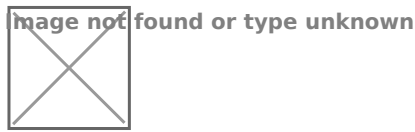


‘Steeped in hatred from the cradle’



Nun Sister Daniilia, a resident of East Jerusalem for 12 years, reflects on ongoing deadlock

“Would it bother you if I spoke with you while in motion? I’m riding my small scooter, wearing my wireless headphones, of course. I’m returning from Jerusalem with supplies, primarily canned food and other long-lasting items, along with some meat. We plan to store it in the freezer in small portions. However, if the recent rumours of impending electricity and water cuts materialise, my choice may not prove to be so wise...”

Sister Daniilia is 61 years old and resides in the Holy Monastery of Little Galilee, situated atop the Mount of Olives in East Jerusalem. According to Christian tradition, it’s the place where Christ appeared to his 11 disciples on the Sunday evening following his resurrection. Today, this historical monastery, affiliated with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, is cared for by Sister Daniilia and another nun a few years her senior, both of Greek descent.

‘Life in the Middle East is an ongoing struggle, often for what we consider self-evident’

What is the current situation there? Is she afraid? Does she feel endangered? “Apart from the disturbance and unease caused by the Hamas attack last Saturday, the broader Jerusalem area remains relatively calm. We have not experienced rocket attacks or hostilities. As for fear, I may not be the best person to answer that; I have my own ‘eccentricity.’ I find enjoyment in vivere pericolosamente [living dangerously in Italian].”

‘I used to work as a DJ’

Is it contradictory to embrace a life of risk alongside monasticism? “Not at all. When you take your vows, renounce your worldly possessions, and enter a monastery to devote yourself to God, it’s akin to jumping out of an airplane without a parachute. I had this experience at the age of 29. Until then, I led a secular life and worked as a DJ. However, when I uttered, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on

me,' tears welled in my eyes, and my calling came from above," shares Sister Daniilia.

