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Maronite Father Hani Tawk and a team of volunteers prepare to cook meals for the needy at I

Maronite Father Hani Tawk and a team of volunteers prepare to cook meals for the needy at Mary's Kitchen in the blast-stricken neighborhood of Karintina in Beirut Nov. 24, 2020. (CNS photo/Doreen Abi Raad)

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BEIRUT — As Lebanon crumbles under a socioeconomic crisis, Lebanon's religious are assuming roles as relief and social workers.

"We cannot be a real priest, a real presence of Jesus Christ, without helping the people. Otherwise, we are just a functionary of the church," Maronite Father Hani Tawk told Catholic News Service.

"We are missionary workers, because we see Our Lord Jesus Christ in the face of every family, every person we meet," said Father Tawk, a member of the informal group Church for Lebanon, which includes 15 priests and one nun from three Catholic rites: Maronite, Latin and Melkite.

"We made this decision to be with the people, to help them, to support them and to seek justice," Father Tawk said.

The roots of their union stem from the October 2019 mass uprising in Lebanon against a corrupt government; during that time, some of the priests became acquainted on the street.

Little by little, they started to meet. As Lebanon's economy began to unravel, individual and collective outreach initiatives began.

Jesuit Father Gabriel Khairallah, with a team of volunteers that includes the Circle of Catholic Youth, organized the distribution of hot meals and food boxes and established a health clinic and dispensary.

What started as 25 hot meals a day in 2019 has now grown to 260 a day. And from 30 weekly food boxes in 2019, the initiative is now delivering about 300 a week.

The increase reflects the emergence of the "new poor" in Lebanon, Father Khairallah said.

Since 2019, the Lebanese currency has devalued by more than 90%, and food prices have increased by more than 1,870%. Poverty is now a reality for nearly 80% of the population, in what was considered a middle-income country.

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"More and more people are in need," Father Khairallah said.

"They have lost their purchasing power. People are not able to afford the minimum necessities. It hurts so much to see the loss of dignity of the people," said Father Khairallah.

"I see my mission as a priest now is also to console, to listen to people," as they share their burdens, the Jesuit noted, adding that many Lebanese religious are trying to develop listening and counseling ministries.

"People feel that the church is the place where they can be helped and where they can share their pain," said Maronite Father Tony Lattouf, a group member and pastor of Our Lady of Assumption Church in Rabweh, a formerly middle-class area

north of Beirut.

As Lebanon's living conditions deteriorate, parishes face challenges in helping families with a myriad of needs: rent and tuition assistance, food, medicine and hospital fees.

Father Lattouf attested to blessings despite the frustrations experienced by religious.

"Sometimes we feel that we can't handle everything. But we always believe the presence of God is with us, that he will take care of things," Father Lattouf told CNS.

The blast at the Beirut port in August 2020 further strengthened the unity of the informal group, and members continue to help the families of the victims and those affected by the blast as well as to advocate for justice.

There has yet to be justice or accountability for the catastrophe, which killed more than 219 people, injured more than 7,000, and displaced more than 300,000.

Following the blast, Father Tawk established Mary's Kitchen in a small garage in a neighborhood about 500 feet away from the port. As more people slip into poverty, the initiative has grown and currently prepares 900 hot meals daily for four distribution areas in Beirut.

The walls of Mary's Kitchen are graced with photos of those who lost their lives in the blast. "It's not just a kitchen," Father Tawk said. "It's a center of conviviality, fraternity, a home for listening."

The 15 priests and nuns of the Church for Lebanon gather for weekly meetings.

"We discuss political issues, social issues and how we can be a sanctified presence among the people," Father Tawk explained.

Despite the different religious traditions of their Catholic rites and different political views, the group is united by a common goal of helping Lebanon's suffering population.

"We are passing through a very miserable situation. But we believe there is light at the end of this tunnel. We believe in the Resurrection," Father Tawk said.