



The passion and the pain

Solomon Ako was whipped, shackled and held up to his neck in cold water after armed men kidnapped him and demanded he renounce his Christian faith.

We turn off the main road and pass precariously along the dirt track until at last we reach the village.

Armed men leading our convoy immediately fan out and take up their positions.

Stepping out of the vehicle into the searing heat, we immediately sense the tension in our hosts' faces.

“You can’t stay here long,” says one. **“It’s just not safe.”**

This is Tsaumin Mayo, in the Diocese of Zaria.

“Where is everybody?” I haltingly ask Fr Mike, our guide. He says: “Most of the people have had to flee. This place has been attacked many times.”

I start speaking to some of those who have come out to meet us.

Solomon Ako, 33, tells me how **when he was kidnapped he was immediately asked to renounce his faith. When he refused, he was whipped and his ankles were shackled.**

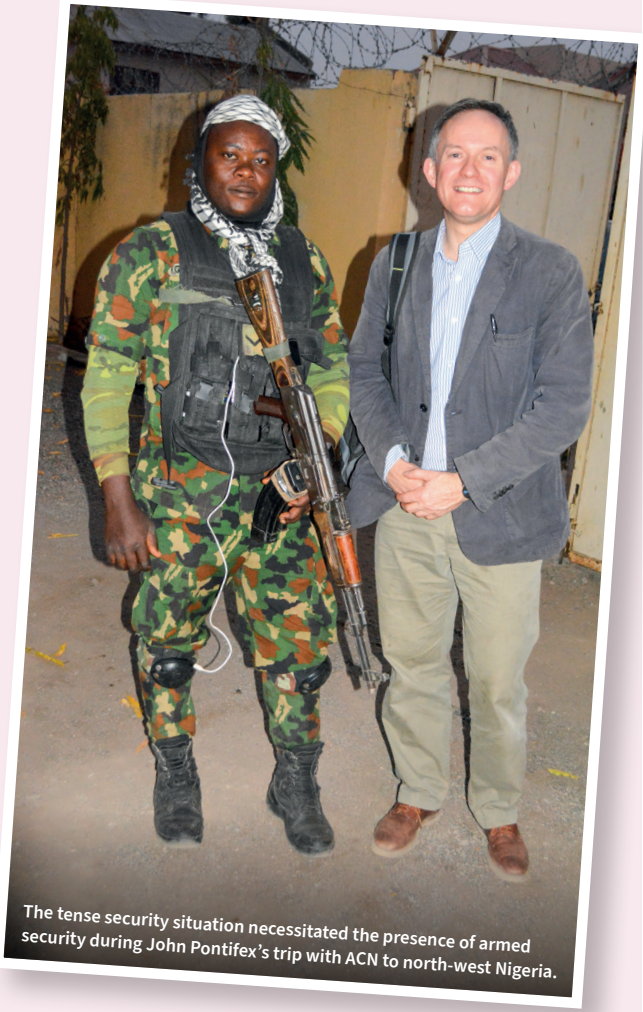
He was thrown into cold water up to his neck.

Fortunately for Solomon he was not alone – there were other Christians with him. “At night, when our abductors were asleep, we quietly prayed together. **I knew there were people like you out there, praying for us.**

“That kept me strong – it keeps me strong still.”

As we bade our farewell, I turned my face away – I did not want them to see that my eyes were brimming with tears.

The senseless suffering inflicted on an innocent community was almost too painful to bear. ☩



The tense security situation necessitated the presence of armed security during John Pontifex's trip with ACN to north-west Nigeria.

Out of the ashes of persecution...

When parish priest Fr Isaac Achi died in an arson attack on his presbytery in Kaffin Koro, northern Nigeria, a young man decided there and then his death should not be in vain.

The youngster, Pius Polycarp Benjamin, is offering his own life by preparing to become a priest.

I had the good fortune to meet Pius and he told me how Fr Isaac's unfailing service to his people had inspired him as a youth.

He said: **“Since I was a boy, it's been my heart's desire to serve God through priestly ministry. I have seen the people who do these terrible things to us. I am no longer afraid to die. I know that God will save us.”**

Pius is one of 250 seminarians at Good Shepherd Seminary, Kaduna, an astonishing increase since the building first opened its doors 25 years ago with just seven students.

ACN has been instrumental in building up the seminary into what it is today – the chapel, library, accommodation blocks, books and other academic materials, lecturers' fees.

