

Tel Aviv Catholic church serves growing migrant community

by [Indrani Basu](#)

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TEL AVIV, Israel (RNS) Many of the locals living around 33 Shivat Zion St. in the southern end of this booming Mediterranean city haven't heard of the new church in their midst. The facade is plain cement, and there's no sign hanging outside.

But Our Lady Woman of Valor Pastoral Center for Migrant Workers fills an overwhelming need among Tel Aviv's diverse and growing Roman Catholic migrant community.

Each week, the church holds five "Sunday" Masses—though only one of them actually takes place on Sunday. The rest are held Saturday, which is Israel's Sabbath and the only day migrants have off from work. Masses are celebrated in the languages of the migrants—Tagalog and English for the Filipino community, Konkani and Malayalam for the Indians and Sinhalese for the Sri Lankans.

There are Catholics here from Eritrea, Ghana and Nigeria, in addition to those from Latin America and Eastern Europe. Taken together, the center serves more than a thousand migrant workers, a sliver of the 60,000 Catholic migrants living in the country.

Some live in Israel legally; others have overstayed their legal permits and have no hope of becoming citizens of Israel.

The split-level hall holds only 250 people, and each service is packed to overflowing. But it's an improvement over the previous gathering space, a bomb shelter.

"My constant nightmare was that something was going to happen and people were going to be trampled to death," said the Rev. David Neuhaus, coordinator of the migrant pastoral church who is also the patriarchal vicar for the Hebrew-speaking Catholics in Israel.

But the new space is already overflowing. At a recent 5 p.m. Mass, people pushed their way into the back of the hall and the corners of the second level. When that was full, they lined the steps between the two levels, hunched on the railing.

More than 500 members of the church will travel to Bethlehem this weekend to see Pope Francis, who will visit Israel, Jordan, and the West Bank May 24-26.

The church, under the aegis of the Roman Catholic Church in the Holy Land, has been in this primarily migrant worker neighborhood for the past five years. It serves both migrant workers and asylum seekers.

The migrant population in Israel has grown rapidly as the country has come to rely more on workers from abroad. Some 150,000 of these workers are believed to be Christians, a number comparable to Israel's Christian population, most of whom are Palestinian Arabs.

Of the migrants, 60,000 are Catholic, which is more than double the number of Israeli Catholic citizens.

The push to establish the center came from recognizing a threefold need, Neuhaus explained. The migrants needed a place to pray, needed to give their children a Catholic education and needed social support, especially health care and child care.

The first goal was to find a place for worship that was more permanent and dignified than the old bomb shelter. By holding multiple weekly Masses in a range of languages, the church is attracting new members every day.

Joanna, a Filipino congregant who works as a caregiver, said she arrived in Israel just one year ago. Like many migrants interviewed who are not legal citizens, she asked that her full name not be used.

"My friends were already going here so I started coming to this church," she said. "I like it because it's just the same as home. The priests are also Filipino."

The center is also home for a small group of Filipino and Sri Lankan nuns, who live in two apartments above the center.

"They get along perfectly except when it comes to the kitchen," said Neuhaus, only half jokingly. The nuns don't much like each other's food, he said, and each group has its own kitchen.

The center's second aim was to create a place to educate the children of migrant workers in the tenets of Christianity. The children have been integrated into secular Israeli Hebrew-language schools, and many speak Hebrew in addition to their native tongues.

"Our children, being the migrant children, are completely integrated into the society around them," said Neuhaus.

When the church was still meeting in the shelter, only a few children attended catechism, or Christian education classes. That has multiplied this year to 150 children, said Neuhaus, and the new center gives them a decent, attractive environment to study.

Once every two weeks, a Saturday Mass is held in Hebrew for the children. Before Mass, they gather on the spacious roof of the church to study and read colorful picture books with large Hebrew text telling the story of the church.

Sixty-six children are preparing to take First Communion—the consecrated bread and wine they believe becomes the body and blood of Jesus. Thirty-two adolescents are preparing for confirmation—a formal rite of passage signaling the taking on the Christian faith.

"We don't want to lose them," said Neuhaus. "Because once they've had confirmation they go off and don't come back, and we're trying to keep them engaged through a youth movement."

The church also tries to find day care centers for migrant children who are too young to go to municipal kindergartens.

Many of the children—perhaps 90 percent—are being raised by single mothers, Neuhaus said.

Yet, even as the church administration tries to improve its social outreach, it strives to keep a low profile. Across the street stands a synagogue that the church has been careful not to disturb. The last thing the church needs is complaints to the municipality from Jewish neighbors concerned by the flood of migrants descending on their neighborhood.

Before it was taken over by the center, the building had been a carpentry shop, part of a poorer Jewish neighborhood with small industries. But as Tel Aviv flourishes, its

development expanding outward, Neuhaus is aware that poorer populations will be slowly pushed out of the quarter. There are already little pockets of development encroaching on south Tel Aviv, and gentrification is all but inevitable.

While the new center is a breakthrough, providing a much-needed hub for the Catholic migrant community, the importance of the space itself is secondary to proximity. In light of this, Neuhaus' vision for the center is clear.

"We have no intention of staying here once it becomes a yuppie area," he said. "We are here to be with the people who need us."

Columbia University students Indrani Basu and John Albert traveled to Israel and the occupied territories as part of a grant from the Scripps Howard Foundation.