

The Fratelli Project

*A report on the educational project run
by the Marist and the De La Salle Brothers
in Lebanon for refugee children.*

by Marco Amato

Les Frères

Les Frères

by Marco Amato

When you arrive in Beirut airport with the intention of visiting the “Fratelli Project” and they ask you about your intended place of residence, all you have to say is “Les Frères”, and the official will say “faddal, faddal” (please, please) and nod you through with just a glance at your passport.

From Beirut to Sidon, the name is well known to everyone. Les Frères is the former school of the Marist Brothers in Rmeileh, Sidon, about 40 km south of the capital. During the civil war, it was occupied and used as a military

From Beirut to Sidon, the name is known to everyone

headquarters. The chapel was destroyed and the infants’ school was used for interrogations. After the war, the building was abandoned and remained unused for a number of years.

Even today, to any visitor arriving in Rmeileh, the imposing, grey building of Les Frères looks like a barracks, which in fact it still is in part. The wing of the school that fronts onto the sea is used by the Lebanese army. The other part, which fronts onto the road from Beirut and the UNHCR site, has finally been returned to its original use as a place for education and meetings.



One wing of the building which houses the Fratelli Project in Rmeileh. On the ground floor, there are the classrooms and toilets. On the first floor, there are the bedrooms and kitchen used by the Community.



Miquel welcomes a little Syrian girl just before the start of classes for the youngest.



Brother Andrés in class with the smallest children. Brothers Miquel and Andrés do not teach, because they are not yet sufficiently fluent in Arabic. However, they are present during the lessons to oversee things and to assist the teachers and children whenever needed.

This is where the Marist Brothers and the De La Salle Brothers have set up their joint educational venture, the Fratelli Project. The two congregations share the same love for children and the same vocation to teaching. They both have primary and secondary schools in Lebanon that are famous for their quality (e.g in Beirut, Antelias, Amchit, Jbeil etc.). However, Les Frères is something different. It takes in Iraqi and Syrian refugee children fleeing from the war. Currently there are 70 of them, but the aim is to welcome many more of the thousands who are now in Lebanon but who hope to return to their homes. Their future is uncertain and there is a danger they will remain outside of education for years. According to Chris Wills, a Marist Brother and a member of the administrative

council for the project, "Through the Fratelli Project, we want to prevent the loss of a whole generation of displaced children. The families fleeing from war want to return to their homes or to settle in other countries where they can start a new life. But we know only too well that many years may pass by before that happens. In the meantime, what will become of these children? The Fratelli Project in Lebanon is just the first of a series of initiatives, a pilot project, which can be replicated in similar situations." In addition, there are children of migrants of an older generation and even Lebanese children who have remained outside of the state school system for some reason, mostly linked to an extremely fragile financial situation and marginalisation.



After the end of classes, the children go to the yard in front of the school to be collected and taken home by their parents or in the school bus.



The entrance to Les Frères in Rmeileh, near Saida, the ancient Sidon.

The children play on the swings before going to class. Since the children's rides were installed in the playground of Les Frères, the children arrive up to half an hour early before the start of lessons.



The 'masters of the house' in Les Frères are Miquel and Andrés, a Catalan Marist aged 60 and a Mexican Lasallian aged 32. Alongside them is Tony, the Lebanese caretaker who looked after the property for years before the school reopened as the Fratelli Project.

Miquel and Andrés give a warm but simple welcome to any visitors to Les Frères such as religious from other congregations, friends who want to know more about the project, volunteers and teachers. In this unusual house, which is half school half home, the kitchen is open to all and there is always a room for the night for those who want to stop over.

Miquel and Andrés welcome the 70 children who come to school every day from Monday to Friday. Activities start at 8.30 in the morning, but some children arrive earlier since the new children's rides were installed in the garden. Some children come from the refugee camps in the neighbourhood, some come from the Shelter in Sidon, others actually live in the Brothers' house. Some come on foot, some in old, overcrowded cars, some in the school bus made available to the Fratelli Project. Some take the opportunity to kick a football around in the yard, but then they all line up to go to the classrooms.

Currently there are five classes. Two for the smallest children and three for those of primary school age and middle school age. Naturally, there is no question of formal schooling. For that to happen the project would need formal recognition, which it does not have. However, the activities are structured as though in a proper school. The teachers, Reem, Manal, Laure, Magida and Fadi give lessons in literacy, mathematics and English. Classes go on until it is time for the midday meal, when the children return by the same means of



Many children make use of the school bus which is made available to the Fratelli Project. One of the teachers always sees the children onto and off the bus. This gives them the chance to make contact with the families.

transport that brought them to their homes in the gardens of the UNHCR or in the Shelters in Sidon.

