



Foreign students of the Bethlehem Icon Center present the works executed during their course to be blessed by an archbishop.



Archbishop Joseph Jules Zerey (right) of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church blesses foreign students of the Bethlehem Icon Center.



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'Iconography as a profession'

Bethlehem is part of the West Bank, the Palestinian territory that has been occupied by Israel for 50 years and which struggles with unemployment and poverty. Knowles points out that obtaining the best materials from Jerusalem is impossible for many Palestinians since they are barred from crossing over from the West Bank. Wearing a paint-stained apron, he says the center is also a way of serving the local Christian communities.

Christians have gone from 20 percent of the Palestinian population to slightly more than one percent over the course of 50 years. "I wanted to do something which could really help to rebuild the iconography as a proper tradition and a constituent part of the Christian community here," he said. "I think people know the Christian population in Bethlehem has been

devastated over the last 50 years." Knowles said that "culturally, the Christian community is a bit on its own, so it seems to me that it was an important thing that I could offer-to teach iconography as a profession rather just as a hobby".

This year, 36 Palestinians have registered, paying fees of around 25 euros. A partnership has also been formed with The Prince's School of Traditional Arts in London, allowing 10 Bethlehem students to earn a British diploma in iconography recognized worldwide. The center has already achieved one particular point of pride: Knowles and three of his students have produced two icons for Lichfield Cathedral in Britain and are to complete a third next summer. — AFP



Ian Knowles (center), British director of the Bethlehem Icon Center advises foreign students of the Bethlehem Icon Center.