

MIRROR

Aid to the Church in Need

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Photo: Carole Al-Farah

A light in the darkness: children in Damascus are longing for the peace of Christmas.

“We do not have weapons. We believe, however, in the meek and humble strength of prayer. Peace is not simply a protest against war, nor is it a result of negotiations, political compromises or economic bargaining. It is the result of prayer.”

Pope Francis, World Day of Prayer for Peace, Assisi, 20 September 2016

Dear Friends,

Perhaps no other religious feast offers such riches – cultural, artistic, and domestic – in short, such genuinely human riches, as Christmas does. The sheer impact this event has had and continues to have in history is evident, not least in the fact that our dating of time starts with the birth of Christ. With Jesus a new era was born. All the books in the world are not enough to describe the new and wonderful reality that was brought to us by the Child of Bethlehem. Hence, in offering our Christmas wishes, we naturally wish to find the most profound and beautiful words to do so.

But how difficult it is to sincerely wish you a joyful Christmas when the globe is caught up in the turmoil of a world war. Many leaders have said this and Pope Francis re-emphasised it on the way to the World Youth Day: “The world is at war. There was the war of ‘14, then that of ‘39–‘45, and now there is this one. Let us not be afraid to say this truth: the world is at war, because it has lost peace!” Those are powerful words, but words of truth. How are we to celebrate Christmas, the feast of peace, when a third

World War is effectively raging on our doorsteps? How are we to feel a sense of joy at all the beautiful things that are connected with Christmas, when millions of people are experiencing the exact opposite?

And yet it is precisely those Christians facing oppression and persecution who by their lives teach us the most profound mystery of Christmas. Against all human hope, and after living as refugees for years, they still



Love never tires of doing good.

cling on doggedly to the hope of returning to their own land. They are not going to be crushed – because, like the shepherds of Bethlehem, they believe in the angel’s message – they believe in the Child, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. In these Christians of the Middle East we see confirmation of the words of St Paul that “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts” (Rom 5:3-5). For this

humble and tender love whose banner, so to speak, bears the emblems of the manger, the child and the cross, has the power to withstand all military, political and economic might. Love never tires of doing good, even though our contribution may seem insignificant in comparison with the billions spent on armaments or squandered in material devastation.

Dear Friends, it is not only the people of Iraq, Syria or in other theatres of war, but all of us who are caught up in a gigantic spiritual battle. And so, in asking you for help, we are not simply trying to prompt fleeting feelings of generosity, inspired by the Christmas spirit. We are asking for your faith, which focused on the Manger of Bethlehem already looks towards the dawning of the new era. Only then can we continue to give generously and without wearying, since God never tires of showering his love upon us.

I wish you and all your families a joyful and blessed Christmas.

P. Martin Maria Barta

*Fr Martin Maria Barta
Ecclesiastical Assistant*



For the strength to persevere

*At last a place to call home again:
Christians from Mosul.*



It was Syria's Christians who translated Aristotle and Plato into Arabic. It was Syria's Christians who taught philosophy and the natural sciences in the Iraqi capital Baghdad. It was Syria's Christians who served as the models for Arabic philosophers and so opened up a narrow window of hope – hope that Islam would become more open to reason and peace.

That was over a thousand years ago. In the meantime Christians in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon have suffered greatly. Their witness is stamped upon the history of the region, and as long as they continue to live in the cradle of Christianity their witness will retain its power. The meaning of this witness is engraved on their very souls. Their homeland is more than their place of origin: it is the homeland of the spirit of love and hope. In paying the rent for Christians expelled from their homes – and now refugees within their own country – we are also giving hope a home. In sending food parcels to tens of thousands of families in **Syria and Iraq** – parcels that are truly survival packs – we are not just saving individual Christians, but a way of life that holds the promise of peace for the region.

In helping to preserve the Christian presence there, we are providing security for today and confidence for tomorrow. A Middle East without Christians would be a region deprived of its soul, a region cut off from its past.