Besides the teachers, there are the volunteers that Miquel and Andrés have managed to recruit to the project. The pupils of the Marist and De La Salle schools also help out occasionally in some activities. In fact the Fratelli Project aims to be a place of education not only for the

refugee children from diverse backgrounds and faiths, but also for Lebanese society, which is being put to the test once more as a result of war and the overwhelming presence of so many foreigners.



Some moments in a typical day in Les Frères. The children arrive or depart accompanied by their parents. A child is writing on the blackboard. A volunteer is in the school yard with the children.





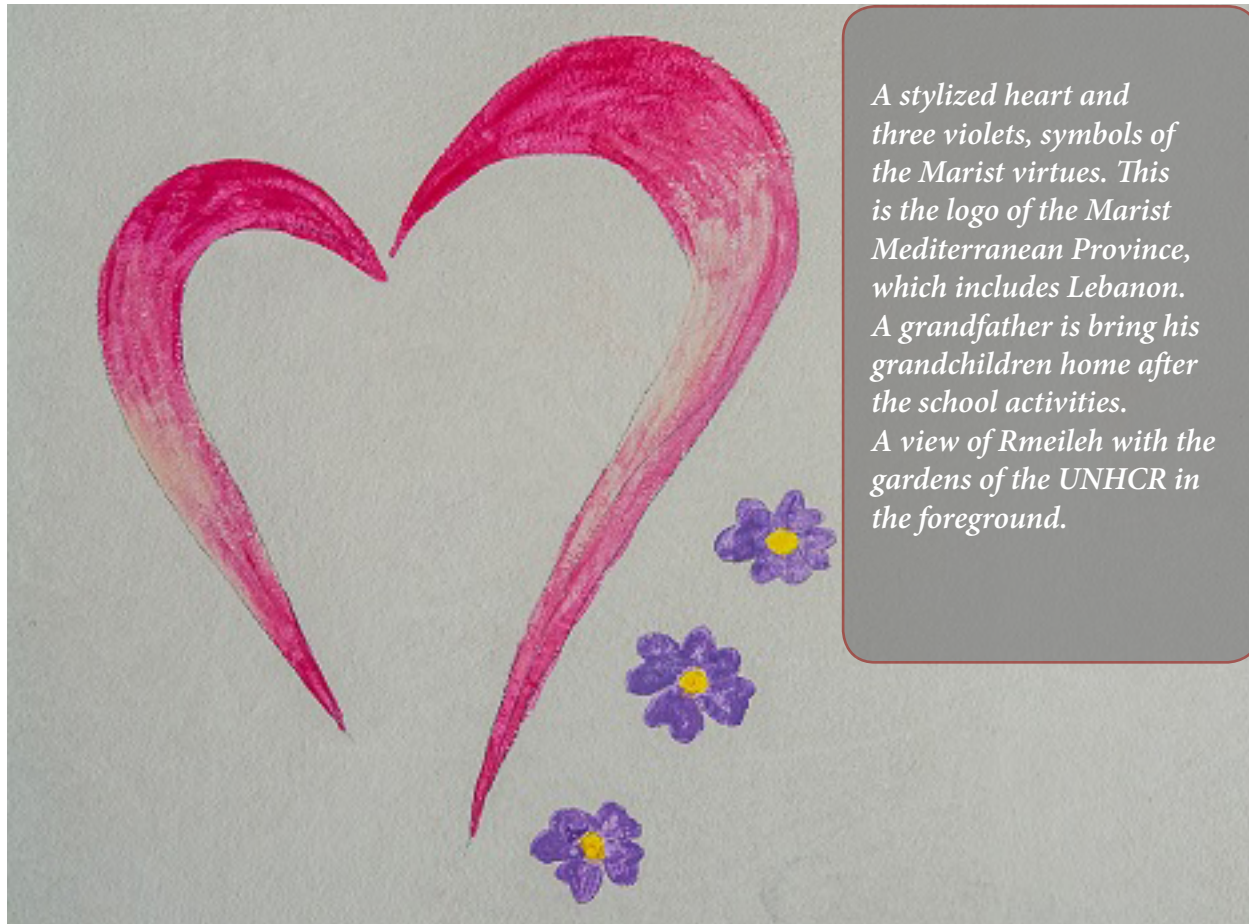
An earnest line of children, waiting to go into their classrooms for the start of lessons.



Above: men working on the reconstruction of the school building;
Below: the building as it is in the parts that have not been rebuilt after the years of neglect. Also pictured is a classroom.




A girl in class.



A stylized heart and three violets, symbols of the Marist virtues. This is the logo of the Marist Mediterranean Province, which includes Lebanon. A grandfather is bring his grandchildren home after the school activities. A view of Rmeileh with the gardens of the UNHCR in the foreground.