Good training is key and that is why ACN is inviting you to support the training of five formators to enable the young men to receive the preparation they need to serve their people in extremely challenging pastoral circumstances. Please be generous.



Click QR code to view John Pontifex's interview with Seminarian Pius Polycarp. ☩



Brave: Seminarian Pius Benjamin.



Seminarians at prayer at Good Shepherd Seminary, Kaduna.



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Seeking sanctuary: This little girl is among a huge number of children who have fled with their families frightened for their future amid an upsurge in banditry and persecution.



Courageous: Catechist Tobias Yahaya.

John Pontifex reports back from a country on the brink of genocide.

TOBIAS Yahaya from northern Nigeria was lying in bed one night when extremists broke in and stabbed him in the chest.

Tobias told me: “We will do whatever it takes to share our faith.”

He is just one of many you are helping through ACN – people whose stories we heard as our ACN team criss-crossed dangerous parts of north-west Nigeria.

Their courage showed forth their faith in Christ who said: “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (Jn 8:12)

Since we last wrote to you, however, the darkness has deepened especially in Makurdi diocese.

Describing “the genocide against our people”, Bishop Wilfred Anagbe told us: “What has been happening is nothing short of terror attacks on innocent villages in order to seize their lands and occupy them.”

We urgently appeal for your help:

- Trauma counselling for people escaping persecution
- Support for Sisters ministering to the sick and the poorest of the poor

- Training and ongoing support for catechists, seminarians and Sisters
- Mass stipends for priests ministering to people on the frontline of persecution
- Rebuilding churches and community centres in areas attacked by extremists.

As Archbishop Matthew Man-oso Ndagoso of Kaduna put it: **“Wherever you find the Church suffering you will find ACN offering help and hope. Without ACN, where would we be?”** ☩

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Urgent appeal from Bishop Wilfred

Christian communities in Benue State have been repeatedly targeted by genocidal violence.

There has been a sudden escalation in persecution in Makurdi Diocese, Benue State, in Nigeria's Middle Belt. From Makurdi, Bishop Wilfred Anagbe wrote to us:

"What has been happening in my village and diocese is nothing short of terror attacks on innocent villages in order to seize and occupy their lands.

"One of my priests, Fr Solomon Atongo, was shot in the leg by terrorists and almost lost his life. It is a miracle that he has survived the attack.

"I have had to close down the parish there as well as the clinic and the Sisters' convent.

"My own village, Aondona was attacked for hours, leaving 20 people dead and scores injured.

"Thousands are now displaced and living in makeshift camps.

"Shortly after, terror was unleashed on Naka town with many killed and displaced. The attack was so intense that even those earlier displaced and taking refuge in a nearby school were not spared.

"It is because of the numbers being killed and the many others dislodged from ancestral lands that we speak of genocide – or ethnic cleansing, as some would call it."

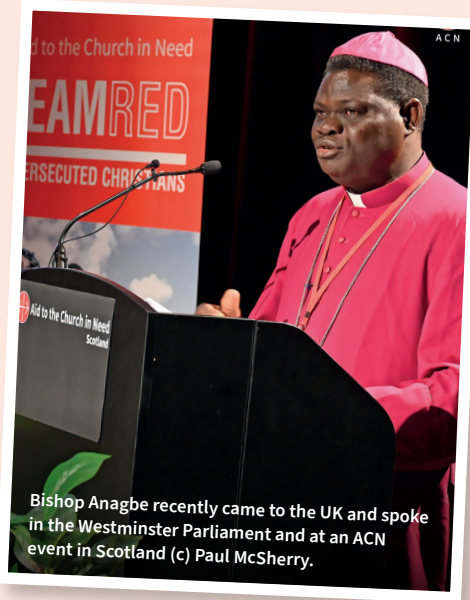
Bishop Wilfred concluded: "I want to thank Aid to the Church in Need. Thank you for the opportunity to share our story with you all.

It is my hope that people all over the world come to know about this genocide against our people in Benue State, carried out by Fulani jihadists."

As well as enabling priests to reach out to the displaced and others suffering in Makurdi, ACN has been providing emergency aid for almost 500 families in Benue State displaced by militant Fulani herdsmen. 🕊



Christian families in Benue seeking shelter.



Bishop Anagbe recently came to the UK and spoke in the Westminster Parliament and at an ACN event in Scotland (c) Paul McSherry.

Escaping death by inches

"We live in a society where being a Christian is a crime. My name betrays me because everyone knows it is a Christian name."

