News
Q&As



The Sisters of St. Joseph celebrate their 150th anniversary in Ramallah, West Bank, in March. (Courtesy of Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)



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As a child, Sr. Mary Subhi Yousef had two dreams. One was to become a nurse and the other was to become a sister. It was her love for Jesus Christ and her desire to serve that led her on the path to fulfill both of those dreams, as she believed both roles were the most convenient way to be closer to God.

Serving her faith in the Holy Land, the birthplace of Christianity, has made her life's passion ever more rewarding.

There are about 50,000 Palestinian Christians across the Palestinian occupied territories and some 1,300 Christians in Gaza, according to a 2022 "Report on International Religious Freedom: Israel, West Bank and Gaza" by the U.S. State Department. However, the recent Israeli invasion of Gaza has likely changed those figures. Israel's air and ground assault on Gaza has killed more than 15,800 Palestinians, including 6,000 children, according to numbers from the Palestinian Ministry of Health in the West Bank.*

Christian numbers were 10% of Palestine's population in 1948, but there has been a steady exodus of Christians leaving their homeland as Israeli occupation has increased. Christian clergy and worshippers who have remained have reported increasing acts of violence, harassment and even being spit upon by Israeli extremists as well as vandalism and desecration of church properties, as reported in March by The Times of Israel. These are incidents that have been occurring long before the most recent escalation between Israel, the Palestinians and Hamas.

For Yousef, her deep devotion to God, her strong Palestinian roots and her love for her community have been her guiding light. Yousef was born in Jerusalem, where she attended and graduated from St. Joseph Girls School. She received her degree in nursing from the Arab College of Medical Profession, located in the West Bank town of Ramallah, just north of Jerusalem.

When she graduated from nursing school she said the dream to become a sister was still growing inside her, so she decided to begin working.

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"The superior sister of St. Joseph Hospital in Jerusalem called me to work," Yousef said. "I did not know her, but I believed at that time that this was a sign from God."

St. Joseph Hospital was established in 1954 by the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition, and is a nonprofit general hospital and the only Catholic hospital in East Jerusalem. The hospital serves East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Yousef worked for a year in the intensive care unit and then made the decision to join the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition and went to Rome for two years for religious formation. After two years in the novitiate, she returned to St. Joseph Hospital.

A few years later, she was called to Nablus in the West Bank and was employed at St. Luke Hospital, working outside of her convent and mainly serving the Palestinian Muslim population.

Yousef called that experience an "amazing mission of serving and of witnessing the love of Jesus Christ to humanity without speaking a word about Jesus, only giving."

While working at the hospital, she attended Al-Quds University in Palestine to obtain her master's degree in health management. At the time, she said, a physician from Ramallah was looking for a nurse sister to help upgrade a three-year nursing program into a four-year program at Ibn Sina National College for Medical Studies, located in Nablus. She worked with the Palestine Ministry of Health to teach there and upgrade the school's nursing curriculum.

"[I was] teaching Muslim students that never heard about Christianity and now they are dealing with a sister," Yousef said. "Grace, challenges, are not easy, but God as his promise, he is with us. Yes, more and more I'm feeling his presence."

In 2010, Yousef joined the faculty of nursing at the branch campus of Bethlehem University located in Emmaus, where she noted that Jesus appeared to the disciples. Bethlehem University, a Catholic institution of higher education in the Lasallian tradition, is the first registered university in Palestine and is open to students of all faiths.



Holy Family Church, the only Catholic church in Ramallah, West Bank, was constructed from 1860 to 1870 by the Sisters of St. Joseph and the Rosary Sisters. (Mary Yousef)

Emmaus is today called Qubeibeh, and is one of "eight villages, separated from other areas due to the wall and intifada," she explained. Yousef is referring to the separation wall that the Israelis constructed after the second intifada, or uprising, that divides Palestinian villages and communities. Palestinians must go through a complex web of Israeli-imposed checkpoints to enter other towns and villages.

In August 2022, Yousef became the superior to the community of Sisters of St. Joseph in Ramallah. The Sisters of St. Joseph have been serving the community since 1873. This year, they celebrated 150 years of their presence in Ramallah.

"We are six sisters, two young women studying to become sisters, two middle-aged and two older sisters," Yousef said. "I am trying my best to serve them with love and understanding."

Yousef said the sisters attend Mass every day at the only Catholic Church in Ramallah, the Holy Family Church, which was constructed from 1860 to 1870 by the Sisters of St. Joseph and the Rosary Sisters.

***GSR*: Can you describe a day in your life? What do you do from morning to night?**

Yousef: I wake up at 5 a.m. and do my personal meditation. I leave the convent at 6 a.m.

At 6:30 a.m., I have Mass in Emmaus with Franciscan fathers. From 7:30 a.m. until 3 p.m., I teach, do administrative nursing work, and see students.

At 4 p.m., I am in the convent with my sisters, living and sharing community religious life.

Can you comment on the current humanitarian situation in Gaza? What is your church doing to help those affected?

What is happening in Gaza, there are no words that can be said to describe it. In the church and even in our community life, we are increasing our time of prayers in front of the holy sacraments and praying the rosary.

Recently, as sisters in Ramallah, we participated with the parish and schools financially to help the people in Gaza.

How has this affected your daily life in the occupied territories?

Now with what we are living in, online teaching is killing me to be in front of the screen of the laptop or computers. Now due to the bad situation, all universities in Palestine are teaching online.

I'm teaching nursing, in which communication, and the nurse-patient relationship is an important aspect. There is no face-to-face teaching, in order to do role-play or simulation in a nursing lab, or showing verbal and nonverbal communications.

As you know, in the universities, many students come from different places. Due to the war in Gaza, all checkpoints to come, for example, from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, are closed. West Bank from Nablus to Ramallah is closed, from Toulkarm to Jenin, also closed. In other words, now every city or village or camp in our place, we can't move.

For example, since September until today, I couldn't visit Joseph, who is the husband of my sister. For that reason, we are visiting online. But schools, thank God, are open as students come from their area.

You taught at Ibn Sina College and are currently teaching at Bethlehem University. What is it like as a Catholic sister teaching Muslim students?

As a sister, and as a nurse who said my nursing pledge, I'm teaching them with all my heart, loving them, dealing with equity. In nursing, we serve all.

How rewarding has it been instructing nursing students?

Considering my mission is strange as a sister, but today, after 25 years of teaching, I'm seeing the graduates in Jerusalem hospitals and in the West Bank hospital serving Christian, Muslim and even Jewish people.

I am thanking God for the lovely mission I have because today I can see not only the outcome, but the impact.

How does it feel serving God as a sister in the Holy Land?

I'm from Palestine; I deeply love my country. My mission is to witness God's love to my surroundings and serve the Holy Land. When I see my graduates in every hospital, I feel happy and even proud, because this is a way to serve the Holy Land.

**This story has been updated with the current number of casualties.*