*“I really want to be
a schoolteacher
very much”*

Dalia, is speaking, a
pupil in the Fratelli
Project

Dalia is 13 years old and lives in the Imam Shelter in Abra, near Sidon, where her family settled when they fled from Syria. She is very enthusiastic about the Fratelli Project. “I really want to be a schoolteacher. I like being here in Les Frères, because we study and play. In the other schools that I went to in Lebanon, I did not feel happy. There were too many in each class and we did not learn anything. The teachers were severe, and the place was ugly, with broken desks! Everything here is nice and new.” When she had overcome her initial shyness, Dalia was happy to tell us about her new life in Lebanon since leaving her home in Damascus. “There are four of children in our family. Three of us are in the Fratelli Project, and we come here every day in the mornings.

In the afternoons, I study and help mother look after my little brother who is two years old.” We learn from Magida, Dalia’s teacher who acts as interpreter, that Dalia’s mother is a very good and competent woman. Thanks to Caritas, she has obtained a diploma in nursing and is now working. However, Dahlia tells us that her father is in Germany. “My father went there to make things better for us. He is getting the documents for us so that we can join him, and so the family can be together again”. We asked her if she was pleased with the idea of going to Germany. “I am happy to do what my parents decide and to do what is good for my family”.



*Muslim women in traditional dress walking in the streets of Sidon.
Dalia (on the right) with a group of her friends.*





An interview with young Nassuoh

Nassuoh is a strong healthy boy, one of the biggest in Les Frères. He looks more than his age of fourteen, perhaps because he already knows what it means to have responsibilities for his family. In the morning, he attends classes in the Fratelli Project, where he can study and play with his friends. In the afternoons, on the other hand, he works as a labourer with his father. He knows a bit about agriculture from working in the fields with his uncle. Magida teaches him English, and she is very proud of him. She tells us how Nassuoh is very good with plants. In Les Frères he has given Miquel and Andrés very good advice about organising the garden. While we are talking in the classroom on the second floor, there is a bit of a commotion downstairs. The De La Salle Brothers are marking the Day of the Child, and the celebrations are about to start in Les Frères.

But Nassuoh is not in any hurry to go. “I would rather finish the interview”, he says.

Nassuoh’s family is one of the many Syrian families that have left home because of the war. They were swindled by a fake offer of a voyage to Canada, and now all they want to do is return home to Edleb in Syria.

“What do you want to do when you grow up, Nassuoh?” we ask him. “I want to be a footballer.” Nassuoh thinks big, like so many boys of his age, but unlike the others he has learned to come to terms with reality.

“If I don’t succeed in that I’ll become a mechanic”.

Magida smiles and says, “I’ll help you.”



*Nassuoh, playing football with his friend in the yard in front of the school while waiting for things to start.
English class for Nassuoh and friends.*

A view over Sidon from the roof terrace of Les Frères



Mohamed

The “Naddaf Shelter” is an overcrowded centre for Syrian refugees in El Miyeh, near Sidon. To drive there from Les Frères in Rmeileh, you pass by a town-sized settlement of around 80,000 Palestinians who fled from the armed conflict in their homeland. You also pass various road-blocks with metal drums painted white and red and barbed wire.

All around the Shelter, there are dusty roads and dilapidated buildings. The family of the

14 year-old Mohamed’s lives there, but just for the time being. Like all the other residents of the Shelter, they have received their notice of eviction and will soon have to leave. That will be within three days, and almost none of them have anywhere else to go.

Mohamed’s mother welcomes us with all the hospitality that she can manage in the difficult circumstances.

She tells us her story while we sit drinking coffee with a view over Sidon. Mohamed is



the second of her ten children, seven girls and three boys. Two of her daughters, still quite young but already married, stayed behind in Syria with their husbands when the rest of the family fled and scattered through fear of Daesh. The family hopes to return to Syria one day. They left everything behind them there, house, work, a normal life. For two years now, they have been living in the Naddaf Shelter, which is a refuge provided by the Islamic community, but they want to have it back so as to make it into a reception centre for elderly people from Syria. The problem is that Mohamed's family are unable to pay any rent. The father has health problems and cannot find paid em-

ployment. The mother stays home and looks after the house. Mohamed and his brother work after school, but that is not enough. Besides, Mohamed would rather continue to go to the Les Frères centre to be educated. Since joining the Fratelli Project, Mohamed has taken on a lot. He gets up early in the morning to apply himself to studies. He is clearly making progress, which was not the case in the regular school. His problem is to reconcile his studies with the need to help the family. His mother would like him to continue attending the centre even when they move to another place, but his father insists that he should get a job.



Andrés and Magida, one of the co-workers in the Fratelli Project, next to the Naddaf Shelter, one of the many buildings for refugees in Sidon. The shelter belongs to the Islamic community. Top right: Mohamed with a group of children from the Fratelli Project. Bottom right: other residents of the Shelter.

