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## **Pillars of Lebanon Catholic Schools Buttress a Diverse Nation**

The following article, written by Spencer Osberg with photography by Sarah Hunter, was published in July 2008, Volume 34, No. 4, of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA) Magazine. Canadian Spencer Osberg is based in Beirut. A native of Northern Ireland, Sarah Hunter's photographs have appeared in many publications.

“We give a Christian education to whomever attends our school,” said Antonine Sister Dominique Halaby of the school she runs in Ghazir, a small town nestled among the coastal hills just north of Beirut.

“We inculcate all our students with values. You are a good Christian or Muslim,” she continued, “when you tell the truth, when you are honest, when you serve humanity.”

A coeducational institution, the Antonine Sisters School offers classes from preschool through high school. Unlike other schools in the region, teachers instruct equally in Arabic, English and French. But once students enter high school, the medium shifts to Arabic and English.

Among the school's 206 teachers, seven are religious sisters. The Catholic nature of the Catholic school, explained Sister Dominique, is not about religious identity, but has more to do with the approach to education. In short, the sisters develop the school's vision and general teaching methods while working with the staff to implement them. Lebanese public schools have a reputation for stressing the traditional rote method, which favors repetition and memorization. In contrast, the preferred teaching method in Catholic schools, said Sister Dominique, places the student at the center of the learning process.

“The student is an actor. He discovers instead of receives. He does research instead of learning by heart and memorizing.”

The Antonine Sisters opened their school in Ghazir in 1981 to a small



In 1981, Sister Dominique Halaby opened the Antonine Sisters School under a hail of bombs. (photo: Sarah Hunter.)

group of preschoolers, who, trailblazing through the curriculum, matured into the first high school graduating class of ten in 1994. The school has grown steadily ever since. By 2007, its high school graduating class numbered 134. With a current enrollment of 2,310 students, Sister Dominique says the school has reached its capacity and now has an extensive waiting list.

What makes the school's success truly remarkable is that it was established during Lebanon's bloody civil war, which ended in 1990 after fifteen years of internecine strife and mass internal displacement.

“We were constructing the most beautiful school, under bombs,” Sister

Dominique recalled.

The school fast became a beacon of hope and a reason to hold on for war-weary families fleeing violence or considering emigrating. Many displaced Christian families from throughout Lebanon found refuge in Ghazir and the then rural surrounding district of Keswan. But, she said, many of these families “stayed because of the school.”

The school also inspired families from the diaspora to return to their country.

“I know medical doctors, architects, lawyers who, when they visited the school's construction site, said: ‘If we are coming back, then we are coming

back because we are finding people believing in Lebanon as you.’

“This was a resistance of another kind,” she added, “a resistance to stay in your country.”

Throughout the civil war, Lebanon’s Catholic schools had been at the heart of this resistance, not only to remain in Lebanon, but to uphold the ideal of a diverse nation, to nurture Christian-Muslim relations and the shared values of education and tolerance.

The war tore the country apart, including its capital. Christians and their armed militias inhabited the city’s northern and eastern neighborhoods. Sunni and Shiite Muslims and their militias dominated the city’s western quarter. Separating east from west, Christian from Muslim, the barricaded Green Line — a dangerous no-man’s-land — ran through the city center.

Yet even during those explosive times, Lebanon’s Catholic schools continued to teach Christian and Muslim students, side by side.

“We are on the Christian side of the Green Line, and throughout the civil war we had Muslim students who crossed the Green Line,” said Mary Elizabeth Sanan about Antonine Fathers College, where she has taught English for more than thirty-two years. Perched on the slopes of *Baabda*, the school overlooks Beirut from the southeast.

“There was one mother who had two cars. She came in one car. She stopped it before the Green Line. She walked across with the children. She had another car on the other side and with it she came to school,” she continued. While there were other schools in western Beirut — closer to home and within a safer commute — this particular woman preferred to risk crossing the buffer zone so her children could attend a Catholic school.

The war is over, but Lebanon’s Catholic educators continue to provide a well-rounded education to all, regardless of creed. Today, the country’s 365 Catholic schools instruct some 200,000 students — about 22 percent of Lebanon’s school-age population — from all of Lebanon’s eighteen officially recognized religious communities. Over 25 percent of the total student body is Muslim and, in many schools, Muslim students are the majority. Likewise, the approximately 12,800 teaching staff and 900 administrators employed by the Catholic school system represent every confession.

