

One of the basic rights that we have here in Ontario is the right to an education, and especially one where we can educate our students within a Catholic environment. While we are able to enjoy this right without cost, there are many places in the world, and here in Canada, where a Catholic education comes at a cost, sometimes financial, and sometimes even more than money.

In our archdiocese, Cardinal Collins has placed an emphasis on helping Christians who are being persecuted for their faith to come to Ontario to start a new life, free from the threats they face simply because of their religious beliefs. As we know, parishes across the archdiocese sponsor families, and more recently, through Project Hope and with the support of many people across the Greater Toronto Area, we are working to bring over 100 families to Toronto. This is one of the ways that we live out the Gospel value to love one another as I have loved you.

Today we gather to recognize those who have extended the hands of Christ by sponsoring a student in the Holy Land to receive an education. Through the generosity of our sponsors, over sixty children have been able to attend the Greek Catholic Patriarchate School in Beit Sahour, the town where Jesus' birth was announced to the shepherds in the fields. In addition to a basic education, the students learn about their heritage, recycle paper and glass to make arts and crafts, and are in a partnership with Bethlehem University to help with training and future job prospects at schools.

In giving thanks to our sponsors, know that you are doing more than helping a child to complete their education – you are also helping to preserve the presence of Christians in the Holy Land. Thank you for helping to send over \$28,000 this year and \$75,000 since 2012 to help these students with their education. Today, we provide each sponsor with a profile of the student they support, and a thank you letter from the school and student – a tangible way to show how your support is making a difference.

I would also like to thank Brother Hikmat Dandan of Jesus the King Arab Christian Council 15045 of the Knights of Columbus, whose vision and dedication has brought this project to life, and who enthusiastically spreads the news about the need to support Christian students in the Holy Land. Brother Hikmat, and Council 15045's efforts were recognized at our Supreme Convention in 2013 as the recipient of the International Youth Service Program Award. While the sponsored students are thanking their sponsors, I know they are also deeply appreciative of the efforts of Brother Hikmat and the members of the Council for all they are doing to make it possible to receive a Catholic education. Thank you Brother Hikmat!