swimmer to find the cross brings it back to the Bishop, who delivers a special blessing to him and his household. This tradition is popular all over the Orthodox World, including cold countries like Russia

# Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Jerusalem

**The Christian World** observes this week during the end of January\*. The week is celebrated worldwide by Christian communities of different denominations, conducting joint prayers in their parish churches.

**The Christian communities of Jerusalem** celebrate the week in various Biblical sites, Patriarchates and parish churches around the city. The prayers are led by clergymen of the hosting denomination in their own language and tradition.

\* The Ecumenical Observance started in 1908 as the *Octave of Christian Unity*. See [World Council of Churches](#)

# 2020 Week of Prayer – Jerusalem Timetable

## WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2020

JERUSALEM, JANUARY 25 – FEBRUARY 2

Theme : ***They showed us unusual kindness*** (Acts 28,2)

The theme for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 2020 has been prepared by a group of churches in Malta and Gozo. It refers to the welcoming of the apostle Paul and the other people on board the ship that was shipwrecked and run aground on the island of Malta. The very same island is one of the many places that feature in the stories of modern migrants who try to escape natural disasters, warfare and poverty. As Christians together facing these crises of migration this story challenges us: do we collude with the cold forces of indifference, or do we show “unusual kindness” and become witnesses of God’s loving providence to all people? Hospitality is a much-needed virtue in our search for Christian unity. Our Christian unity will be discovered not only through showing hospitality to one another, but also through loving encounters with those who do not share our language, culture or faith.

### PROGRAMME

Saturday, Jan. 25	Anastasis (Holy Sepulchre), Calvary <i>Greek Orthodox Office of “Apodeipnon” (C</i>
Sunday, Jan. 26	Anglican Cathedral of St George <i>Nablus Road</i>
Monday, Jan. 27	Armenian Cathedral of St James <i>Old City, Armenian Quarter</i>
Tuesday, Jan. 28	Lutheran Church of the Redeemer <i>Old City, near the Holy Sepulchre</i>
Wednesday, Jan. 29	Latin Patriarchate’s Church <i>Old City, from Jaffa Gate</i>
Thursday, Jan. 30	Upper Room, Cenacle <i>Mount Zion</i>
→ Friday, Jan. 31	St Mark’s Church, Syrian Orthodox <i>Old City, near Jaffa Gate</i>
Saturday, Feb. 1	Ethiopian Orthodox Church <i>West Jerusalem, off Prophets’ Street</i>
Sunday, Feb. 2	Greek Catholic Church of Annunciation <i>Old City, near Jaffa Gate</i>

# Syriac St. Mark Church



Joint prayer by clergymen of various denominations



## Syriac St. Mark Church



Blessing of the participants by individual clergyman