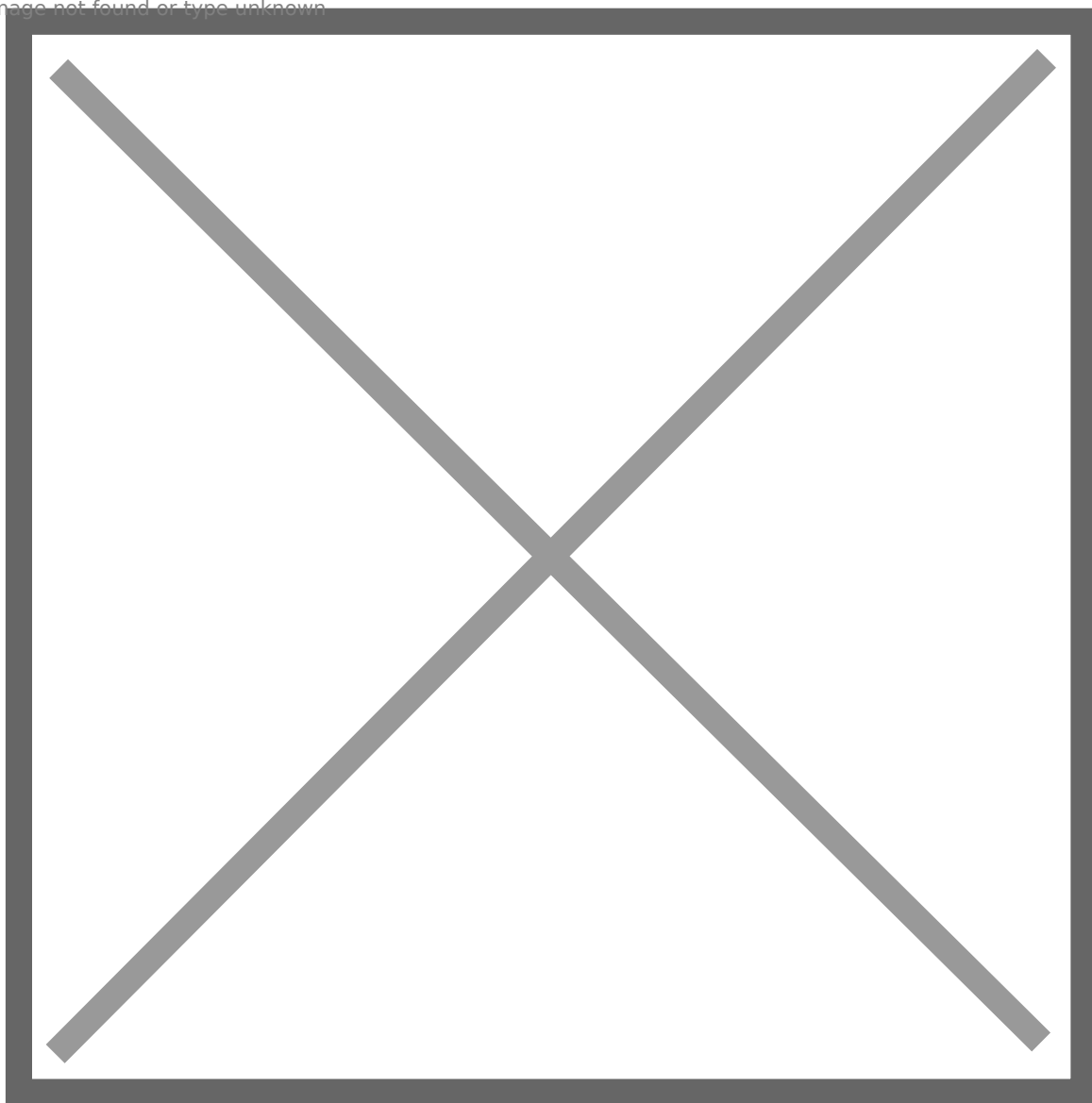
"It's been 32 years since she made that decision; 12 of them spent in Israel. Yet it has not been long enough to completely decipher the intricate social fabric of this corner of the world. "Everything is incredibly intricate, and the polarization persists. Sometimes I wonder if people here have no choice but to live this way; it's as if they've been steeped in hatred from the cradle. It may sound far-fetched – and certainly doesn't apply to everyone – but life in the Middle East is an ongoing struggle, often for what we consider self-evident.

I've noticed that whenever something goes wrong, blame and curses are directed toward the 'other side.' In our area, only Arab-Israelis reside; there are no Jews at all. Regardless of what goes awry, even if a tree falls, they will attribute it to the Jews. The demonisation of one group by another – or by others – has been ingrained here for centuries. Just when we are on the verge of optimism for peace, something happens, and the flames of conflict reignite. Take the situation with Hamas, a terrorist organisation that, in reality, harms the Palestinians with its actions. If Gaza is devastated, they will bear the responsibility. My heart aches for what is happening to this people."

And the Christians? How are they treated? "The ultra-Orthodox Jews, the Haredim, are the only ones treating us with hostility. You'll often witness illiterate kids openly spitting at Christians or hurling stones at them in the Old City, because that's what they've learned. As for the Muslims, the most significant crisis was in 2014. Rockets were raining down, and we had nightly skirmishes surrounding the monastery following the 8 o'clock prayer. Yet again, it was youths causing these issues. I empathise with these kids. Islam restricts them from interacting with girls, from publicly consuming alcohol, and they have no creative outlets. Violence through gang activities seems to be their sole outlet. Do you know the extent of bullying I sometimes endure? If I were to document everything in a book, it would likely become a bestseller, and I'd be able to cover all the monastery's expenses."

Despite it all, she has no intention of leaving or returning to Greece and her hometown, Thessaloniki (her paternal family hails from the northern port city's Harilaou district). "Sometimes, when I'm pushed to my limits, the thought of leaving crosses my mind as a possibility, but I immediately dismiss it. Christ chose these places to manifest and become human; He didn't go to Belgium or Luxembourg. Who am I to complain or grumble?"

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