

# Why the Holy Land is the 'fifth gospel' of Christianity



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By [Kevin Jones](#)

Jerusalem, Nov 7, 2018 / 03:07 am ([CNA](#)).- Pilgrimage to the Holy Land is a powerful journey that can ignite Christian faith through seeing the places Jesus walked, worked miracles, died and rose from the dead.

The Franciscans who have served in the region say people should go.

“When you come here, you are very moved by the experience. It puts the gospel in perspective,” Father Athanasius Macora, O.F.M., told CNA from Jerusalem. “It’s a very powerful tool for evangelizing or re-evangelizing Catholics.”

Macora, an American, is a friar of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, which oversees the holy sites, helps support the Christian presence in the Holy Land, and welcomes Christian pilgrims from around the world.

Another Holy Land Franciscan, the Ghana-born Father Benjamin Owusu, O.F.M., reflected that the Christian experience of Jesus Christ preceded the written scriptures.

“Jesus said we should go and proclaim the gospel. And the gospel was proclaimed. People came to believe. But not in the written part of revelation – if the Word became flesh, it became flesh in a place. Where is that place? That is the Holy Land,” Owusu told CNA. “The Holy Land also testifies to the Word made Flesh, and that makes it more real to us.”

“By going to the Holy Land, the Holy Land becomes real in the life of Christians because of what it stands for,” he continued. “It is, as Pope Paul VI put it, the ‘fifth gospel’ which is not written on ink, but written on stones.”

Owusu works in the pilgrimage office of the Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land in America, the Franciscan Custody’s outpost in Washington, D.C. The monastery itself hosts replicas of holy sites and holds various events to help link visitors to the land where Jesus Christ walked.

The Holy Land includes Israel, the Palestinian territories, and parts of Lebanon, Jordan and Syria.

The diversity of Christian sites there range from the churches and other places marking events like the Annunciation in Nazareth, the Nativity in Bethlehem, Jesus’ ministry along the Sea of Galilee, and of course Jerusalem, where the site of Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection is now marked by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Added to these places are the living legacy of the Jewish people. The Wailing Wall, located at the base of the site of the Temple of King David, gathers thousands of Jews who pray and celebrate at the start of every Sabbath.

Muslims too consider Jerusalem a holy site, and the heights Temple Mount, once the site of the Temple, now hosts both the al-Aqsa Mosque and the golden, gleaming Dome of the Rock shrine.

Father Macora said that in his time in the Holy Land, he has witnessed “quite a number of stories” of spiritual enrichment or transformation among Christian pilgrims. People decide to go to confession for the first time in decades because of a visit to the Holy Sepulchre.

“Once I was asked by a friend to guide a woman at the Holy Sepulchre. I don’t think she was practicing her faith, but after she came out of the tomb she was weeping. So she was hit by the experience,” he continued.

Owusu said the Holy Land has played a large role in the Christian imagination “since time immemorial.”

“Believers have always wanted to go back to their roots, to see the places where our salvation history took place. For example, St. Francis of Assisi was so eager to go and see where Jesus was born, where he was crucified, and where he rose again.”

A Holy Land pilgrimage “really helps Christians in their belief, it ignites their faith and helps us to understand the Scripture in a different way.”

Macora has seen pilgrims weeping at the altar in the quiet Basilica of Agony, near the Garden of Gethsemane, the site where Jesus prayed before Judas handed him over to be arrested.

The Franciscan priest, an American who grew up in a military family, has served in the Holy Land for more than 20 years. Among his current roles is guardian of the Flagellation Monastery in Jerusalem.

Meeting local people is an important part of the experience, he commented, as they are “definitely part of the enduring fascination of the Holy Land.” Some people, such as the region’s shepherds, maintain cultural practices similar to those of biblical times. The guides who accompany visitors and pilgrims are very important, serving as “an ambassador of his or her people.”

He also cautioned that the enduring problems and recent history of the Holy Land, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, are something that first-time pilgrims can misunderstand.

“I think that they have to understand how complex the Holy Land is,” said Macora. “I think that they need to hear both sides of the story. There is a conflict going on and there are all kinds of sharp rivalries, even between Christians themselves.”

Israel is about 75 percent Jewish. Its Palestinian population, largely resident in the West Bank and the Gaza strip, is about 18 percent Muslim and two percent Christian, with both Christians and Muslims tending to identify as Palestinian Arab. The Christian population has largely declined due to emigration. Only about 16,000 of the 870,000 residents of Jerusalem are Christian, a significant drop in recent decades, CNEWA reports.

Owusu said there is more to the region than many visitors expect. While people hear about the Holy Land through news media, which often tell stories of violence and conflict, he stressed the importance of “those stories we don’t hear: the day-to-day experiences that go on there among these people, where Christians and Muslims live together in the same place, where Jews and Muslims live together in a particular place.”

“Those things never come on the news,” he said. “These are the things that really make the place real. Not occasional crisis, but the day-to-day life that really goes on. That is what people would really like to know.”

“It is a place where life continues,” he said. “People should not be limited to the bad news, but they should look beyond that and be hopeful.”

However, Macora said it is difficult to make deep contact with local people.

“It takes time to understand certain things and this is not easily achieved,” he said. “For someone coming to the Holy Land for the first time, there is a lot of information, almost too much, to process on the first pilgrimage.”

For Owusu, the Holy Land should never be “a museum where you go and only see places.”

“The people are formed in Mother Church, especially the Christians in the Holy Land,” he said. “The people reflect the reality and the history of what we know about the place, especially in connecting it to the Scriptures.”

While Americans can be skeptical of visiting the region, Owusu said locals receive Americans “with two arms open, as they would receive the Polish or the Italians.” Travel to the Holy Land is positive for both the pilgrim and the host.

“It brings them together,” said the priest. “Pilgrimage in this land is also a sign of hope. The people mostly depend on pilgrimages and they also see that, irrespective of whatever situation the American comes from, there is another brother on the other side of the world that may bring them hope.”

“What you bring back from the holy land is faith. You take your faith there and you bring it back,” Owusu said.

Pilgrim groups hit a record high in January 2018, with 770 groups bringing 26,000 people, the Custody of the Holy Land-sponsored Christian Information Center said in February. In January 2017 only 529 groups visited and a year prior only 390 did.

Israeli government statistics indicate over half of 2017 tourists were Christian and one-quarter were coming on pilgrimage, with over 40 percent having previously visited Israel. The number of Chinese, Russian and Eastern European pilgrims were on the rise, the Jerusalem Post reported in February.

Israeli tourism minister Yariv Levin credited the increase in tourism to his office’s changes, including an improved visa process.

While travel costs and can be a barrier for a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Owusu said it is possible with some financial preparation.

“It’s a life experience,” he said. Those with a desire to go could afford it by saving about a thousand dollars a year for several years, he estimated.

Those who want to go on a pilgrimage should contact the Franciscans who work there, he suggested.

“We’ve been doing this since time immemorial,” said Owusu.

The Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land in America has information on pilgrimages at the website [holylandpilgrimages.org](http://holylandpilgrimages.org).

<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/why-the-holy-land-is-the-fifth-gospel-of-christianity-46396>