

RETREAT: THE CROSS AND THE HOLY LAND WITH ACN

This resource is for a full day's retreat or can be used in sections for a half-day retreat or over a series of Apostles Group Meetings.

Session & Time:	Aim(s):	You will need:
Opening Prayer 5 minutes	- To set the tone and root the sessions in prayer. - To introduce the theme: The Cross.	Slides 1-4 Prayer
Ice breaker 10 minutes	- Fun - To facilitate familiarity with places linked to Jesus.	Word game: slides 5-10
Session 1 Map Activity 30-60 minutes	- To place New Testament accounts of Jesus in their geographical context. - To make links between the Holy Land in Jesus' time and today.	- Maps (slides 12-14) 'The Bible in the Time of Jesus' sheets. - Picture & place names.
Session 2 The Haddads and ACN 30-60 minutes	To explain the lived experience of Christians in the Holy Land today with reference to the cross and ACN.	Storyboards
Session 3 20 minutes	- To facilitate deeper understanding of the Sign of the Cross. - To give space for discernment and reflection on the Sign of the Cross as a prayer. - To encourage prayer and appreciation of the power of the cross.	Slides 33-48
Session 4 40 minutes	Craft activity (see below)	
Liturgy	Readings and prayers suggested.	

INTRODUCTION

SLIDE 1:



This gives you the option to say that Maisy Milk has travelled to the Holy Land.

SLIDE 2:

Welcome to our retreat.

SLIDE 3:

Bethlehem has been a centre of olivewood carving since at least the 4th century.

People come on pilgrimage to see the places where Jesus walked, and they seek souvenirs that connect them to him. Here you can see the 'holding cross'.

This retreat is about the Cross and the Holy Land. ACN sells Holy Land Holding Crosses made in Bethlehem. They are designed to rest comfortably in the palm.

OPENING PRAYER

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Look at the cross. What do you think of when you see it? Silence... Let us be still and remind ourselves that we are in the presence of God. The swirling patterns and warm tones symbolise the intricate intertwining of human life with God's presence. God is involved in our lives and cares about every detail.

SLIDE 4:

Lord Jesus,

The Cross was once a sign of suffering and death, but through your love and God's power it became the way you saved us. It reminds us that even when terrible things happen, God can bring good out of evil.

Help us to carry our own crosses—the difficulties and challenges in our lives. When things are hard, help us to remember that you walk beside us and give us strength.

Thank you for giving us Mary as our mother from the Cross. May she help us to trust in you and follow you each day.

We pray for the people of the Holy Land and all those suffering because of war. Bless the work of ACN and all who bring hope to those in need. May the saving love of Jesus on the Cross bring peace to our world.

Help us to live as sons and daughters of God, always choosing love, kindness and goodness. Amen.

ICEBREAKER - SCRAMBLED WORDS (5 minutes)

SLIDES: 5-10

1. Scrambled word: **RTAHNEAZ**

Clues

This place is in Galilee.
Jesus spent many of his early years here.
It is not where he was born.
Joseph and Mary lived here.
It starts with N.

2. Scrambled word: **HMELBETHE**



This town is in Judea.
It is mentioned in Old Testament prophecies.
A famous king, David, came from here.
Jesus was born here.
It starts with B.

3. Scrambled word: **JAMERULSE**

This is an important city in Judea.
There was a temple here.
Jesus visited this city many times.
The Last Supper and crucifixion happened here.
It starts with J.

Nazareth – where Jesus grew up.
Bethlehem – where Jesus was born.
Jerusalem – where Jesus taught, loved people and showed kindness.

SESSION 1: THE LAND OF JESUS (30 minutes)

MAP ACTIVITY: (30 minutes)

(Important note: the map is not an exact replica and lacks detail. The exercise is about linking Jesus' life with the Holy Land today, not the exact geographical locations. The areas shown are approximate).

Aim:

To place New Testament accounts of Jesus in their geographical context. To make links between the Holy Land in Jesus' time and today.

