

# Survivors of jihadist attacks *still* need your support

Wassim, a Christian IDP in Marmarita, is helping provide ACN aid for other IDPs who fled extremist threats and violence (see "Crisis in the Valley of the Christians" on the back page).

## **"Convert to Islam – or we will behead you".**

One resident in Syria's ancient Christian shrine town of Maaloula reported seeing militants seizing five villagers and threatening to kill them unless they renounced their Faith. At least 10 villagers were later killed for refusing to convert.

In Maaloula, where extremists destroyed churches, monasteries and homes, ACN has helped the community to rebuild its life (read "Maaloula's resurrection" inside) – but the war in Syria is still not over for thousands of Christians who fled extremist attacks across the country.

Having escaped Islamist violence many still struggle to survive, living

hand to mouth, turning to the Church for their basic needs – **and in parts of the north displaced families already fighting to survive have now been hit by this February's earthquakes adding new troubles.**

Before the war there were 1.5 million Christians in Syria, today there are perhaps no more than 400,000 – less than a third of the pre-war population. **Neighbouring Lebanon has taken in thousands of Syrian Christian refugees, but with the UN and international community providing practically no help the Church in Lebanon has borne the burden of caring for their brothers and sisters.**

But ACN is offering hope – families are being fed and sheltered, medical



needs are being seen to, refugee children are receiving an education by the local Catholic Churches – including Eastern Catholic Churches like the Melkite Church.

Your love can transform the lives of families who have suffered for their Faith. ✚

# They escaped extremists – then came the earthquakes



A church delegation assesses the damage, accompanied by soldiers.

**Christian families who found a safe haven in Lattakia after fleeing from Idlib and other north-eastern cities held by jihadist rebels suffered again when earthquakes struck in February 2023. Hundreds of Christians saw their homes damaged or destroyed.**

In Lattakia ACN's Xavier Bisits said: "Many people are in despair. One woman, who had originally been displaced from Aleppo during the war,

told me that she doesn't want money, what she wants is to begin life again in another country."

**ACN backed the Franciscan community's relief effort, providing shelter and food for those affected by the natural disaster – and now the charity is backing the local Churches' scheme to repair 250 homes hit by the earthquakes.**

Xavier said in the meantime, the

Churches are continuing their support for those with nowhere else to go: **"The Church is often the only source of help for Christians who say they are not helped by the UN or other international NGOs."** He added: "The situation of Christians in the Middle East is so difficult, especially given the scale of emigration we have seen. Christianity dies if they leave." Please help keep the Faith alive. 🙏



Father Fadi, a Franciscan in Latakia, overseeing the food distribution.



Father Fadi talking to guests the Franciscans are feeding and sheltering.



©Xavier Bisits/ACN

## "Living in hell"

**"I'm called Majed. I now live with my family in Lebanon, but my father tells me that we are originally from Syria and that our real home is there."**

13-year-old Majed is one of thousands of refugees forced to flee Syria and seek refuge in Zahlé in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley.

Majed was just three years old at the time and has no memory of leaving Syria, but his father Basman will never forget it. **"They attacked us with guns, although we were completely defenceless. They killed 15 young people and burned down five houses. Everybody fled. We ran,**

**along with everybody else, not taking anything with us except the clothes on our backs."**

Majed's father told ACN that in the six months before they left more than 50 people were killed and others abducted. "We [were] living in hell – with no work, no electricity, no schools, no food. We daily ran the risk of being shot by snipers."

