

Supporting priests shepherding their flocks through crisis



The then Fr Jacques Mourad celebrating Mass before being seized by Daesh.

Syria's Christians have fallen "into crisis and fear" according to Archbishop Jacques Mourad – but he's no stranger to adversity and is determined to see that priests will be there to minister to their spiritual needs.

Kidnapped in 2015 by Daesh (ISIS) when he was still a monk, Syriac Catholic Archbishop Jacques endured five years of captivity during which he was tortured to make him renounce Jesus. He never did.

Every part of his Archdiocese of Homs, Hama, and Nabk suffered destruction

Feeding the faithful who fled fanatics



Parishioners at St Joseph's Church, including families who fled Islamist extremists.

during Syria's Civil War, with some neighbourhoods having 80 percent of their houses destroyed. In Homs itself churches were targeted as part of the ongoing bombardment.

In the last couple of years, a church in Hama was riddled with gunfire and the cemetery in the nearby Christian town of Mhareh was vandalised. In troubled times the faithful need priests – but priests need to feed themselves and pay their bills, which is a challenge in a country where 90 percent live in poverty.

Archbishop Jacques asked for Mass stipends to support him and the 14 priests in his archdiocese ministering to the faithful. How could we refuse to help?

He said: "Thank you for your constant support for our Church and for our families who remained in the country – but I write



Homs was devastated during the civil war.

now to thank you for the Mass stipends for our priests. These Mass stipends are their primary source of livelihood.

"I wish to convey our thanks, appreciation and prayers for ACN and your benefactors. May goodness, security and peace prevail in our homeland and the whole world." 

After Christians were driven out of their homes by jihadists during the civil war many of them fled to Damascus – Syria's capital city is now thought to house half of all the country's Christians.

Many ended up in Dwelaa a rural suburb on the south-east edge of Damascus. Fr Basilius George says the parish "houses the poorest Christians in the country", including many forced to flee their villages.

St Joseph's Melkite Greek Catholic Church has set up a project to feed more than 300 people including the elderly and those struggling to support themselves. What Fr George calls the "families of martyrs" which he says includes "widows and those who have no one else to help them" are among those set to receive help.

Fr George told ACN: "During the war, many Christians – displaced from Christian towns, such as Maaloula [the shrine town where jihadists went from house to house seeking Christians]... joined the parish. They have suffered greatly".

The project initially faltered due to a lack of financial support, but thanks to your generous love, it will be up and running very shortly.

The head of the Melkite Church, Patriarch Youssef, thanked you for all your help: "I can only praise the soup kitchen project being organised by Fr Basilius George – please accept my thanks and the assurance of my prayers." 

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'Blessed are the peacemakers'

The Sisters of Jesus Abandoned in Deir El-Ahmar, in Lebanon's picturesque Beqaa Valley.

This report includes a first-hand account of a trip to Lebanon by ACN's Amy Balog.

When Pope Leo XIV visited Lebanon late last year, he described it as a "land where 'peace' is much more than just a word, for here peace is a desire and a vocation".

Indeed, Christians in both Lebanon and Syria are well-placed to help foster reconciliation within societies that have suffered so much from war and economic crises over the decades.

In the many Catholic schools supported by ACN, interreligious harmony is a reassuring reality. The Sisters of Jesus Abandoned and countless other religious congregations

are working tirelessly to promote Christian ideals even in Lebanon's Shi'a Muslim majority areas.

Catholic schools in Lebanon are renowned for their quality of education. Even Muslim parents want their children to attend these institutions where they will become acquainted with Christian values like solidarity, forgiveness and human dignity.

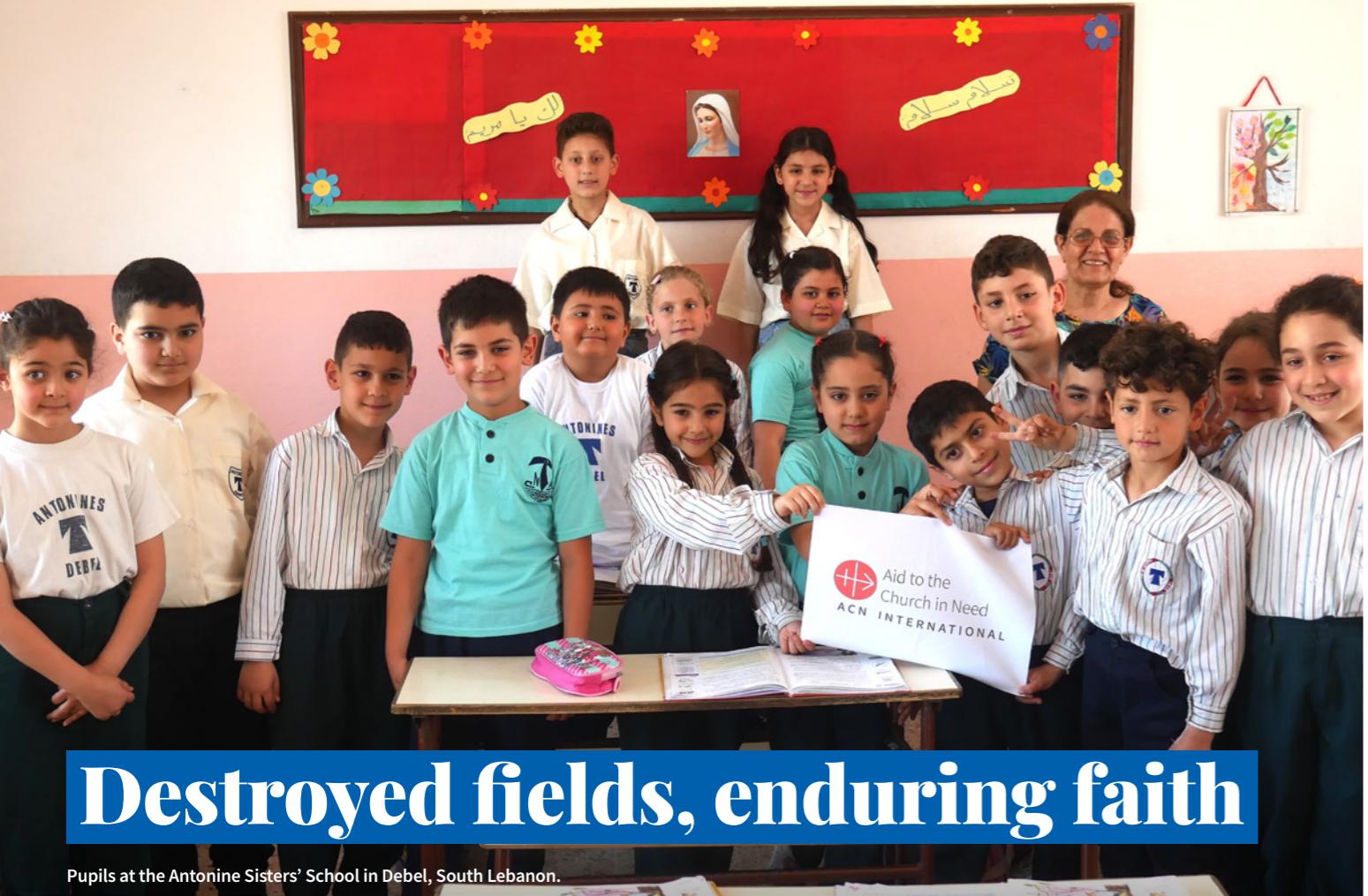
In addition to the help for Catholic schools and religious congregations, your support is urgently needed for these key ACN projects in Lebanon and Syria, including:

