

SERVING THE CHURCH IN THE DIOCESE OF CORPUS CHRISTI

SOUTH TEXAS

# Catholic

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A photograph of two hikers standing in a field of tall grass and brush. The hiker on the left is wearing a light-colored bucket hat, a blue jacket, and a clear plastic poncho. The hiker on the right is wearing a dark hooded jacket and sunglasses. Both are holding trekking poles. The background shows a misty, hilly landscape.

*Thank You Lord*

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Christian and Muslim students at 40 schools in Israel, Palestine, and Jordan are financially supported by the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre.

## Corpus Christi faithful focused on the Holy Land

**Tom Cullinan**  
Contributor

It's neither a well-kept secret nor a secret society, but a growing number of Catholics in the Diocese of Corpus Christi have made a faith-filled commitment to support Christians in the Holy Land. They are part of a lay apostolate known worldwide as the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem. The order is an international group of Catholics dedicated to propagation of the faith, defense of the weak, and it is especially focused on charity toward Christians in the Holy Land.

The ongoing hostility in the Middle East and the Holy Land is evident in the denial of religious freedom and the destruction of churches, shrines, and other holy sites. Persecution of the

Church has forced many thousands of middle-class Christians out of the region. It is a true exodus, reducing their number to barely two percent of the population and still declining. Those few who remain are mainly craft workers, tradesmen, and hospitality workers financially supported by visiting pilgrims.

Corpus Christi members of the order continue to respond to the oppression. "We were first attracted to support the Holy Land through the order once I understood that there were no other logical parties to do so," explained Bobby Gough. "The rapid loss of Christians — due to the lack of business opportunities and the inherent dangers of living among terrorists — means that outside

help is desperately needed."

Daphne and Paul Laudadio also feel called to alleviate the suffering. "We want them to know that, even as far away from their plight as we were, they are in our prayers and given tangible financial assistance," Paul said.

Small minorities persist only if their skills are high enough to earn them the esteem of the society in which they live, and this can only be achieved with high standards of education and training. The order provides spiritual, financial, and humanitarian assistance to help these Christians achieve educational and professional standards, thus enabling them to play active and productive roles in their own countries.

Through the Latin Patriarch of





Contributed photo

Dame Kathleen Cullinan of Corpus Christi receives the pilgrim shell from Bishop Boulos Marcusz, Latin Patriarchal Vicar for Jerusalem and Palestine.

*Contributed photo*

Jerusalem, the order provides contributions that fund schools, seminaries, renovations, and other projects. For example, it currently pays the salaries of more than 1,500 teachers and staff at 40 schools in Israel, Palestine, and Jordan where Christians and Muslims study and learn to live together. It also provides direct support for needy families and refugees in the biblical lands, including housing.

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"My total dedication became more personal when I spoke with a priest in Palestine and asked for his thoughts about the difficulty for those who remain there. He told me straight out that the church could not survive without the help of the order," said Bishop Michael Mulvey, Bishop of Corpus Christi, who has been a member for some 15 years.

A primary goal for all knights and dames of the order is to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land where they walk in the terrain and discover sites depicted in the Bible, giving life to what might previously have been mere mental images. This is done not as a sightseeing trip or vacation, but rather as a joyful act of faith. The waves of pilgrims have been rising, from 11,000 in 2016 to 16,000 in 2017 and 26,000 last year. Not surprisingly, during these years the number of groups bringing them doubled to 770, with likely more in 2019.

For members of the order, the Holy Land pilgrimage is experienced personally as a religious reawakening and learning experience in the land of Jesus. It is also an opportunity to meet a few of the people they are supporting and to show them they are not forgotten.

Bishop Mulvey remembers entering a cave where Jesus was held overnight in Caiphus' house before the crucifixion. "The brutality, starkness, and coldness of that space struck me very deeply," he recalled. "It gave me chills. I could only imagine being in there with him and knowing how much he suffered out of love for me and for every person."

"Our Holy Land pilgrimage experience was surreal," said Paul Laudadio. "We were walking in the land that our Lord Jesus Christ embodied here on earth."

Father James Stembler, Vicar General and Moderator of the Curia for the Diocese of Corpus Christi, added, "It is truly a blessing to walk in the same land that the Son of God walked."

Pilgrims are permitted to enter the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre and participate in a Solemn High Mass. "While waiting to enter his tomb, my legs became weak and shook as I was humbled and blessed to be there," recalled Bobby Gough. "Entering the tomb with free-flowing tears was the most significant and powerful moment in my life."

As a symbol of completing the journey, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem confers a pin with special distinction on members — a pilgrim shell to be worn on their cloaks. An average of 12 groups of the order from across the world visit the Patriarchate each month. Pilgrimages sponsored by the order are also available to nonmembers and non-Catholics on a space-available basis.

In Corpus Christi, members of the order assemble regularly to strengthen their faith, including a holy hour of adoration at the "pink sisters" Blessed Sacrament Convent Chapel each month. Members participate in the Chrism Mass and feast of the Exaltation of the True Cross held at the Corpus Christi Cathedral in September and worship at their home parish for the feast of Our Lady of Palestine in October. They also gather for social events each spring and prior to Christmas.

Some members say that participating in the order reinforces their attitude about the good works of the Catholic church. Marcy and Neil Hayes observed that while they have always been involved in the church, "During our 10 years in the order, we became even more involved."

To learn more about the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem and its Southwest Lieutenancy, visit [eohssouthwest.com](http://eohssouthwest.com) or email Chuck Cazalas at [hccazalas@sbcglobal.net](mailto:hccazalas@sbcglobal.net). 