

Miracles *do* happen

ACN's John Pontifex reports back from Iraq



DESECRATION IN SEARCH OF RESTORATION: Christian communities such as this one in the Nineveh Plains are rising from the ashes of destruction – thanks to you.

When genocidal militants forced thousands upon thousands to leave their homes and obliterated everything they held dear, many feared it would spell the end of Christianity in Iraq.

But, eight years later, following a project assessment trip there – our first since before COVID – we can report not only that Christians have survived the persecution but they are renewing their communities.

It is proof that miracles *do* happen.

In the pages that follow, you will see the fruits of your kindness, your care and your faith.

You provided food, medicine and shelter to those fleeing persecution.

You have helped rebuild homes, churches and schools.

Four-year-old Marila (pictured), whom we met at a kindergarten in Iraq's Nineveh's plans, said simply: "We love you."

With huge challenges remaining, we urgently need your help for:

- Schools – kindergartens, primary and secondary schools and university education
- Catechesis – youth camps, Bibles and media outreach
- Medicine – pharmacies and medical training
- Churches – restoring churches, parish halls, presbyteries and libraries.

Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil, in northern Iraq said: **"You at ACN have helped save us from extinction here in Iraq. Now our aim is not just to survive but to thrive."** ☩



Marila, four, with an ACN rosary at he House of Angels kindergarten, Alqosh. Kindergartens are a priority for ACN aid.

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Renewing the ancient stones

At a time of genocidal persecution, desecration of churches, arson attacks on homes and widespread violence, ACN has over the past decade completed 354 projects in Iraq:

- 24 churches and chapels
- 18 convents, monasteries and presbyteries (priests' houses)
- 2,858 homes
- 28 parish halls and centres
- 20 schools and kindergartens



Rural life in Bahzani, in Iraq's Nineveh Plains.

The Singing Sister

Which of us would abandon a comfortable life in Sydney, Australia in favour of joining a convent in Iraq, a country which you and your family spent years trying to leave behind?

That was the choice made by Sister Grace, singer, keyboardist and now a member of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate in Ankawa.

Sister Grace told me that aged just 14 she and her family had risked life and limb to escape their native Baghdad.

Finally setting in Australia, she studied and finally mastered what she calls "Aussie English" before becoming a legal secretary.

After 15 years in Sydney, she announced that she felt called to return to Iraq as a Sister.

"Some of my family refused to

speak to me," she explained, "but I **could not resist the call of God to return to my roots here and serve the community.**"

A year into her noviciate, Sister Grace now teaches Christian education and catechesis to hundreds of young people. We met her teaching them hymns.

Sister Grace, who once released an album of devotional music, said: "I love being with the teenagers. They are really hungry for the word of God – they are always asking questions.

"I feel content. I cannot see myself doing any other kind of work or living any other kind of life."

■ Please help us support Sisters and youth catechesis across Iraq. 🙏



SING A NEW SONG TO THE LORD: Sister Grace leads youngsters learning sacred music as part of catechesis and Christian education classes, in Ankawa, Kurdish northern Iraq.

15 death threats but undaunted

Were any of us to go through what Paulos suffered, nobody would blame us for wanting to flee our homeland.

And yet **this man of faith and fortitude has no intention of leaving.**

Meeting him in the Nineveh town of Bartella, Paulos said: “When the extremists took over, they began calling me day and night, demanding I pay them.

“Fifteen times they called me and threatened to kill me.”

For the sake of his family, Paulos eventually took sanctuary in Baghdad but, with the militants defeated, Paulos is back doing what he loves best.

He describes how as a civil engineer he is working with ACN to restore churches and other structures desecrated by the extremists.

As we speak, we pass Daesh (ISIS) graffiti: ‘The Government of ISIS will stay here.’

He responds: “But we say to ISIS: It is us who will stay here, not ISIS. We must work so that Christians can stay. It is our country.” ☩



Paulos Al Wakeel stands in front of anti-Christian graffiti at a church in Bartella.



HELP FOR THOSE MOST IN NEED: The ACN-funded Medical Health Centre has just opened in Alqosh, providing subsidised care to some of the poorest faithful in the Nineveh Plains.

Medicine for the poorest of the poor

“Without your help, all that we have achieved so far would have been impossible. Now, our goal is to turn it into a small hospital.”

ACN project partner Father Salar Kajo shows us round the Medical Health Centre, which serves the mainly Christian town of Alqosh.

The centre has been up and running for only three weeks and provides subsidised services in one of the poorest areas in the Nineveh Plains.

