

# Markings of a Jerusalemite Life

*A Life Worth Living: The Story of a Palestinian Catholic*, by Bernard Sabella, edited by Carole Monica Burnett. Oregon: Resource Publications, 2017. ix + 237 pages. \$50.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper.

Reviewed by Saliba Sarsar

What makes life worth living? Professor Bernard Sabella, a Palestinian Catholic native of Jerusalem and a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, provides a clear answer. In a captivating memoir, rich in empathy, honesty, and detail, he invites us to listen to his story and that of his multigenerational family as they live their Christian faith and Palestinian culture in the Old City of Jerusalem and beyond.

In six main chapters, Sabella weaves the personal with the familial, the intellectual and philosophical with the social, and the local with the regional and international. With an authentic voice and a humane touch, he addresses issues of discord and conflict but also argues for faith and putting one's faith into action, pride in Jerusalem and Palestine, enlightened education, justice, nonviolence, healing and reconciliation, and peace.

In the first chapter, "Growing Up in a Refugee Family: Catholic and Palestinian," he tells of how his family became refugees in 1948, which "left a life-long impact on all of us." The intensification of fighting forced the family to leave home in Qatamon (now a West Jerusalem neighborhood) and find temporary refuge in the Old City. But the short term turned permanent as Jerusalem became divided between the western part under Israel and the eastern part under Jordan. The home in Qatamon was expropriated by Israel's Absentee Property Authority and given to a newly arrived Jewish immigrant family. In later years, interestingly, Sabella became executive secretary of the of the Middle East Council of Churches' Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees.

For Sabella, pursuing higher education was never a question, and he chose Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. In "College Years: The American Interlude,

Part One,” he explains that although studying there was “exhilarating,” his thoughts were never far from his family in Jerusalem. Tough times occurred in June 1967 when he learned of the war and worried about the safety of his parents, home, and “beloved city of Jerusalem.” Reflecting on both the 1948 and 1967 wars, he argues, “There can never be true reconciliation until the injustice that befell the Palestinians is dealt with in fairness and with respect to their right to dignity through redressing the injustice.”

Living in a foreign land is never easy for anyone. In “Graduate Studies: The American Interlude, Part Two,” Sabella speaks of how hard it was in the early 1970s for a Palestinian, especially one with liberal views, to be accepted in the United States, let alone at a traditional institution such as the University of Virginia. Plane hijackings by some Palestinian factions and the civil war in Jordan between the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Jordanian armed forces did not help. Determined to succeed academically, Sabella wrote his master’s thesis on the leading Palestinian families during the British Mandate in Palestine in order to understand “the social dynamics within my own society and how they influenced conflict with the Zionist movement.” The academic challenge, obviously, was and is to remain objective so as “to look from outside at my own society and to override the inherent limitations of an insider’s perspective.” Thinking of home and what separates Palestinians from Israelis, Sabella favored compromise through dialogue initially, contrary to others who believed in liberating Palestine through armed struggle. Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly evident that talk is not enough and the steps toward conflict resolution are difficult “because the structural, strategic, international, and internal U.S. factors and considerations are stacked against Palestinians.” Sabella’s return from the U.S. to Palestine with his doctorate in sociology, along with his wife Mary with a master’s in counseling psychology, was exciting as they both began working at Bethlehem University, the only Catholic university in the Holy Land. In “Experiencing Bethlehem University and the Palestinian Rebirth,” he writes of how Palestinians highly value education both as “some sort of security or safety net . . .” and as “the symbol of perseverance and survival against all kinds of odds.” While at Bethlehem, the first intifada (1987–1993) occurred, leading the Israeli military authorities to close Palestinian universities, including Bethlehem. The intifada, or Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation, involved Palestinians from all walks of life and led many a Palestinian educator to teach students at their homes. Sabella guided his students to distance themselves from the events outside in order “to assess objectively the social reality and its different aspects,” but that did not sit well with some of them.

In “Church and Civil Society: Striving for Progress,” Sabella makes clear that as a devout Catholic, he respects the religious beliefs of others and advocates for an inclusive religious education. As a sociology professor, the challenge for him is how “to move from a narrow religious pedagogy to a religious education that is open to seeing others on their own grounds rather than from the perspective of our own religious training.” A similar philosophy applies to interfaith dialogue and its necessity. The intent is not only to detect convergence among Christianity, Islam, and Judaism and their respective adherents, but to use faith in support of resolving socioeconomic and political issues as

well. A specific challenge concerns Palestinian Christians, the forgotten faithful, who have been steadfast in the land where Christianity originated. Unfortunately, the political, social, and financial difficulties of the past few decades have led many to leave the Holy Land. Sabella believes that the Church can play a more active role in highlighting the Christian presence, assisting Christian Palestinians, and promoting dialogue.

In the last chapter, “Reflections on the Future of Palestine,” Sabella elaborates on his decision to enter politics. As an academic, he felt free to examine political views and actions “on their own merit and not on the basis of party or factional platforms.” He learned much about human or social relations in high school as a member of JEC (Jeunesse Étudiante Chrétienne or Young Christian Students), which was advised at that time by Father Michel Sabbah (later the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, 1987–2008), who counseled engaging others with “our religious, social, and political convictions without being apologetic about them.” As a Palestinian and a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, Sabella bemoans the polarization in Palestine, as happened between Fatah and Hamas between 2007 and 2017, or that exists in the Palestinian-Israeli context, including the Separation Wall. Polarization is conducive neither to healing nor to reconciliation. For Sabella, the only way to resolve what is ailing Palestinian society and Palestinian-Israeli relations is through nonviolence. He writes, “The process of making peace is a painful one; pain, nevertheless, should not cause us to give up and opt for further violence and confrontation.”

A servant-leader and a professor, Sabella’s mission is to inspire positive change, replacing dispossession with perseverance, injustice with justice, occupation with liberation, and darkness with light. That’s what truly makes life worth living.

Sabella’s *A Life Worth Living* is highly recommended. In addition to enabling us to witness the life of a Palestinian Christian family in Jerusalem and beyond, it enhances our understanding of Jerusalem, the Palestinian cause, and the urgent need for peace.

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