

Offering mercy in a time of crisis

Have mercy on us, O Lord: Christian women at prayer in Yohannabad, a mainly Christian district of Lahore (Magdalena Wolnik)

PAKISTAN'S Christians are suffering as never before.

One of the world's most persecuted religious

communities, they are no strangers to extreme poverty, discrimination, acts of violence, rape and kidnapping.

And so, when COVID-19 came, they were defenceless.

Living in cramped conditions, and forced to do the menial jobs nobody else wants to do, it soon became clear that Pakistan's nearly 4 million Christians were at particular risk both of catching the virus and suffering the brunt of the economic fall-out.

After losing their jobs, **some have found it impossible to put food on the table.**

Insult was added to injury when aid organisations in Pakistan began refusing Coronavirus aid – including food – to Christians and other minority groups.

But, thanks to your charity, ACN has rushed through emergency relief packages, offering food and other urgent aid to 3,000 of the most needy families in and around Islamabad, as well as 2,000 families in Lahore and 350 families in nearby Faisalabad.

Archbishop Sebastian Shaw of Lahore told us: "We are just so grateful to you for what you have given. Thanks to you, anxious parents are able to feed their families."

This aid comes on top of ACN's ongoing work to help Christians in Pakistan survive persecution.

In this report, we celebrate the faith-filled work you are enabling us to do – build churches, train catechists, teach the Catholic faith as well as defend the innocent and provide vocational training for women.

With COVID-19 cases spiking in Pakistan, there is so much more to do. We dearly wish to reach out to other suffering Christian families so that they can be sure that they are never forgotten or forsaken. 🙏

COVID-19: Helping the poorest

THANKS to you, ACN has – so far – helped more than 20,000 faithful in Pakistan, the poorest of the poor, who have suffered most from the pandemic.

Suffering persecution and discrimination, most Christians in the country have inadequate housing and sanitation and have to settle for menial jobs where hygiene is poor and wages are very low.

When the pandemic came, many lost their jobs and the catastrophe deepened when aid organisations refused to give food to Christians, reportedly putting pressure on them to convert.

ACN project partner Cecil Shane Chaudhry, Executive Director of the National Commission for Justice and

Peace, told us: “COVID-19 knows no boundaries – everyone is at risk.

“So how can it be fair to deny food and other emergency help to Christians and other minorities especially when they are among those suffering most at this time?”

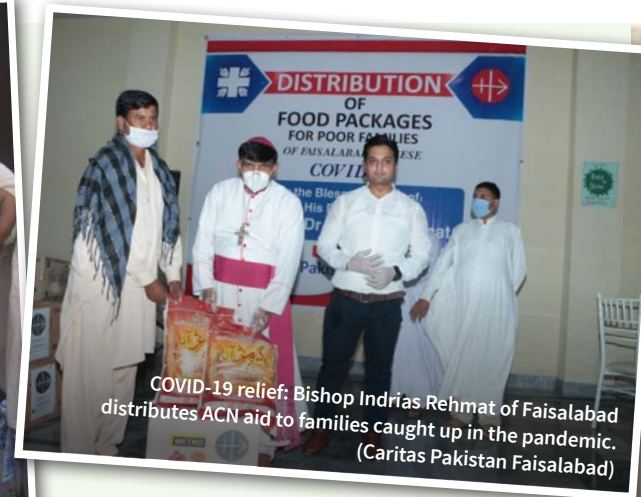
Determined to stop the risk of starvation, Aid to the Church in Need’s response was swift:

- Food for 3,000 families, including widows, orphans and jobless people in the Diocese of Islamabad-Rawalpindi
- Urgent assistance for 2,000 of the neediest families in the Archdiocese of Lahore
- Food for 350 needy families in the Diocese of Faisalabad plus



Appreciative: Recipients of ACN COVID-19 aid (Caritas Pakistan Faisalabad)

- school/college fees for 200 students from families affected by COVID-19 as well as face masks, COVID-19 protection and sanitation equipment
- Mass stipends for 70 priests in the Archdiocese of Lahore



COVID-19 relief: Bishop Indrias Rehmat of Faisalabad distributes ACN aid to families caught up in the pandemic. (Caritas Pakistan Faisalabad)

