

Rekindling Hope in the Holy Land

CATHOLIC leaders across Israel and Palestine have begged ACN to respond to the Pope's call to help save Christianity in the land of Christ.

Frightened by the rise of fundamentalism and struggling to make a living, many of the faithful feel they have no choice but to abandon their cherished homeland.

Christians who in 1960 were 20 percent of the population have reportedly plummeted to less than 1.4 percent.

Other statistics show that in recent years they have made up nearly 30 percent of all emigrants.

Keeping Christianity alive is the mission of both Patriarch Fouad Twal of Jerusalem and Archbishop Elias Chacour of Galilee.

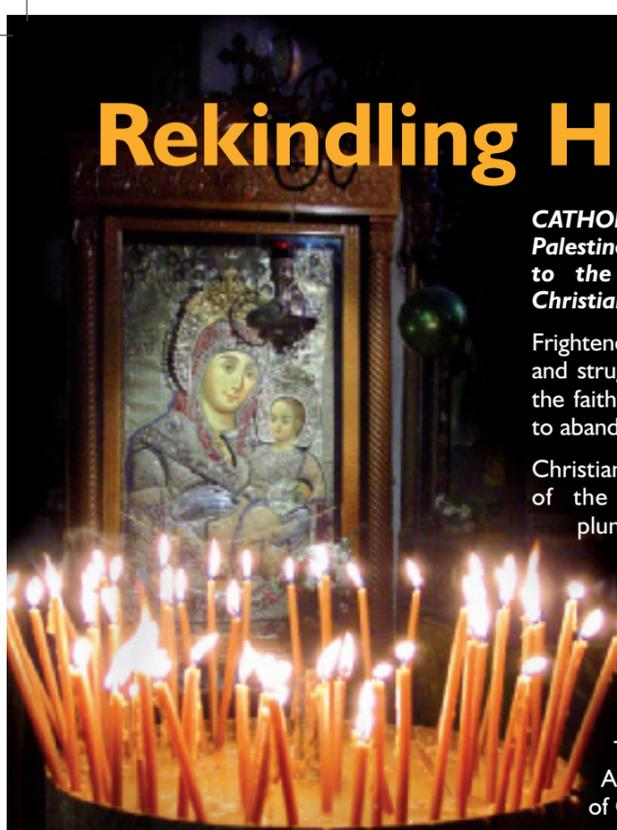
In an interview earlier this year, Patriarch Twal said:

"The fact that the people of Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Nazareth or Galilee happen to be there is not just an accident of birth. It is a mission.

"It means they must be witnesses to our faith."

Heeding Benedict XVI's appeal pronounced at the charity's 60th anniversary celebrations, Aid to the Church in Need is redoubling its efforts in the region.

Supporting Sisters working in schools, helping priests in poor and sometimes dangerous outlying parishes, helping to build churches – these are just some of the many projects ACN is supporting in the troubled region.



Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem – entrance to the Grotto

HIGH on a hilltop overlooking Christ's birthplace, Beit Jala Seminary has as many as 80 students, supported by ACN.



Narwan Azeez Hassan

One such seminarian is 20-year-old Narwan Azeez Hassan, who loves basketball and swimming. When his family emigrated from Jordan to the USA they

begged him to follow them. But Narwan is determined.

He said: "I want to give people here the example that Jesus gives us – to show love and courage. The priest is above all someone who serves."

When I asked him if he was afraid of serving in the West Bank or Gaza, he responded: "I will get my courage from here – the land where Jesus lived.

"Jesus can give us all the courage we need. He said: 'I am with you always.' I try never to forget that."

"Life is difficult but God is good"

LIVING in a few dark rooms at the end of a narrow street, Tony and Margaret Nabil struggle to find the means to put food on their table.

They welcome us into their dimly-lit living room. The roof leaks and when it rains, buckets are placed strategically about the place. There is a musty smell. Tragedy has dogged the family – Tony is unwell and largely confined to bed. Their daughter is also sick.

What money they have comes – at least in part – thanks to Margaret's work making rosaries, putting them on chains. The key tools, she explains, are an age-old pair of pliers and plenty of patience.