Outcomes:

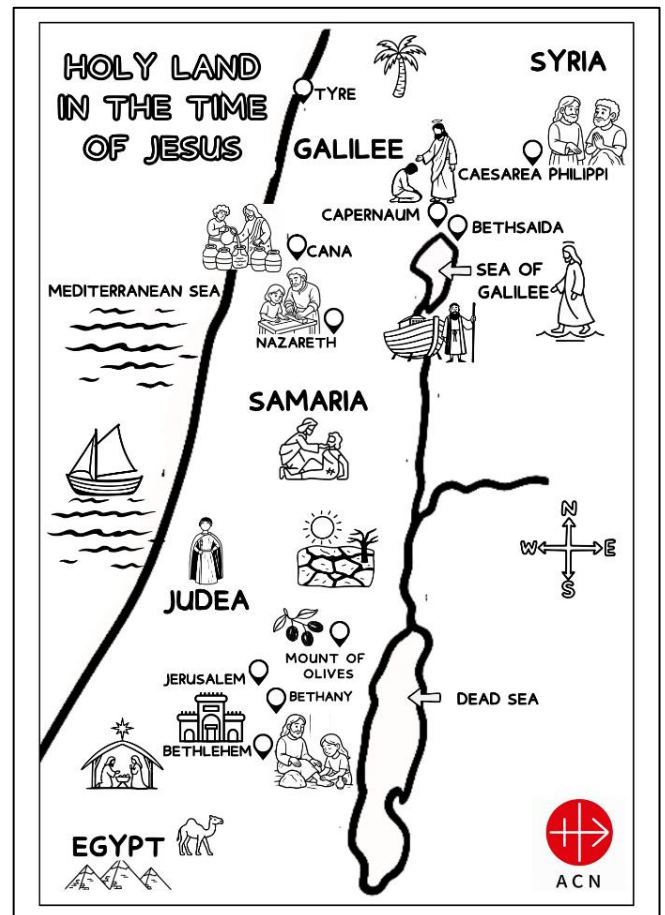
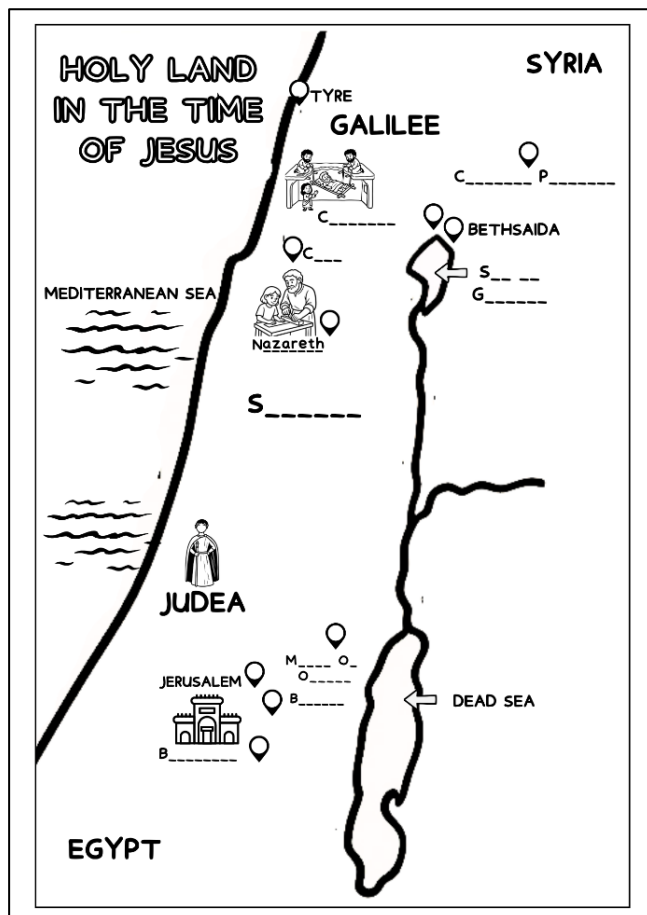
Maps fully or partially completed (one large map per class or separate maps in groups).

You will need:

1. Maps printed on A4 or A3 (or you could use sticky notes and the screen/PowerPoint).
2. One sheet 'The Bible in the Time of Jesus' sheet per person/pair or group (there are 8 in total, so groups of 4 for a class of 32).
3. One place name and one picture per person/pair or group.

By the end of the activity, they should be able to:

- explain: where (at least one) event in Jesus' life took place.
- point to where it is on the map.
- identify an image related to the account.
- state the title of the biblical account.



