

“Remaining with the people”, the Brothers’ choice in Lebanon

In recent weeks, **Lebanon has been the focus of world attention due to the spiral of war and violence** that has claimed the lives of so many innocent people there, as in other countries in the Middle East.

“I follow with concern what is happening in the Middle East and I call once again for an immediate ceasefire on all fronts,” said Pope Francis, who has repeatedly insisted that **“war is a defeat for all”**.

Sensitive to the dramatic situation of the Lebanese people, **the Lasallian Family has been developing various initiatives of support and in favour of peace**, such as the day of prayer led by the Lasallian Region of Europe Mediterranean (RELEM) on 7 October.

Meanwhile, **the Lasallians of the District of Proche Orient who are in Lebanon continue to accompany the affected population and the victims**, especially the families of the Lasallian students, sharing with them the uncertainties of each day, while maintaining faith and hope, as Brother Habib Zraibi, Visitor of the District, has said on various occasions.

‘Fratelli Lebanon’

Also in Lebanon, near the city of Sidon, there is a community of Marist and De La Salle Brothers who for nine years have been running the **‘Fratelli Lebanon’ Project, a socio-educational initiative that offers alternative training and recreational activities, as well as fraternity spaces** for the most vulnerable, most of whom are Syrian refugees and local people living in poverty.

The ‘Fratelli Lebanon’ community is made up of two De La Salle Brothers, two Marist Brothers and a Redemptorist couple. **Brother Guillermo Moreno, from the Arlep District, has shared with various media his testimony to what is being experienced, and has given a special interview to the Conference of Religious of Spain (Confer), from which we share some extracts:**

Question: What has been the process of personal discernment that leads

to overcoming a situation like the one you are experiencing in the area and the balance is tipped towards remaining there and helping the people?

Answer: Well, the subject of **personal and community discernment** has been something that has touched me especially in the last two weeks. On a personal level I experienced an initial moment of doubt (...), but the truth is that I placed myself before God in prayer and it was very clear that the criterion of discernment for a Christian must always be love and we cannot make decisions based on fear because sooner or later we will regret it (...).

So in the end the question was: **Lord, what do you want from me at this time?** And His answer was very clear: to **remain with the people and help them in this difficult time.**

I believe that all of us who have felt the call to give our lives to the Lord as consecrated men and women know that it is a total gift that often translates into a small, everyday gift of self, with simplicity and without seeking publicity. This is how I have lived most of the time, but at other times the God of Love asks us to respond to him in less everyday contexts and more complicated situations, and the logical thing, the normal thing, is to continue to give this response of total self-giving until something prevents it. I often say to myself: "Guillermo, who are you following? It is Jesus who died on a cross, it is the God who made himself small among the most vulnerable. **I have no vocation to be a hero or a martyr, it is simply to follow the logic that has accompanied me this far. The strange thing would be to leave, to leave the people, to turn away,** I have never done that when I was in Spain and Portugal, why would I do it now? I think most of you would do the same as me if you were here.

But there is another dimension to discernment and that is the community part. I do not live alone, nor can I do without the community. Although it was clear to me that I had to stay, I did not want to impose my criteria on anyone. I was open to take a different community decision and also to obey our Brother Superiors in Rome if they asked us to leave, but thank God neither happened. On the contrary, our Brothers in the Fratelli Council gave us the freedom to decide as a community and they would respect our decision. And the six members of the community, one by one, decided to stay here with the people.

We had several meetings to share how we felt about what was happening, with the constant sound of bombs around us... We shared the news that was reaching us and also the ideas that each one of us had about possible future scenarios. **This discernment has led us to be creative in our mission and little by little we have become enthusiastic about a project that currently fills our time and our hearts.**

Q.- What concrete actions is the community taking to help those most in need?

A.- On 23 September, the war began and all the educational centres were forced to close, but after a week we began with small actions that in the following days have been consolidated and are now focused on three:

- **Educational space:** every day we open the centre in the morning so that the children who live nearby can come on foot and spend two hours playing and living together in peace. At the end of the morning, we give them a small snack. We started with 20 children 10 days ago and today we have 163. We believe that the number will continue to increase in the coming days.

- **Psychosocial support:** every day two vans go out to visit families in the area near our centre. Almost everyone has taken one or two other families into their home and many are living on the street. The first thing is to ask them how they are and offer them Fratelli as a helping hand in this time of despair.

- **Humanitarian aid:** we have started to identify needs and distribute food, blankets, mattresses, medicines, hygiene materials... We have presented a project to different donors in Europe to raise funds to help some 2,000 families over the next three months. Apart from helping the families in our area we have also started to help other Associations that are helping displaced people in Sidon and Beirut.

Q.- Do you see a near solution that will bring real peace of mind to all of you who are living through this harsh reality?

A.- Everyone says that, even if the war ends in a few weeks, the humanitarian crisis that has been provoked will take months to resolve. There is already talk of more than a million internally displaced people; in our area alone, there are 90,000 displaced people.

** The full interview is available on the Confer and Arlep websites.*