- Mass stipends for priests
- Emergency food and medical aid for displaced families
- Pastoral activities for children and retreats for adults
- Rebuilding destroyed churches and homes
- Solar panels for churches and monasteries to reduce energy costs.

Travelling around Lebanon with ACN felt like a pilgrimage back to the roots of the Faith. I expected to find a despairing Church, but instead, I encountered a living flame of hope that no weapon can extinguish. 

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Destroyed fields, enduring faith

Pupils at the Antonine Sisters' School in Debel, South Lebanon.

We drove through many ghost towns and villages in south Lebanon which looked like the set of a post-apocalyptic film – except there were no cameras and no way for the world to know about the horrid scale of the destruction.

During the latest war between the Israeli armed forces and the militant group Hezbollah, Shi'a-majority areas were targeted, while the region's historic Christian communities were also caught up in the crossfire, suffering terribly.

Even though the airstrikes have mostly stopped, Christian families in south Lebanon continue to face deep economic hardship while reeling from severe emotional trauma.

Antonine Sister Gerard Merhej told me that the local population has dwindled as many families have left for Beirut and beyond in search of work after witnessing the devastation of their livelihoods.

Sister Gerard explained: "The fields in the area have been destroyed in the war. The families that have stayed have no income because they used to work in agriculture."

The Antonine Sisters' School offers much-needed education in Debel. The school remains open as a beacon of hope, sustained by ACN help, including stipends for teachers.

Sister Gerard noted that those remaining in the area are "trying to get started with farming as an alternative source of income".

She expressed her heartfelt gratitude for your generous support: "We don't know what we would do without you. Thank you for helping us survive."



'St Charbel is with us'

In south Lebanon, in an area where few Christians remain, Moussa and his wife Micheline were not home when the neighbouring house – reportedly used by Hezbollah to store weapons – was hit.

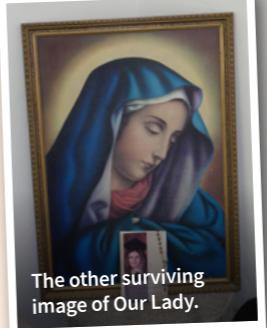
"The 10-foot cross on the rooftop and St Charbel's intercession saved our family," Moussa said. "We give thanks to God."

Moussa's every sentence glowed with deep gratitude, often ending with a phrase praising God and thanking ACN benefactors.

After returning to their burnt-down home, they found only two items intact: pictures of St George and the Virgin Mary.

They spent their life savings to rebuild their house. ACN provided emergency food and medical aid to support their family and others like them.

One of those organising the distribution of vital ACN aid in the area is Sister Maya El Beaino of the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary.



Back to the monastic beginnings

The Brothers of Beit Maroun in Deir El-Ahmar, Lebanon are a Maronite Catholic monastic community founded less than a decade ago. They are 23 young men, mostly in their twenties and thirties.

Brother John Maroun told me that they are "inspired by the mission and resilience of early Maronite monks" – and their countenances radiate so much joy and peace.

Like St Maroun and his followers in the fourth and fifth centuries, the Brothers built their monastery with their own hands, with minimal outside help.

ACN has funded their formation and health insurance.

Brother John Maroun and Brother John Paul were born in Sydney, Australia to

Lebanese parents. Discerning a vocation to the monastic life, these two, unrelated young men returned to their ancestral homeland to join this community.

Brother John Maroun trained as an engineer and Brother John Paul as an architect, so their knowledge and skills were very helpful in the planning and construction of the monastery.

With so many young people leaving Lebanon, it was a beautiful sign of hope to meet a few of those who have chosen to return.

The Brothers of Beit Maroun and other religious congregations throughout Lebanon are looking to us for support. Your generous love means the world to them.

