ACTIVITIES REPORT
2015

“It is proper to God to exercise Mercy, and he manifests his omnipotence particularly in this way.”
Saint Thomas Aquinas

Informing - Praying - Giving
…to be and to become merciful
### 2015 IN REVIEW

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### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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### AID TO THE CHURCH IN NEED

was founded in 1947 by the Dutch priest, Father Werenfried. Today, as an international foundation of pontifical right, this Catholic charity has as a mandate to assist the poor and suffering or persecuted Church. The organization has 21 national offices around the world, such as the Canadian national office which took root in Montreal in 1982. Together, they support upwards of 5,000 pastoral projects per year in over 140 countries. Projects such as the training of seminarians and novices, subsistence aid for priests and consecrated people, construction and renovation of chapels, seminaries, convents and more; support is also given for the purchase of means of transportation to reach the faithful faraway places. We support the media apostolate and the distribution of religious books. Another aspect of ACN’s work is to transmit information about the situation of the Church around the world.

In the interest of brevity, the abbreviation ACN is used to refer to Aid to the Church in Need.
She recalls, “the testimonies of young men preparing for the priesthood, the smiling faces of devout catechists who finally have a bicycle to make their visits to the villages easier, the prayers and thanks of the contemplative Sisters who finally have the necessary equipment to make candles, a source of revenue for them. Or the children in Syria who received new winter boots before the onset of the cold weather.”

ACN is – always! – essential. Not that the pontifical charity has not been important in the past, but from 2005 to 2014, the number of Catholics in the world has gone from 1,115 billion to 1,272 billion, which represents 17.8% of the world population.¹ The African continent saw its Catholic population increase by 41%, which exceeds the growth of the entire African population (23.8%). “In fact, on all continents except for Oceania, the number of Catholics has increased faster than the population as a whole,” mentions Ms. Lynch.

. . . and now, the downside

priests and laypeople with whom we work are telling us about it. “In some countries this does not surprise us – unfortunately, we are accustomed to hearing talk about anti-Christian attacks in Pakistan, in Syria and in Iraq – but what is more recent, is the increasingly aggressive form Islam is taking in countries where there was once a peaceful coexistence or tolerance between Christians and Muslims. For example, in the African countries of the Sahel region or in the Balkans,” indicates Regina Lynch. “And then there are countries, especially in Africa, where Islam has never been very present, but where it is making new inroads via social projects and scholarships for young people, for example in Angola, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and in Malawi.”

This type of Islam is not the only tradition in which extremists are active. “For example, in some Asian countries, other fundamentalists or extremists, such as Hindu fanatics in India, use their political power against minorities through subtle legal means, including against Christians.” In China, the communist regime continues to imprison or put under house arrest those Catholics who do not conform to their views. And that is not including the sectarian groups, especially in Latin America, “that we can no longer ignore,” she states.

1. Zenit.org, March 9, 2016
A strong Church... which is counting on us

“The bishops in regions where the Church is persecuted or suffering due to these different forms of fundamentalism are turning to us to help them strengthen the presence of the Church and to strengthen the faith of their people,” writes Regina Lynch. “Sometimes, this can be something as concrete as replacing a small mud hut with a new chapel, or even rebuilding the churches of the Maiduguri diocese in the north of Nigeria, which were burned by Boko Haram. We can also help with the construction of houses for the priests and Sisters who wish to be present among their believers.”

She points out that often in times of crisis, “they [the brothers and Sisters] are the first ones to whom people turn.” Which implies that, at each moment in their lives, they must be fed spiritually and... in a very concrete way as well! “That is why we are sending priests Mass Offerings and providing Sisters with subsistence aid. The contemplative Sisters keep the local Church in their prayers, but they also need a place to stay and a source of revenue. We are providing this essential support,” indicates the director.

The same is true for the catechists, who must also be well trained in order to transmit the faith. “The bishops emphasize the necessity to help people know and grow in their faith, particularly if they have to endure the physical and psychological attacks of fundamentalist groups. That is why they are asking us for support in the training of catechists or for curriculum on the fundamental principles of the faith. Bibles, religious books, radio or TV shows, and even a pastoral centre can help to accomplish this task.”

The boundless generosity of our benefactors

Again this year, ACN benefactors displayed boundless generosity. Meaning in 2015, a total of $137,750,000 CAN, was donated to finance various projects – 6,209 projects in total, distributed as follows: 29.3% for projects in Africa, 21.6% in the Near East, 16.6% in Central and Eastern Europe, 15.2% in Asia, 13.5% in Latin America, 3.1% for the western world and 0.8% for international projects covering several regions or continents.

We received over 8,000 requests – this is a new record. Approximately 1,110 projects had to be turned down, mainly due to a lack of funds, and the remaining projects were postponed to 2016.

Fortunately we were able to meet the increased number of seminarians in the Church by supporting the training of 1,406 seminarians more than the year before. The greatest increase was observed in Africa. In total, we supported 11,075 seminarians worldwide, that is, one out of ten seminarians. In Africa, one out of two seminarians received our help, which follows the rhythm of the growth of the Church.

3,124 Sisters and 1,404 contemplative Sisters received our support. Chapels, convents, seminaries and pastoral centres were built, for a total of 1,705 construction projects. In order to spread the Gospel, 1,255 priests, brothers and sisters received means of transportation such as cars, donkeys or boats.

The variety of projects financed reminds us of the diversity of the Church and of its needs. “Various challenges await us in 2016,” concludes Regina Lynch. “Unfortunately, many remain unchanged as religious fundamentalism and political instability in many areas of the world do not show any signs of slowing down. But 69 years of existence as an organization have shown us that we must have faith in Divine Providence and our Divine Mother, and that even what is seemingly impossible can become possible.”
LAST FALL, POPE FRANCIS CAME TO AFRICA. HIS HISTORICAL VISIT WAS SEEN AS THE STEPPING STONE TO NUMEROUS HOPES FOR PEACE, INCLUDING, AMONG OTHERS, IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC (CAR). MSGR. DIEUDONNÉ NZAPAILANGA, BANGUI’S YOUNG ARCHBISHOP WRITES: “AS I MENTIONED IN MY CHRISTMAS MESSAGE, THE ANGEL OF GOD APPEARED THROUGH THE POPE TO PROCLAIM THE MESSAGE OF PEACE.”

