

Caritas Jerusalem at World Youth Day 2019



A young woman praying with a rosary made in Bethlehem

About 700,000 young people from all around the world came together, with Pope Francis and Church Leaders, to celebrate World Youth Day 2019 in Panama, a beautiful event of 5 days of prayer and religious activities that started on 22 January and ended on 27 January. This year's WYD was special for Palestinians, not only because a group of young Palestinians participated in the event, but because Pope Francis gave every young person present a gift of an olive wood rosary, produced in Bethlehem by Caritas Jerusalem, and encouraged them to pray for world peace, beginning in Jerusalem.

Caritas Jerusalem was asked to provide the 1 million olive wood rosaries to be distributed by Pope Francis to the youth and George Handal, who as well as being Caritas Financial Manager is familiar with the olive wood business, managed the project. He chose small workshops in the Bethlehem governorate and the income enabled the owners to develop their capacity and employ more staff. The project, funded by the AVEJMJ organization, provided hundreds of jobs for unemployed youth, marginalized women and people with disabilities.

“I would like to thank to all those who worked tirelessly on this project. Producing a million rosaries in a short time was no easy task! But all the long days of hard work and fatigue vanishes, especially when I think about the hundreds of people who could make a living with dignity, particularly people with disabilities, the youth and widows.” Stated Mr. George Handal.



In front of the altar in Panama: from L. David Fawadleh and Kamel Matar who worked on the rosary project, with George Handal (R) who managed the project.

A short video, in Spanish, showing the different stages of making the rosaries was shown on the large screens to the whole assembly. Following the video, George Handal spoke in Arabic (with translation) explaining how the project helped the poor in Bethlehem, most of whom were Christians. He chose small workshops and income from the project enabled the owners to develop the workshops and upgrade their capacity. More than 300 people were employed in the different stages of making the rosaries including students, people with disabilities, and many previously unemployed women who could not find suitable, flexible employment elsewhere.



Bishop Peter Burcher responsible for funding the project with George Handal in Panama

Aid to the Church in Need sponsored two young people, Kamel and Tamara, to attend WYD and to speak in their native Arabic language about being Palestinian Christians. Tamara was very excited about taking part in such a beautiful event. Her excitement arose from the idea that she was going to meet hundreds of people from all different backgrounds, cultures and communities that have one thing in common, which is the love for Jesus. She recalls the pleasure of people when they met someone from the Holy Land, but also says one of the difficulties she faced whilst being there was how to explain the reality and the presence of local Christians in Palestine. When Kamel saw people in Panama praying with the rosaries that he had helped to make he could hardly contain his excitement: “I was very proud of myself and everybody who worked on this project” he said



*Picture taken from the large screen, speaking to the assembly of youth and showing the rosaries
From Left: 3 young organisers with Sr Bridget Tighe, George Handal, Tamara and Kamel.*

Dressed in traditional Palestinian costume Tamara Qassis and Kamel Matar spoke in Arabic (with translation) to about 700,000 young people from around the world. “It was an amazing experience, we were the voice of Christian Palestinians to the world, and we delivered a message of peace that, despite our daily struggle, we are people of peace, and we are in need for the prayers and support of Christians throughout the world” Tamara said.



From left: Kamel and Tamara with David who had worked on the project.

Kamel, who had worked with Caritas Jerusalem to produce the rosaries, said proudly about his time in WYD “we proved for the whole world that the Palestinians are resilient people who just want peace and stability in their lives despite the wars and obstacles they are facing”. He couldn’t believe that he was on stage and being the voice of the millions of Christian Palestinians around the world.



Bishop Peter Bürcher with Sister Bridget Tighe FMDM, General Director Caritas Jerusalem,

Sister Bridget, General Director of Caritas Jerusalem, was among the people who took part in WYD. She was pleased to participate in this significant event for the very first time. Moreover, she was delighted to see this big number of people coming together to pray with joy, love and peace. What captured her attention the most was the scene of hundreds of thousands of young people praying with the rosaries that were made in the Holy Land. Seeing the fruit of the AVEJMJ project has made her happy. Early in the week she and George Handal joined a group of young people in the chapel of Saint Pope John Paul II to pray the rosary. Sr. Bridget and George led a decade of the Rosary in Arabic to the delight of those present who had never heard Christian prayers recited in Arabic before.

Caritas Jerusalem commissioned two crosiers made of olive wood in Bethlehem as gifts, one for Pope Francis and one for the Archbishop of Panama, Jose Domingo Ulloa Mendieta. To their delight and surprise both the Archbishop and Pope Francis used the crosiers during Mass on the second and final day of WYD respectively. This was indeed a great honour for the artisans and people of Bethlehem, for Caritas Jerusalem, and for the association of St Jean Marie that funded the project.



Presenting an olive wood crosier, made in Bethlehem to Archbishop Jose Domingo Ulloa Mendieta. From L to R. George Handal, Sr Bridget Tighe, Bishop Peter Brucher, Archbishop Jose, David Fawadleh and Victor Chang

“WYD was a very peaceful event. I heard that policemen in different countries say that when large crowds of young people gather for an event clashes or problems often occur, but that when hundreds of thousands of youth come together for WYD they are peaceful and enjoy themselves but there is no violence. What a wonderful compliment to Christian youth!” Sister Bridget said.



Pope Francis during the final Mass with the crozier made by Palestinian Christians in Bethlehem

World Youth Day was a touching experience for every participant. It changed the lives of millions of people around the world, especially Palestinians, through those who participated in the event, those who received olive wood rosaries made in Bethlehem, and those who were part of the AVEJMJ project.

Caritas Jerusalem, with the AVEJMJ Association, not only produced and delivered 1 million olive wood rosaries that were given to the youth of the world as a gift from Pope Francis, it enabled the voice of Palestinian Christians to be heard praying, witnessing to their faith, and expressing desire for peace in their native Arabic language.