All these things remain unspoken, but they are in the air in Latakia as Father Issa Abdo and his helpers hand out aid parcels to displaced families – a few kilograms of flour, a couple of pounds of rice, sugar, noodles, cooking oil and milk powder; then another little parcel with soap, toothpaste and shampoo. All treasured items for these families, who could otherwise never afford them. Each parcel costs **€55** and should last for two weeks. When it comes to their rent, we aim to cover six months, for that is the minimum time it will take them to



Safe in her own home: With her sewing machine Amineh can support her family.



Rita fled here from Aleppo with her handicapped son. Thank you for paying the rent!

find work and somehow get back on their feet. And no one else is helping to pay for the security of four walls and a roof over their heads. There are 1,800 of these families in Iraq, and 27,000 in Syria. Their spirit, their way of life, their history lives on in these homes. Though they may not know it, they carry the “household of faith” (Gal. 6:10) in their hearts. This is the real house for which we are paying the rent. ●

The statistics of suffering

After six years of civil war, three in every four Syrians now live in extreme poverty.

13.5 million – that is how many people depend on help for their survival. Almost 9 million of them barely have enough to eat. 11 million were driven from their homes or forced to flee. 6.5 million internal refugees in Syria itself. Estimates by international agencies of the number of those killed range from 250,000 to 470,000. And another 1.9 million have been wounded or traumatised. ●



Your Christmas gift for the Christians of the Middle East

Heating in Rable's mountain heights: €100

Winter in the mountains of Syria and Iraq can be harsh and cold – even at the lower levels.

For those forced from their homes sheltering here in huts and containers, the price of heating oil is beyond their reach. Yet at the same time, anyone cutting down a tree for firewood faces harsh fines or even imprisonment by the Syrian regime. There are several thousand fami-

lies living in the mountain villages of Michrefeh, Rable, Ain Hlaquim and others in the diocese of Latakia, at an altitude of over 2000 feet (700 m). We are helping with winter fuel costs for 600 of these families, especially those with children and elderly members to care for. **€100** from you will help one family through the winter. It is a similar situation in Iraq. How much are you willing to contribute per month?



Standing together for warmth: You too can help the Christian refugees survive the winter.

Help for priests and religious: €50

Father Mikael Mourani was 86, Father Paul Khoury is 85. Both men lived a life of hardship and deprivation as priests.

When they were born, Syria was still a French protectorate; the Alawite region was an autonomous region. Then the Great War came, followed by regional wars, a dictatorship, and now the civil war. Throughout those years the two men prayed unceasingly. And in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass they united their sufferings with the sufferings of Christ, until they could do so no longer. Father Mikael ran the race, and died last summer. Father Paul has been laid low by a stroke. But their brother priests, Habib, Elie, Youssef,

Ibrahim, Jean, Faez, Issa, Bassam, Tannous, Boulos, Alain, Nidal and all the others in the diocese of Latakia still remember both men in their daily Masses. ACN is supporting them too, thanks to the Mass stipends of our generous benefactors – the only income they have. This is also true of their 18 brother priests in the neighbouring diocese of Homs. And the 10 religious sisters there likewise depend on your support. Their work in the vineyard has become a work in the wasteland. The war has destroyed every other source of income. For just **€50** you can support a priest or a religious sister for a month.



Serving and suffering to the end: Father Paul after his stroke.

Milk and nappies: €25 for one month

At first there were 200 babies. Carried in the arms of their exhausted mothers.

Many were crying – in hunger or in pain. Empty stomachs and nappy sores. They were given milk and clean nappies – relief for babies and mothers alike. But that was just the beginning. These were among the most helpless of the war refugees, many of them barely escaping with their lives. Here, in northern Syria, Maronite Bishop Antoine Chbeir set up a first-aid commit-

tee to identify their needs. How many families in need? How many babies? Where to find the nappies? Where to get milk from? Or feeding bottles? Who would pay for it all? Then more and more people arrived. Soon there were 650 babies. Their mothers' arms their only cradle. Now the diocese is crying for help, and not just for one day. **€25** will see one baby through one winter month, clean and well fed.



Clean and well fed – and mummy and the family are happy too.

How many months, and how many babies can you help?