The family arrived in Zahlé in March 2012, at first lodging with a relative who was already a refugee there. But as the small flat was shared by 15 people, Basman sought work and moved his family into a flat with two rooms. His wages barely covered the rent, electricity and other bills. **But Basman heard that the local Melkite Church was helping refugees. Its "St John the Merciful Table" project feeds**

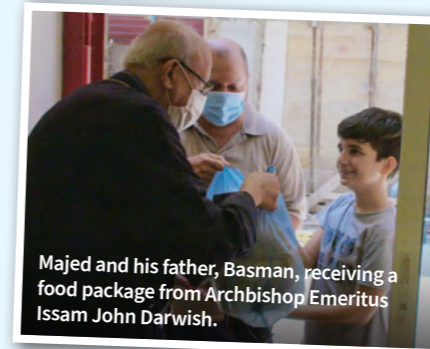
**Syrian refugee families – as well as local Lebanese families plunged into poverty. The Church additionally helps refugees cover essential costs.**

Basman said: "Thanks be to God, without this aid we would not have known what to do, since on top of everything else, owing to the COVID-19 crisis, we had no work for a whole year. If the Lebanese themselves don't have any work and face a very difficult situation, then what can be said about us?"

**He added: "We are still all alive, and we are grateful to all those who have been so good to us and we pray that God may reward them, because we can never repay them for what they are doing for us."** 🙏



Melkite Archbishop Emeritus Issam John Darwish helps to prepare food for the refugees.



Majed and his father, Basman, receiving a food package from Archbishop Emeritus Issam John Darwish.



Maaloula.

©Jacques Berse/ACN

## Maaloula's resurrection

**When Maaloula was taken by Islamist rebel soldiers in late October 2013, the nightmare began for the Christian shrine town's inhabitants.**

At least 10 Christians were killed for refusing to renounce their Faith – bodies were left in the streets as a stark warning to other residents – and jihadists marked the doors of believers' homes, sometimes adding the terrifying message: "We will kill you". Most Christian residents escaped on 7<sup>th</sup> September via the town's sewers.

**When the first residents returned, they found graves dug up and desecrated, 90 homes destroyed, and damage to churches including the fourth-century monastery of Sts Sergius and Bacchus. Irreplaceable, ancient icons were either missing or vandalised. If that wasn't enough the jihadists razed orchards which formerly provided employment.**

But ACN helped restore homes and parts of Sts Sergius and Bacchus' Monastery, as well as supporting the setting up of micro industries, including a small clothes factory, to provide jobs for returning families.

**Almost a decade on, the community is once more living and thriving – thanks in part to your love. Takla, who works at the clothes factory, told ACN: "Maaloula is where we belong – so thank you for all you are doing to help us."** 🙏