Still standing!

By coming to Central Africa, the Pope performed an act of faith that I will never forget. The safety conditions weren’t ideal. However, he dared, and God dried our tears,” he continues. Pope Francis also stated: “this visit [to CAR] was in fact the first one in my intentions, because this country seeks to escape from a very difficult period of violent conflict and great suffering for the population.”

The country has gone through a period of significant violence between Christians and Muslims (coming from Chad and Sudan), and Anti-Balaka animists, which adds to the endemic poverty of one of the poorest countries on the planet.

Even if the war is over today, there is still a lot of work to be done when it comes to pacifying the country. “A path of listening, dialogue and reconciliation is ongoing, because wounds are gaping,” says Christine du Coudray, ACN’s program manager for Africa. The Church can play, and is playing, a crucial role in the reconstruction of the country. Thus it nourishes the soul of Central Africans, thanks to 53 monstrances which

Thanks to the benefactors of our work, hundreds of pilgrims were able to come and meet him. We purchased vehicles to transport pilgrims, and these are now useful to the Church in its pastoral and evangelization work.
were supplied by the government in order to have perpetual adoration in the country’s nine dioceses. Other testimonies to the power of this November 2015 visit? “As soon as the Pope set foot on kilometre 5*, Muslims and non-Muslims spontaneously started embracing each other, as though the Pope’s presence had liberated a power which annihilated all of the forces of evil,” a man confided to a Franciscan.

The Pope, an Apostle of Peace

Certainly, if the Pope’s visit on African soil was to support the CAR population, it was also meant to restate the strength and the necessity for an interreligious dialogue, in Uganda and in Kenya, an encouragement for local Churches to always be agents of peace.

In a context where radical Islam is making considerable advances in places which were not even under its influence a few years ago, the Church must remain vigilant. For example, in Kenya, Muslims make up only 11% of the population. Fundamentalist forces are seeking to increase their presence by building numerous mosques, by establishing radio stations and by attracting young graduates with scholarships. There are also incursions of terrorist groups such as Al-Shabaab (an offshoot of Al-Qaida) which pose a significant threat. We simply need to remember the Garissa University massacre in April 2015, in which 145 non-Muslim students were shot point blank.

The Kenyan Church continues to want to respond peacefully to these acts of hate. The construction of churches and presbyteries, the training of seminarians, the support to clergy with mass offerings, the installation of diocesan radio stations, are all examples of our on-site support. The young Kenyan Catholics of the diocese of Homa Bay (central western part of the country) are not forgotten as they can now count on a YOU CAT Centre, named after the catechism designed for youth during Madrid’s WYD in 2011. Lastly, an anglophone John Paul II Centre for the Family was opened, a first in this language, although the centre was already present in francophone Africa.

A continent under pressure

Often accused of corruption by some of its governments, the African continent is facing another challenge which could prove to be devastating: the rise of radical Islam. In Nigeria, Boko Haram not only kidnapped young girls (April 2014), but also set fire to churches and various buildings belonging to the Church. Fortunately, the decline in terrorist forces is good news.

We have already given $275,500 CAN to the diocese of Maiduguri, the most affected by acts of violence, for the reconstruction of its infrastructure, along with an emergency aid of $87,000 CAN to provide supplies to the returning families.

In North Africa, in countries such as Mali, Niger, Chad, Libya, North Cameroun, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania, our organization is worried about the local Churches – very much a minority – which experience incidents which reflect the radical orientation of certain Islamic groups in North Africa. “Their attacks are aimed at rejecting Western culture, any form of openness to dialogue and a peaceful coexistence,” states Rafaël D’Aqui, project manager for the greater part of North Africa. During a meeting with the bishops of these countries, Pope Francis particularly recognized, “the courage, loyalty and perseverance of Libyan bishops, as well as that of priests, brothers and lay people who remain in this country despite innumerable dangers”. A situation which can be applied to North Africa as a whole.

The Christian presence on Islamic soil is destined to be that of a universal sister or brother, as was the presence of Charles de Foucauld, who we are remembering this year 100 years after this death. It is a presence encouraged by Aid to the Church in Need.
The family is at the heart of our concerns

Another challenge faced by the African Church is the accompaniment of families, in the line of thought of the two synods and the post-synodal apostolic exhortation Amoris Laetitia, The Joy of Love. In Angola and in Mozambique, and also in Guinea-Bissau, we are supporting the family apostolate with various training aids. It is just as essential to do so in places like São Tomé and Príncipe, where the suicide rate of young people is the highest in the entire continent. We are supporting the local Church by establishing religious communities, Christian communities and training.

Lastly, there are countries where our support remains essential for a population left to itself. In Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Sœurs de la Résurrection (Sisters of the Ressurection), a community cofounded 60 years ago by Father Werenfried, ACN’s founder, and the Belgian Sister, Mother Hadewych, are the faces of God’s love for the most destitute. These 208 semi-contemplative Sisters allow for the word of the Gospel to come alive in many regions, such as the archdiocese of Bukavu, where the illegal and corrupt exploitation of natural resources takes place right under the noses of its people. In fact, this people only gets crumb compared to the huge profits generated by their local resources. It is the stage of much violence, murders, rape of children and women.

We are supporting the community and a large part of the Church in this region through training, subsistence aid and mass offerings.