THE HOLY LAND IN THE TIME OF JESUS













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THE HOLY LAND IN THE TIME OF JESUS

Sea of Galilee
 JESUS WALKS ON THE WATER

Caesarea Philippi
 PETER'S DECLARATION ABOUT JESUS

Bethlehem
 THE BIRTH OF JESUS

Samaria
 THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Cana
 THE WEDDING FEAST AT CANA

Bethany
 JESUS IS ANOINTED AT BETHANY

Mount of Olives
 JESUS PRAYS ON THE MOUNT OF OLIVES

Capernaum
 JESUS RETURNS TO CAPERNAUM AND HEALS A PARALYSED MAN

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THE HOLY LAND IN THE TIME OF JESUS

TITLE :

PICTURE:

Matthew 14:22-26

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

CONSIDER:

1. Where does this take place?
2. What is Jesus doing?
3. What are others doing?
4. Are there any words that stand out?
5. What is the message?

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INSTRUCTIONS:

Each person/pair or group will receive one account from the New Testament about the life of Jesus.

READ AND DISCUSS BIBLICAL ACCOUNTS (8 MINUTES)

- Each person/pair or group reads the account from the New Testament. Discuss the questions on the sheet.

FIND CORRESPONDING CARDS FROM OTHER GROUPS (6 MINUTES)

- Find the image and title of the account.
- Now pupils travel to other individuals and groups to locate the image and the title which refers to their account. (6 minutes)
- Image and title cards shared so that each person/pair group returns with the corresponding image and title.

ADD TITLE AND IMAGE (5 MINUTES)

- Back in places, now add the title and picture to their page (either draw and write) or stick with blu-tac.

DISPLAY AND SHARE (10 MINUTES)

- Display the map which has been completed. Pupils look at map and find their biblical account.
- Take away completed map and display blank map.
- Invite each pupil/group to come forward and fill in the name of the place and tell the class what happened there.

If you have time, pupils could have individual maps to fill in and draw the images.

LINK between session 1 and session 2:

As we can see from the map, the land where he lived, taught and travelled was known as Judea, Galilee and Samaria. These places, now often called the Holy Land, were, in Jesus' time, under Roman rule. Now, let's go forward in time to today – over 2000 years. Now, that same area includes Israel, Gaza and the West Bank.

- Israel is a country.
- Gaza is a small coastal area where many Palestinians live.
- The West Bank is another area where many Palestinians live, east of Israel.

Many people who live there now are Israelis or Palestinians, and both groups feel very connected to this land because it is an important part of their history, culture and beliefs. Unfortunately, they have disagreed for many years about how the land should be shared and governed. In October 2023, Hamas, a group that controls Gaza, attacked Israel. Israel responded by using its military, including its army and air force, to attack Hamas in Gaza. Since then, ordinary people on both sides have been hurt, lost family members or had to leave their homes. (www.britannica.com/explore/israeli-palestinian-conflicts)

SESSION 2: THE HADDADS AND ACN

Aim:

To explain the lived experience of Christians in the Holy Land today, with reference to the cross and ACN.

Objectives:

- To understand what Jesus meant by "take up your cross."
- To show the impact of the war on a Christian family.
- To explain what ACN is doing to help.

Outcomes:

1. Explain the meaning of "take up your cross."
2. Give examples of how families are coping in the Holy Land
3. Describe how ACN is supporting Christians in the Holy Land.

You will need:

1. Presentation
2. Storyboards

INTRODUCTION

"Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me."
(Luke 9:23)

Ask children what they think this means and explain:

When Jesus said, "*Take up your cross and follow me,*" he didn't mean we have to carry a wooden cross. He meant that sometimes following him can be difficult, and we should trust him and keep going, even when things are hard. For Christians, taking up one's cross is therefore not simply enduring hardship; it is carrying life's burdens in union with Jesus, believing that, just as the Cross led to the Resurrection, suffering united to Christ can become a path to holiness, love and eternal life.

The faithful presence of Christians in the Holy Land keeps alive the places where Jesus lived, died and rose again. For ACN, it is vital that the spiritual heart of Christianity should continue to be a living witness to the importance of Christ's life, death and resurrection. This is one of the reasons why ACN invites us all to participate in prayer and action on their behalf. In this session we are going to think about how a family is affected by the war and what ACN is doing to help them. As we look at their story, think about the cross each member of the family is having to carry.

INSTRUCTIONS:

Read out with corresponding slides (or invite children to read):

SLIDE 16:

Bethlehem has been a centre of olivewood carving since at least the 4th century. People come on pilgrimage to see the places where Jesus walked, and they seek souvenirs that connect them to him.

SLIDE 17:

Families in Bethlehem have passed this craft from parent to child for centuries and they provide food and an income.

The Haddads live in a modest home on the outskirts of Bethlehem. There's Maryam, aged 10, her older brother Daniel, their mum, Sophia, dad Georges and their elderly grandfather Jamil.