Tobias Yahaya ('John' in local Hausa language) – a catechist based at Holy Family Catholic Cathedral, Sokoto, north-west Nigeria – told me how he was at home one night with his wife and four young children when extremists broke in and stabbed him in the chest.

When one of the militants lunged forward to strike him again, Tobias, a strong man in his mid-30s, grabbed him by the arm and raised the alarm.

In hospital, doctors told him the blade had missed vital organs by a few inches.

It later emerged in court that his attackers knew full well he was a catechist.

Despite everything – after three months – he was back serving as a catechist.

Tobias told me: "I have prayed about this with my wife and children and we are determined for me to continue as a catechist."

"Every time I hear a loud sound, it shakes me. Sometimes, when I put on my cassock, I am afraid but I stand on my feet because of my faith.

"We have read how Jesus suffered for us. We will do whatever it takes to share our faith."

ACN needs your help to support catechists. The charity is helping 61 aspiring catechists from the Diocese of Katsina, in north-west Nigeria.

Other projects include building a multi-purpose hall for aspiring female catechists in Jos, Plateau State and providing 20 motorbikes for catechists in Shendam diocese. 🕊



See QR code to see an interview with Catechist Tobias Yahaya



Undaunted: Catechist Tobias Yahaya.

I will not abandon my people – Fr Solomon

"If we hear gunshots, we immediately gather in the church to pray."

Fr Stephen Solomon is parish priest of Layin Minista, in north-west Nigeria's Katsina State.

Terror has taken hold. There has been an upsurge in abductions, violence and theft of livestock, with sporadic gunshots being heard night after night.

Many have had no option but to flee – and three of the seven outstations in the parish have closed because the faithful have evacuated.

But up to 1,000 have chosen to stay – many of them precisely because of Fr Solomon's determination not to abandon them.

His bishop, Gerald Mamman Musa, said:



Fr Stephen Solomon: His determination to stay with the people is helping them stay strong in the face of repeated attacks.

"Three times families in his parish told him to leave. Many people had been abducted and they warned him he'd be next.

"But he refused to go. If he had left, the whole village's Catholic community would have gone with him."

Without Mass stipends from ACN, priests like Fr Solomon could not survive and minister.

In the last few weeks alone, ACN provided Mass stipends to 63 priests from Maiduguri, also in northern Nigeria. 🕊



ACN is committed to helping Christian communities build back better and stronger in response to outbreaks of persecution.



Building the church of tomorrow: Parishioners in Pankshin Diocese need ACN's help to complete their community centre.

Help them raise the roof

Parishioners reeling from one of Nigeria's worst outbreaks of persecution have implored our help to build a community centre vital for trauma counselling, skills training and spiritual support.

They were sitting down to Christmas dinner when militants stormed their Diocese of Pankshin in Plateau State and "summarily shot" people over a four-day killing spree.

Undaunted, the faithful have persisted with their plans for a 60-room pastoral centre and now nearly five years on they have turned to ACN to fund the erection of the roof.

Praising his faithful for their "resilience" in the face of "terrorists who want to destroy our faith and occupy our land", Bishop Michael Gokum appealed to ACN for help with the centre, saying: "I would be so grateful if you could realise this dream of ours." 🕊

Love that endures beyond the grave

For mother-of-five Rebecca Kuwva, the tragic events of 4th October 2008 are so crystal clear they could have happened yesterday.

One evening at home in Katsina, a policeman knocked at her door and told her to come to the hospital. Her daughter, Monica, 24, had been stabbed.

It turned out that Monica, a fine singer, had finished choir practice at the nearby St Martin des Porres Church and as it was late had called a taxi to take her home.

Little did she know that the driver was a predator. He pulled off the highway to assault her and when she refused his advances he knifed her and fled.

As Monica staggered forward in the pouring rain, a passer-by stopped and came to her rescue and brought her to the hospital where she was united with her mother.

But as the family were unable to pay the hospital fees, she lay there untreated and in the early hours she died.

Her mother, Rebecca, now 53, is one of countless people grieving in a country frequently described as in a collective trauma from endless cycles of violence.

ACN is supporting psycho-spiritual therapy courses, two-year programmes, one for Katsina, Rebecca's diocese, and another for Idah diocese. Will you help us? 🕊



Grieving: Rebecca Kuwva, from Katsina, north-west Nigeria, holds up a picture of her daughter, Monica, who died after being stabbed by a rapist.



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