The beautiful island of Madagascar also possesses extraordinary riches, but, as in DRC, the population does not see any sign of it. “The Church is almost the only hope for the population. It opens many schools, thanks to the admirable work of various indigenous or missionary religious organizations,” writes Christine du Coudray. She also highlights an event that was well-attended this year by the country’s Catholics: the visit of the relics of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux and of her parents “for three months, in the middle of the jubilant and praying crowd,” she adds. A visit which was realized with the invaluable help of our benefactors.

Finally, a forgotten conflict: the two Sudans. Ethnic conflicts, massive corruption and killings are the cause of an ever-increasing distress within the population. In this context, the bishops need strength to achieve their mission, especially since there are still only six bishops for nine dioceses! Therefore, thanks to you, in January, Rome’s Congregation for the Propagation of Faith invited the whole Episcopal Congregation, incorporated into one for both countries, to a retreat in Mount Tabor (Israel), followed by a workshop to study together the problems and solutions pertaining to this particular Church. The bishops also met Pope Francis. “They went back to their missions in peace and hope and we remain by their side, attentive to this Church, which remains our priority in Africa,” concluded Mrs. Du Coudray.

*District of Bangui, the capital, particularly affected by sectarian violence in recent years.
The enormous influence of the Arab countries is visible and the Church is afraid of losing its Christian identity, hence the importance of Pope Francis’s visit to Sarajevo on June 6, 2015. This visit had two basic goals: to highlight the 20th anniversary of the Dayton Agreement which put an end to the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina; and the 100th anniversary of the beginning of World War I, in Sarajevo, in 1914.

The highlight of this visit was the Mass celebrated in the stadium with youth and the meeting of the Pope with young people from the John Paul II Youth Pastoral Centre: an “investment” in the country’s youth, according to the Centre’s representatives and a support which ACN ensures with the trust and hope that these young Christians will become agents of peace in a country where peace is still very fragile. “Without peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is no peace in the Balkans,” stated European parliamentarians in 1994. Catholics, despite their discouragement in the face of rising Muslim fundamentalism, feel it is their duty to promote peace and dialogue between everyone in Bosnia and Herzegovina. ACN is supporting them in this difficult work.

WHERE TO BEGIN? THE CULTURAL, SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS MOSAIC OF THE EASTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES IS GREAT, AND THERE ARE MANY CHALLENGES FROM A SOCIOECONOMIC POINT OF VIEW. IN SOME COUNTRIES, SUCH AS BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, THE UNEMPLOYMENT RATE IS AS HIGH AS 60%! FURTHERMORE, IN THIS COUNTRY, THE RISE OF A MORE RADICAL ISLAM CAUSES CATHOLICS TO WORRY THAT DISCRIMINATION AGAINST THEM WILL INCREASE, OR WORSE, THAT THEY WILL BE PERSECUTED.
Ukraine: a persistent desire for freedom

The events in Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square), Kiev - riots which continued for three months in 2013 in the Square, demanding the departure of the pro-Russian president, Viktor Ianoukovitch – are “a catechesis for everyone,” said Mgr. Gullickson, Ukraine’s former nuncio. Now president of the Ukrainian Catholic University of Lviv, he states that, two years after the death of one of the protesters who also attended the University, these events represented a chance for the “desire for peace, for freedom of the press, for a fair judicial system and for equality before the law. [. . .] and that corruption must disappear [. . .] This is why he lost his life,” says the prelate.

Life is still difficult in this country which is fiercely passionate about its independence. The economy is slow and there is galloping inflation since the Orange Revolution. Survival is often a miracle! And then, there is the “War in Donbass” in which pro-Russians, concentrated in the eastern part of the country, come face to face with the Ukrainian loyalists. War almost always gives rise to questions of meaning in the heart of the people involved. According to the provincials of the Redemptorists, the population is opening its heart to God, the Church and the volunteer commitment.

The Church – with its Eastern rites and its Latin rites – is called upon to support the population. “We bring the Word to the people and are preaching forgiveness and love,” says Father Mikolaj. Thanks to our emergency aid, bishops were able to provide comfort in this prevailing distress.

Sisters have not been spared by this very difficult economy. “The price of gas is so high that we are literally throwing our money into the fire. We must switch to wood ASAP!” wrote the president of the Women’s Eastern Religious Superiors. That is why our support to subsistence is so crucial.

Their devotion and their way of humbly helping the poor, the sick, the homeless and the families are a testimony to what can shine the brightest in the true light of the Church: to be of service to those who need the most help and the love of their neighbour. A Sister’s convent will always remain a place where everyone is welcome, irrespective of religion.

Whether due to deep psychological harm, depression, or existential anxieties, or simply during life’s difficult moments, everyone is listened to and helped. It was brought to our
attention how much people were begging for religious objects despite not knowing what they are, but simply because “it helps.” In 2015, we especially tried to support the initial and continued training of Sisters, and also helped them with buying apartments or houses. Their apostolate in hospitals and senior and foster homes, as well as their action for life are a great testimony of faith and a contribution to evangelization.

We also invested a large part of the donations we received in the training of seminarians, as they are a priority for us. Among the numerous projects we supported thanks to the help of our benefactors is notably the last phase of the renovation of the inter-diocesan seminary in Ivano-Frankivsk, where 260 seminarians are preparing themselves for the sacramotal life.

In 2015, our aid was also focused on smaller construction or renovation projects. Small parishes often need churches. This gives people the possibility to practice their faith in a community setting. These projects are proof that the Church recognizes the signs of times, that is, we have to help all those who are in search of their Christian roots and a path to God. We can really observe that people are increasingly searching for churches as places of silence, consolation and of personal encounters with the living God.

A priest from Kiev’s eparchy wrote: “your international support is a visible sign of the presence of God and His care for us. When I celebrate the Divine Liturgy for my Christian brothers in other countries, it helps me feel like a member of the universal Church. This feeling of not being alone is of great importance, especially during the difficult times Ukraine is going through.”