At Notre Dame College, a school of the Antonine Sisters in the southern village of *Nabatieh*, most students are Muslim. “Our students in *Nabatieh* are as dear to us as our students in *Ghazir*,” said Sister Dominique. “Muhammad, Hassan, Ahmed, Tony, Joseph or George, it’s the same thing. We do not distinguish between them. We love them all.”

When instructing Christian students, she continued, teachers try to enrich their knowledge of their faith and “help them build their convictions as Christians.” But in places such as *Nabatieh*, where most of the students are Muslim, they teach morality and ethics, values people of all faiths share.

Catholic schools can be found throughout Lebanon, in areas where there is little religious diversity or towns where Christians and Muslims live in segregated areas. In such places, the boundaries separating public school districts frequently coincide with community boundaries — thus reinforcing sectarianism.

Catholic schools, meanwhile, enroll students from all communities, whether adjacent, distant, Christian or Muslim. In many parts of Lebanon, they represent the last forum where Christian and Muslim youth meet and grow up knowing one another.

“Catholic schools are natural places where children can come together, sit next to each other and get to know the other person slowly but surely,” said Maronite Father Marwan Tabet, who heads Lebanon’s General Secretariat of Catholic Schools.

“It’s not like you have to shove it down the throats of people — and the kids grow to know each other, to love each other, to accept each other. That’s very important.”

Father Marwan believes the student body’s religious diversity ranks among the greatest strengths of the nation’s Catholic school system. These schools, he said, are a “place where there is no proselytism, where children are not converted to Christianity. On the contrary, they are open to the other culture. They are accepted and they are cared for with the best of means and possibilities.

“When our institutions are accepted in areas that are solely non-Christian,” he concluded, “that fortifies the Catholic school because it is still accepted by the others.”

For 18-year-old Sara, a Shiite in her final year at the Antonine Fathers College, Catholic school has meant enjoying the freedom to mix among

groups with which she would not have had the opportunity in public school. She knows that beyond the walls of the school, belonging to one religious community or another usually has divisive political and social implications.

“I’m Shiite, so I’m supposed to be with Hrekit Amal or Hezbollah. If you’re Christian, you’re supposed to be with Aoun or the Lebanese Forces,” said Sara. “In public schools, they promote that. There, you have pictures of political leaders ... in my neighborhood, we’re brought up like that.”

This entrenched sectarianism has bred fear and intolerance. Some Lebanese do not venture to areas inhabited by other religious communities. In the predominantly Shiite neighborhood of Chiyah, where Sara lives, many believe they will be “shot and killed” if they cross the street into Ain Er Rommane, a Christian neighborhood.

“I’ve been there, a lot of my friends have been there, and nobody’s gotten shot yet, so I don’t know,” she laughed.

Recognizing that she voices a “very, very different opinion,” Sara blames much of Lebanon’s sectarian troubles on political leaders, who, in her view, intentionally rouse supporters with inflammatory speeches. In turn, supporters “deify” and blindly follow their leaders. But, she continued, “most of the time the people are just clapping. They don’t understand what they say.”

At Antonine Fathers College, Sara and her classmates study Lebanese history, politics and culture, which, she believes, provide the necessary intellectual tools to understand and hopefully change society.

“We have the tools, we just haven’t got the chance to apply them. Everybody here says, ‘When I grow up, I don’t want to do this, I want to change this,’ and we have a lot of political discussions about how it should be and what we should do. But, we never really get the chance to actually do it, because we’re so brought down, stomped on, by political people who only care about themselves.”

Antonine Fathers College has a strict policy against political discussions among students in the classroom during school hours. Nevertheless, students often share their political opinions with one another. And while at times it leads to intense debates, Sara said, they inevitably end in reconciliation.

A mother and a teacher, Khadijeh

Ahousien describes the instruction her son receives at Notre Dame College in *Nabatieh* as a sort of inoculation against “negative prejudices” that helps him develop a healthy set of his own beliefs. A colleague, Carmon Hamadi, enrolled her three children in the school for both the reputable education and “openness of mind” it offers.

Mrs. Hamadi, a Shiite Muslim who has fulfilled her obligation to make a pilgrimage to Mecca — one of the five pillars of Islam — teaches English at Notre Dame, which she finds especially rewarding.

“We don’t only educate children here, we grow them,” she said of the school’s 1,850 students, who range in age from forty days in the nursery to eighteen years old.