How long will it continue?, asks Sister Lolita

A couple of pairs of scissors, combs, hairclips, a hairdryer – and Gracia can get back to working as a hairdresser and be able to feed her family. An old sewing machine, a bit of material, some shears, thread and binding – and Claudine can get back to her dressmaking and so stop her family from going hungry. It's just the little things that are needed. The Good Shepherd Sisters are helping to provide the tools they need. But they too need support and encouragement, for sometimes their strength can also falter.

How long? asks Sister Lolita of the congregation of Our Lady of the Good Shepherd in Damascus. "How long will these henchmen of the devil still be allowed to rampage? Can there ever be peace again in this country, for this savagely beaten and openly bleeding body that was once the Syrian people?" People are asking themselves, "What have I done? Why has my home been destroyed, my future ruined, my children slaughtered, mutilated or enslaved? How much longer must we endure this suffering?"

Sister Lolita can recall all too many such stories of suffering. Every day she visits



Traumatised in Damascus: Sister Lydia supports the mothers.

families who barely escaped death and who – despite all their hardships – are infinitely grateful to her. Ahmed used to live in Raqqa with his wife and two little girls, Hiba and Selena. He ran a small tailoring business and, thanks to his skilful hands, they managed to make a modestly comfortable living for themselves. Then the barbarians of IS arrived. "Indiscriminately shooting, they murdered old and young alike, burned down houses, drove the people from their homes. I grabbed hold of my wife and two daughters and ran for it, hearing shots behind me. Then they hit me in the left leg, and I also felt bullets in my back. I let go of Selena, told her to run to mummy and dragged myself after them." They managed to reach their relatives in a



Like the Good Shepherd, Sister Lolita comforts, encourages and consoles.

nearby village, and continued their journey the next night, finally ending up in Damascus. Ahmed stares ahead, eyes unfocused, forcing back the tears, and says, "I am so grateful to God that we have found a place to stay here for my wife and our two little angels." His wife strokes his hand, paralysed since that night, and says, "You are the shining light of our lives; with you we will overcome everything."

This war has been going on for six years now, writes Sister Lolita, and there is no end in sight. "Six years in which young people had hoped to build their future and not lose it, in which families hoped to see their dreams fulfilled and not disintegrate into daily nightmares, six years when children should have been born and not killed, when young women and men should have married and not been plunged into disaster. How long must we still endure this?", Sister Lolita asks. She has no answer. No one does. She only knows that she and her fellow religious will keep on helping with the little things and with great love, like the Good Shepherd, so that the littlest and the helpless do not lose all hope. "For every soul counts in God's eyes, every life matters, every child is a prayer, an appeal from God to us." We are helping these sisters, so that they can help others. It is our responsibility too to make sure that no one gives up hope.



Listening and helping to find solutions. Two young mothers tell her their problems.



Rebuilding their church – the first priority



Despite the devastation, there are big plans – to restore this church in Qusair as a centre of peace.

“We must not put obstacles in the path of the Merciful Father”, says Pope Francis. And he adds: “Instead we must pray for the gift of a strong faith, so that we can be signs and instruments of mercy.”

The “strong faith” of these Christians from Qusair, near Homs is not in doubt. They are returning to their small, devastated town – and the first thing they want to do is rebuild the church of the Prophet Elijah. It was partially destroyed during the bitter fighting that led to the expulsion of the population. Now the IS fighters have been expelled in their turn. The Christians want to return home: to a normal life; to the sound of the church bells; to children going to school; to shopping for their groceries. As little Zeina Kasoha says, “Now we’re back home. I love

our town, and I want to go back to school again here.” And she asks us not to forget her, or the other children, so that they can continue their education and one day be there for others too. Her faith has sustained her, as it has others. Now they want to bring life back to the ghost town of Qusair, starting with their church bells. The sound of the bells has great symbolic importance in the Middle East, It says: We are people of goodwill; this is a place of peace. Christians are a vital part of the religious mixture in the towns and villages of

this region, a binding element... “We belong here”, says Father Louis, and he too has big plans. By rebuilding the church with an adjoining suite of rooms, it could become a catechetical centre. At the same time the sisters will once again have a home, and a parish and community centre will be built. In their desire for education and their zeal to spread the Gospel message by their peaceful presence, young Zeina, Father Louis and the other returning Christians in Qusair are like so many other Christians in Syria and Iraq. They long to be signs and instruments of mercy. Their hands may be empty, but there is the light of faith in their eyes – and the hope that we will stand by them in rebuilding their society.

