

Forty years in Bethlehem among the "Infant Jesus" of today

Sister Donatella Lessio who, for the past eleven years, has worked in the Caritas Baby Hospital, the only children's hospital in the town where Jesus was born, wants to share her experiences with us.

The people realise what we are doing and the question that the Muslim mothers ask us is "why do you do it?". So then we speak to them about the Baby born in a stable in Bethlehem who, when he grew up, chose the cross to communicate his infinite love for every human being, especially for the weakest, the smallest and the alienated. They understand, yes they understand! They thank us and they show their gratitude in many ways, in their way of being moved, that we feel we do not deserve, because, in the end, we don't do all that!".

These words come from Sr. Donatella Lessio, the spokeswoman of the four Elisabettian sisters who offer their services in the *Caritas Baby Hospital* in Bethlehem. She talks to us about their work with the new "Infant Jesus" of today, of how they treat the wounds in their bodies, trying to instil in their families a desire for forgiveness and peace.

In this month it is lovely to be near the cradle of the Redeemer helped by the nuns of this religious order, founded in 1828 by the Paduan Elisabetta Vendramini, the same nuns whom we meet in the Home of Providence in Sarmedola, in the Cheap Soup Kitchens and the Charity of the Bread for the Poor, to meditate on the Little One who has saved us and we can recognize in the face of every human being!

This children's hospital in Palestine seems to be a corner of Padua, where not only the Elisabettian nuns work but also many doctors and volunteers from the city of the Saint! Anthony is next to them, he has inspired their vocation to service transmitting that enthusiasm which he had when he set off for Morocco in that autumn of 1220. There is not a word against Islam, in all of his writings, only the desire to help everyone to find the path towards the only God.

Sr. Donatella comes from Vicenza, and she has been in Bethlehem ever since 2004, where she directs the formation centre of the *Caritas Baby Hospital*. It was St. Francis through Zeffirelli's film "*Brother Sun and Sister Moon*" that caused her vocation to

serve the poorest grow in her. It is with great pleasure that we listen to her words that overflow with culture and joy for the path she has chosen and the enthusiasm for what the Lord has asked of her. She was already used to divine "jolts" when, for three years, she had worked with the terminally ill of Aids.

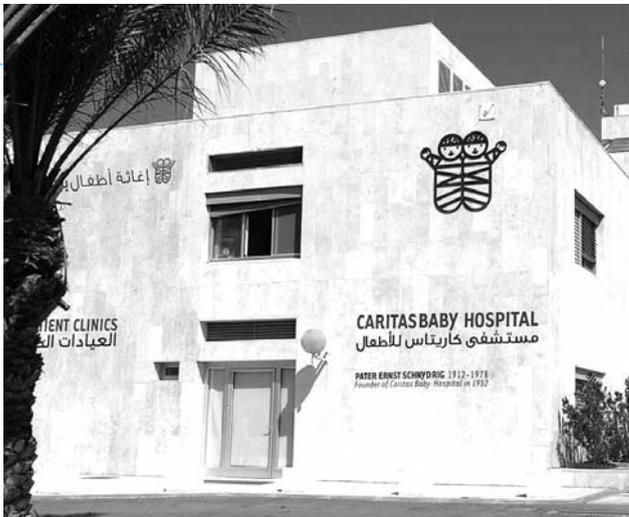
Also her fellow sisters come from difficult experiences in African missions. The Paduan Gemmalisa Mazza is the superior of the community and responsible for the project "beauty in embroidering" with some thirty Palestinian women creating objects by hand, which when sold help their unemployed husbands. Erika Nobs is a German and member of the Executive Council of the hospital, she directs about 90 nurses. Then Lucia Corradin, from Vicenza, is responsible for hearing tests that she has started. Then Sr. Maria Pia Refosco has come from the "House of Bread" in Via Del Santo.

The size of the *Caritas Baby Hospital*: there are 82 beds for children from 0 to 14 years of age, 45 for mothers, 4,000 admissions a year with various pathologies, then 35,000 visits to the surgery, but the figures expand as does the nuns' love and that of all of the staff (218 between doctors and nurses) towards those in need of care.

