Faneromeni High School: a nest of multiculturalism

Written by Maria Antouna

Nicosia, Nov 25 (CNA) – One might be surprised to come across a hub of lively young children, from all over the world, right in the heart of this divided capital city, Nicosia, where damage and destruction is but a breath away, as buildings stand derelict and abandoned for the past few decades, in the UN-controlled buffer zone.

Yet, this is exactly where multiculturalism is thriving, thanks to pioneering educational programmes Faneromeni High School has adopted. The school lies in the old part of Nicosia, within the Venetian walls.

The historic grounds of Faneromeni church and the nearby high school are considered a landmark of the area. A visitor walking up the steps of the school cannot help but admire the building's neoclassical architectural form.

It is break time and pupils are running around the school corridors carefree. Their happy faces, full of life, reflect their innocence. Children from all nationalities speak Greek fluently. To hear them, one cannot tell whether they come from Cyprus or elsewhere.

How can anyone categorise children in different groups or nationalities? After all, they all have the same smile, the same innocence, exhuming an inner calm that reaches out to everybody’s soul. Here, all children are the same, they look to the future aiming to seize the day and live it to the full.

Two girls are chit-chatting with one another, laughing merrily.

''I speak Arabic at home because my parents cannot speak Greek. I am the one teaching them the language”, says fifteen year old Yiasmin Alkadi, who comes from Iraq. ''At least I try to do so'' she adds laughing. ''My mother does not work but my father works for the UN'', she says.

''I have fun at school. I wouldn't want to return to my country'', she notes, adding ''now I am a Cypriot, that's how I feel. This is the place I have been living in for the past seven years''.

Her friend Mela Konstantinou, of the same age, is from Romania. She says her father is a Romanian Serb and her mother Romanian.

''I wouldn't want to go to Romania. I want to stay in my beloved Cyprus'', Mela says, adding that ''I would like to become a Greek language teacher. I even like the idea of becoming an actress or a script writer''.

''Having fellow students from other countries has taught me from a young age not to be a racist'' Giorgos Athanasiou, a Greek Cypriot student says, adding that ''I am very lucky because I learn a great deal from my fellow students, they teach me about their countries and their languages''.

''I don't see them as different, they are just like us'', he points out.

''Our students come from countries with different cultures and customs'', says Evie Shakalli Argyridou, the headmistress of the school.

According to Argyridou most of the children are Greeks from Pontos, a region located near the Black Sea. Greek Cypriot students are few and usually come from mixed marriages. Non Greek speakers constitute about 20% of the school children and usually come from Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Iran and China.

The old Nicosia centre has suffered as a direct result of the Turkish invasion of 1974, which split it in half, a buffer zone dividing the once thriving historic centre. Many Greek Cypriots who lived in the area chose to move further away. In recent years there has been a trend for immigrants to inhabit the area and make the old walled city of Nicosia their home. More often than not the families are poor and their standard of living is low.

The school is considered to be in an Educational Priority Zone and a Greek language teacher has been appointed to teach foreign students. Greek language teaching programmes, which are funded by the government and the EU, are provided in an effort to combat social exclusion and reduce the possibility of substandard school performance.

Argyridou also notes that the Ministry of Education offers students extra curriculum classes in the afternoon in Greek, mathematics, IT, foreign languages, journalism, physical education, theatre, music and art.

Despite facing adversity, the school continues to maintain high standards, Argyridou stresses.

The school cultivates human values such as democracy, freedom, social justice and moral values such as respect, understanding, solidarity, tolerance and love, she notes.

“We cultivate respect to tradition, history, religion, language and particular ethnic characteristics”, Argyridou adds.

Faneromeni church ecclesiastical committee also helps poor families when needed.

Faneromeni high school was founded in 1852, originally an all boys school. From 1937 to 1961 the school operated as a school for girls. Today, the school operates as a nest of multiculturalism, offering education to children of all origin, ethnicity, religion and background.

Cyprus was divided in 1974 when Turkey invaded and occupied its northern third. UN led negotiations are underway between Cyprus President Demetris Christofias and Turkish Cypriot leader Dervis Eroglu in an effort to reunite the island under a federal roof.

Nicosia remains today the only divided capital in Europe.

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