

## „First Step” in Lebanon – what’s new?

### 1. Beirut

As you well know, in Beirut we cooperate directly with the Capuchin school Notre Dame des Anges (NDA), located in the Badaroo estate, where we currently care for 67 children.

This year in March addition to regular meetings with the school administration, we conducted Easter workshops. We managed to involve teachers in the classes and prepare photos of our kids, which were then sent to their donors.

Living conditions in Lebanon are deteriorating, which affects, for example, wages in the education sector and transport costs. Teachers began not only to leave schools but even to go to the Gulf countries in order to look for better-paid jobs. Hence, schools have introduced additional fees, such as the "solidarity fond", which aims to ensure fair salaries for teachers and support the costs of their transport. Additionally, parents pay into another fund that helps cover the costs of teaching materials. Therefore, this year we supported this fund to relieve the burden on parents.



*Easter workshops in NDA*



In January 2023, “Sumar Sleem” The Head of Mission in Domus Orientalis for Lebanon & Syria visited Poland. One of the main purposes was to create a contact between Zespół Szkol Katolickich im. Jana Pawła II school and the Notre Dame des Anges school located in Badaro, Beirut. As a result of this visit, the two schools started to communicate together, and tried to hold two online meetings. But unfortunately, due to the internet connection issues in Lebanon, they couldn’t. Undeterred by this challenge, they spontaneously found an alternative and started communicating through videos, photos, and text messages.

The students at both schools were also encouraged to initiate connections between each others. Facilitated by the support of their teachers and schools, this interaction took shape. Polish students took the initiative by creating two videos. One video presented an introduction of their country’s location and the symbolism behind their national flag. Another one showed their activities during the break time.



On the other side, Lebanese students aged 14-15 shared some information about fasting and Easter traditions in Lebanon.

Furthermore, the school in Lebanon was sending videos and photos that captured their students engaging in various activities. This multifaceted exchange allowed both schools (teachers and students) to gain insights into each other's lives and cultures, fostering a deeper understanding and connection among them.

In addition to this collaboration, the teachers and students from the Polish school demonstrated an outstanding level of solidarity by providing financial assistance to the schools in Lebanon and Syria. Accordingly, and since the beginning of this year, they started to collect funds from various sources such as holding a charity concert, 2 Kermesse where the students sold cookies, a money collection among the teachers at the school and at the First Communion ceremony.

By the end of this school year, some Polish students sent handwritten letters to the students of grade 4 in Notre Dame des Anges school and to others enrolled in the First Step Program in Aleppo, Syria. The reply to them would be sent back in the beginning of 2023-2024 school year. Through this timeless tradition, the students were so excited exploring new horizons, and creating a bond that will endure across time and distance.

### **Coordinator's insight:**

*„At the end of 2020, I joined Domus for volunteer work. It was my first experience volunteering with an NGO. A couple of months later, I was asked to be the coordinator of First Step Program in Lebanon. At first, I thought that it was just a duty to fulfill by sending some reports and photos and communicating with the school... And here the story began!! Maybe no words can describe my happiness while interacting with the students. Each time we go to visit them for a workshop or activity I see them smiling and happy to meet us again and ask to come more often!*

*The teachers started to help us and be more involved. What I can ensure is that First Step isn't just a Programme anymore. It's a source of happiness and joy. A way to breathe and communicate, a place where we receive more than we give. Looking at our children in the Program growing up is something so touching and impressive. I can see a bright future for those students, for us as a team, especially for me, and for this Program as an overall as well”.*

Melissa – coordinator of First Step Lebanon



## **2. „First Step” in the South of Lebanon**

This summer, we initiated projects in the villages in southern Lebanon: Kfour and Homsiyeh. These are places where Christians still live among Muslims. Unfortunately, the conditions in which they live are very difficult, so we try to support them so that they are not forced to emigrate. You yourself know what is happening now on the border of Lebanon and Israel and further south. Kfour and Homsiyeh are close to those areas.

Nelly, who helps us to coordinate projects in the South: "I did my PhD in France at one of the best universities, I got a lucrative job offer, I also have a French passport". When we ask why she didn't stay in France when everyone was leaving, she replied: "It's very hard to live here, but I feel the Mission given by God." She adds that these villages are part of Galilee, that we must stop the demographic catastrophe and the outflow of Christians, and that Lebanon can be something more than a sinking, wrecked ship.



Homsiyeh, Galilei



Sumar and Nelly

And what project, if not "First Step", will be the best form of help for the families who stayed in Galilee? Let's listen to Sumar, the head of our Mission in Lebanon and Syria:

*"We are in Nabatieh (a city bordering Kfour), we enter the school where we meet Sister Marie Touma. Her warm welcome and calm tone of voice made us immediately feel as if we had known each other for a long time. We immediately sensed that you understood our Mission and shared similar views on the future of Christianity in the region. In 2022, the school celebrated its 70th anniversary, and my sister tells us about its founding at the request of the city's residents and the gradual development of the campus. 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.*

*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.”*

As a result of the visit we adopted 6 kids from Kfour, who are now officially in the First Step Programme! In the future we will try to find Donors to include all of them!

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