

Keep the heart of Faith beating in Iraq

“We forgive those who murdered us, who tortured us, who raped us, who sought to destroy everything about us. We forgive them. In the name of Christ, we forgive them.”

Archbishop Bashar Warda was speaking to Aid to the Church in Need about the horrors which Christians – and indeed other minority groups – suffered during Daesh (ISIS)’s occupation of Iraq’s Nineveh Plains. Daesh committed genocidal atrocities including mass killings, abductions, sexual slavery of women and the destruction of religious sites.

However, with Aid to the Church in Need’s help, the region’s Christians continue to rebuild their lives. Tens of thousands lived as internal refugees after being driven from their homes – around 90,000 were cared for by ACN project partners in Erbil – but 41,000 have now been able to return to their homes. Others have settled elsewhere in Iraq, or left the country altogether, although a small number remain as internal refugees waiting until their homes can be restored.

Thanks to you, ACN has been able to care for refugees and help them return home. Now the key challenge is keeping Christianity alive in Iraq, including supporting the work of Sisters whose ministry has encouraged many to return.

According to Archbishop Warda, Daesh’s occupation left Iraq’s Christians “perilously close to extinction” but – as you will read inside – ACN is empowering them to stay. 🕊



Father George Jahola stands in the ruined courtyard of St Benham's Church, Qaraqosh, on Iraq's Nineveh Plains, prior to its renovation.

A symbol of hope



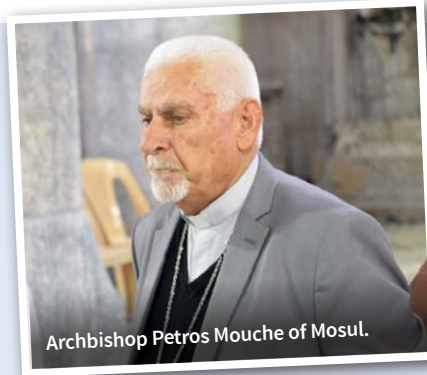
Graffiti left in the church by Daesh.

Every day, parishioners gather to pray in the charred shell of the Church of Al-Tahira (the Immaculate Conception), although they are saddened to worship in a church which was once the pride of the town of Qaraqosh, but now bears the scars of Daesh's occupation.

When Daesh held the city, the church's courtyard was used as a firing range – you can still see the bullet holes. Inside the church, the walls are daubed with graffiti.

When residents finally returned to Qaraqosh they found that Daesh had made a bonfire in the church from the furniture, manuscripts, and prayer books. The extremists also blew up the church's iconic clock tower.

Syriac-Catholic Archbishop Petros Mouche of Mosul told ACN: "For us, this church is a symbol. This church was built in 1932, and it was the villagers of Qaraqosh who constructed it. For this reason, we want this symbol to remain



Archbishop Petros Mouche of Mosul.

as a Christian symbol to encourage the people, especially the locals of Qaraqosh, to stay here."

ACN's help with the first phase of rebuilding has enabled more than half of the families forced out by Daesh to return. Nevertheless, many are still recovering from the trauma of displacement, murdered relatives, and the knowledge that local Christian and Yazidi women were forced into sexual slavery.

As a sign of hope for Qaraqosh's Christians, ACN has pledged to help restore the interior of the church.

Archbishop Mouche said: "I would like to thank all the people who help, as ACN couldn't help us without the support of their benefactors." ☩



Praying together in the charred interior of Al-Tahira Church, Qaraqosh.

Future heralds of the Gospels

"You will be the apostles. You will be the heralds. You will help convert the world."

These words were addressed to Iraqi seminarians by New York's Cardinal Archbishop Timothy Dolan. He was speaking to young men studying at St Peter's Seminary, Erbil shortly before the fall of Daesh.

Today there are currently 15 seminarians studying there for ministry in the Chaldean Church in Iraq. On average, it costs about £300 per month to support one seminarian – including meals, the cost of tuition and healthcare – and ACN is providing ongoing help for these future heralds of the Gospel.

