

## Sister Michaelina: Interview

Sister Michaelina is a nun with the Carboni Sisters. She lives in Black Boy Lane in Haringey. Her 'sister's' convent is in Aizaria (Bethany) in East Jerusalem and she lived and worked there for a number of years. Since the erection of the Separation Wall, Aizaria has been surrounded on three sides by it, cutting it off from Jerusalem. The Wall goes right through their convent and cuts their nursery off from the village. There was a campaign to pressurise the Israeli authorities to allow a gate in the Wall so that the children of Aizaria could get to their nursery.

Sister Michaelina is keen for us to pass on her experiences of living in Aizaria to help the fight of the Palestinian people.

We started the nursery in Aizaria (Bethany) in the convent about fifteen years ago in 1994. It started with children mostly coming for a bowl of porridge because the poverty was desperate. Eventually it became a nursery and we taught the children.

One thing from that time that impressed me was the Mayor of Aizaria. He was old and blind and he had cataracts. 'Listen' he said 'First it was the Turks, then the French, then the English and now Israel. We need to be in charge of our own land, our own farms, our own lives.' The situation seemed to be improving for a while – the mothers were coming with their children every day to the nursery. I was there day after day with the mothers and the children and the teacher but they didn't want to speak to me as they were so sad and the anger was building up. It was before the Separation Wall which started to be built in 2002 but still there were the roadblocks. The mothers took their children back as they couldn't get through the roadblocks. Students couldn't get to the University of Bethlehamas the road to it was closed. It was blocked. You can just imagine what was building up in the hearts of the Palestinians. In my situation, in the convent, we used to wake up and ask ourselves the question 'What will today bring? How will the situation get worse for the people?'

There was a bus driver who brought the children in his mini bus. One day he came to me and said 'Sister I don't know what to do.' The Israeli soldiers had threatened him by saying if he continued to go round collecting the children to take them to nursery they would blow up his minibus. A day later that's what they did.

Another man came to the sisters and told us he had to take away his child from the nursery. Just half an hour before an Israeli soldier accused him of being connected to a suicide bomber and said they were going to blow up his house. We heard that the Israeli soldiers did blow up his house. Another man, who we had employed since being a boy to do odd jobs around the house, had managed to put away some money to buy a house. The house was small but pretty and he was married now with five children. The soldiers destroyed it. They knocked it down because he worked for us. They told him it was illegal and said he hadn't any permission to build his house. It made us so angry especially as we could see the illegal settlements growing up all around us. Over the last twenty years they have grown like mushrooms in the West Bank. They have made their settlements beautiful but they have no respect for the Palestinian people.

Our convent in Bethany is also a House of Prayer for pilgrims to the Holy Land. A group of Americans were staying there on a pilgrimage. They had Bible readings and they invited speakers. Amongst them was a Rabbi. I was in the community at the time so I went to hear the talk.

He showed them slides of the Jewish settlement, Ma'ale Adumin which was like a city. It was lacking nothing; water, roads, lights, everything and next to it were the Bedouins who had nothing – no electricity, no running water, no toilets, nothing.

The situation got worse. I remember a woman asking us to give them the key to our gate. The woman was pregnant so this meant she would be able to get through to a hospital behind the Wall when she needed to. The Wall runs right through the middle of our convent so we had a gate with a key which came out in East Jerusalem on the other side of the Wall. One of the sisters – an elderly lady – used to open the gate and let people through to the hospital and the Israeli soldiers, who were completely ignorant of this, used to drop in for coffee afterwards. Recently a woman who needed a gall bladder operation was phoning someone to take her to the other side of the Wall to the hospital. There were always situations like this.

One day, when the Palestinians told me that our neighbouring village Abu Dis was divided into two, I was so angry. I

went down and found there was a massive roadblock caused by a huge block of cement with barbed wire on top. I approached this Israeli soldier and said I wanted to cross the road to see someone. He wanted to say yes but he couldn't. What I remember was the desperation of the people that day. The road was packed with Palestinian men trying to get to work and it was pouring down with rain. They came to us and said "Sister can you please do something for us. You must tell people about this. Tell the Pope to do something for us." It was a desperate cry. That is why in London I go to meetings to ask people to do something for them.

We needed to do some work on our convent. The bathroom and shower needed fixing but we were always postponing it. A time came when we said it would be a good time because it would give work to the Palestinians. They came but they had to stay for a whole month. They couldn't go home because of the roadblocks going to Bethlehem and Ramallah. Bethany is only a few miles from Bethlehem but they could not do walk home because of the blocks.

Now there is the Wall as well. The Palestinians are in prison within this Wall of eight metres high. You can imagine this Wall and you can see why the Palestinians want to bomb it.

There is a Peace Group of Israelis and, when it is Harvest time and time to gather in the crops, they work with the Palestinians. If a soldier or a settler tries to attack them the Israeli peace group stops them. The settlers throw rocks and stones and set fire to the crops but the peace group stops them. This is something positive. There are people of good will. So many times we have needed help and the Peace Group has helped us. We are an enclosed order and it would have been easy for us to go but we decided to stay in Aizaria because we wanted to live with the Palestinian people. They would come to talk to us. People cannot go to work now, children cannot go to school, people cannot get to the hospital so they come to us for help. When they built this Wall we were partly on the Israeli side but we said we wanted to stay working with the Palestinians so the Israelis allowed us eventually to build a gate. Parents bringing their children to the nursery cannot go through the gate so they would have to bring their children so far and their teacher or a Sister would meet them and take them through the gate. Children can never play outside their homes and so they never go out to play. It is not a normal life. The nursery gives them a bit of freedom.

The teachers are good. The children are taught mainly in Arabic. I stayed two years and helped them teach and helped as much as I could. It is supposed to be one of the best nurseries in the village.

It is very difficult to be positive but we have to be. The Bedouin are our neighbours and we share our water with them as they have very little. There are constant water cuts as the Israelis control all our water supplies so we have moved our water pipe. Just a mile away, in Ma'ale Adumin, there is running water on tap twenty-four hours a day, where everything is flourishing. If this was just for a day a week or even a month it would be bearable but this is day after day after day, every day. How can anyone live like this? Everyone should do something to stop this. The settlements should be stopped. In England the Sisters send a little bit of money but it needs the big powers to stop the settlements. But we in this country need to do all we can to show the Palestinians are not forgotten.