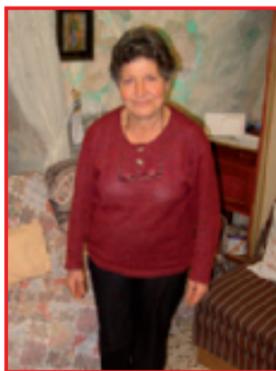
If she works non-stop, it takes eight hours to make 36 rosaries.

ACN has enabled her to get the work thanks to its support for Bethlehem's

cottage industry – a community of Christian families who make rosaries, crosses and other religious items. Using trusted contacts on the ground in the 'Little Town' of Christmas carol fame, ACN can ensure the work goes to the people who most need it.

For Margaret and Tony, the income generated has helped stave off eviction from their home after they fell behind with their rent.

Smiling, Margaret explained she loved the work. "It is like a hobby," she said. "It helps take my mind off things. Life is difficult but God is good."



Margaret: Linking faith and hope.

Olive wood Crosses, rosaries and other Holy Land items are available from ACN. Visit www.aidtochurch.org or phone ACN on 02 9679-1929

ACN HELP FOR THE MIDDLE EAST 2007- 2008

\$56,600	Syria/Jordan/Iraq: Emergency support for Iraqi refugees in Damascus and Amman – medical aid, Christmas presents, catechesis and school education
\$24,000	Lebanon: Catechesis in government schools
\$28,800	Beit Sahur: (Bethlehem): Help to extend a church where at present it is standing room only. It is one of the few regions where congregations are growing and Christians are not emigrating
\$41,100	Lebanon: Rebuilding churches damaged or destroyed during the July 2006 War
\$32,300	Iraq: Support for nursery schools in northern Iraq

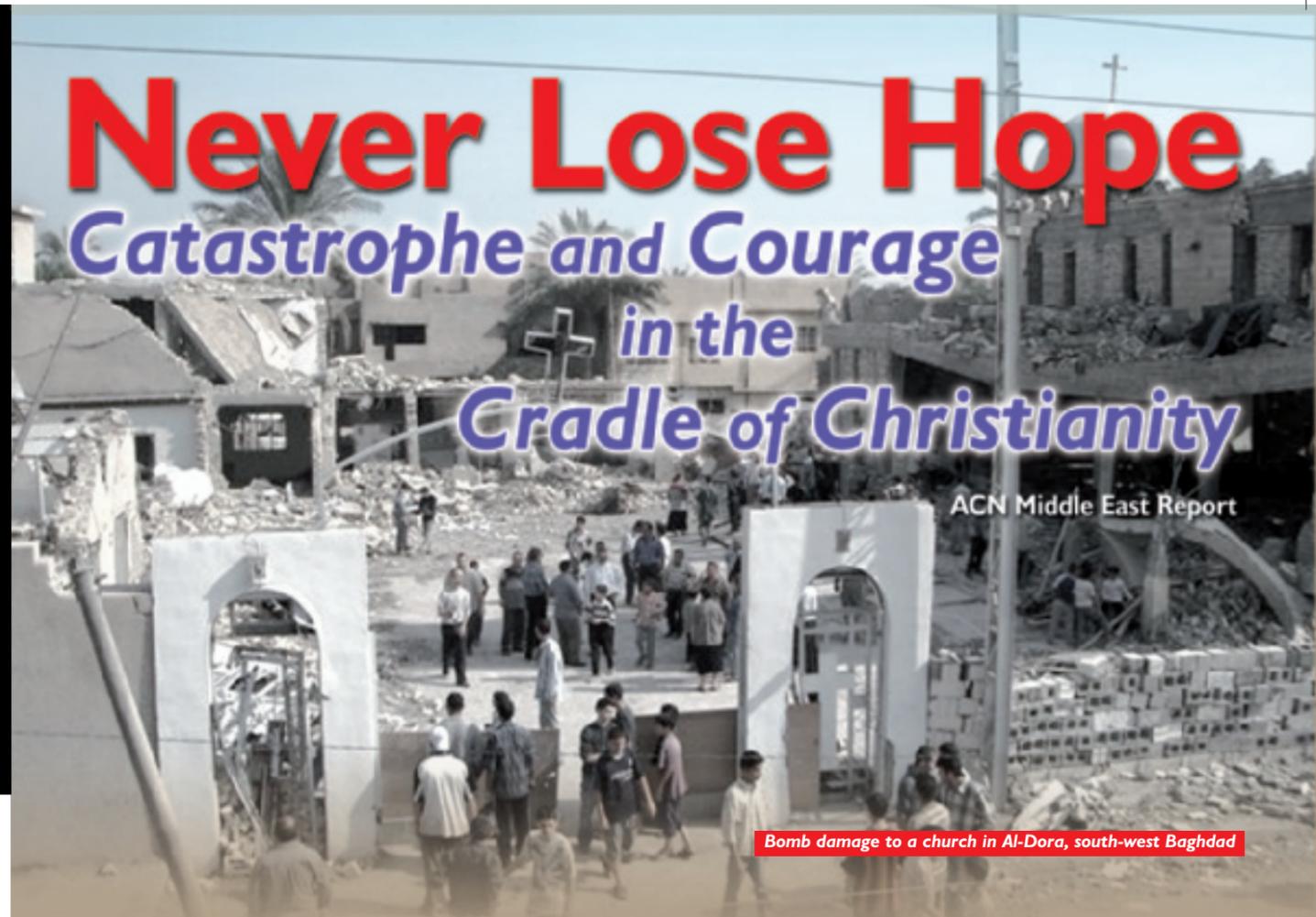
Any donations in response to this leaflet will go towards projects mentioned in this report – or other similar ones – to help suffering Christians in the Middle East and other areas of greatest need.



