

Maronite Catholics rally with support for victims of catastrophic Beirut blast

Edmonton's Maronite Catholics can only watch in horror and sadness as their homeland struggles to recover after two devastating explosions that have been described as worse than Lebanon's 15-year civil war.

But in the midst of their grief: hope and the confidence in the resilience of the Lebanese people.

"It's a shock. It's such a big, big, big explosion. The people are so sad because they can see on TV what was happening," said Rita Sader, a member of Our Lady of Good Help Parish in Edmonton.

Beirut was rocked Aug. 4 by massive blasts that killed at least 135 people and wounded about 5,000. Hospitals and emergency crews are overwhelmed. The cause is believed to be a chemical explosion.

Sader's extended family lives just outside of Beirut, the capital of a country facing a new struggle after war, the influx of refugees, and most recently, a financial crisis on top of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"What's going to happen now?" she wondered. "What are the people going to eat?"

"It's really catastrophic," added pastor Rev. Charles Saad, who still has family in Lebanon. "This is the third biggest explosion in the world after Hiroshima and Nagasaki ... It's worse than the civil war."



Rita Sader is seen with Rev. Charles Saad, pastor of Our Lady of Good Help parish, and her son Anthony-Joe Asmar. Courtesy of Rita Sader

The local Maronite Catholic community will be raising money through its Facebook page to help the people of Lebanon, as will the 20 Maronite parishes in Canada. Bishop Paul-Marwan Tabet, the Montreal-based leader of the Maronite Catholic Eparchy of Canada, will be leading that effort.

A separate, nondenominational Go Fundme page has been set up to accept donations to the Lebanese Red Cross. In less than 24 hours, it raised more than \$3,000.

Leading that fundraising is Hossen Haymour, whose friends were injured and lost homes in the blast in her homeland. She had planned to be in Beirut this week, staying in a hotel in the port city, before circumstances changed. She heard about the blast soon after it happened.

“I was calling friends one by one. It was terrible. I couldn’t help myself, I was crying and panicking, asking ‘What if? What if?’” said Haymour, who serves as president of the Arabic Club for Culture and Arts in Edmonton.



Hossen Haymour, seen with her husband Nadir and her daughters Amatullah and Leia, has started a fundraiser for victims of the Beirut explosions. Courtesy of Hossen Haymour

Rita Sader first heard about the explosion on the What's App group chat for the Lebanese community in Edmonton, and immediately called family members who live about a half-hour's drive outside of Beirut.

"Everybody's safe, thank God. All my family is there, my family, my husband's family, my aunts, uncles and cousins. We're the only ones in Canada," said Sader, who immigrated to Canada in 2008. "But a lot of people have no food now and they're struggling."

The Sader family is safe, but they said they could hear and feel the impact of the blast.

Sader, her husband Claude Asmar, and 12-year-old son Anthony-Joe Asmar have been living in Edmonton ever since they came to Canada, finding a spiritual home among the 130 families of Our Lady of Good Help Maronite Parish.

Initial social media reports blamed the Beirut blast on sectarian violence. However, investigators believe the cause was 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate stored in a port warehouse for six years without safety measures. Many, including Sader, question why such large quantities of a lethal chemical would be held in the centre of the Lebanese capital so close to homes, shops and a major highway.

"The government was supposed to remove it, but didn't. So the government is at fault for all of this."

The scale of destruction is unimaginable.

The Sader family returns to Lebanon regularly, most recently in September. The once beautiful and thriving port of Beirut has been reduced to rubble. It's estimated that 85 per cent of the goods and services in and out of Lebanon go through the port. Only three per cent of it remains intact.

Sader said this will have devastating consequences for the people of Lebanon, who endured civil war from 1975 to 1990 and most recently had been become angry at government inaction and an economy that was already fragile.

"When I left in September, people were talking about starting a revolution, because people were mad at the government because they didn't have anything. Now they have this," Sader said. "It's unbelievable. You can't even buy milk for your babies."

Even before the explosion, Sader said the inflation rate was soaring amid an economic crisis. At one point \$1 US was the equivalent of 1,500 Lebanese pounds. In short order, the local currency plummeted to 10,000 pounds for every dollar.

In spite of the devastation, members of the Lebanese community in Edmonton say their homeland is resilient.

“Nothing is worse than a civil war where people are fighting and killing each other, but this disaster is on a different level,” said Haymour, a mother of two who emigrated from Lebanon 16 years ago with her husband, Nadir.

“I believe there’s always, always hope. The Lebanon has been through a lot and come out stronger. Like all the Lebanese around the world, we are praying, praying.”

Father Saad said he appreciates the messages of sympathy that have been pouring in including those from the 60,000-strong Lebanese-Canadian community in Edmonton, Our Lady of Good Help parishioners, Premier Jason Kenney, and Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith.

“We were shocked and disheartened to learn of the massive and devastating explosion in Beirut ... especially knowing that many of you have been personally touched by this unprecedented disaster,” Archbishop Smith said in a message to the Maronite Catholic community.

“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.”

Archbishop Smith recalled his visit to Lebanon in 2017.

“During my short time there I witnessed the unique creativity, hospitality and resilience of the Lebanese people – despite facing challenges we in Canada can only imagine,” he said.

“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.”

Archbishop Smith is expected to meet with the Maronite Catholic community of Edmonton personally when he celebrates Mass on Aug. 9 at 6 p.m. Our Lady of Good Help Parish.