The environment in which they work is very difficult starting from the complicated social - political situation in this small corner of land. "Palestine is a state" - Sr. Donatella tells us - "that in



To the side: Sr Donatella Lessio next to a sick child and, on the other page, surrounded by children at Christmas. Four Elisabettian nuns work in the Caritas Baby Hospital in Bethlehem: their presence here began exactly forty years ago.



Last year the Caritas Baby Hospital gave assistance to more than 35,000 children.

The hospital is supported by the help from the many voluntary donations.



fact is not a state. It is a land divided by a wall that is over 700 kilometres long and is still being built, in spite of it having been forbidden by the UN resolution, against the Hebrew settlements on Palestinian land or the demolition of houses and entire villages, the up-rooting of olive trees and the military occupation. It is a controversy between Israel and Palestine, the later consisting of two independent territories, the West bank on the western shores of the Jordan River and Gaza, inhabited by Arabs, mainly Muslims. Here Jews, Christians and Muslims live, at one time they were friends, but now they hardly ever meet. Forgiveness does not seem to have a place here”.

- In the meantime people in difficulties who knock at the door are welcomed!

“At the *Caritas Baby Hospital*, the only paediatric centre for children in Cisgiordania, welcoming is inborn in all the people working there. Jews, Christians and Muslims are welcomed. Father Ernest Schnidrig, the founder of the hospital, wrote: ‘I do not want the experience of the Holy Family to re-

peat: they left Nazareth to go to Bethlehem and found shelter in a cave only’. All babies, as soon as they arrive, are wrapped in ‘swaddling bands’, cuddle cured or accompanied towards eternal life. Death is the hardest aspect to deal with as it is impossible to accept that of a little one. Many children are transferred to our Intensive Neonatal and Pediatric Therapeutic Units from the hospitals in Palestine as the mothers say that here their children are well cared for and cured. We do not make converts as we are interested in living the Gospel proclaiming the infinite love of the Father”.

- Where does the Caritas, who runs this Swiss-German non-profit Association, find the money to cover all of these needs?

“The hospital has been financed by funds and private donations ever since 1952, the year of our foundation. Associations, organizations, parishes, dioceses, single citizens and Institutions all give us a helping hand. For example, last February, the Italian ANCI (Italian National Association of Municipalities) financed a ventilator, that was handed to

us by Pope Francis. Then we must not forget the numerous volunteers and the collaboration of some groups of doctors and nurses from the Padua Hospital”.

- Which missions in Bethlehem you are particularly attached to?

“Certainly, with the luck of being here, giving our services in a place so loaded with memories of Christ! It is a great privilege to be servants in the reign of the King of kings! Then our work in the *Caritas Baby Hospital*, a branch of the stable in Bethlehem, is priceless in spite of the fatigue and the difficulties. The evagelical expression ‘Mary and Joseph wrapped him in swaddling bands’ is for us the equivalent of taking care of the little Muslims and Christians who arrive here everyday. The present-day political situation, marked by walls, occupation, check points, and restrictions against man’s liberty, help us to cast our Christian coherence. We are ‘forced’ by the Gospel to love, forgive, have faith and welcome every human being”.

- As you work so hard without a break, do you still find time to pray?

“The hospital has a large chapel. At one time we nuns used to celebrate the Eucharist every day, but then, because of the lack of priests, we have reduced it to Sundays allowing also our staff to participate. Nowadays some groups of pilgrim do the celebration, for them the hospital is the present living stable of Bethlehem. It is open to everyone and it has a statue of Mary with Palestinian characteristics, here, also the Muslim women kneel in prayer before her. We spend a lot of time in prayer, in saying the Rosary and in personal meditation. For some ten years now we have rebelled against the present day situation by saying the Rosary every Friday, along the wall that divides Palestine from Israel, asking for it to fall and for peace to return”.

- And what about Christmas?

“Bethlehem celebrates three christmases: the Latin Christmas, the Orthodox and the Armenian. In these three feasts I see, not a division among Christians, but rather homage to our God for that great gift that he has given us. The celebrations are very lively and one feels an atmosphere of commotion everywhere, the lights shine in the night, welcoming the three patriarchs who enter Bethlehem like the three Magi. Here there is a different air that gives us strength to work for every single little image of the Redeemer”.