PO Box 6245, DC NSW 2148 Tel/Fax 02 9679-1929
Email: info@aidtochurch.org Web: www.aidtochurch.org
Reports by John Pontifex (2008)

Never Lose Hope Catastrophe and Courage in the Cradle of Christianity

ACN Middle East Report



Bomb damage to a church in Al-Dora, south-west Baghdad

DEEPLY saddened by the crisis engulfing Christianity in the Middle East, Pope Benedict XVI has asked Aid to the Church in Need to provide urgent help.

In many parts of the land Our Lord Jesus Christ knew so well, the faithful now live in fear as increasing poverty and growing extremism threaten the survival of these ancient communities.

A mass exodus of Christians from the Middle East is now taking place. For some it is a question of escaping bloody persecution.

On reaching safety, they have told the story of their sufferings; how they experienced a sudden upsurge of violence and intimidation – much of it directed against Christians who face threats, kidnappings, eviction from their homes and even death.

All this for refusing to abandon their faith in Jesus Christ.

The Pope's increasing sense of alarm is spelled out in this message to ACN: "We look with great concern at some Churches in the Middle East which are threatened in their very existence."

Across the Middle East, people of all faiths have suffered – this report assesses the especially severe crisis facing Christians but also points to some miraculous signs of hope.

Determined to keep faith, bishops, priests, Sisters and lay faithful are turning to ACN for vital assistance – help for priests and Sisters at work in dangerous areas, emergency aid for refugees and training for

young seminarians and catechists who still believe there is a future for Christianity in the region.

We owe it to them not to lose hope. The Pope's words of encouragement to ACN could not be clearer. "May almighty God grant Aid to the Church in Need light and strength so it may continue to help wherever the need of the Church is greatest."

Pope Benedict XVI

"...Churches in the Middle East are threatened in their very existence... May God grant ACN strength to help wherever the need is greatest."