Although Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ukraine took up more space in our work this year, countries such as Kosovo, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Belarus were also places where the local Church is receiving help. At the end of September, ACN took part in a conference during which other organizations such as ours discussed the future of Christian communities in this area, and the theme was: how to support the Christian minority of the Balkans! To be continued in 2016.

Russia: an historical meeting!

Russian specialist for ACN, Peter Humeniuk qualified the meeting between Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all Russia, which took place in Havana, Cuba, on February 12, 2016, as “historical.” Why include this in this 2015 report? “This is an event which was preceded by 25 years of efforts by Aid to the Church in Need,” he says; the last visit of an ACN
delegation to Russia goes back to February 2015. After a close to 1,000 year schism between the Roman Catholic Church and the Russian Orthodox Church, this coming together was prepared in “strict confidentiality.”

Mr. Humeniuk reports that “the atmosphere of the meeting was “brotherly” and was in the character of the “beginning of a long journey between the two Churches.” According to him, this meeting also highlights a less encouraging aspect: that of the state of the world. The 30 points of the joint declaration reflect this: the plight of the world, the threat of a world war, the genocide of Christians in the Middle East and in North Africa, the threats against the family and traditional Christian values, especially in the West. The specialist considers that “In such a context and time, it would be disastrous not to be able to speak as one voice.”

With regard to the future co-operation with the Orthodox Church, an in-depth review of the joint declaration has begun and will continue, but already, regarding the accuracy of this declaration, ACN knows that it will encourage common signs of solidarity with the Christians persecuted in the Middle East and will focus its support on the common activities and programs which promote the family as a whole.

In 2016, ACN will continue its partnership with this large part of Europe. To this end, a journey of meetings and recognition – in order to better grasp the needs of the Church – is planned for Russia’s neighbouring countries – former Soviet republics – Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Russia itself will also be the object of a trip.

A declining senior population

Romania, Moldavia and Albania are countries rarely in the news. However, the migratory situation is dramatic. For example, in the latter two countries, one sixth and nearly half, respectively, of the labour force live and work elsewhere. They are among those who harvest the fruits and vegetables found on the tables of the Germans, French, Italians, etc.

This absence of youth creates an emptiness in the Church, but we can’t let a Church crumble because there are only a small handful of seniors at Mass. Thus, in these countries, ACN invests in the support of priests and seminarians, in the renovation of presbyteries and in the support of catechists who help grow and nourish the faith of children and teenagers, along with helping with the transport over long distances by helping with transportation.

The support of the benefactors is thus crucial in Europe’s forgotten regions, but always precious in God’s eyes.
Testimonies from Christians, the seeds for new hope!

WE HAVE BEEN SUPPORTING THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES SINCE THE CONFLICTS BEGAN IN IRAQ AND SYRIA. “THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST REMAINS DOMINATED BY THE WAR IN SYRIA AND THE ISLAMIC STATE’S (IS) VIOLENT ACTS IN IRAQ,” WRITES FATHER ANDRZEJ HALEMBA, PROJECT SECTION MANAGER FOR THIS PART OF THE WORLD.

In Syria, the bishops of the country talk about the tragedy of war. Msgr. Samir Nassir is one of these bishops. “After four hours of walking through the mountains and valleys, a mother was forced to abandon her two youngest children by the side of the road because she no longer had the strength to carry them.” She chose to save the other two.

There is also the story of the father who lost everything and who compared his situation to that of a beetle trapped at the bottom of a container. “It runs in circles until it dies at the bottom. This is what I am living,” he said.

An increasingly fragile presence

Patriarch Gregorios III, spiritual head of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, uses the image of a “tsunami” to talk about the massive migration of Christians from the Middle East. In August 2015, in an open letter to young people, he wrote that the exodus was so significant that he seriously
questioned the future of the Church in Syria. “The wave of emigration [. . .] breaks my heart, hurts me deeply and deals me a mortal blow. What is the future of the Church in the face of such a tsunami of emigration? [. . .] What will become of our parishes and religious institutions?”

We are meeting the needs of those who stay, whether by obligation or by choice. In 2015, we distributed food, clothes, diapers and formula, as well as providing support to the members devoted to the Church, who, for their part, continue to accompany and fortify the population in their faith, despite everything. . .

This humanitarian work impresses even the most fanatical. Father Jacques Mourad, kidnapped in May and released in October, let us know. “What Aid to the Church in Need did for us played a great role in my liberation,” reckons this apostle of interreligious dialogue. As a matter of fact, one of his friends who had ties to the Islamic State (IS) mentioned to Father Jacques that he was impressed by the material aid he had provided to the town of Karyatayn, to which ACN contributed in part.

Iraq, nothing gained

It is not because Christians live in relative freedom in some of Iraq’s areas – the capital of Baghdad – that the battle has been won. On the contrary, we are noticing a frightening trend of islamization because of law bills which result in a regression of religious freedom. All of this gives Christians the feeling of being abandoned, and completely neglected by their government.

We can also question if the sectors in the towns that were once Christian – still under the control of IS or close to liberation – will be given back to them. “Aid to the Church in Need is ready to guarantee assistance in the construction of a Christian infrastructure” in these zones, states the project manager for this section, Father Halemba. But, will it be too late?

Egypt: A light at the end of the tunnel?

The beheading of 21 Egyptian Coptic Orthodox on a beach in Libya in February 2015 was an important occurrence in this tragic year. Paradoxically, this event may be one of the triggering events of greater sympathy from the Egyptian people for one of its significant religious minorities.