SLIDE 18:

Life has been incredibly hard for them. For years, Georges earned a living as an olive-wood carver, shaping crosses, Holy Family figurines and Nativity sets — carrying on a craft his father and grandfather taught him. But when war started and pilgrims stopped visiting, his workshop stood silent. With no tourists, there were no sales.

SLIDE 19:

Money disappeared almost overnight. The family began sharing smaller meals, and Sophia quietly went without so the children could eat. Grandfather Jamil needed daily medication, but the family could no longer afford it. They were worried he wouldn't survive without his medicine.

SLIDE 20:

Maryam often feels scared and she missed her friends. They used to play together all through the holidays, but now everyone is separated.

SLIDE 21:

Daniel loves visiting friends, going to youth groups and getting involved in activities but due to the pop-up roadblocks and checkpoints this is now difficult.

SLIDE 22:

ACN began providing the Haddads with emergency food, medicine and help covering their rent and electricity bills.

SLIDE 23:

Grandfather Jamil finally received the treatment he desperately needed. Georges was offered a place in an ACN-supported job-creation project, allowing him to rebuild his olive-wood business and provide for his family with dignity.

SLIDE 24:

Aid to the Church in Need is committed to helping to keep that door open and has pledged a large donation to cover fees for over 800 Christian students in 13 schools in the Holy Land, in the belief that their education is an investment in the future of Christianity in the entire region. For Maryam and Daniel, ACN's support changed everything. ACN helped pay their school fees, making sure they could stay in school and continue their education.

Even though Christians are the smallest of the three major faith groups present in the Holy Land, the Catholic Church runs the largest network of schools in the region. These schools provide a concrete opportunity for people of different faiths to meet, to respect one another, to learn together and to build relationships that last a lifetime.

Where pressing needs are particularly dire, the local Church is supporting all families — of all faiths — helping build bridges of peace. So, the Haddads survive, stay hopeful and remain rooted in the land where Jesus once walked.

SLIDES: 25-26:

Here are some children being helped by ACN.

SLIDE 27:

These pictures show examples ways ACN helped people. What are they?

SLIDE 28-29:

How many did you guess?

Question: If you could choose only five items from this list to give to people in the Holy Land, which would you choose?

ACN (Aid to the Church in Need) try to help families in places like the Holy Land by:

- Giving food, medicine and shelter: ACTION
- Helping churches so that they can help people in the community: ACTION
- Reminding people they are not forgotten: INFORMATION
- Supporting schools so children can keep learning: ACTION

- Encouraging people to pray for peace: PRAYER

What does this show you about the value of fundraising?

SLIDE 30:

From ACN's Project Holy Land webpage. This shows how your 'ACTION,' e.g. fundraising is helping real people.

SLIDE 31:

Discuss your thoughts about the Haddads, ACN and your role as an ACN Apostle as you colour the storyboard. You can write down your thoughts below the pictures.

Pupils colour in story board.

LINK between session 2 and Session 3:

For ACN, helping Christians in the Holy Land really matters. These Christians live close to the special places where Jesus lived, died on the Cross and rose again. One of the holiest places is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. "Sepulchre" means a tomb, and Christians believe this church stands near the place where Jesus died and was buried. Inside, Christians also honour a tiny relic believed to be part of the True Cross - the real Cross on which Jesus died. This reminds us that the Cross is not just a symbol: it points to Jesus' great love, his sacrifice and the hope he gives to the world.

SESSION 3: THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

Aim:

To develop pupils' understanding of the Sign of the Cross as a prayer and profession of faith, exploring its connection to Jesus' saving work in the Holy Land and encouraging thoughtful participation in prayer and the liturgical life of the Church.

(RED: *Celebrate*; PLD: Participation in Prayer and Liturgy. Sections **3.3** Participation in the Liturgy, 6.1 Key Elements of Prayer and Liturgy, and 7.10 Common Prayers.)

Objectives:

- Explore the connection between the Cross and Jesus' life, death and resurrection in the Holy Land.
- Reflect on the meaning of the Sign of the Cross in their own prayer life.
- Recognise how the Sign of the Cross is used within the Church's prayer and liturgical tradition.

Outcomes:

1. Participate respectfully and prayerfully in making the Sign of the Cross.
2. Reflect on the importance of the Cross for Christians today.

QUICK QUIZ: SLIDES 33-38 (answers on slide 38)

Either:

- Complete in teams writing down answers.