Some 250 people took shelter here when the Israelis were bombing,” said Sister Lucie Akleh, pointing to a corner near a stairwell at *Nabatieh*’s Notre Dame College.

The 2006 war with Israel has had a devastating impact on the Notre Dame community. One student lost his life while many others witnessed the serious injury or death of family members and friends. Families who earn their livelihoods from agriculture have been unable to return to work. Live cluster bombs still litter their fields.

Mrs. Hamadi said she has noticed a change in many students’ behavior since the war broke out, some of whom have grown apathetic toward their schoolwork.

“They say: ‘Why should I study? Why should I do this? War will come and it will destroy everything.’”

At a small elementary school run by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Lyon in the village of *Qlayaa*, southeast of *Nabatieh*, students and faculty are still reeling from the 2006 war. During an exchange of fire, villagers, including many of the school’s 316 students, joined a convoy of vehicles fleeing north. It was subsequently bombed en route. While none of the students perished, they watched others die gruesomely.

The school’s director, Sister Bernadette Morkos, said students now display symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder. Some have developed a stutter when speaking, others have sudden panic attacks and still others experience lapses in memory.

“Sometimes intelligent kids are listening, but when the teacher asks questions they seem surprised, they jump and are scared. They have so

much anxiety. They are in class, but they are not entirely in the classroom,” Sister Bernadette said.

In response, she has coordinated a relief effort for the school community, including hiring a psychologist and occupational therapist to work with the staff, students and their families.

Economic stagnation — exacerbated by the recent war — and the current political crisis have made life difficult for many Lebanese and have taken their toll on the nation’s Catholic schools. Many families who send their children to the Antonine Sisters School in Ghazir have fallen behind in tuition payments; some have been unable to pay for as long as five years.

The dearth of good paying jobs, the political crisis and the threat of renewed civil conflict have also driven up the number of Lebanese emigrating from the country.

In 2000, Lebanon’s registered population numbered around 4.7 million, but only 3.5 million actually resided in the country. Many of those leaving belong to Lebanon’s educated middle classes. Unable to find suitable employment at home, they pursue opportunities in the West or in the Gulf states. For Lebanon’s Catholic schools, their departure has meant a growing shortage of qualified teachers.

“Many of the most qualified Lebanese are not in Lebanon,” lamented Sister Dominique. Catholic schools, however, are not the only ones in Lebanon affected by emigration. The country’s economic recovery and longevity will largely depend on the availability of a qualified and dynamic workforce.

Father Marwan regrets the problems caused by emigration but is at a loss how to reverse the tide.

“Our schools cannot stop emigration,” he said. “It is the place of the government to stop the brain drain and make a place in Lebanon for every child who is graduating to find a job and to be able to survive here.”

But current emigration trends worry those working within Lebanon’s Catholic school system for another reason. Emigration has hit the country’s Christians especially hard.

There is no reliable statistical data available on Lebanon’s various religious communities and no official census has been conducted since 1932, but it is readily apparent that the number of Christian families — Catholic and Orthodox — residing in the country has steadily declined in

recent years.

Father Marwan estimates that as many as a half million Christians have emigrated in the last 10 years. Another negative demographic indicates that the birthrate among Christians is significantly lower than among Muslims.

A senior at Antonine Fathers College, 17-year-old Tony, said many of his classmates believe life is better outside the country, offering more opportunities, stability and security. While he understands why they want to leave, he hopes to make a life for himself in Lebanon.

“If we all go, who are we leaving the country to?” he asked. “Before our country does something for us, we have to do something for it, we have to work for it.

“I’m going to try and handle stuff and face the troubles,” he continued. “If it gets really bad, for example a war or something, or if it gets practically impossible to live here, then maybe I’ll have to go. But even if it gets a little bad, I’m going to try and stay here and cope with it.”

The outcome is that Christians, historically preeminent stakeholders in the Lebanese government, seem to be playing an ever-waning role in state affairs. Administrators in Catholic schools view a diminishing Christian influence in government as cause for alarm. Without a strong Christian voice in politics, they fear lawmakers may potentially erode the freedoms that the Catholic school system at present enjoys, particularly in regard to its religious foundations.

In this context, Father Marwan stressed the vital importance that Catholic schools maintain their competitive edge. The combination of their high academic standards and commitment to diversity and universal values may very well ensure their survival in an ever-more religiously homogenized Lebanon.

The future of Lebanon’s Catholic schools, said Father Marwan, “relies on the extent to which these schools will remain centers of dialogue and crossroads of culture.” □