Following this martyring, the Egyptian president not only bombarded the IS positions in Libya, but also began construction – at the expense of the State– of a large church in their memory. Moreover, the original location of the martyrs was renamed “Village of the Martyrs.” Finally, many Muslims sent messages of sympathy and stated that they admired the fidelity demonstrated by these people assassinated towards their faith. According to the Orthodox Coptic pope, Tawadros II, Egypt is “on the road to renewal.” After years of discrimination and persecution, are Christians finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel?
New Ethiopian famine

**Ethiopia** is one the world’s oldest Christian communities. But it also has a large number of new Christian communities and newly evangelized areas, as some tribes are coming into contact with Christianity for the first time. These areas have no electricity, little water and are characterized by extreme heat. Solar panels and donkeys are treasures in these remote areas, which is why ACN benefactors are contributing to purchase them.

Refugees from **South Sudan** are also very numerous in **Ethiopia**, a country which accounts for the greatest number of refugees on the African continent. We are present to support these populations through local Catholic communities. Lastly, other regions are also faced with famine. Our charity is committed to supporting more than 1,400 families of catechists, and thus becoming the first to help the Ethiopian Church through this humanitarian crisis affecting approximately 18 million people.
Intercontinental change

LATIN AMERICA (SOUTH AND CENTRAL AMERICA) IS A CHANGING REGION. WHILE THE ECONOMY IS MUCH BETTER IN SOME COUNTRIES AND ALLOWS THE LOCAL CHURCHES TO FINALLY BE ABLE TO DEVELOP GREATER FINANCIAL AUTONOMY, THE VALUES CONVEYED BY THE THEOLOGY OF PROSPERITY* SOMETIMES COUNTERACT THOSE SUPPORTED BY THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN ITS WORK WITH FOR THE MOST DESTITUTE. A LOOK AT 425 MILLION CATHOLICS (40% OF CATHOLICS IN THE WORLD) EXPERIENCING ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS CHANGES.

First of all, in South America, we remain firm in our commitment to the Church in Colombia and Bolivia, both of which have seen 12 projects equally approved (6-6), in support of seminarians and the promotion of vocations. However, it is Peru’s Church which, this year, receives the lion’s share. In fact, 19 projects now allow for better training of future priests and for good reason: the challenge faced by the Church due to the advent of new religious traditions, often with sectarian undertones and aggressive proselytism, is great. Moreover, although from a secular Catholic tradition, the level of religious knowledge within the population is generally low.

Support for the service of priests and the training of teams of lay catechists, as well as the construction of small chapels are absolutely crucial for the Word and the face of God to reach this very large, poor and abandoned population. We support this development.
Dangerous work bearing fruit

The high southern plains region is one of Peru’s poorest and holds a significant aboriginal presence consisting of Quechua and Aymara. For the last ten years, ACN has resolutely supported new bishops in order to strengthen local seminaries, which were once almost devoid of vocations. Due to the lack of priests, many of the Sierra parishes – each generally comprised of over 30 small isolated communities – were pastorally neglected and even abandoned.

The last ten years have therefore allowed us to appreciate the first real fruits of a true missionary service, in spite of the difficulties, which also often prove to be dangerous for the members of the local Church.

We can also address a difficult and dangerous situation for another Church, one located in Central America. In Guatemala, the presence of violent street gangs – a phenomenon also seen in Honduras and in El Salvador – can be explained by difficult family situations and an education system unable to reach marginal areas. The Church accepts the difficult task of staying with these young people so that one day, the cycle of violence might be broken.

There are signs of hope. For example, we often attend celebrations where popular participation is considerable, particularly among young people. In many communities, retreats and meetings with youth are also very popular and the commitment of lay people is also significant.

At the same time, priestly vocations are gradually increasing. The missionary fathers coming from abroad are being replaced by a new generation of local priests, and in a more evident way outside the capital of Guatemala City. In this delicate process of generational change, crucial for the future of the Guatemalan Church, it is extremely important to provide this young clergy with adequate training and material for it to develop its pastoral service, especially in the poorest regions.

Guatemala’s paradox is that although there is an increase, the Catholic Church still consists of less than half of the 14 million inhabitants. The other religious traditions are Evangelical and consist of 38% of the population, against 46% for the Catholics, while 14% do not officially claim any religious affiliation. The remaining 2% is spread out among other Protestant traditions.

A building, a sign of God

The support that we have given to the country over the last few years focusses mainly on small grants for construction projects, mostly for churches and chapels. After visiting last year, we can confirm that this type of help, together with a strengthening of training initiatives, meets a particular requirement of the local Church: the chapels, in many cases, in addition to being meeting places, represent unity and the centre of community life.

The population shows a strong commitment to building churches, providing labour and all possible assistance, despite its limited means. The construction of these places reinforces the sense of belonging to the Church and neutralizes the aggressive actions of sectarian groups, both in the towns and in the smaller villages.

In the neighbouring country of El Salvador, the beatification of Msgr. Romero, martyr of the faith, attracted attention. We support the local Church initiatives which aim to heal the wounds
of the civil war from the 1980s, during which the Blessed died, as did thousands of Christian Catholics, lay Catholics, Sisters and priests, witnesses of faith. By building places of worship and through various publications, ACN is renewing its commitment to heal the wounds of the civil war, in the spirit of the Year of Mercy.

More to the North, conditions are still critical in Haiti, the Pearl of the Antilles. Due to its lack of development and an unstable and violent political climate, the reconstruction of chapels, churches, convents and presbyteries as well as other ecclesial buildings remains difficult six years following the devastating earthquake of January 2010. The high cost of preliminary seismic studies – necessary to the reconstruction – added to the transport costs of the material, further complicates this work.

Yet, we continue with our support to the local Church. Reconstruction, while important, is not the only means which is encouraged. We are helping the local Church find the best way to provide for the evangelization to the poorest. Lastly, we have also helped by purchasing various means of transportation, as we also did elsewhere in Latin America.

A journey of hope: the Pope in Cuba!

Regarding the visit of Pope Francis to the country, Ulrich Kny, project manager of the Latin American section which includes Cuba, writes: “Even if many observers, as well as the international press, wanted above all to give great political importance to the Pope’s visit, and some regretted that the violation of human rights and other violence in the country were not severely criticized, we must not forget that it is not as a head of State, but as a missionary of charity, that the Supreme Pontiff arrived in Cuba.”