- Ask pupils to stand up for 'A', stand for 'B' etc.
- Ask pupils to go to corners of the room A, B, C and D to denote their answer.

Now we are going to think more deeply about the cross. When we pray, we usually begin it with the Sign of the Cross. This is an especially important and meaningful action. Sometimes we do it without thinking, so today, we are going to reflect on why it is a prayer and what it means.

Note: If you want a shorter/easier version, please read the parts in bold only. If you would like more depth, use all the notes below.

The Sign of the Cross is:

SLIDE 39:

1. **A mini-summary of Christian faith. It's like a short prayer that says much in just a few seconds.** It is a "physical creed" (a creed being a set of important beliefs, stated to show your faith). When we do it, we are showing what we believe of Jesus and his Church.

SLIDE 40:

2. **When we make the Sign of the Cross, we are tracing the love of God on ourselves.** The words "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" state our belief in the Trinity. Making the shape on our bodies recalls Christ's crucifixion and redemption.

So, in one short action, it declares both who God is (Trinity) and what God has done (salvation through the cross).

SLIDE 41:

3. **Involves the whole person (not just the mind) and shows what you believe with your actions. It uses the whole body to pray - words and actions come together.** We are made up of our bodies and souls, and these are united. The Sign of the Cross uses the body to pray. It shows that faith is not just about our minds but that our whole self is united to God.

- The vertical line is the relationship between God and humanity.
- The horizontal line is the relationship between human beings.
- Together, they symbolize the union of divine love and human love, fulfilled in Christ.

SLIDE 42:

4. **A way of saying, 'God I know you are here, present with me and I would like to come into your presence – literally – and spend this time with you.'** When you say the words and pray in God's name, you are declaring his presence and coming into his presence.

SLIDE 43:

5. **A powerful gesture because it connects us to something real. It points to something that really happened. Jesus truly died and rose again.** It refers to the actual event of redemption, not an abstract idea.

SLIDE 44:

6. **A reminder that we belong to God.** It is like putting a sign on yourself that says, “I belong to Jesus and I’m signing myself with his mark”. It is a deeply meaningful act of trust in God and when we do it, we are asking God to be with us.

SLIDE 45:

7. **It is a sign of our identity as children of God.** The cross is traced on our foreheads at baptism and when we now make the Sign of the Cross it is a renewal of the sacrament of baptism.

SLIDE 46:

8. **The sign links you to the body of Christ, and when you make it, you remember you're joining to the body with Christ as the head.** In this sense, it's both personal (I belong to Christ) and public (a visible witness). It should be a meaningful thing we do – not just a habit.

SLIDE 47:

9. **The Sign of the Cross is a way of placing oneself under God's protection.** The cross shows us that God has power over everything, even death. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, “The Church imparts blessings by invoking the name of Jesus, usually while making the holy sign of the cross.” (CCC 1671) This means that when you make the Sign of the Cross, you are calling on Jesus' name. In the Bible, calling on God's name means asking for his help and protection.

SLIDE 48:

10. **When we do it, we are consecrating – which means dedicating, or making holy - whatever follows (our prayer, work or actions).** By making the Sign of the Cross, we are saying to the Lord: I want to be your child. Please help me with my decisions.

Finish by making the Sign of the Cross together prayerfully.

References:

1. *Sign of the Cross: Recovering the Power of the Ancient Prayer.* (Bert Ghezzi)
2. *Significance of the Sign of the Cross* | EWTN
3. *Ask Peter Kreeft: The 100 Most Interesting Questions He's Ever Been Asked* (Peter Kreeft)
4. *Sign of the Cross: A Creed?* www.theologycentral.net
5. *Signs of Life: 40 Catholic Customs and Their Biblical Roots* (Scott Hahn)

SLIDE 50 (Plus **SLIDES 51-53** if you wish to show the children images of the Holy Sepulchre at the start or the end).

SESSION 4: CROSS-MAKING ACTIVITY

Aim:

To make a cross to (some or all of the following:)

- use during a liturgy.
- remind pupils of the day.
- display in school.
- talk about the retreat in a future fundraising assembly.

- bring home and use in prayer.

Note: There are various craft options for this session depending on time and resources. For this reason, three options will be given below (papier-mâché, wool-wrapped and drawing).

1. Papier-mâché cross - you will need:

- a) Cardboard
- b) Newspaper strips
- c) Glue and water (or flour + water)
- d) Bowl
- e) Scissors
- f) Paints and decorations

Instructions

1. Draw and cut out a cross shape from cardboard.
2. Mix glue and water together in a bowl.
3. Dip newspaper strips into the mixture.
4. Lay strips over the cross (2–3 layers).
5. Leave to dry overnight.
6. Paint and decorate your cross.

