
Basilicata to support artisans in Bethlehem in the spirit of St Joseph

Support for local artisans in the birthplace of Saint Joseph, the artisan par excellence, in the year dedicated to him. The initiative was developed by **QUM social cooperative**, operational branch of Caritas in Tursi-Lagonegro, (Basilicata, southern Italy), comprising 8 partners. It was inspired by a Sicilian priest, **Don Piero Sortino**, who proposed to launch a campaign for the purchase of small statues of the patriarch-Saint made by craftsmen in Bethlehem, thus creating an opportunity to work after an almost year-long compulsory suspension due to the pandemic. A small factory in the city was chosen for this purpose, employing Christians and Muslims.



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Last Christmas, the cooperative supported a number of small shops in the Holy Land through the purchase and shipment of olive-wood souvenirs. The new project is dedicated to St Joseph: "The Pope recently proclaimed the Year of St Joseph, this inspired me to dedicate this initiative to him, the most distinguished citizen of Bethlehem after King David, and the Patron Saint of workers and providence", said Father Sortino. " We also wanted it to have a social purpose directed to all wood artisans - the profession of Saint Joseph - currently facing serious difficulties as a result of the pandemic. **The project of QUM social cooperative.** The first contacts with the Bethlehem factory were met with tears of joy. "They were deeply moved, they almost broke out in tears. These craftsmen haven't worked or received wages for almost a year," the priest said. "Ten of these artisans are working for us today." The co-op has already commissioned over three hundred small statues of St Joseph, with a target of five hundred. "The people running the factory told us that if we manage to successfully place orders for them, fifteen craftsmen will receive a sum amounting to a one-month salary".



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"This is our next goal, in preparation for St Joseph's Day on 19 March. However, we intend to keep this project going all year round, we would like to help these workers for as long as possible." Their work system consists of orders from all over Italy to the social cooperative, which then commissions a given number of orders from the Bethlehem factory. After receiving the statues, the coop will handle the packaging. Each statue will be individually packaged and shipped to all those who have placed an order and made a contribution. "We have not spoken about prices, just a solidarity contribution for these families of artisans," the priest said. We are thereby creating a spiritual bond, a twinning, with the city of Bethlehem." **The gratitude of the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem.** The initiative received the endorsement of the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, **Msgr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa**, who sent a video thanking the diocese of Tursi-Lagonegro, its bishop, Msgr. Vincenzo Orofino, and the QUM cooperative. "Through this initiative you are preserving the ties with our diocese, with the very poor area of Bethlehem," he said. "I am well aware that there are problems everywhere. I imagine that there are also problems in Tursi. Yet, despite this, you have chosen to think of us. We thank you for that. From here, everything we can do, first and foremost praying for you from the Holy Sepulchre, we will do with all our heart."

Filippo Passantino