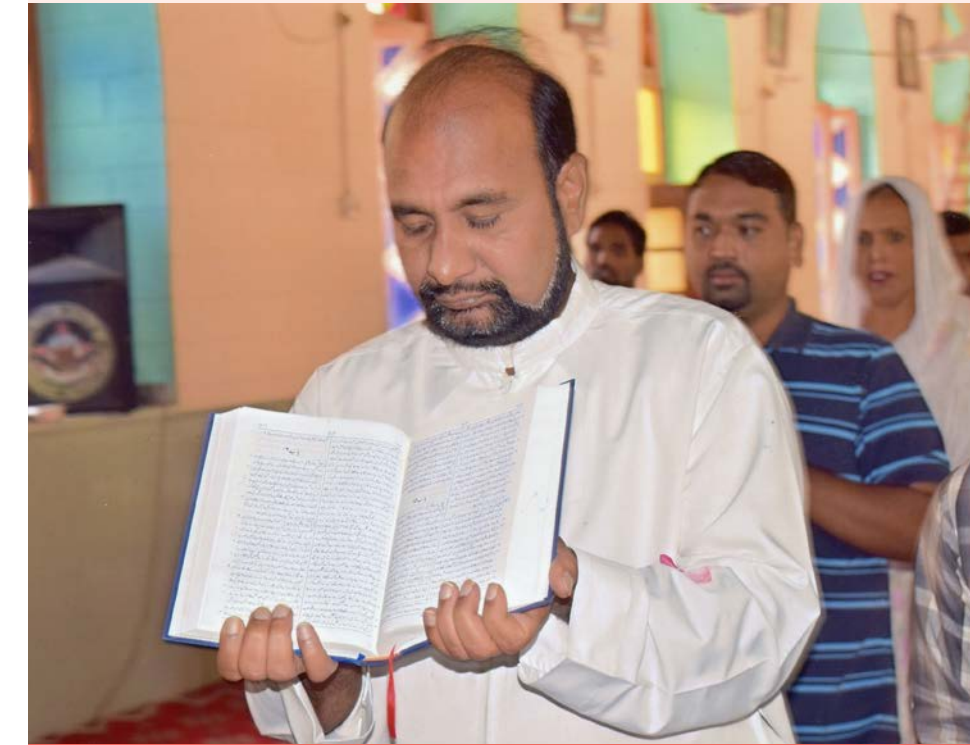
Archbishop Joseph Arshad of Islamabad-Rawalpindi and President of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Pakistan said: “All we want to do is to assist as many families as possible to stave off hunger and give hope.”

Amid recent reports of a surge in coronavirus cases across the region, there are thousands more families across Pakistan in urgent need of emergency help. ☕



Help at hand: Priests bless aid destined for poor families suffering because of Coronavirus (Caritas Pakistan Faisalabad)

The beating heart



The Good News: Catechists are learning to spread the Gospel, thanks to you

ST ALBERT’S Catechists’ Training Centre is recognised as the beating heart of the Catholic Church’s pastoral outreach in Pakistan.

It is at the centre that 50 people from across the country undergo a three-year training programme to become full-time catechists.

After completing their studies, the catechists go on to live with the communities they serve, teaching the Faith, leading prayers, morning and evening, and helping people struggling with grief, loneliness and in marriage difficulties.

Now the training centre urgently needs funds for course books, teachers’ fees as well as food and accommodation for the students.

Appealing for ACN’s help, Brother Zafar Doud, the centre’s director, said: “The role of the catechists in the diocese is vitally important for our Christian communities, especially in the remote villages.” ☕

Abducted and forced to marry at only 14

FOURTEEN-year-old Catholic girl Maira Shahbaz was walking near her home near Faisalabad when a car drew up.

Three men got out, grabbed her and fired shots into the air as they sped off.

And all this during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Maira’s mother, Nighat, later discovered that Mohamed Nakash, who masterminded the abduction, had forcibly married her daughter and pressured her into renouncing her faith. Mr Nakash is already married with two children.

At Faisalabad Magistrates’ Court, the family produced a birth certificate and Church and school documents to prove Maira’s age.

But the magistrate ruled in favour of Mr Nakash, who produced a certificate – dismissed by Maira’s family as a fake – to show that he had married her six months earlier when she was only 13.

Mr Nakash claims Maira is 19.

In such cases, in Pakistan it has been argued that, even if the bride is a minor, the marriage is still valid.

Although state law forbids child marriage, Muslim

custom allegedly accepts it, provided the girl has had her first period.

In court, Maira’s mother, Nighat, was so upset she had a heart attack and was rushed to hospital.

Nighat told ACN: “I beg that my daughter be returned to us. I am frightened I will never see her again.”