2. Wool-Wrapped Cross -you will need:

- a) Lolly sticks or thin cardboard
- b) Glue
- c) Scissors
- d) Pens and pencils
- e) Wool or yarn
- f) Sellotape

Instructions:

1. Arrange the lolly sticks in the shape of a cross, with one stick placed vertically and the other laid across it horizontally.
2. Hold the sticks together where they cross in the centre.
3. Tie the end of the wool around the centre of the cross. If needed, ask an adult to help secure it with a knot.
4. Wrap the wool around the centre several times vertically and horizontally to hold the sticks firmly together.
5. Weave the wool diagonally around the centre:
6. Wrap over one arm of the cross.
7. Bring the wool behind and around the next arm.
8. Continue around all four sections several times to create a decorative pattern.
9. Pull the wool tightly as you work so the cross stays secure.
10. Finish by tying a knot at the back of the cross.
11. Trim any excess wool with scissors.
12. (Optional) Add a loop of wool at the top so the cross can be hung up.

3. Draw a cross and add thoughts, words, pictures and symbols of the retreat day (templates on pages 16-17 of booklet).

SUGGESTION FOR PRAYER FOR CELEBRATION OF THE WORD:

Suggested bible passages:

Children could choose one of the passages from Session 1 or Matthew 8: 34-38:

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”

Suggested prayers:

1. We pray for our Christian brothers and sisters throughout the Middle East.
2. For the refugee families from Iraq and Syria, may they find safety, homes, education and hope for the future.
3. For the people of Gaza, provide food, shelter, and comfort to all those suffering through conflict and hardship.
4. For the Christian families of Bethlehem, help them to remain strong in faith and support them as they build homes, schools and communities rooted in your love.
5. For Jerusalem, bless priests, sisters and all those who care for the holy places where Jesus lived, died and rose again. Guide and strengthen those preparing to serve your Church.
6. May Christians everywhere be courageous witnesses to the Gospel, and may peace, justice and hope flourish throughout the Holy Land and the Middle East.
7. For our ACN Apostles Group, that we may continue to grow in our love of God and others.
8. For any members of our school community who may now be carrying heavy crosses.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS:

Today, the ancient Christian community of the Holy Land — rooted in the very places where Our Lord lived, taught, died and rose again — is facing unprecedented hardship.

Christian families have carried the faith for over 2000 years, but today, war, economic collapse, displacement and fear are threatening their ability to stay in their biblical homeland.

- The Christian population in Bethlehem, the birthplace of Christ, continues to fall, from 85% in the mid-20th century to less than 10% today.
- Healthcare crisis with Christian hospitals and clinics reporting shortages of medicine, clean water and electricity in Gaza and the West Bank.

- 48% of Christian youth in the Holy Land are considering emigration, citing fear, discrimination and lack of opportunity and a future in the Holy Land.

Aid to the Church in Need plays a critical humanitarian and pastoral role in the Holy Land. ACN's support focuses on Christian communities in Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Israel, providing emergency relief and long-term resilience programmes.

In Gaza, where around 1000 Christians remain, ACN helps the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem (LPJ) supply essential items such as food, water, medicine, fuel and hygiene kits to families sheltering in the Holy Family Catholic Parish and the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Porphyrius, both of which host hundreds displaced by the conflict.

Across the West Bank and East Jerusalem, where Christian livelihoods have collapsed due to the halt in tourism and widespread unemployment, ACN delivers food coupons, medical assistance, subsidies for rent and utilities, and support for students.

In Israel, ACN assists migrant Christian workers and asylum seekers through the Vicariate for Migrants and Asylum Seekers, providing accommodation, healthcare and necessities.

Beyond emergency aid, ACN invests in job-creation, vocational training and support for Church-run institutions to help stabilise Christian presence and prevent further emigration.

ACN promotes the messages of Church leaders (especially Cardinal Pizzaballa) who consistently call for forgiveness to disarm revenge and for dialogue to overcome hatred. Local Church institutions, supported by ACN, accompany traumatised populations - especially children - in places like Bethlehem, where sisters care for young people affected by war. Healing trauma is essential for preventing cycles of anger and future conflict.

ACN also echoes appeals from the Holy Father for an immediate cessation of hostilities and for justice, peace and reconciliation to prevail.

As well as active support, solidarity and prayer is essential.