

Sunday Independent

1,093,000 READERS

IFRA QUALITY CLUB MEMBER

Vol. 99 No. 52

December 26, 2004

€2.00 (£1.30 in Northern Ireland)

(From bottom of page 3)

Oh little town of Bethlehem, how grim we see thee lie: 78 barriers to peace on earth

CONAL URQUHART
in BETHLEHEM

CHECKPOINTS are a way of life for Br Fergus McArdle. He experienced them as a teacher in Northern Ireland during the Troubles and now as vice-president of Bethlehem University he cannot leave the West Bank city without crossing one. The main checkpoint is garlanded with Christmas lights but they cannot disguise the sense of oppression felt in the city which is now surrounded by high walls and Jewish settlements.

Midnight mass is supposed to be Bethlehem's great festival but instead it highlights the gloom felt by the Palestinian inhabitants of Bethlehem, both Muslim and Christian.

"There is a feeling that the place is being strangled," said Br McArdle, who was brought up in Dundalk before joining the De La Salle Brothers.

According to the UN, Bethlehem is surrounded by 78 physical obstacles, including 10 checkpoints and 55 blocked roads. The town is partially surrounded by six miles of 20-foot concrete wall. Israel plans to build a further 20 miles of walls and barriers.

His students are regularly harassed and teachers, many who live in nearby Jerusalem, worry that the completion of the wall may force them to decide whether their future is in Israeli-controlled Jerusalem or Palestinian Authority-controlled Bethlehem.

A United Nations report published this week said that tourism, Bethlehem's main industry, has been devastated by the four-year old Intifada. The number visiting Bethlehem has dropped from 91,726 in 2000 to 7,249 in 2004.

The Christian community, 30,000 of Bethlehem's 60,000 population, has dropped by



TEACHER: Br McArdle is vice-chancellor of Bethlehem University

almost 10 per cent since 2000. "Christians feel threatened by the Israelis for being Arab and by the Muslims for being Christian," said Br McArdle.

Bethlehem University was set up in 1973 by the Vatican and the De La Salle Brothers

to help stabilise the Christian presence in Bethlehem and the Holy Land. It is funded by church groups all over the world and government donations. The Irish government currently funds courses in midwifery, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, water research and emergency nurses at the university, but it plans to halt funding in two years.

The student body consists of 70 per cent Muslims and 30 per cent Christians. The anomaly presents no problem for Br McArdle. "The university was meant to be a beacon to the Christian community but it was also meant to be an example of Christian spirit: love thy neighbour whoever they may be. We believe everybody has their own way to God whether they be Christian or Muslim," he said.

Bethlehem is like any other Palestinian city. Apart from the abundance of churches,

the main indication of its Christian culture is the presence of young women with flowing hair in tight jeans and the open sale of alcohol.

The Church of the Nativity this week was visited by small groups of tourists. It is entered by a narrow, five-foot high doorway which gives onto an empty, pillared nave.

Beneath the sanctuary is a warren of caves where Jesus is believed to have been born. Despite the everyday feel of the town, the church and its grottoes still exude an air of mystery with ancient tapestries, paintings and Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic rituals. Br McArdle said he was excited by the prospect of working in the town that he had sung about in hymns when he arrived here two years ago.

"This is where it all started. If it had not, my life would have been very different and

the world would have been a very different place."

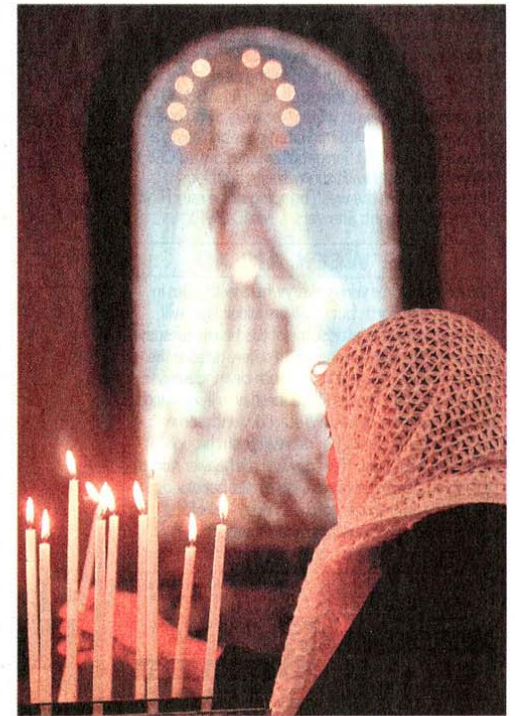
However life in Bethlehem is difficult for its inhabitants.

"Some of the kids have to get up at 5.30am to travel small distances to get here and they often suffer abuse on the way but they still arrive smiling," he said.

Br McArdle recalled checkpoints when he taught in Downpatrick but feels that the Israeli treatment of Palestinians is often more about humiliation than security.

"On the day of a maths exam last year, the students were made to hold up their calculators as they walked through the checkpoint. The soldier collected them and then smashed them up.

"At other times the students will be made to show their notes and the soldiers select one in every five and rip them up. That could be a whole term's work," he said.



HOPE: A Palestinian woman lights candles by a statue of the Madonna in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem