



GRAND MAGISTERIUM – VATICAN
EQUESTRIAN ORDER OF
THE HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

Updates from Gaza: a day-by-day support through many projects

Interview with Sami El-Yousef, regional director of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association for Palestine and Israel



Sami El-Yousef, you are the Regional Director of CNEWA – Pontifical Mission in Jerusalem. Could you tell us more about the history of this organization and its present-day action in the Holy Land?

The Mission was established in 1949 by Pope Pius XII as a temporary mission to aid the Palestinian people, 750.000 of whom became refugees as Israel was created in 1948. Of significance is that 30% of all Christians of the Holy Land became refugees then. In the first 20 years of operation, the Mission was mostly involved with the distribution of humanitarian aid and supplies. Thereafter and when it became clear that the refugee issue is becoming a long term one, the mandate was expanded to provide more sustainable support and thus the main focus became to aid the local churches in supporting communities, mostly in education, health, and social services. Pastoral support through the local churches continues to play an important element.

Since Rome was not equipped to administer the Mission directly from there back in 1949 and since most of the initial financial support was coming from North America, another papal agency Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA) set up in 1926 to aid the Oriental Churches of the East was asked to administer the Pontifical Mission. This administrative structure continues until today where the two institutions are administered as one under the combined name CNEWA- Pontifical Mission with the President of the Pontifical Mission serving also as the Secretary General of CNEWA. We operate out of three offices in the Middle East with the Jerusalem office serving Israel and Palestine, the Amman office serving Jordan and Iraq; and the Beirut office serving Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt.

Last month you were in Gaza. How is the situation there and what is PMP doing to support the population, in particular concerning the creation of job positions?

Indeed I am a frequent visitor to Gaza as I make approximately 6 visits per year consistently since I joined the Mission in 2009. Our work is concentrated in Gaza through providing services to the community at large with no distinction to religion, color, race, or gender. Such work is done through a number of partners in Gaza including the Latin Parish and its institutions including the Holy Family School, the Latin Patriarchate School, and other operations of the Sisters of the Incarnate Word; Additionally our partners include the Ahli Arab Hospital being the only Christian hospital in Gaza; the Near East Council of Churches clinics and vocational training centers; the Rosary Sisters School; the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), among others. The variety of support included humanitarian support during wars, renovation of premises, equipment and furniture grants, programmatic support where needed such as malnourishment programs and psycho-social support, scholarship support, youth sector support, pastoral programs, and capacity building and job creation. A star project will be launched soon that will provide 16 unemployed Christian youth with employment for 12 months in one of our partner institutions. This will undoubtedly help our Christian youth building their experience and at the same time bring some much needed income. It is noteworthy to mention that the unemployment rate of Gaza is about 45%, the highest in the world.

You recently met the Holy Land Commission of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, what is the relationship between CNEWA – PMP and the Knights and Dames of the Order, above all concerning the projects supported through ROACO? In your latest report from Gaza you mentioned, for example, the Rosary Sisters School whose renovation works will be one of the projects the Order is funding through ROACO. May you tell us something more?

We have an extraordinarily wonderful relation with the Order who supports us. One example has been support to the major renovations project of the St. Louis Hospital in Jerusalem. Our role in such instances is to ensure proper implementation of the project, sound financial administration, regular monitoring and evaluation, and eventually providing financial and narrative reports. We also coordinate with local Catholic Aid organizations to ensure that there is efficient distribution of projects as well as to avoid duplication in funding. Our greatest work of coordination was during the latest Gaza war in 2014 where organizations active in Gaza coordinated their intervention to ensure that the needs of all our partners and the Christian community are sufficiently attended to. Given that some support comes from agencies that are outside of the ROACO circles, then in such instances our role becomes even more critical to ensure proper funding. CNEWA is a founding member of ROACO and has been heavily involved since the beginning and maintains cordial working relations with all members.

In the case of the Rosary Sisters School in Gaza, we have consistently supported the school with tens of grants over the past 7 years, with the source of funding coming from a variety of sources around the world. Thus developing close working relations with local beneficiary institutions is not only important for the proper implementation of a particular project, but we become partners in identifying needs and sources of funding to match such needs. The relationship becomes so close and open that we are continuously cross referencing emerging needs and funding sources, even if some funding goes directly to the school itself.

The Grand Magisterium supported some of our programs, in particular our youth development program for the past six years where over 40 youth institutions were supported with grants that would enhance their capacities, improve their physical facilities and cover some expenses of their activities. They have also provided much needed emergency support during wars and crisis that not only supported the Christian communities during a time of war but also helped institutions deliver their services to the community at large, always with the Christian values at heart.

François Vayne

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