

John Baptist Greco

1895 - 1986

"We're not trying to convert people. We're trying to bring them closer to Christianity. We're trying to inspire goodwill and better understanding."

- John Greco

John Baptist Greco, the inspired organizer who spearheaded the creation of Holy Land U.S.A., was born in Waterbury on March 27, 1895. He moved to Italy as a young boy where he stayed until he was thirteen when he returned to Waterbury and worked in his father's shoe repair shop. In later years, after withdrawing from seminary study, he received a law degree from Yale University where he was a distinguished scholar.

Greco worked with the poor as an attorney and with the church as a layman. In 1934, he organized the Catholic Campaigners for Christ, a lay group dedicated to religious teaching. For almost twenty years he and his followers visited communities from Maine to Georgia. They preached at street corners, jails, parks, cotton fields and almost anywhere; explaining their Faith.

In 1952, Greco and Anthony Coviello lead a Connecticut campaign to put Christ back into Christmas. In the aftermath of the movement, he and his co-workers began building Nativity scenes which they sent to localities in Connecticut and elsewhere.

During 1956 a seventeen-acre site, on Pine Hill, was acquired by Greco who transformed the area of worthless ledge into a major tourist attraction. With the help of friends, he developed a miniature replica of Holy Land in the Middle East, recreating buildings and structures of Bethlehem and Jerusalem to one quarter the original size. The purpose of Holy Land was explained by a sign at the entrance which said: "A group of dedicated men present a pictorial story of the life of Christ from cradle to the Cross - it is our prayerful wish that the project will provide a pleasant way to increase your knowledge of God's Own Book and bring you closer to Him." Over forty-four thousand visitors annually came to Holy Land from all over the United States and Canada while it was featured in national and international publications. By the early 1980's tourism ceased as Holy Land deteriorated due to vandalism and weather.



For more than half his life Greco had been devoted to apostolic work. He received many honors during his lifetime. Locally, former Mayor Victor Membruno and the American Legion paid him tributes. He was lauded by Governor Grasso for his meaningful years of love for others, enthusiasm, hard work and dedication to his cause. Greco was praised by Presidents Reagan and Carter and Israel made him an honorary citizen of Bethlehem. In 1957, he was proclaimed a Knight of Saint Gregory by Pope Pius XII.

At the top of Pine Hill a fifty-two foot Cross, illuminated at night, stands as one of Waterbury's most well-known and most visible landmarks, seen for miles by pedestrians, motorists and air travelers. John Greco, who died on March 9, 1986 was a small, wiry modest man who left a large spiritual gift to his hometown.