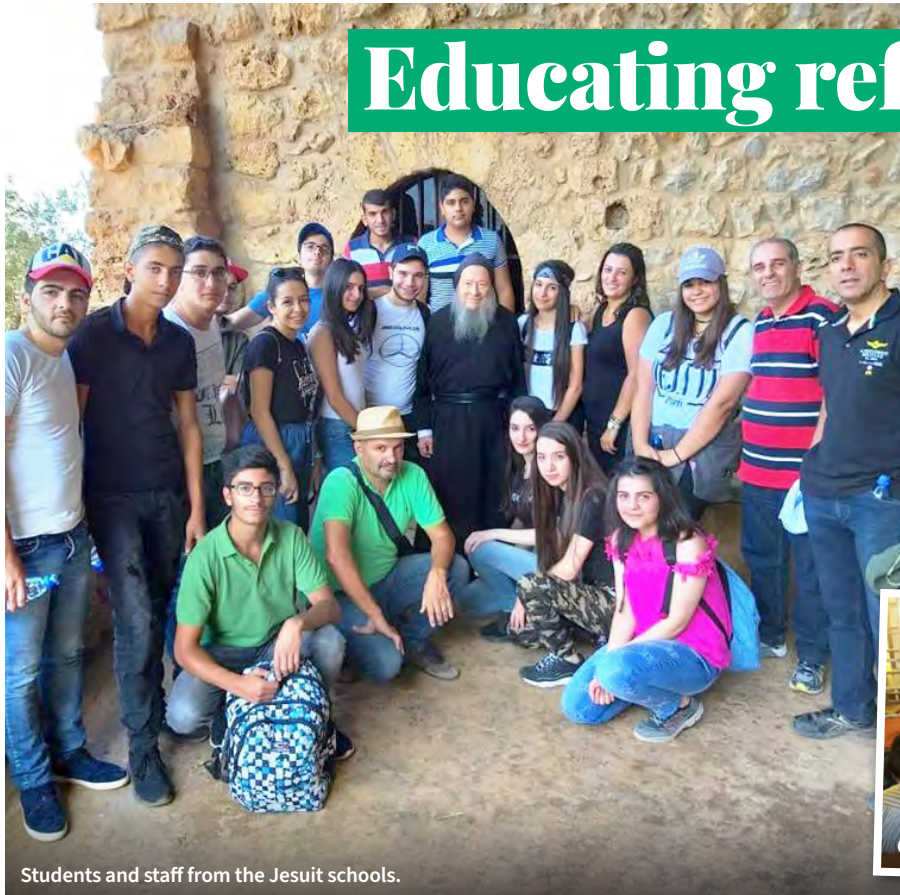


An icon defaced by Islamists.

©Fr. Toufic Eid B.S./ACN

Majed.

# Educating refugee children

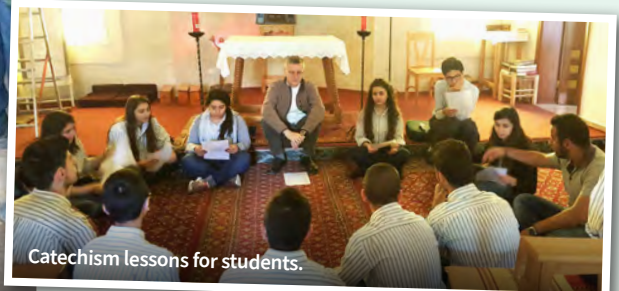


Students and staff from the Jesuit schools.

Almost 200 Syrian refugee children have received schooling at Jesuit-run institutions in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley – with support from ACN.

It is vital that young people do not fall behind in their education while they are living as refugees – and the schools also provide Christian students with catechesis in their Faith.

Fr Marek Cieslik SJ said: "On behalf of these girls and boys whose situation is very difficult, on behalf of their families and all people working in our schools, I would like to thank you very much". 🙏



Catechism lessons for students.

## Crisis in the Valley of the Christians

At the height of the war, the Valley of the Christians became a haven for those fleeing jihadists in north-east Syria – but most of the families who escaped the extremists are still unable to support themselves.

ACN has been working with the local Melkite church since 2012 to provide rent for 350 households – and hopes to provide further support for 180 IDP families struggling to make ends meet. The project is run out of St Peter's Centre, which provides food, heating oil, rent and medical care. Nine young people, most of them IDPs themselves, help out by visiting poor families and distributing aid.

Yasser, whose family in Marmarita is receiving assistance, told ACN that without it his family would not survive. He said: "Our situation is at rock bottom. My leg got injured during the war and I was admitted to get surgery done. Because I had to stay there for a month,

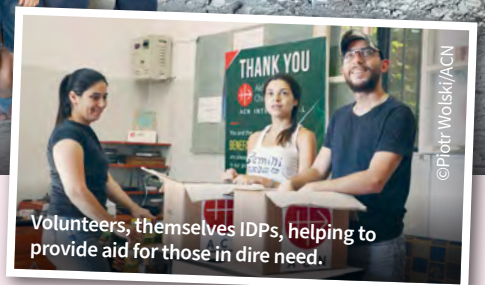


Yasser and family in their house in Marmarita.

I was laid off from work. **At the moment we don't have food, only bread, and we are struggling.** The Catholic Church is the main caretaker of our family."

**He added: "I have a great faith in God although the economic situation is deteriorating each day. I have a strong belief that God would never leave us alone or abandon us."**

Only you can be the hands of God, providing essential aid for families like Yasser's. 🙏



Volunteers, themselves IDPs, helping to provide aid for those in dire need.

To watch the video about the Valley of the Christians, please scan the QR code or visit [www.acnuk.org/valley23](http://www.acnuk.org/valley23)



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