

# The Virgin Mary protects us

**“In February of 2014, the jihadists completely ravaged our church. They destroyed the icons, shredded the Books of Gospels and burnt down the altar. They also stole anything they could get their hands on.”**

Fr George Hadad, the Melkite priest in Yabroud (80 kilometres north of the capital Damascus) is still heartbroken by the desecration of the church. The town fell under the control of rebel forces in 2011 including the jihadist Al-Nusra brigade, who made the Christians’ lives hard. Al-Nusra soldiers used explosives to remove the cross from the church.

Fr George said: “Fortunately, the damage was not as extensive as we had feared. The Blessed Virgin had protected Yabroud. The Muslims of Yabroud are also saying this. They revere the Blessed Virgin just as we do.

“In fact, we have always got on well with the Muslims of Yabroud. During the occupation there were a few who collaborated with the jihadists – but this was a small minority of uneducated people. The Muslims even helped the Christians to safeguard me whenever I left the house.”

Before the war about 3,500 Christians lived in

Yabroud. Most left, but almost 80 per cent have returned since the town was retaken in March 2014.

Aid to the Church in Need is supporting Fr George and the Christians in Yabroud with numerous projects, including \$290,000 to provide food and other essentials for 1,500 families – and to keep the Faith alive in these dark times ACN is giving \$100,000 so catechesis can start again at 10 centres in the region, including one in Yabroud for 480 young Catholics.

Local Melkite Archbishop Jean Arbach said: “Thankfully we are able to continue with our pastoral work, despite the difficulties. We thank Aid to the Church in Need for this.

“Our clergy are doing what they can. I am very proud that the priests stayed with their congregations, even in difficult situations. I trust that God will give us peace through the intercession of the Virgin Mary.” ●



**On the day after Homs was liberated, the parish priest returned to the devastation at St Mary’s Syriac Orthodox Church.**

# Your help is their hope

How ACN is ministering to crisis-stricken families in Syria and Iraq



**Your help in action: Emergency help distributed in a church compound for families in the Valley of the Christians, near Homs, Syria.**

**“The jihadists are not far away. We Christians are scared of them,” Sister Houda Fadoul told ACN.**

She oversees a convent of Syrian-Catholic nuns on the edge of the desert 80 kilometres north of Syria’s capital, Damascus.

But she adds the local Muslims fear the extremists too: “After all, the jihadists also kill Muslims. No one wants them here.”

Christians and others have been targeted by extremists in the region.

The jihadist group calling itself Islamic State is attempting to seize vast swathes of Syria and Iraq to set up a caliphate governed by strict *Shari’a* law which would spread across the Middle East.

In 2014 they took control of Iraq’s Nineveh Plains and parts of north and north-eastern Syria.

Extremism and conflict have reduced many families in

Iraq and Syria to extreme poverty, but ACN is helping with aid including:

- The Good Shepherd Sisters’ clinic in Beirut caring for refugees from Syria and Iraq
- Makeshift housing for displaced families in Iraq
- Mass offerings for priests ministering to the persecuted in Iraq and Syria
- Food and medicine for refugee families in Syria’s Valley of the Christians

Sister Houda said: **“We have to help the people regain their hope and faith in a future in Syria. If not, we will lose them. We therefore thank everyone who has donated to Aid to the Church in Need for their support.”**

She thanked benefactors, saying: “Now we are again dependent on their generosity and especially on their prayers.

May God bless them.” ●



**Priests, Sisters and lay workers are providing food and other essentials that Syria's beleaguered people need to survive.**

# Only with God can we go on...

**“You can't imagine in what kind of circumstances the family was living. It was damp and cold in that cellar. It was like a catacomb. You could hardly breathe... It was horrible when I saw it. They lived like that for three years.”**

Sr Annie Demerjian of the Sisters of Jesus and Mary who is looking after families in Aleppo, northern Syria described the living conditions of one family.

“The father owned a flower shop. However, he had to close it. Bit by bit they had to sell everything they owned: furniture, electrical devices, clothing – they gave everything away for a little food.

“At some point they moved into the cellar. The rent for their former flat was too expensive. There was no

electricity in the cellar. Both children, a son and a daughter, had to give up their studies because they didn't have any more money.”

The father sought Sr Annie's assistance last year. “We immediately decided to help the family. They now have electricity, perhaps not all the time, but still... The girl has told us that we have given them new hope to live.”

But Sr Annie told ACN that their story is by no means unusual. “It doesn't matter which house you go into, each has a sad story to tell. We are really surrounded by evil.”

Faith gives her hope in the midst of the suffering: “I don't ask God about the why. I only ask Him to give me the strength I need for the day. This removes the burden from my

shoulders. And I have realised one thing: the Lord acts subtly, but He acts. We see this every day. This is the only reason we can go on.”

And with the scale of the need, the help of God is necessary. Sr Annie told us: “At the moment we are helping about 600 families with clothing, food, gas or anything else they need to survive. We are only able to do this thanks to the support of Aid to the Church in Need.”

ACN has helped Sr Annie with more than \$485,000 to provide the basic essentials for these war-scarred people in Aleppo and nearby Hassake. **“I can't express how thankful we are to those who have made donations...The people need spiritual food, but also the kind you can bite into.”** ●

## Teaching them they have a future

**Eight new Church schools – five in the Kurdish capital Erbil and three in Dohuk – will educate 7,200 displaced Iraqi children.**

“The schools are giving parents and children fresh hope. They are a further argument for staying in the country they love,” said ACN's Middle East Projects Coordinator Fr Andrew Halemba.

The first of the prefabricated PVC buildings was opened in Erbil in December. Classrooms are also used for catechesis and other Church activities.

While most pupils are Christian,

education is being provided regardless of religion. One school in Dohuk primarily teaching Syriac-Orthodox children will also enrol Yazidi pupils.

The schools are a priority for Iraq's bishops. Chaldean Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil, who ACN visited in March 2015 to further assess the needs of displaced Christians, thanked Aid to the Church in Need for their support.

**“This is an important contribution to giving our refugees new perspectives. We wish to thank all benefactors for their generosity.”** ●



**The school may not be finished yet – but these children are grateful to ACN for the chance to resume their education.**



**As Islamic State advanced through northern Iraq in 2014, more than 120,000 Christians fled their homes. Upwards of 70,000 found refuge in the Kurdish capital Erbil.**

Responding to urgent pleas from the bishops, Aid to the Church in Need provided \$6.6 million in aid for the persecuted Christians. One of the largest grants in the charity's 67-year history, it includes food parcels for displaced families, like those shown above.