



Media Release 22.06.2020

ACN releases its Activity Report – over \$171 million (AUD) raised for the support of the Church throughout the world. Africa and the Middle East among the major beneficiaries.

The international Catholic pastoral charity and pontifical foundation *Aid to the Church in Need (ACN International)*, which has 23 national offices and over 330,000 private benefactors throughout the world, raised over \$171 million (AUD) in the year 2019 for suffering and persecuted Christians all over the world.

With the additional help of some \$8 million in donations carried forward from the previous year, the charity was able to fund activities to a total value of \$179 million. Some 80.4% of these – or approximately \$144 million – were spent on the three areas regarded by the charity as the main “pillars” of its mission: direct financial support via various aid projects, providing information about the situation of Christians in various countries, and encouraging Christians to pray for their suffering brethren.

Altogether, the charity sponsored 5,230 projects, providing assistance for a wide range of different needs in 139 different countries, above all in Africa and the Middle East. This was an increase of 211 projects compared to 2018, and benefited a total of 1,162 different dioceses, over one-third of all the Catholic dioceses in the world.

Once again, Africa was the region in which most of ACN’s projects were located, with 29.6%, or almost a third, of the project funds allocated, making possible a total of 1,766 projects. In Nigeria (121), Cameroon (91) and Burkina Faso (52), where Islamic fundamentalism and jihadist terrorism are wreaking havoc among the people, the charity funded 264 projects to a total of \$4.8 million. The Democratic Republic of the Congo, owing to its vast size of over 2 million km² and the grave conflicts it is suffering, including international forgetfulness, was the single country in Africa in which the greatest number of projects were realised in 2019, and the third worldwide. Here ACN funded 268 projects to a total of \$5.3 million.

Some 22.1% of the project aid allocated went for the support of the Christian minorities whose existence is threatened in the Middle East, the cradle of Christianity. In Syria, which is still suffering from the terrible civil war, ACN funded 132 projects to a total of almost \$12.2 million, for the most part, focused on basic emergency and survival aid. The other major beneficiary was Iraq where, following the rebuilding of over 6,000 homes in previous years, a new phase has begun for the repair of places of worship and monasteries, in order to rebuild the spiritual homeland of the many Christian families who have returned to their towns and villages. Outstanding among the 50 major projects approved by the charity to a total of \$9 million in Iraq was the rebuilding of the Al-Tahira Cathedral in Qaraqosh, the largest Christian church in Iraq.

Another country affected by warfare and grave economic poverty, yet at the same time spiritually rich, was Ukraine. This was the priority country for ACN in Eastern Europe, with a total of almost 300

projects and over \$6.4 million allocated in funding during 2019.

In Latin America, Venezuela has sadly become the country in receipt of most aid, after Brazil. Here ACN funded 108 projects providing vital support for the Church in Venezuela and its people, for many of them the sole support in a country suffering from a profound political and economic crisis, social upheaval and the almost total lack of healthcare provision. Similarly, in Asia ACN's priority included aid for Pakistan and India, where Islamic religious fanaticism in the one and extreme Hindu fundamentalism in the other are bringing daily discrimination and danger to the ordinary lives of the Christian minorities there.

Outside of the geographical context, ACN also supplied aid in the form of 1,378,635 Mass intentions, which were celebrated in 2019 for the intentions of its benefactors and which represented some 15.9% of the donations given. This enabled the charity to support 40,096 priests – roughly one in every ten around the world. Most of the stipends were used not simply for the support of the priests themselves but also for the benefit of the people by supporting their pastoral and social work among them.

ACN continued with its support for the formation of seminarians and for members of the religious congregations, aid the charity regards as crucial for the future of the Church. Thanks to this aid, over 13,000 religious sisters were able to continue and improve their service to the poorest and most vulnerable on the margins of the major cities or war torn regions and in the inaccessible mountain and forest regions. At the same time it was able to support the studies of over 16,200 young seminarians around the world, or one in every seven worldwide. Together, these projects for the support and formation of the above groups accounted for some 16% of the aid allocated by the charity.

Since the beginning of 2019 ACN funded 266 motor vehicles, 119 motorbikes, 266 bicycles, 4 buses, 3 trucks and 12 small vessels for the facilitation of the pastoral mission of the Church by land and sea in many remote and difficult regions, among them Brazil, Burundi, India and Madagascar.

The charity ACN was founded in 1947 after the Second World War, initially for the support of refugees, and for many years its work focused on support of the persecuted Church behind the Iron Curtain. Since then, and in addition to the funding of projects, its aim has been to inform the world of the plight of the persecuted Church and to support it through political advocacy.

Today there are some 200 million Christians around the world who are unable to practise their faith freely, and there are over 80 countries in the world where the fundamental right to religious liberty is not guaranteed. At this moment in time Christians are persecuted, oppressed or actively discriminated against in over 40 different countries.

Consequently, in 2019 ACN has spoken up for persecuted Christians before international organisations such as the United Nations and the European Union and has published innumerable writings and articles in six or more languages, with face-to-face interviews and audiovisual programmes on the situation of these suffering Christians, using national and international media. It has also invited representatives and notable victims of the persecuted Church to speak at international meetings, events and conferences enabling them to give personal witness to the situations, which are often unknown to, or ignored by, the West. Among these were the “Night of witness” in the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, just a few weeks before the tragic fire that

engulfed it, and the “Red Week for Persecuted Christians” in which thousands of major monuments were illuminated in red light on four different continents, in order to draw attention to the right of religious freedom and the suffering of persecuted Christians.

Finally, in the realm of prayer, one initiative worth mentioning among so many others was the Rosary campaign “A Million Children Praying the Rosary” for unity and peace in the world. In 2019, and with the support of the Holy Father via social networks, hundreds of schools, parishes, religious communities and countless families in over 80 countries around the world joined together in this campaign of prayer, united in the conviction that in addition to concrete practical aid, prayer and faith are ultimately vital to the healing of this world.

Despite the critical economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the international foundation looks to keep up the level of support to the suffering Church in 2020. Although this is a great challenge, the needs in many partner countries have been greatly aggravated. Since the start of April 2020 ACN has already allocated \$8 million to the support of priests and religious, and those they serve, in some of the poorest countries. Additionally, the charity has organised other emergency aid programs for suffering Christians, notably in Syria and Pakistan.

Written by Maria Lozano, edited by Laura Cain.

Read ACN's International activity report by visiting: www.aidtochurch.org/annual-report

*Please note that figures have been converted from Euro to AUD at the average exchange rate of 2019: 1 Euro = \$1.6109 AUD.

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