

World Humanitarian Day: A Gaza resident's story of loss and survival

For the last 10 months, the world has witnessed one of the worst humanitarian crises unfold in Gaza. The region has become the most dangerous place in the world to be a child, with vulnerable families facing violence on a daily basis.

The death toll has surpassed 40,000 people, according to local health authorities. More than 1.7 million people have been forced to flee their homes and 96 per cent of Gazans are experiencing high levels of food insecurity.

In response to these challenges, Caritas Australia is working with partners on the ground to provide urgent assistance to people displaced and affected by the war in Gaza. Majdi Al Jelda is a former employee of Caritas Jerusalem and is an eyewitness to the horror people in Gaza continue to face. Majdi arrived in Australia in April, escaping from the war and seeking a safe path for himself and his family.

As Majdi adjusts to his new life away from his beloved Gaza, he shared his experience with Monsignor John Woods, Vicar for Social Services and Welfare from the Catholic Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn, who is an advocate for peace and a permanent ceasefire in Gaza.

Can you tell us about where you lived and grew up in Gaza? What are some of your favourite memories?

I was born and raised in Gaza, I'm 32 years old and I lived in Gaza all my life before moving to Australia last April. I studied in schools run by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) until year nine and did my high school years at a public school.

I have a Diploma in Accounting from Al Azhar University and a Bachelor's degree in Accounting from the University of Palestine. Shortly after graduating, I started working as an accountant before moving to the department of marketing and communications. For the last five years, I worked for Caritas Jerusalem, supporting people in need in my region and around the world. The memories I share with my Caritas Jerusalem colleagues revolve around them being my second family. I really enjoyed working and sharing my time with them.

I started learning music in 2000. During the following years I participated in the orchestra of Edward Said National Music Institute of Birzeit University. Just until before the war erupted, I was an accordion teacher at Al Sununu Institute. As a musician, I have participated in multiple festivals and concerts for local organisations.

You're from a Christian family in Gaza, what is the local church community like?

I was a follower of the Orthodox Church of Saint Porphyrius. The Christian community in Gaza was divided into two churches, the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church, but we were all like a small family who knows and communicates with each other

The number of Christians in Gaza is very low in comparison to the whole population. Before the war started last October, we were 1,037 people of 2.5 million inhabitants.

We always faced difficulties celebrating our holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, and we had to acquire an entry permit to visit holy places like Jerusalem or Bethlehem due to the Israeli occupation. Most of the time our permits would be denied, even though our Christian community had no relations to political parties whatsoever.

Can you tell us a bit about the work you were doing for Caritas Jerusalem prior to October 2023?

I worked as a Communication and Media officer for Caritas Jerusalem. I was responsible for filming all projects from both Health and Socio-Pastoral interventions. I used to capture photos, films, interviews and much more with my camera and also worked as an editor. Thanks to my films, many projects got renewed and many more got started after existing and potential donors got to know our work better. I was also responsible for our official Facebook page.

Could you tell us - however much or little you feel comfortable sharing – about what you and/or your community have experienced since October 7th?

On 7 October 2023, I woke up and started to get ready for work, as I did on any other regular day. Suddenly, we started hearing continuous sounds of bombing everywhere. We had no idea what was going on, but we had this inner fear that a war had just started. That morning, we received messages from work to remain at home. I lived with my family in the north of Gaza, the area which was marked for evacuation by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF).

Both the Orthodox and Catholic Churches are located close to each other, so most Christians took refuge there, including myself and my family. We spent 195 consecutive days there, the hardest days of my life. We couldn't move outside the church's walls, sometimes we couldn't move at all. We had to sleep in one room that we shared with 100 more people.

Food and water were scarce. Bombing was around us and close to us all the time. We used to spend our time in the church either praying or trying to enjoy with family, friends and the other people around us. This experience made us become closer to each other; we became like a family.

War was hard, war is still hard. Even now, although I have been able to leave, I am worried all the time for my family and friends who remained there facing bombing and famine.

