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To the Editor

The Holy season of Christmas is upon us and we are already occupied with purchasing gift and the thoughts of the pleasure we would like to give to those we love. It might be appropriate at this particular time to pause for a minute and consider Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus Christ and life of the constantly decreasing Original Christians still living there.

I had the occasion recently to talk to Dr. Batarseh, the Catholic Mayor of Bethlehem. He explained the sorry state of affairs in his town. Israel is proceeding with constructing the "separation fence", which is mostly a 26-foot solid concrete wall at the entrance of Bethlehem. Israel has already taken about 15 % of the municipality by annexing Rachel's Tomb and surrounding areas to Israel. Travel to and from Bethlehem is very difficult and requires permits rarely given. The Bethlehem area has become a large open-air prison. Joseph and Mary would not have been able to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem this year.

The American and international boycott of aid to the Palestinians and Israel's refusal to pay the Palestinians the tax and customs funds collected on their behalf, has resulted in no funds available to pay teachers, public hospitals and municipality workers. Salaries have not been paid for about 10 months. The Mayor stated that he has been traveling to Europe and Asia asking charitable organization to help the town through the various churches in Bethlehem. Some pastors in Bethlehem now pay for garbage collection, street cleaning and repair of streets through funds that are permitted to be transferred to the Bethlehem churches. In the meantime the Christian residents, looking for a better life, are emigrating to join family members overseas. Some day soon no descendants of the Original Christians will be living in Bethlehem, breaking a 2000-year tradition.

The one saving grace is that Bethlehem University, a Catholic university run by the American Christian Brothers, is the largest employer in Bethlehem and thus helps some of the residents of Bethlehem.

Christians in Bethlehem need lots of help. Please pray for them. Urge even-handed U.S. policies and consider additional help either through your parish or our Order.

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