Dead but not forgotten: The funeral procession for three subdeacons killed alongside Fr Ragheed Ganni in Mosul, north-west Iraq – 3 June 2007



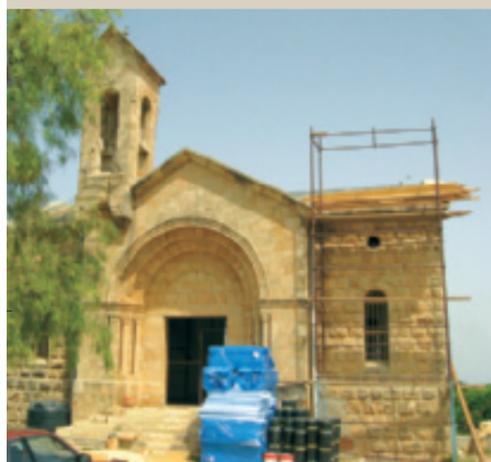
Rebuilding Hope

AID to the Church in Need is providing urgent assistance to rebuild – quite literally – the Church in Lebanon after years of violence.

Lebanon has one of the most influential Christian communities across the Middle East and a tradition of inter-faith cooperation.

As Pope John Paul II famously said: “Lebanon is not just a country, it is a message.”

ACN is helping to rebuild churches, presbyteries, parish halls and convents damaged and destroyed both in the July 2006 war – which devastated the southern diocese of Tyre – and during the 1975-90 conflict.



Out of the ashes... A new church in Lebanon

Other priorities for ACN include help for Catholic catechesis in government schools, support for poor and persecuted priests (Mass stipends) and aid for seminarians.

ACN is working to rebuild hope in a community decimated by massive emigration of Christians to the West. Few ever return.

Bishop Elias Nassar of Saida recently told ACN: “I have a great suffering in my heart. Some Christian villages are going through a terrible time right now.”

“Please give us your support and prayer. We need the prayers of the whole world.”

Bishop Elias Nassar of Saida, Lebanon

Martyrdom in the 21st century

PERSECUTED and oppressed at various intervals down the centuries, Iraq’s Christians could be forgiven for thinking that they had survived the worst that life could throw at them.

But now Christianity in Iraq is threatened with extinction.



Baghdad: Violence and misery

A people with roots as far back as the end of the first century AD are desperate for help.

Within the last few years, a campaign of terror has been unleashed across many parts of Iraq, affecting people of all religions but especially Christians.

Fanatics have gone from house to house hunting down Catholics and Orthodox alike and forcing them to choose between their faith and dire retribution.

Which for the faithful means possible kidnapping, eviction from their homes or a huge fine.



“Christians have been singled out as scapegoats to be exploited or eliminated. Please do not leave us alone. Do not abandon us.”

Archbishop Louis Sako of Kirkuk, northern Iraq

Christian women have allegedly been forced to marry militia chiefs.

Among the many dead are up to a dozen priests and deacons. Fr Ragheed Ganni, from Mosul, was killed in June 2007 aged just 35.

Moments before he and three sub-deacons were shot dead the attackers screamed at Fr Ragheed for keeping his church open. The priest, whose training was funded by ACN, replied: “How can I close the house of God?”

Speaking from Baghdad in an interview with ACN, Bishop Schlemon Warduni said: “People in the West don’t believe in hell. They should come here.”

Reports suggest that Christians in Iraq are down from more than one million to barely 400,000 today – all in just a few years.

In Al-Dora, a residential district in south-west Baghdad known as the ‘Vatican of Iraq’, Christians have been comprehensively driven out with up to a dozen church buildings forcibly closed.

Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho 1942 – 2008

“ALLOW me to write to you again and request you to think of our diocese that has been through a lot of agony and pain.”

Thus begins what turned out to be the final letter written to ACN by Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho.

Courteous and full of warmth, the letter was characteristic of the man whom I met in Rome only a few years ago.

It was truly shocking when at the end of February 2008 – barely a month after he wrote this request for Mass stipends – Archbishop Rahho was kidnapped outside his cathedral in north-west Iraq.

His bodyguard and two drivers were killed at the scene.

Archbishop Rahho’s captors then began demanding a ransom for his release of up to US\$3 million.

Less than two weeks after his capture, his kidnappers announced that he had died – apparently of natural causes.

His body was found dumped in a shallow grave outside Mosul, the city to which he had dedicated almost his entire life.