Camps without Christians

Almost 4 ½ million people are living in the refugee camps in Turkey (2.5 million), in Lebanon (1.1 million) and in Jordan (800,000).

Most of the camps are run by the UN. But you will find almost no Christians among these refugees. Instead they seek refuge with relatives, or in Church-run centres. They feel safer there than in the camps. Most want only to return home. They are being helped and supported by religious

sisters and brothers. In southwest Turkey we are helping nearly 100 Christian refugees from Iraq and Syria. In eastern Turkey there are almost 1000 families. To give more details might put their safety at risk. The religious who are caring for them in Jordan and Turkey sometimes also reach the limits of their physical and spiritual strength. But without their help – and yours – most of the Christian refugees here would have nothing.



Praying for peace in the country. Christians somewhere in Turkey.



Not a day without praying for you

“ACN and their friends are the only ones to have stood by us since the spring of 2014, when the mass expulsions began. Without you many would have starved.” Archbishop Warda of Erbil in northern Iraq is not a man to exaggerate. Today he lives among the 12,000 families who were forced to flee from Mosul and the Niniveh Plains. He knows just how immensely grateful these people are, and how greatly they would love to return, sooner rather than later, to their own home towns and villages. They remember what a comfort and consolation it was to receive your Christmas gifts for their children – the shoes, anoraks and toys. They felt strengthened and supported by your love. “Not a day goes by when they don’t pray for you”, he writes. With Bishop Warda they thank you, and ask for your prayers also, that peace may come to the Niniveh Plains.



**Johannes
Freiherr
Heereman,**
Executive President,
ACN (International)

Dear Friends,

When the Mother of God appeared a hundred years ago to the three shepherd children in Fatima the world was ablaze with war. Our Lady warned the children and told them, “Pray the Rosary daily for an end to the war and for peace in the world”. They did so. Again today the world is ablaze; Pope Francis even speaks of a ‘Third World War’. Our Lady’s warning still applies today, and it applies to us. We plan to organise a pilgrimage to Fatima to mark this hundredth anniversary, and I hereby warmly invite you to join us. It will be on 13th September 2017.

Prayer is undoubtedly the surest way of bringing an end to war. But we can also help, even now, with other types of gifts to bind up wounds and make good the damage that this war has inflicted, particularly on the Christians of the Middle East. This is the goal of the special initiatives we are undertaking in the run-up to Christmas. We are calling for prayer and practical charity – both are necessary, for suffering Christians and for the conversion of the world. With these thoughts in mind, I wish you all a holy and blessed Christmas.

Need, love and thanks – your letters

For the children in Aleppo

The enclosed money is for Christmas parcels for the children and families in Aleppo. It is what we would normally give for our grandchildren, who are already well and truly spoiled. With the agreement of their parents, we are happy to be able to send it to you instead. May God bless your work!

Grandparents in France

Marvelling at your devotion

The aid given by ACN for persecuted and suffering Christians is a marvellous work of charity and of social and missionary commitment. I marvel at the energy and strength of devotion with which ACN works among the people. I will continue to pray for your apostolate.

A bishop in Austria

Not a day longer

After reading your ACN annual report, I couldn’t wait any longer to send you my small contribution. Please use it however you think best, since I feel so helpless in the face of the many difficulties and problems faced by our brothers and sisters, simply for being Christians. I pray to the Lord for them every day, and for this world which continues to reject and persecute Him to this day.

A benefactress in Portugal

Grassroots access to the needy

Thank God for your wonderful ministries! You are one of the few charities that we trust to use wisely every dollar we donate, and that has grassroots access to the most needy in the Middle-East.

A benefactress in Canada

How to make your contribution to the Church in Need:

1. Go to our Head Office website: www.acn-intl.org
2. Click the **donate now** button
3. Either: Go to the National Office of *Aid to the Church in Need* in your country.
4. Or: Make an online donation (if you live in a country without an ACN National Office).



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