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Palestinian Catholic schools pinched

Judith Sudilovsky | Nov. 22, 2008

BETHLEHEM, West Bank
For six months last year Adel Handal was unable to pay his phone bill, and the electricity has been cut off more times than he cares to remember because he did not pay the bill.

But while Handal, 44, a hairdresser, and his wife cut corners to maintain their household, they have never considered taking their four children out of Catholic schools.

"They have been going to these schools since kindergarten, and we prefer them to stay there. It is better for them to be in a Christian environment. We will do whatever it takes to keep them there," said Handal, who pays about $1,500 per year for all his children to attend the girls schools run by the Rosary Sisters and the De La Salle Holy Land school for boys. Tuition does not include the yearly $120-per-child registration fee or incidentals such as uniforms, books and daily transportation.

For Handal, whose income barely reaches $400 a month, the monthly payments he must make constitute almost 25 percent of the family income. The Handals try to cut costs in small ways, like packing lunches instead of buying them.

Some months Handal simply does not have the money for the tuition payment, and he swallows his pride and asks the school principals for help. The schools try to accommodate him, but with so many needy families the schools, too, need to juggle their assistance each month.

"I feel bad that I have to go talk to the school directors. But I have to go," said Handal. "Why should I feel embarrassed? We didn't do anything to be ashamed of. I work hard."

For families like the Handals, the periodic tuition reduction they receive is not enough to alleviate the financial burden private education puts on their budget.

The economic situation in Bethlehem has been in a constant decline since the outbreak of the second intifada eight years ago, said Handal, and the cost of living has gone up while salaries decreased.

"Just this year the price for a loaf of bread has doubled," he said.

The only inheritance he can give to his children is a good education, he said, and he is not willing to give up on that.

Though only a few families were willing to speak openly about their struggles to keep their children in Catholic schools, the Handal family's predicament is not unique.

According to the Office of Catholic Schools in the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which oversees all Catholic schools and kindergartens in the Palestinian territories and Israel, some 60 percent of the families who send their children to Catholic schools in the Palestinian territories need financial assistance.

Franciscan Father Abdel Masiach, director of the office, said the situation in the Gaza Strip is worse. Most of the families are working poor. The situation in Israel is better, he said.

Throughout the patriarchate, he said, the average family only pays 40 percent of the cost of tuition per child.

Despite the steep financial burden of running schools without the full tuition being paid, officials' main concern at the moment is to keep the children in the Catholic schools, he said. School directors and principals seek financial help for their schools wherever they can.

"It is very rare for children to have to drop out of school. The principals do not permit that to happen," said Father Masiach.

Yusef Daher, director of the Jerusalem Inter-Church Center, recounted the stories of a few families he knows who have had to withdraw their children in the middle of a term because of financial issues. In 2007, the heads of Christian churches in Jerusalem and the Holy Land commissioned the center to do a study on the state of the Christian schools.

"They care too much about their dignity to say they are taking their children out of school because they can't afford it," said Daher, adding that some families will put the children in less-expensive Christian schools or nondenominational private schools. Very few families will put their children into public schools, he said.

Palestinian public schools are not considered to have the same standard of education as the private Christian schools, and for most Christian families it is important that their children receive proper religious education at school, he said.

"It is a very different community in the government schools. The manners and morals are very low as is the educational level, and they won't give our children the kind of Christian education we want," said Daher, who added he feels the burden of sending his own four children to Catholic schools in Jerusalem.

Although schools are willing to work and find a solution for families needing financial help, many Christians are reluctant to ask for help, said Daher.

In Bethlehem, where appearances count for everything and everyone knows each other, families are wary about disclosing their financial situation -- even though they are aware that others share their plight, said Daher.

"Christian parents don't want to appear to be begging or complaining," he said.

Christians are less likely to be able to turn to their extended families for assistance because many family members have emigrated, and the majority of those who are left are under financial stress.

Jerusalem Christian schools especially have been hit hard, Daher said. The city is cut off by checkpoints and the Israeli separation barrier, making it difficult to bring in teachers from the West Bank, who, because of their lower cost of living, can accept lower salaries. The separation barrier and travel restrictions also make it difficult for teachers in the West Bank to reach their schools in different cities and towns.

"The past five years have been very dramatically (difficult)," said Daher.

Though the Jerusalem economy is experiencing a slight upswing, the situation continues to be difficult throughout the Palestinian territories, said Father Masiach.

He said although the schools are able to continue their day-to-day academic tasks with their small budget and

the current financial assistance they receive from abroad, the building infrastructure and extracurricular activities at the schools are suffering and need upgrading in order to provide the level of education for which the schools are known.

"Since the intifada it has been really difficult. In those years we (received) very near to zero payment from parents. We are feeling the effects of that period up until now," he said.

Meanwhile in Bethlehem, 17-year-old Issa Handal, who wants to study computer science, hits the books with a vengeance most parents would envy. During the summer and three days a week after school he participates in a special educational program for gifted students in business and computer sciences through the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Hebrew University.

He knows, says his father, that the only way he will be able to continue his education is if he receives a full scholarship.

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