Father Salar introduces us to medics in the various departments – **pharmacy, dentist’s surgery, laboratory and doctor’s surgery.**

Dr Bader Bello, a dentist and a permanent deacon, tells us: “Yazidis, Christians – everyone uses this service. We charge far less than elsewhere and now people are coming in from neighbouring villages.”

Describing how demand for the centre has soared, Father Salar adds: **“We want to increase the outreach – midwifery, delivery rooms, a service providing x-rays.”** ☩

School of recovery and hope

A huge milestone on the road to recovery from genocide was passed when an ACN-funded secondary school opened its doors in the heart of the ancient Nineveh Plains.

Unlike almost all other projects involving restoration of damaged buildings, Al-Tahira Secondary School in Qaraqosh (Baghdeda) was built from scratch.

With capacity for 625 students, the school is run by the Dominican Sisters and comes complete with science laboratories, conference hall, library and chapel.

Student Rameel Rabu Wadi, 16, told ACN: “With a chance to study well, we feel we have a big future here. Thank you so much for supporting us.” ☩



SCHOOL OPENS AMID REJOICING: With your help, hundreds of youngsters are at the new Al-Tahira School, Qaraqosh (Baghdeda). Education is vital in the struggle against unemployment -- a major cause of Christian migration.

THE RESTORATION AND THE NEW LIFE: Thanks to you, earlier this year St Kyriakos Church, Batnaya opened for Mass more than seven years after Daesh (ISIS) militants desecrated it.

2022



Batnaya, arise from the ashes!

“O, you slaves of the Cross, we will kill you all. You dirty people, you do not belong here.”

This is the graffiti Daesh (ISIS) militants scrawled inside a chapel they desecrated in Batnaya, a town in the Nineveh Plains.

At the time, the people had every reason to run from Daesh, but now it is quite the reverse.

We found children playing football, we saw shops open for business and the streets filled with people. Up to 500 people were back in Batnaya.

When I was last here, the place was a ghost town – rubble everywhere, even cemetery headstones smashed up.

In St Kyriakos Church, **the extremists had smashed up the marble altar**, and used the scarred image above for shooting target practice.

So imagine how moving it was to go back and see workmen sanding the altar, laying flagstones and fixing the doors into position.

Not only is ACN repairing St Kyriakos Church but also the nearby Mary

2014



Immaculate Chapel, the parish library, presbytery and a kindergarten run by the Dominican Sisters.

Even though the church restoration was not quite complete, it opened for packed Easter Masses.

Bishop Thabet of Alqosh said: **“We need more help as the church is not yet finished. You have been so kind already but anything more you give to help renew our community would be so appreciated.”** ✠

Iraq: Current ACN project priorities

- RESTORATION OF DESECRATED CHURCH: SS Sara and Behnam, Qaraqosh (Baghdada)
- MASS STIPENDS – 42 priests in dioceses in Alqosh, Erbil and Zakho
- SCHOOL EQUIPMENT – St Afram's House for Children, Qaraqosh
- MEDICAL CENTRE – Creation of health clinic, Alqosh
- UNIVERSITY SCHOLARSHIPS – 150 students at Catholic University in Erbil
- CHRISTIAN VILLAGE RESTORATION: St Kyriakos Church, the Mary Immaculate Chapel, presbytery, library and St Joseph's Dominican Sisters convent and kindergarten, Batnaya



Father George Jahola stands on the roof of SS Sara and Behnam Church, Qaraqosh (Baghdada). Behind, the frame of the ACN-funded church tower rises up to replace the one blown up by Daesh (ISIS) militants (see right).



Joudy, 18: Daring to dream

Smiling from ear to ear, Joudy Fouad's enthusiasm is infectious.

The 18-year-old begins: "I was dreaming of being at a university like this and here I am."

Joudy is on the ACN-backed Pope Francis Scholarship Programme at the Catholic University in Erbil (CUE), Ankawa, northern Iraq.

Four years since it began, 283 students are now enrolled and CUE is on course to admit 1,000 young people. CUE is open to Christians as well as Yazidis and others.

Joudy says: "What I like most about CUE is the environment. It's so friendly and you feel the teachers really care."

Originally from Aleppo, Syria, for Joudy, it's been a difficult road to CUE.

She recalls being at school one day when a rocket landed, causing a huge explosion.

The family fled to Erbil, after learning many Christians had sought sanctuary there.



Joudy (centre, wearing brown jumper) with her university friends

Still in her first few months at CUE, Joudy said: **"My dream is to be an architect. I imagine one day being able to play my part in building up my city once again. I remember how beautiful it used to be."** ☩