A humble man known for his jokes, he knew the risks of staying in Mosul. His letter to ACN closes with a prayer which shows that his hope never failed him.

“Please pray for us so that peace and stability may once again prevail in our terror-stricken homeland.

For our part, we pray for all those who cooperate with you in alleviating the plight of our Christian community.”

In happier times: Archbishop Rahho with fellow clergy, friends and Sisters



Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho



BUT HOPE STILL REMAINS. For Christians desperate to escape the persecution, Church leaders have opened up refuges providing food, clothing and – where possible – medical assistance.

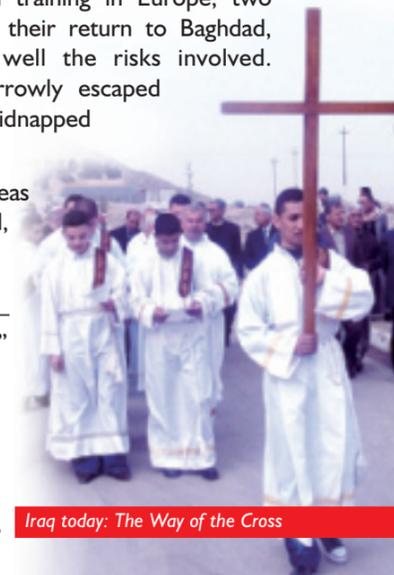
St Peter’s Seminary and Babel Theological College – both in Al-Dora – have been evacuated to Ainkawa (Erbil), in northern Iraq.

ACN is giving key support to seminarians and Sisters.

After ACN-funded training in Europe, two priests announced their return to Baghdad, knowing all too well the risks involved. One of them narrowly escaped death after being kidnapped 18 months earlier.

Their bishop, Andreas Abouna of Baghdad, told ACN: “Their return here is wonderful news – a real sign of hope.”

He added: “You at ACN have been such a great help to us. You remind us that faith is stronger than fear.”



Iraq today: The Way of the Cross

Safe at last

BOULOS* arrived in Syria having risked his life to escape Iraq.

With him was his one hope for the future – his beautiful daughter, Miriam, aged seven.

The pair fled Baghdad after Boulos’ uncle became the fifth member of their family to suffer at the hands of extremists, who kidnapped him for refusing to abandon his faith.

The harassment the family suffered traumatised Boulos’ wife, Anna, especially after she had a miscarriage.

Soon, she became ill and died.

Determined to start afresh in Syria, Boulos and little Miriam sought help and eventually discovered the Good Shepherd Sisters in the capital, Damascus.

The Sisters receive emergency help from ACN in a project providing food, housing, warmth and jobs for Christian refugees from Iraq.

**Names changed for security reasons*

The Sisters teach the children – essential especially when so many are behind in their studies.

The nuns have helped Boulos find work in the local market.

“I don’t know what we would do without the Sisters,” said Boulos.

“We don’t want to be forced to go back to Baghdad. For many of us Christians, it’s just not safe any more.”

ACN wants to expand support for the refugees from Iraq – there are up to 200,000 altogether in Syria and Jordan, and many others in Turkey, Lebanon and Egypt.



A Sister in Syria caring for a little boy and his grandmother – both refugees from Iraq



Youth Day in Fassuta, Israel, supported by ACN

United in Faith

WHEN Church leaders in northern Israel invited young people to take part in a big event to celebrate their Faith, few people could have guessed their response.

Here in the Galilee region, among the hills and valleys Christ knew so well, Christian communities have been beset by fundamentalism and poverty. Many feel they have no choice but to leave.

So it came as a major morale booster to have the youth rally which was held at Fassuta, close to the Lebanese border.

The event attracted 11,000 people – almost double the expected turn-out.

The day, which received ACN funding, included Mass, music and dance.

Afterwards, the event organiser, Archbishop Elias Chacour of Galilee, wrote to ACN: “At Fassuta, young people were asking: ‘Are we really so numerous? Why haven’t we had such events before?’

“We are a big family. Since then, the phone hasn’t stopped ringing and Christians feel encouraged. They have regained hope.”



Inspiring hope: Archbishop Chacour