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Melvine Khoury speaks to Pope Leo XIV Dec. 2.

Melvine Khoury, 36, who underwent eight surgeries following the 2020 Beirut blast that killed 220 and injured scores more, speaks to Pope Leo XIV Dec. 2 during his visit to the Lebanese port to pray for victims of the explosion and their families. (OSV News screenshot/Vatican Media)

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As Pope Leo XIV was wrapping up his first apostolic trip to Turkey and Lebanon recently, the world was moved by the sight of a young Lebanese woman crying and hugging the pontiff as he was meeting with victims of the deadly 2020 Beirut port explosion.

"My heart was beating so fast when I saw that God had put the Holy Father right in front of me," Melvine Khoury, a Maronite Catholic, told OSV News by phone from Beirut.

"We stood in the port, the scene of the horrific crime, this massive explosion that forever changed our lives," she said, her voice full of emotion.

Some observers say this meeting of Leo's was the most powerfully emotional moment of his entire visit as he consoled the loved ones of those who died.

Video footage showed Khoury, holding her cross in one hand, speaking to Leo as he listened intently. She asked if she could hug him. He replied, "Yes," as she wept profusely.

"Standing in front of the pope, memories of this awful explosion flooded back. The cross was the same I held during the eight operations I underwent to repair the injuries I suffered," she said. "It also reminds me of how much Jesus loves me, dying on the cross, experiencing the pain of this world."

Pope Leo XIV kneels to speak to a boy in Beirut Dec. 2.

Pope Leo XIV kneels to speak to a boy in Beirut Dec. 2 during a meeting with families of victims and with survivors of a deadly 2020 port explosion. The boy is holding a photo of his father, who died that day. (CNS/Vatican Media)

The Beirut port explosion of Aug. 4, 2020, was the largest non-nuclear blast in modern history. It killed more than 220 people and wounded scores more, like Khoury.

Efforts to investigate and bring to justice those responsible for allowing hundreds of tons of explosive ammonium nitrate at the port have so far been thwarted by political interference.

Khoury, 36, was at home in the Beirut district of Ashrafieh with her mother and brother when the powerful blast ripped through, slamming her against a wall as furniture flew in the air. Her left cheek, shoulder and clavicle were broken, and she sustained injuries to her left eyelid and teeth.

Her brother suffered wounds from flying shattered glass, while her mother was unharmed. An aunt sitting in a wheelchair in a nearby apartment died from wounds from shards of glass.

"I told the Holy Father of this terrible pain, and yet feeling a sense of peace and hope remembering how much God loves me. It cannot compare to Jesus' suffering on the cross," she said.

Leo recited a silent prayer at the port Dec. 2 and later celebrated Mass, ending his first overseas trip as pontiff. Laying flowers at a memorial at the port, he prayed for survivors of the blast and tearful relatives of its victims.

"Although Pope Leo did not speak, he expressed with his eyes and listened intently to me and others. What is so beautiful is his listening," Khoury said. "You sense that he understands deeply what's inside us, the pain inside us, and that his understanding is great."

Beside Khoury stood a man and his daughter, who was 2 years old when her mother, a nurse at St. George's Hospital, was killed in the blast. A young boy standing with them experienced the death of his father who worked at the port.

"Pope Leo's visit greatly touched us. He listened. He prayed in silence. This listening and prayer was extremely deep. He understands and feels the pain of the Lebanese and the need for justice to be served for the people," Khoury said.

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She expressed hope that Lebanon's Maronite Catholic President Joseph Aoun and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam will finally obtain justice for the victims of this tragedy.

"Peace and justice must go hand and hand for the families," she said. "I believe that God has given us this hope by sending the Holy Father as a messenger of peace to this place of the explosion to help us. It's like placing Jesus on the spot of this crime to offer us grace and goodness in the place of death."

"For me, the powerful explosion of 2020 was like a rebirth, but now I say (with Pope Leo's visit), it's a resurrection," she said. "Jesus has seen these five troubled years and gave us His grace through the way Pope Leo listened and heard me, saw my pain and ministered Jesus' peace to my heart."

"The Lord brought the pope to Lebanon to minister the peace of Christ and has given Lebanon deep joy," Khoury said of the Nov. 30 to Dec. 2 pastoral visit.

In his farewell remarks before leaving Lebanon, Leo said he was deeply moved by the encounter at the port.

"I pray for all the victims, and I carry with me the pain and the thirst for truth and justice of so many families, of an entire country," he said.

"We love Pope Leo," Khoury said of the encounter. "He is truly a man of God. We saw Jesus and the messenger of peace."

This story appears in the **Pope Leo in Turkey and Lebanon** feature series. View the full series.