

Where Christianity begins - villages in the south of Lebanon.

First visit

“Go there and see what you can do for these people!” - Father Elia sends us to villages in South Lebanon where Christians live among Muslims.

We are accompanied by Father George, a treasurer of the Maronite diocese of Beirut and Nelly, a lecturer working at three universities. They both come from that area. "I completed my PhD in France at one of the best universities, I received a lucrative job offer, and I also have a French passport", Nelly says about herself. “Then why are you here when everyone is trying to immigrate?” - we ask. "It's very hard, but I feel the Mission given by God," she explains. In a moment she adds that the villages in the South are part of Galilee, that we must stop the demographic catastrophe and the outflow of Christians, that Lebanon can be something more than a sinking, wrecked ship.



Father George passionately tells us about the difficult history of the places we are visiting. The village of Kfour in particular is marked by the pain of the Lebanese drama of wars sweeping through the country.

We meet the residents who warmly welcomed us. We are also introduced to father Youseff, whose father was also a priest here but was murdered in the past in unexplained circumstances. Although not free from doubts, he patches up the wounds of the local community. He tries to be a shepherd for a community that lives in very difficult conditions: there is no work, no electricity, life is becoming more and more difficult. Young people tell us about their dreams of renovating churches and establishing a cultural center so that people from cities have a reason to visit and return to their roots. They are trying to hold on to their land in such critical conditions.

This one-day trip moved us deeply. It also allowed us to touch the essence of Christian migration in Lebanon, which begins in such places. People are first forced to move to bigger cities, then return to villages less and less often because they cannot afford gasoline or have to take up additional work. If the situation in a big city becomes unbearable, they emigrate. Previously, they went to Europe, Australia, Canada, the USA, now it is so bad that they choose the Gulf countries or even Africa.

There is a big work to be done to support our Brothers in the smaller towns of Lebanon. We start with small steps by installing 50 solar lamps for families in two villages. The lamps also illuminated their churches. By the way, the local electrician got a temporarily job to! All this thanks to this year's "Three Kings Procession".

Second visit

We went to Homisyeh and Kfour again in the summer, during the visit of representatives of Domus Orentalis and Caritas Łódź. Fathers Elia and Guillaume were with us too. We needed their support in making a realistic assessment of the possibilities of our involvement which will not only bring real help, but will not in any way increase existing tensions.



It was not an easy visit. Sometimes it takes time before our intentions are understood, sometimes we have to say "no" to the ideas that seem to be a priority for people/communities in need. This is always a key moment. A moment when assertiveness must be combined with respect, so as not to be perceived as another Western NGO that came to tell people how to live and what to do.

We believe that we managed to find a way how to take the next steps after installing the lamps. Besides, people were very thankful for the lamps.



School in Galilee. Third journey.

Let's give voice to Sumar, the head of our Mission, who understands the complexity of functioning in a mixed environment like no other. After all, she is a Christian herself, but she was born as a Muslim:

„All is set. It's Thursday morning and we are on the way to Nabatieh. First time going there, but it feels like a deep nostalgia to a place we never actually knew. Something pulling us toward this region and its history, toward the stories we heard and the dreams we are having.



A one hour drive and we are already there. We were greeted by Fr Youssef who was following up with us on the phone and was worried we might get lost on the way. We had to confess that we grabbed the opportunity to have a coffee in a shawarma snack, which was not open yet. Don't ask too many questions, it's Lebanon after all and only God knows how the owner managed to get us coffee for two.

There in the school, we met with Sr Marie Touma. Her warm welcome and calm tone felt like we have known her since some time. The conversation was flowing effortlessly, we could immediately feel we share the love for the mission and the common vision for the future of the Christian community over there.

She told us that the school celebrated 70 years in 2022, and recalled how the inhabitants of the area called out at the time to have a Catholic school established in the area and how the campus expanded little by little to become this beautiful institution.



Of course the war had its toll on it and it was closed for some time, but was open again as soon as the peace was restored.

Sr Marie recounted the past at the school when the Christian / Muslim students ratio was 50/50. A touching sign about the history of cohabitation, the common traditions between the two communities, and the trust in the quality of education offered by the school. She tells us that unfortunately, nowadays, the Christian students registered at the school from the surrounding villages, don't amount to 10% of the students 'body. It's a simple reflection of the reality of the surrounding community where most of the Christians migrated either to other parts of the country or abroad. A high price to pay for the war, the occupation and the distorted consequences. Those students whose parents stayed are the poorest among the students with almost zero financial capabilities.

She acknowledges that she has a soft spot for the children of Kfour. It all started when she went to help Fr Youssef in the preparation for the first communion in Kfour and noticed them. As she described her reaction and how "she started to fish them one after the other" to enroll them in the school in the prospect to receive a decent level of education, we couldn't hide our smiles because someone was willing to make the effort and find the means.

She was so proud explaining how they caught up with the other students and how they demonstrated their abilities and will to achieve.



We were choking with questions and she was gladly offering us the answers along with homemade lemonade and cookies, making sure we taste all. She invited us to look through the window and check the high school students during recess, to show us that all of the students here, regardless of their background, come from families who want their children to grow up in an open environment that offers them the opportunity for learning and communication, with only five nuns undertaking the mission and operating a school with both French and English programs.

What touched us the most is the fact that the school is a pillar for the Christian community in the area, not just for the education of the students but also for the survival of the people who work at the school and their families, whether in the administration or as teachers. All the administrative body is Christian and around thirty teachers as well. They all share the deep understanding that they don't stand a chance to survive if it wasn't up to the school

offering them the opportunity to put bread on the table, make a living and survive the hard circumstances surrounding them. The easiest choice is always to migrate to Beirut and maybe visit the villages during the weekends or file for immigration abroad. But with the financial crisis, even coming back for a short vacation is considered an unaffordable luxury.

How Sr Marie embraced Mother Teresa de Calcuta to be her patron saint and intercessor to help her undertake her mission as a director of the school was our final heart melting moment when we realized it doesn't take a lot to know where our hearts will stay. It was pretty much moving to listen to her how she seeks to live Christ like her without having to mention him.



It's time to leave and Fr Youssef escorts us outside to the car. He insists we assure him when we reach Beirut. And yes, on the way back, we try to keep calm and we try to convince ourselves we need time to think as we told them. But the truth is we are already brainstorming, hatching ideas, and...the story shall continue."

What's next?

- 26 children from Kfour study at school, to start with, we decide to provide 6 of them with an annual scholarship, which will almost entirely cover the cost of tuition fees. This is how the "First Step" program works.
- We continue installing the lamps.
- We intend to conduct cultural activities as part of YBTE projects
- Over time, we will try to introduce the "Get a Job!" project to Kfour and other villages in South Lebanon.