Khalil Tahir Sandhu, a lawyer appealing the case in Lahore High Court, told us: “**The people who do this kind of thing to a child like Maira treat [Christians] not like human beings but as if we’re animals.**”

With reports that up to 1,000 Christian and Hindu girls and young women in Pakistan are abducted every year, ACN is working with the National Commission for Justice and Peace, providing legal and paralegal aid for those suffering this abuse and others accused of blasphemy, as suffered by Asia Bibi. ☕



Maira’s mother, Nighat, second from right, with Maira’s brother and sisters



Abducted: Maira Shahbaz, aged 14

Building the Faith on firm foundations

FOR almost four years, the faithful living in remote villages outside the city of Faisalabad have been pleading for a church of their own.

Until now, parish priest Father Nadeem Joseph has said Mass for the 500 or more Catholics in Sahiwal district out in the open air, overlooking the street, sometimes in temperatures of more than 40°C (104°F).

Most of the faithful live below the poverty line, working as farm labourers and market traders, yet they were able to gather what funds they could to begin laying the foundations for the church.

Unable to go any further, they appealed to ACN.

Father Nadeem said: “**In spite of their poverty and many difficulties, the people are very strong in their faith.**”

“There is an urgent need to offer the Holy Sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist, a place where the people can gather together as a community.”

Thanks to you, ACN offered the funds necessary and now the work is underway to finish the church. ☕



On this rock I will build my church: ACN is committed to building and repairing churches across Pakistan



Every year, hundreds of Christian girls and young women in Pakistan are abducted, forcibly married and pressured into abandoning their faith.



Youngsters from St Anthony of Padua Church, Chakwal town, northern Punjab

Let the little children come unto me (Mt 19:14)

FOR children who have just started at primary school right through to students preparing to leave university, the Diocese of Faisalabad is committed to providing Christian education.

To do so, they need teachers and catechists of the highest quality and so ACN is helping the diocese to provide seminars, refresher courses, materials needed for exams as well as stationery.

Course Director Father Pervaiz Gulzar told ACN: “We are entrusted with the task of guarding and enhancing Catholic doctrine in a way that is more accessible for our young people.

“Demand is so high but we have very limited resources. Still, we strive to reach out to the people hungry for the Word of God.” ☕

Get me to the hospital on time

FOR poor, rural-based families dependent on a free minibus service to get them to hospital, it is vital that the vehicle is in good working order.

But after 17 years, the current minibus is now constantly breaking down.

Patients in an area where tuberculosis and hepatitis are rife are frequently delayed getting to the Rosary Christian Hospital in Okara, in Pakistan’s Punjab Province.

Explaining how the hospital serves 15 poor villages in Faisalabad diocese, hospital director Father Armato Adino wrote to ACN, describing the woes of keeping the minibus on the road.

He said: “Due the minibus’s dreadful condition, it often gets out of order and costs a lot of money on repairs and maintenance and doctors also get late.”

ACN did not hesitate and wrote back, saying the charity would help fund a new one.

Will you help us keep our promises of love so that Father Armato and the Dominican Sisters who work at the hospital can continue to provide a free bus service for families urgently in need of medical care? ☕



Tending to the sick: The Rosary Christian Hospital, in Okara, provides essential healthcare, especially for poor faithful in outlying villages

Setting downtrodden Christian women free



Feeding hope for the future: A mother with her son in Nagar Parkar, Diocese of Hyderabad

PERSECUTED because of their faith, sexually abused because of their gender, Christian women living in Pakistan's slums are at constant risk of being kidnapped and trafficked.

A spike in the trafficking of Christian women from Pakistan to China received widespread media coverage last year.

But, with your help, ACN can help break the cycle of poverty that results in hundreds of women being sexually exploited in a distant country.

From across three impoverished neighbourhoods in Faisalabad city, 250 Christian women are going forward for training in candle-making, detergent production – vital in the fight against coronavirus – and handicraft.

Drawing on teachers from sympathetic schools and colleges, and with help from local entrepreneurs, the women hope one day to open new businesses so they can earn a living from their new-found skills.

Hopeful of being able to join the scheme, Nasreen, a young Christian



from Faisalabad, said: "I realise that, unless I learn new skills and earn a proper living, I will never be able to raise my family out of poverty."

With your help, we can reach hundreds more Christian people like Nasreen find a new future in which they are respected both for their faith and for the fact that they are women. ✚

ACN aid priorities for Pakistan



EMERGENCY AID

Food, sanitary items and masks to protect against COVID-19



LEGAL AID

Legal and paralegal help for Christians unjustly accused



CATECHESIS

Books, online materials, courses and retreats for teachers of Christianity



MASS STIPENDS

Support for poor priests including those at risk from the pandemic



Aid to the
Church in Need

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