In summer 2018, ACN also helped with badly needed maintenance for the seminary. When the Church in Erbil was stretched beyond capacity, caring for tens of thousands of internal refugees, providing food, shelter and other aid, the seminary's upkeep was not a priority. This left the building needing



Seminarians and ACN visitors at St Peter's Chaldean Seminary in Erbil after Mass.

urgent repairs to the air-conditioning and drainage systems.

Only thanks to you can we help

these young men, who have given their lives to Christ to become apostles and heralds of the Gospel in Iraq. ☩

Caring for Christ's children



Two of the Ephremite Sisters cleaning up their convent following Daesh's retreat.

The Ephremite Sisters' nursery in Qaraqosh was left devastated by Daesh's occupation of the city – which before the extremists seized it was the last Christian majority town in Iraq.

A hole was made in the side of the nursery by a grenade – which fortunately did not cause any significant structural damage – and the roof has several shrapnel holes from a mortar shell that exploded. When the Sisters

returned from the refugee camps, they also found the inside in a terrible state: walls were daubed with graffiti, while ceilings and other fixtures had been torn down.

Yet, despite all this, the Sisters opened the nursery's doors again shortly after Daesh were driven out. They managed to make the first two floors operational, but the upper two levels are still unusable. The building needs plastering, painting, new windows and doors, not to mention new electrical wiring and plumbing – including major repairs to the sewage network.

The Sisters currently look after 47 children, from six months to five years, but their Mother Superior, Sister Mariam, is hoping that 80 children can be cared for after ACN has helped them repair the building.

The Ephremite Sisters have their convent next door to the nursery, and are restoring it with ACN help. **Sister Mariam said, "We thank the Lord and thank you for your support and generosity which enabled us to return... and to serve our Christian people."** ☩



An Ephremite Sister with children in Qaraqosh before Daesh's invasion.

Passing on the flame of Faith

Fr Ayman Hermiz from St Joseph's Church, Sulaimaniyah begged us to help pass on the Faith to the city's Christian children.

The children come from 310 families – many of which fled to Sulaimaniyah



Father Ayman Hermiz and one of the parish Sisters collecting children for catechism classes.



A child lights a candle of hope in Iraq.


Photo: Mamweel Ramna

in the Kurdish region after Daesh seized the Nineveh Plains. Some of the families are hoping to return home, while others have settled here permanently.

“We have a responsibility for our daughters and sons, to teach them the Christian religion and to pass on our heritage and spiritual wealth,” says Fr Ayman.

In most towns Christians live together in one quarter, but Sulaimaniyah's Christians are scattered throughout the city, making it harder to gather the children together for catechesis. But that doesn't deter Fr

Ayman who, in addition to running three hours of catechesis for 190 young people every Friday morning, also organises summer classes for children preparing for their First Holy Communion.

A team of catechists, Sisters and young volunteers help Fr Ayman run the classes – but he needs support for essentials like text-books, fuel to heat the classroom, and the cost of ferrying children to classes. Having fled Daesh, the families are poor and unable to contribute much to the cost. Will you help us provide the £12,700 that Fr Ayman needs to pass on the Faith? 

ACN's ongoing help for Iraq

● Refugees

As Christians fled their homes following the 2014 seizure of Iraq's Nineveh plains, ACN gave around **£20 million** in emergency aid to provide food, shelter and other essentials.

● Reconstruction

To enable refugees to return to the towns and villages they had been forced from, ACN helped to rebuild 37 percent of all homes – a total of 2,086 – at a cost of more than **£5 million**.

● Reviving communities

To ensure Iraq's embattled Christians have a future, ACN is supporting projects to strengthen Christian communities (some of which are described in this report).



Chaldean priest Steven Azabod in front of the Dominican Sisters' ruined convent in Batnaya. ACN will help rebuild the St Orah's Convent.

As Fr Daniel from Bartella said when we met him in late 2018: **“Unless you help us we cannot stay.** The people who came back are planning to stay... Thank you for your support, with the help in the reconstruction of our houses, and when we were in exile...

but ***please don't leave us halfway.*** May God give you His regard, grace and blessing.”

ACN is committed to continuing to help our brothers and sisters following their horrific experiences – with your help we will not leave them halfway. 