“In his luggage, he mainly brought the message of Jesus’ “logic of love”: a selfless love at the service of one’s neighbour; a love which, with a charitable glance, is able to transform hearts; a penetrating love which comes to visit and builds bridges; a love that is most evident in family life. Pope Francis invited all “to live the revolution of tenderness, like Mary, the Mother of Mercy.” In Havana, he reminded young people of a culture of encountering and, despite different viewpoints, Cubans must build a social friendship seeking a common good, and they
must go together in search of hope, the future and the nobility of the country.”

Unusually, Cuban state television reported on the Pope’s visit with live broadcasts and documentaries, at a never before seen level. This was the first time since the Castro revolution that a Catholic priest was able to comment on televised broadcasts, live. Millions of Cubans were therefore able to follow Francis’ captivating sermons and speeches in their mother tongue. Even the Holy Father’s gestures – his way of reaching out to people, of giving his whole attention to the people who were able to personally say hello to him, and to bless the sick and the children – his openness, his warmth and his humanity remained deeply engraved in the hearts of all Cubans.

That being said, the challenges are still great for the Christians. “Even if, at first glance, the situation as a whole hasn’t changed much in Cuba, the bishops, priests, consecrated people and lay people have committed themselves with an impressive creativity in order for the seeds sown to keep on developing,” recalled M. Kny.

Support for this Church remains essential, including the financing of the creation of premises for the celebration and transmission of the Faith, for continuing education and formation. We are also ensuring a subsistence and mobility aid for some ecclesial collaborators. The distribution of Bibles and of catechetical material, as well as the diffusion of religious symbols is also on the agenda in this state where 60 years of communist regime have greatly impregnated the population. The rate of religious practice – all faiths combined – is only 15%.

**Farther south, corruption cripples**

Lastly, in Argentina and Brazil, the construction of churches and chapels is a sign of hope, in countries plagued by corruption. “The churches and chapels are a visible sign of hope, of life, of love and of the fact that there is something more ahead,” as our project partner living in a densely populated suburb of Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, writes.

We cannot end our Latin American overview without naming the countries where other local Churches benefit from the generous support of Aid to the Church in Need’s benefactors: Venezuela, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay. In the latter, very secularized country, the local Church is one of the poorest on the continent, and this, despite a stable economy. Our support is also essential.

“The great majority of our project partners are aware of the fact that our help relies on prayer and selfless generosity,” concludes Ulrich Kny. “The often touching reports, testimonials and thank you letters we receive from Latin America attest to this. We gladly thank our benefactors and assure them of the prayers through which many bishops, priests; consecrated and lay people “return the favour” for the charity bestowed upon them.”

*Religious belief which claims that God increases a person’s financial riches, according to the size of his faith.*
Where to begin? First, the Chinese giant. Despite current difficulties, this country continues to be a key player in the global economy. However, it is very different when it comes to fundamental freedoms. The communist party which has been in power since the 1949 revolution, wants religions to develop a “sinicized” theological thought according to President Xi Jiping (May 2015), which means to serve the goals of socialism as conceived by the leaders of the “Middle Kingdom.” According to some experts, the regime uses this expression to preserve the stability of the society in these difficult economic times.

In 2015, the campaign of elimination and the destruction of places of worship in the province of Zhejiang (south-east) continued to worry the parishes, even though it was mainly Protestant churches which were targeted. Some estimates tell us that in 2015, about 1,500 crosses were removed, not counting the churches which were partially or totally demolished.

However, we are observing a constant growth of the Catholic Church in China and the believers continue to want to deepen their faith. The power of attraction of Catholic parishes is undeniable, especially among the young and educated citizens signaling a certain maturity. Many parishes organized prayer vigils for the Christians of Syria and Iraq during lent, thereby responding to the call of Pope Francis. Our China specialist wrote: “[. . .] even the countless efforts made by the State to regulate, inventory and control the Church, and especially to dismantle its crosses, attest to the fact that until now, the State has not managed to restrain the propagation of Christianity in the People’s Republic.

THE ASIAN CONTINENT IS A WORLD IN ITSELF. SO MANY DIFFERENT CULTURES AND SOCIAL SITUATIONS LIVE SIDE BY SIDE. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IS INCREASINGLY PRESENT IN ASIA AND PLAYS A KEY ROLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF GREATER SOCIAL JUSTICE, A SEARCH FOR MEANING AND A DIALOGUE BETWEEN CULTURES AND RELIGIONS.

China
A country where the Catholic Church holds to its faith, despite it all

A strong faith
Myanmar/Burma, the joy of a yet-to-build society

The return of democracy is a balm for a society which lived in a regime of fear for decades. The Church stood alongside this population in distress and now looks to the future with a great deal of hope.

However, the legacy of the military junta is poison: indescribable harm to the economy, ecology and especially to the souls of the country. The pastoral leaders will have a lot to do to provide direction to their faithful, protect youth from drug addiction, human trafficking and prostitution. We must also demonstrate other options other than materialism, and the duty of fighting poverty, strengthening families and seeing that the Church again provides its own contribution to the school system.

Burma’s Church is lucky in that its population is very pious, regardless of religious tradition. Furthermore, according to the regions, between 65% and 90% of Catholics attend Sunday mass. Lastly, the Rosary prayer is very popular. As for faith education, women’s religious communities show a strong interest in the Bible apostolate.

In 2015, our support to the Burmese Church translated into the construction and renovation of chapels, churches, training centres, presbyteries and religious homes. Coupled with an adequate education in faith, the presence of these religious buildings provides roots to the Christian communities.

Lastly, as a premise for this mostly joyous year, the consistory of February 2015 gave the country its first cardinal, Yangon’s archbishop, Msgr. Charles Maung Bo.

