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ACN Australia launches national prayer campaign in response to the coronavirus pandemic

Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) has launched a national prayer campaign for the multitude of needs surrounding the coronavirus pandemic. The charity has designed, printed and is distributing over 100,000 coronavirus prayer cards to priests, religious orders, ACN benefactors and anyone who requests a prayer card.

The Pontifical Foundation is also arranging a spiritual bouquet of Masses that will be celebrated by priests in need and is inviting all Catholics to join the prayer campaign. Further details and instructions can be found at: www.aidtochurch.org/coronavirus.

The spread of COVID-19 has forced the closure of churches in multiple countries, causing Catholics to be unable to physically attend their local parishes for Sunday worship and Easter liturgies. ACN Australia hopes that by inviting Catholics to contribute to a bouquet of Masses, that it will be a spiritual comfort to them during Holy Week, highlighting the spiritual and material dependence we Christians have on one another.

The Masses will be celebrated by priests in regions like Africa, Asia, Latin America and parts of Eastern Europe. The Mass stipend offered will help priests to survive and continue their ministry, in turn, they will offer Mass for our intentions i.e. the multitude of needs surrounding COVID-19 and for all those that have been affected by the virus.

"When news about the pandemic started to dominate the headlines we asked ourselves at ACN what we could do in response and we have discerned that we can and must encourage prayer," said National Director of *Aid to the Church in Need Australia*, Mr Bernard Toutounji. "We are being asked to self-isolate and this feeling of being cut-off and alone can cause fear and unrest, even in those of faith. Our national prayer campaign aims to combat this, we are encouraging all people to join us in praying this coronavirus prayer, asking Mary, Help of Christians to intercede for us. We are happy to post these prayer cards anywhere in Australia."

"As Catholics, we know that the most powerful prayer is the Mass. For over fifty years, ACN has arranged Masses on behalf of poor priests, therefore, in addition to distributing the prayer cards, we are building a spiritual bouquet of Masses for all the prayer intentions that we have as a result of this health crisis. We are imploring Our Heavenly Father and our Blessed Mother to be with us during this time. I invite all Catholics who are able, to add a Mass to our spiritual bouquet," continued Mr Toutounji.

Aid to the Church in Need International has also shared news about the impact that the coronavirus is having on those Christians already suffering from persecution or poverty. A letter received from an African priest shared his fears of the future: "I greatly anticipate a lot of suffering among priests because whatever we eat and use, comes from the Sunday special offering. Now that churches are closing, where are we going to find food?"

Bishops in Africa have also expressed fear about the inadequacy of their governments to cope with the spread of the virus. Some seminaries have closed, while others deliberately stay open and keep the students there, rather than sending them back to their villages.

Burkina Faso is one of the most vulnerable countries because of the refugee crisis. The Cardinal of Ouagadougou, who is also President of the SECAM (Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar), has tested positive to COVID-19. In Venezuela, the pandemic has only worsened an already serious situation of high unemployment, inflation and food shortages. In parts of Asia, many people can no longer earn a daily wage and consequently, the local Church has less income.

"At a time where the majority of us cannot attend Mass, arranging a Mass to be celebrated by a priest in need is a beautiful way to participate in the Eucharistic celebration and at the same time, you are giving an Easter gift to the poor and persecuted Church. 100 percent of every Mass offering is sent to the priest in need, no administration costs are taken," emphasised Mr Toutounji.

For more information about the prayer campaign visit: www.aidtochurch.org/coronavirus
Or call: **1800 101 201 (Monday to Friday: 8am-5pm AEDT)**

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