

# Canadian Catholics offer prayers, support to Lebanese after devastating explosion

Canadians and the Catholic Church in Canada have always been there for the people of Lebanon in times of need, says Bishop Paul-Marwan Tabet, leader of the country's Maronite Catholics.



**Bishop Paul-Marwan Tabet**

And in the coming weeks as the Lebanese people overcome the aftermath of a deadly explosion, he expects Canadians will continue to provide spiritual and financial support in times of crisis as they have always done.

"The Catholic Church in Canada has never not been there for the people of Lebanon, it has never shied away from helping the people of Lebanon," Bishop Tabet told the Canadian Catholic News just days after a devastating explosion in that country killed at least 200 people, wounded more than 6,000, and caused massive destruction of buildings and homes in and around Beirut.

The Lebanese government resigned on Aug. 10 amid the social unrest unleashed across the country by the tragic explosion on Aug. 4.

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement of support after the tragedy that pledged solidarity with the Lebanese people, addressed to the Maronite Catholic community's spiritual leaders.

"We have seen the images of its aftermath and we are heartbroken by the devastation that it has wrought on the Lebanese people," the CCCB statement said.

“We, the Catholic Bishops of Canada, your brothers in faith, stand in prayerful solidarity with you and your people as the rescue and recovery efforts continue. On this Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord, we pray that your suffering be transformed by the Light of Christ so that you, and the resilient and courageous people of Lebanon, are comforted by His sure and abiding love.”

According to Statistics Canada, the majority of Canadians of Lebanese origin are Christian and in 2001, 42 per cent indicated that they were Catholic.

The Maronite Catholic Church, which comprises primarily Lebanese people, shares many attributes with Orthodox churches but is in full communion with Rome and accepts all the pope’s teachings. The Montreal-based Eparchy of St. Maron has 19 parishes and missions across Canada, including Our Lady of Good Help in Edmonton.

Bishop Tabet said the Canadian Bishops have always been supportive of the Maronite Catholics, and some, including Archbishop Richard Smith of Edmonton, have visited Lebanon in recent years to learn more. On the first Sunday after the explosion, the Archbishop made a pastoral visit to the Maronite parish to celebrate Mass and offer a message of consolation, solidarity and hope.

“We were shocked and disheartened to learn of the massive and devastating explosion in Beirut on Tuesday, especially knowing that many of you have been personally touched by this unprecedented disaster,” he wrote in a letter to parishioners. “On behalf of the people of the Archdiocese of Edmonton, I offer my deepest sympathies and condolences. Please be assured that we are keeping you and your loved ones in our prayers during this terrible time.

“I was blessed to visit Lebanon in 2017, and during my short time there witnessed the unique creativity, hospitality and resilience of the Lebanese people – despite facing challenges we in Canada can only imagine. I pray that Our Lord grant them solace, healing, and hope as they grieve their losses and begin to recover and rebuild. May you, too, find consolation through your faith in Christ, whose love conquers all things.”

With the Lebanese government in disarray, Canadians are being advised to send their donations to the country via respected non-governmental organizations such as the Red Cross.

**Archbishop Smith suggested Catholics also consider donating to Development and Peace-Caritas Canada or the Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA), both of whom have years of practical experience through their partners in the region.**

“This is yet another trial for a people already struggling with an unprecedented social, economic and political crisis, and the explosion is further threatening the food and social security of the population,” a

Development and Peace statement said. "This tragedy comes at a time when hospitals, already short of resources, are trying to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic."

Rita Rhayem, Director of Caritas Lebanon, said the need is acute.

"The situation is critical," she said. "It is apocalyptic, but we don't stop and we will carry on in order to help all those in difficulty. The wounded are received in our primary care centres, which are overwhelmed, the hospitals are incredibly crowded. They lack everything, including food to support the affected population."

Donations made to Development and Peace – Caritas Canada are eligible to be matched by the Canadian government.

"The Lebanese people are going through a major crisis," Carl Hétu, national director of CNEWA Canada, said in a statement. "The Beirut blast comes on the heels of a political crisis, overwhelming debt, financial collapse, unemployment, the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as successive waves of regional conflict. We direct our prayers to the people of this country with whom we Canadians have so many ties. We invite all to join us. The Lebanese people need our help."

Three Christian hospitals close to the port, including the 600-bed St. George Hospital, were severely damaged and evacuated after the blast.

"Our staff, as with the entire city, is really shaken," said Michel Constantin, CNEWA's Beirut-based regional director. "Our building was damaged, our offices are filled with shattered glass that could have been deadly had we not left for the day. Lebanon is on the brink of economic, political and social collapse. This will not stop us from doing our work. More than ever, the people of Lebanon need our help and, most especially, the help of their local and universal church."



Caritas Lebanon workers offer assistance to the wounded in Beirut  
Development and Peace Photo

Funds raised by CNEWA Canada will be directed to the CNEWA office in Beirut, which will share them with local churches that offer essential health and emergency services and pastoral outreach.

The Canadian government has pledged about \$25 million in support for the people of Lebanon, and is matching donations made to a number of charities through the Humanitarian Coalition.

At the community level for Canadians of Lebanese background, Bishop Tabet said the first priority is to raise funds quickly and get aid on its way, so the focus has been on supporting Lebanon's Red Cross.

"At the community level we have been campaigning on behalf of the Red Cross, but more needs to be done and we will be launching a campaign to support all the families who are now in need, who will need food, shelter, medicine," Bishop Tabet said of what he expects to be a relief effort that will continue for months.

*(With files from Grandin Media)*