Bangladesh, a contested freedom

As for this small, flat country surrounded by the Indian giant, the situation is difficult. If poverty is among the difficulties, persecution is more and more significant for the Christian minority. A priest of the Italian foreign missions, Father Paroli, was shot: a very real trauma for him and the Christian community. Not to mention the Protestant pastors and laypeople who received death threats and were also targets of fanatic Muslims. “The Christian community is under tension,” stated the bishop of Dinajpur, Msgr. Sébastien Tudu, who asks that we pray for his country and, more particularly, for his diocese.

Farther to the south, in Sri Lanka, the visit of Pope Francis in January was a great success, “coupled with a tremendous opportunity to finally open a true path of reconciliation between the Tamils and the Singhalese,” says Véronique Vogel, project manager for this section of Asia. Francis was consequently able to throw bridges of fraternity toward part of the Buddhist community, hostile to the Christian minority.

In his address to the Catholic community, the Pope focussed on the necessary and indispensable memory work to close the past wounds and injustices tied to the civil war. Combining speech with action, he met with Tamil families and visited the Marian sanctuary of Madhu (400 years old), along with canonizing the Blessed Joseph Vaz, considered the apostle of Ceylon. The continuing education of priests and seminarians, the construction or reconstruction of churches and pastoral centres, as well as the restoration of the national seminary were among the projects supported in 2015.

Religious freedom threatened?

To create a pure nation, led solely by Hindus. This is, in short, is what the ultranationalist party in power in India, the BJP, wishes. The abuses, red tape and injustices suffered by Christians are numerous.

In 2015, two Sisters were raped in the State of Bengal. And, “these are not isolated incidents,” says Ms. Vogel, also project manager for this region. In Chhattisgarh and in the Madhya Pradesh, the very strict anti-conversion laws create a palpable climate of insecurity among Catholics.
For example, in Chhattisgarh, the regional government would like to be a champion of modernity: development of the road system, entire neighbourhoods under construction, support for the mining industry, etc. All this to the detriment of tribes who have been living there for centuries. In support of the principles of social ministry, the Church is defending them.

Another particularity is that Hindu extremism completely ignores the contribution of minorities to Indian society which is multicultural, multi-religious and multiethnic, and of which Christians have been a part for hundreds of years. Fortunately, in some regions, they benefit from a considerable recognition, and non-fanatical Hindus will even name and honour Jesus in their practice, calling him Khrist Bhakta and attending Christian sanctuaries.

Despite all the problems, we were able to help in the construction and restoration of ecclesiastical buildings and to contribute to the pastoral training of the Dalits, or the ‘untouchables.’ In short, the Church remains strong despite the threats in this very diverse democracy.

Slightly to the north, an incursion into Nepal also allows us to see a rise in Hindu extremism, in a country which continues to suffer the consequences of the April 25 and May 12, 2015 earthquakes. Providing support was rather complex, as the financial resources coming from abroad were monopolized by the government in order to “better manage and coordinate” the humanitarian aid. The blockade was recently lifted and this might help support the Nepalese Church, for which, Msgr. Paul Simick, its vicar general, asks us to pray.

Pakistan, strong and suffering

Despite its many sufferings, the Pakistani Church is showing admirable strength. Among its five to six million Christians, approximately half are Catholic. Our support is similar to that provided by ACN throughout the world, but we must also take into consideration that Christians must protect themselves. We are helping with needed security measures by installing security equipment around religious buildings to protect the faithful.

Proof of an exemplary faith, the Centre for Peace in Lahore is directed by Dominican Father James Channan, who, despite anti-discriminatory laws and constant threats from extremists, continues to wish to apply - to the letter - the Gospel’s spirit of love. The inter-religious dialogue which he practices is a model supported by ACN.

Lastly, this picture of the great Asian continent would be incomplete without Christians from the Philippines. In this mainly Catholic country (80% of the 100 million inhabitants), the Church is facing great challenges, such as the rise of inequality and materialism. The government’s hesitation in the crisis and the peace process management on the Island of Mindanao (90% Muslim) did not help the Christians’ situation. There, we support the initiatives of an interreligious dialogue, such as the Silsila movement which celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2015.

Finally, we are still involved in the reconstruction of ecclesiastical structures which were destroyed during Typhoon Yolanda in 2013.
The strength of a network of love!

There is reason to rejoice! In 2015, the number of Mass Offerings we were able to send to priests throughout the world increased once again. Compared to last year, there was an increase of 212,317 Mass Offerings, so that we distributed a total of 1,431,380. As a result, 3,921 Masses were celebrated daily for the intentions of our benefactors. On average, that is one Mass every 22 seconds!

These offerings helped to support 43,203 priests, of which 1,213 had the responsibility of training seminarians. There are also 6,662 priests from 93 different religious communities who were able to benefit from these Mass Offerings. Therefore, in 2015, Aid to the Church in Need supported one in nine priests around the world with Mass Offerings which were distributed as follows: 42.22% in Africa, 26.09% in Asia, 15.57% in Latin America, 14.33% in Eastern Europe, and 1.79% in Western Europe, for a total of $17,017,208 CAN.

Nigeria: the power of the Rosary

Their testimonies can be counted in the thousands: these Mass Offerings allow God’s presence to be felt in places where misery and great poverty are found. Here are two examples of situations which remind us of the power of prayer and spiritual solidarity!

In Nigeria, the Maiduguri diocese has suffered great difficulties over the last few years. It is located in the northeastern part of the country, in the region which endures the greatest violence from the Boko Haram terrorist group. Since 2009,
100,000 residents of the diocese have been forced to flee. Over 5,000 Catholics have been killed and many Church buildings, schools and hospitals have been destroyed.