Despite the daily violence, Caritas Jerusalem staff continued their work supporting people in need. Through Caritas Jerusalem support, a small health clinic was set up right next to the Catholic Church where medical services were provided for free. I used to film and edit videos about individuals who received critical medical care in times of medical care absence.

The day I read my name on travel statements it was a sad day. To leave Gaza, my church and friends, without knowing if I would ever return, it was really hard for me. My journey from the north to the south of Gaza was quite challenging, I had to walk for six hours carrying my luggage, my grandmother's and my brother's, as he has special needs. We walked for 12 kilometres under the hot sun and surrounded by bombing and uncertainty of safe arrival.

Where were you living before you left? What was it like there?

I was a different Majdi. I was a Majdi who loved waking up in the morning because I would go to work and spend the day with my colleagues - they were like family to me. Together, we were making a positive change in our small world, a world within the walls of the siege. I enjoyed walking by the sea and spending time with my friends, going out at night and trying new restaurants. I loved having people over and playing music on my balcony at night which had the best view in the world with the moonlight covering Gaza.

I enjoyed my time with my students at the institute and enjoyed my time with my friends at music festivals. I was really happy there. If Gaza returned to its old self, would all my friends be able to return as well? And if they all did come back, can we go back to how we were?

What has your experience of Australia been like so far?

My experience has been amazing! It is a new experience of travelling abroad, experiencing a safe life. Unfortunately, it's underlined by the sorrow of leaving behind my home, my extended family, and my friends.

If it was up to me, I would have travelled in better circumstances, not having to leave everything behind and escape. But this was my chance to save my family's and my own life. I am glad I could start from scratch in a place full of potential and stability, somewhere safe where no conflicts would prevent me from living.

What are your hopes for Gaza, for yourself and for your family?

I hope the war ends soon. This war took our beloved ones, our friends and many good people who had no relation to this political conflict. Human suffering must stop. I hope and pray for Gaza to return to its beautiful self that we used to know. Now it is a ghost

city where everything is destroyed. Even the sea lost its charm. As for my hopes for my family, I hope we live a peaceful life here full of success and happiness.

“War is an affront to our humanity” - Monsignor John Woods

Majdi’s sharing personalises the media reports and images of the war in Gaza. War sees relationships, hopes and aspirations on hold if not extinguished. Hearts and minds are hardened, infrastructure destroyed. This is contrary to the call of the Gospel.

Celebrating the Assumption of Mary last week, we gave thanks that we are made for eternal glory, and to be ‘signs and instruments’ of the reign of God this side of the grave (John 10:10). War is an affront to our humanity. It divides what love seeks to unite. “No more war!”, insists Pope Francis.

The Australian Catholic Bishops on 8 May 2024 echoed his call when they said, “We believe that a just ceasefire with the release of all hostages and unhindered access for desperately needed aid are essential at this time. We support global efforts to negotiate a lasting peace.”

Of course, as St. Pope John Paul II insisted, a lasting peace can only be founded on justice for all. Our prayer is that people of good will prevail. May the one who prayed for the forgiveness for his persecutors send the Spirit of reconciliation into troubled hearts and minds. Meanwhile, might the humanitarian relief work of Caritas Australia and its colleagues afford the afflicted reason to hope for a better future. Ours is an incarnate faith.

We respond to the Gospel imperative in prayer, reflection and action in our time and place. Besides donating to Caritas Australia or any recognised charity, you might write to your local newspaper and federal parliamentarians to express your concerns.

To support Caritas Australia’s Gaza Appeal, visit www.caritas.org.au/donate/emergency-appeals/gaza-crisis or call 1800 024 413 toll free.

*Monsignor John Woods was ordained in 1978 for the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn. He has held various parish and administrative appointments, and is currently the Parish Priest of Transfiguration Parish, North Woden and Vicar of Social Services and Welfare. Since 1986 he has been Chaplain to the Canberra Raiders.