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Michael La Civita, director of communications for the Catholic Near East Welfare Association,

Michael La Civita, director of communications for the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, and Laura Ieraci, editor of ONE magazine, participate in a panel about the reality of the Eastern churches in regions of crisis at the Catholic Media Conference in Atlanta June 21, 2024. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

Laura Ieraci

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The heroic work and witness of the Eastern churches in some of the world's most conflict-ridden regions was highlighted at the annual Catholic Media Conference held in Atlanta in June.

"Conflict, Crisis and Hope: Eastern Catholics in the World's Hotspots," a 75-minute panel on the last day of the June 18-21 conference, cast a spotlight on the efforts and challenges of the Eastern churches tending to the human and spiritual needs of the people in their care amid the turmoil in Ukraine, Ethiopia and the Holy Land.

The panel was organized and sponsored by Catholic Near East Welfare Association, or CNEWA, to underline the 50th anniversary of its flagship publication, ONE magazine.

Three speakers representing these regions joined the conference via Zoom: Archbishop Borys Gudziak of the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia, Bishop Tesfaselassie Medhin of Adigrat, Ethiopia, and Joseph Hazboun, CNEWA-Pontifical Mission's regional director for Palestine and Israel.

Michael J.L. La Civita, executive editor and CNEWA's director of communications, moderated the panel. He opened the discussion by setting the context: "Catholic communities throughout the Middle East, Northeast Africa, India and Eastern Europe — whose peoples are served by Catholic Near East Welfare Association — are at the center of events unfolding there."

He also noted, "It's probably more pressing today than it was five years ago for us to be really expressing our Catholic identity and having stories … (about) what the church is experiencing and how the churches, through leaders such as those gathered here today, are at the forefront of preserving human dignity and issuing that call."

La Civita recalled covering significant historic events in these regions — the fall of communism and the beginnings of a peace process in the Holy Land, for instance — since starting with the magazine in 1989.

"The Eastern churches were not only directly impacted by these great events but functioned as 'influencers of the time' in forging what believers hoped would be a future for the common good for all," he said.

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Speaking to conference participants from Lviv, Ukraine, Gudziak spoke about the death, displacement and trauma that have resulted in Ukraine since Russia launched a full-scale war in 2022. The archbishop underscored the death of more than 100,000 Ukrainian soldiers and up to 50,000 civilians in areas under Ukrainian control.

"There's no count in the Russian-occupied area," he said.

Of the 8 million people who fled Ukraine, 2 million have returned. All 4 million people who are currently internally displaced have been housed "somewhere, by someone."

"Communities, homes, people share their houses," he explained.

"In these circumstances, people grow up very quickly," he said, referring to the impact of the war on the students at Ukrainian Catholic University, which he leads as president. The university received thousands of displaced people, particularly those with disabilities. Several members of the university community — students and alumni — have died on the front lines, he added.

"In times of hardship, people come together," he continued. "The war gives people grace to respond. The church is there, the bishops are there, the priests are there, the sisters are there, and that is very important. It gives people support."

He described how monasteries, convents and other religious houses run by religious orders close to the front lines, have "become hubs for humanitarian aid" that also provide "a spiritual, moral significance."

"People feel that they have icons of God before them. The church is there. It's there where it hurts. It's there where they're hungry. It's there where the bomb alerts are happening, or the bombs are actually falling.

"So, there's suffering, but there is great valor and there's hope, which the church supports, the church announces and the church encourages."

Medhin, who spoke to participants from Rome, described how the priests, religious men and women, and lay workers in his eparchy stayed close to the suffering people during the two-year war between the Tigray People's Liberation Front and the Ethiopian forces. That conflict, and the humanitarian and environmental disasters that ensued, killed an estimated 600,000 people; up to 5 million people remain displaced.

He described how for two years there were "conflicts, blockages and sieges and absolutely no outlet for communication."

"Adigrat has been destroyed, dispensed," he said. "The Catholic Church remained quite strong. All missionaries, my priests, remained in their respective mission points," and this has helped with the current efforts toward healing, rebuilding and restoration.

The bishop said there was no defense "to help us of any sort."

"If we survived," he remarked, it was due to the "sense of solidarity" and the prayers of others, encouraged by Pope Francis.

Foreign media, forbidden entry into Tigray during the war, are still not permitted to enter and report from the region, the bishop said, underlining the important role of Catholic journalism through agencies in the church network, such as CNEWA, to "present the reality from the ground and then also to give people hope."

Currently, the church in Adigrat is accompanying those suffering from the trauma of war and trying to stem the growing problem of emigration, especially among the youth, by providing vocational training opportunities, a means to earn a living and remain in the country, he said.

"You know, physical matters can be repaired soon enough, but the human aspect — this will take a long time.

"We want to be instrumental," Medhin added about the efforts of his eparchy. "We want to set up our conflict-resolution projects into resilience- and peace-building institutions. And your media can help us in stabilizing these establishments on the terrain, with research and community development."

From Jerusalem, Hazboun said the church's ability to respond to the needs in Gaza since the conflict broke between Israel and Hamas in October has been "very challenging." As of mid-June, however, two church-run projects in Gaza have managed to provide a steady supply of food and potable water to those in their care.

In the occupied West Bank, a land highly dependent on tourism, the conflict has caused an unemployment crisis, plunging many families into need. Church groups, supported by CNEWA, are working to help these families.

"It is important to realize the reality in which the church operates in this tiny land, so we can understand the complexities," he said.

Christians represent less than 1% of a population of 14 million in the Holy Land, "yet the contributions of the church are really considerable." Currently, church-run institutions number 298 and serve 2.5 million people.

In response to a question from a journalist, Hazboun reported that the CNEWA-funded Al Ahli Hospital in Gaza continues to operate "under very harsh conditions, with lack of medical equipment, medical supplies and medicine," despite being

among the first sites hit in Israel's military response to the deadly Hamas-led incursion into Israel Oct. 7.

While several other CNEWA-funded clinics have been destroyed, CNEWA continues to support "a number of medical points" in Gaza, he added.

This story appears in the **War in Ukraine** feature series. View the full series.