



Aid to the
Church in Need

ACN AUSTRALIA

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On the first anniversary of the explosion in the port of Beirut, the city still struggles to cope with its wounds

On the eve of the commemorations for the first anniversary of the explosion in the port of Beirut, which at precisely 18:07 on August 4, 2020 devastated the port and the Christian quarters of the Lebanese capital – especially Gemmayzé, Mar Mikhaël, la Quarantaine, Achrafieh, Bourj Hammoud – leaving over 200 people dead and 6500 wounded, the Lebanese people are hovering between rebellion and fatalism.

August 4 has been decreed by the Lebanese Council of Ministers as a day of national mourning, with all work suspended in government administrations and public institutions, and large crowds will gather in the port of Beirut for a ceremony presided over by the Maronite Patriarch Béchara Raï.

However, for the ordinary people, already overwhelmed by the profound crisis afflicting the country ever since October 2019 – by the endemic corruption, decaying public infrastructure, hospitals on the edge of collapse in the face of a continuing Covid-19 pandemic – there is still no light at the end of the tunnel. In the hospitals, many of the nurses have already left to work abroad, and the same is true of many doctors, who have either left or are seeking to leave. Catholic school teachers, faced with a salary that is no longer enough even to feed their families, are likewise resigning, hoping to emigrate. By the end of last year over 380,000 requests for emigration papers had been submitted to the embassies of the EU countries, Canada and United States... The future of the country looks bleak indeed!

Well over 50% of the population now live below the poverty threshold, and today one can even say destitution. At the Holy Family School in Jounieh, a good 20 km from Beirut, Sister Eva Abou Nassar, the school's administrative director, confided to us that she has already lost around 20 teachers in June and July. "Most of them want to emigrate, since they can simply no longer make ends meet. Their purchasing power has fallen drastically. Whereas before the crisis a starting salary of 1,525 million Lebanese pounds (LL) were roughly equivalent to 1000 US dollars, with the collapse of the Lebanese pound it is now worth no more than 75 or 80 US dollars. An experienced teacher earns twice that much, but that is still far too little. Whereas before the crisis one dollar was worth 1500 Lebanese pounds, it is now being exchanged on the parallel market for 18,500 LL."

Since Lebanon has to import almost everything, it all has to be paid for in dollar terms. “A tin of baby milk – and you need two a week – costs 250,000 Lebanese pounds. And to hire a generator (since the public electricity supply only operates for between two and four hours a day) costs 600,000 LL a month – while the minimum wage is just 675,000. Getting a spare part for your car can cost you between two and four months average salary... Some of the families here in Jounieh, a town not generally regarded as being poor, actually go out early in the morning, in order not to be seen, scavenging food from the dustbins!”

“Pope Francis has given us hope that we can confront this crisis, with his appeal to the universal Church not to let us go under. The Pope is not going to abandon the Church in Lebanon! We are regaining some degree of confidence, despite all the difficulties. Why should we fear others when we have our faith in Jesus Christ? The yeast may be little in quantity, but it can leaven the whole loaf!” This is the conclusion of Father Père Raymond Abdo, Provincial of the Order of Discalced Carmelites in Lebanon, who welcomes ACN to the monastery of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Hazmieh, one of the suburbs of Beirut.

The international Catholic pastoral charity and pontifical foundation Aid to the Church in Need (ACN International) is heavily committed to supporting the Lebanese people struck by this crisis, which has lasted since the autumn of 2019, and by the consequences of the explosion on August 4, 2020 in the port of Beirut.

Already, in its projects for the year 2020, ACN has invested some 4,414,000 AUD in the reconstruction of pastoral infrastructure destroyed by the explosion, and an additional 3,628,900 AUD in emergency relief aid, along with other aid for pastoral support, transport, basic subsistence and so forth – all in all a total of over 8 million AUD.

To help the people in Lebanon visit www.aidtochurch.org/lebanon

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