At the close of 2014, Msgr. Dashe Doeme lived through an impressive experience. While praying the Rosary in his chapel in front of the Blessed Sacrament, he says that Jesus appeared to him. He did not speak and handed him a sword. He took the sword, and as soon as he did, it turned into a Rosary. Jesus then repeated three times: “Boko Haram has disappeared.” Following this, the bishop declared: “It clearly appeared to me that we could chase out Boko Haram with the Rosary.” At first he did not want to talk to anyone about this experience, but then he felt compelled to by the Holy Spirit. He started to talk about it to the priests of his diocese.

A few months later, the situation had in fact improved: in the spring of last year, an intervention force of the Nigerian army, associated with Chadian and Cameroonian troops, managed to regain some Nigerian villages occupied by Boko Haram.

Some refugees were then able to return to their homeland.

People now have to rebuild their lives. Through Masses for reconciliation and redemption, Msgr. Dashe Doeme encourages them to remain firm in their faith, despite the suffering they have experienced. Moreover, he encourages them to follow Christ’s example and forgive the terrorists. They must not let themselves get lost in thoughts of vengeance or reprisals, which ultimately lead to a vicious cycle of violence and war. The bishop is convinced that healing is only possible if believers forgive and look to the future with hope and confidence.

Priests and sacraments are currently more necessary than ever in order to promote the process of healing and forgiveness, but many priests have themselves endured terrible things. In the Maiduguri diocese, more than half of priests had to flee Boko Haram and have nothing left. This is why, in 2015, Aid to the Church in Need forwarded a value of $43,500 CAD in Mass Offerings to 69 of these priests.

India

Last year, the 23 Jesuit priests involved in the pastoral care of the tea-pickers in the State of Assam received 900 Mass Offerings from our benefactors, for a total amount of $10,440 CAD, in order to be able to continue their precious apostolate towards the underprivileged.

The State of Assam, in the northeastern part of India, is the biggest tea producing area in the world. Millions of people work in these plantations. Many of them belong to underprivileged ethnic minorities. They do not know how to read or write, and are exploited. Parents work from early in the morning until late at night in the plantations. They do not have time to take care of their children, and as they have no education themselves, they do not send their children to school.

The Jesuits are there in order to educate them. And adults are participating! They also offer pastoral and spiritual support to the pickers. A presence which reminds these overexploited people that they also have dignity as children of God. Conveying the love of God to them is an essential task. Because of these Mass Offerings, this free presence is infinitely loving and possible. Thank you!
For our organization, a scholarship project is successful when the student returns to their local Church, teaches in a faculty of theology, a novitiate or an interregional centre of catechesis, or any other official means set up by the local Church. And, that they pass on the missionary flame and passion for theology to the new generation. Therefore, awarding a scholarship is not simply a matter of financial support, but it must become prolific for both the individual and the local community.

What is particularly delightful for us this year is that some bishops actually benefitted from our scholarships in the past.

Scholarships to unforeseen powers

The challenge in the awarding of scholarships is also that of local Churches: knowing how to meet the challenges faced by the country’s society. Thus, one of our scholarship recipients is from the Middle East. He hopes for peace in Syria. As his fellows – Christians and Muslims of good will – still had an urgent need for him two years ago, he asked us to delay the scholarship. God only knows when and how he will be able to apply his knowledge for the reconstruction. We pray for this to happen quickly.

In other cases, the education we are supporting serves to reinforce the identity of a united Church in Rome, as is the case for a Middle Eastern liturgy student. At times, studies have much greater consequences than foreseen when, for example, the fruits of studies are felt not only in India (country of origin), but also all the way to the Gulf countries and Africa.

A Sister comes to us from Belarus. She is studying psychology at the Gregorian University in Rome. During her semester break, she is already applying what she is learning by supporting people who suffer from drugs and alcohol addiction. She is also preparing chaplains who are helping young people suffering from problems with alcohol, of which there are way too many in this country of nine million people. She helps them find a way to recover from addiction and to open themselves up to God. She is also supporting the people responsible for the training of priests in their mission.

The main ingredient of dialogue: Humility

Other students have challenges concerning the end of fundamentalism and the beginning of dialogue: what a challenge! In this regard, a priest from the north of Nigeria is particularly impressive. He is the only Christian in his family and, through his studies, he is preparing himself for a dialogue with Muslims. When asked if dialogue is possible, he simply answers: “yes.” When asked what qualities a Christian must possess for dialogue, he answered: “humility and extensive knowledge.” When asked if humility is the right attitude to have, given the Muslim feeling of superiority, his answer was: “humility rather than submission, but a humility which comes from a deep profession of faith and a profound knowledge of faith.” According to him, this is what is missing in the West.

Finally, it is worth noting that many students – mainly Sisters – come for training in Montreal, Canada, at the Institut de Formation Humaine Intégrale de Montréal (IFHIM). Among other things, they learn to become “builders of bridges for peace” in their countries, which are often beset by the many problems of extreme poverty and unjust and dangerous exploitation of natural resources, particularly in Africa and Latin America.

In 2015, 33% of ACN scholarship recipients were from Africa, 33% from Asia, 18% from Latin America and 16% from Eastern Europe.
COMMUNICATING THE STORIES OF THE SUFFERING CHURCH

In 2015, the press team produced numerous written articles, reports, radio and TV shows, two “classic” telecommunications means used to reach benefactors and the world, which does not prevent the use of increasingly large social networks, essential in these times of immediacy.

Proof of this increasingly significant use of image as a means of reaching our benefactors is that our photographs are much in demand: 643 requests coming from 21 national offices, for 4,889 picture files. Furthermore, new pictures are added every day, for a total of over 51,000 archived pictures! A treasure-trove of visual information on the Church in the world, easy to use on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, to name a few of the most frequently used ones.

The image as a means of invitation

In this age of the image, reaching our benefactors through these means has become essential, as well as being very quick and affordable. Last year, six major prayer campaigns using these networks allowed us to alert our benefactors to the kidnapping of Father Jacques Mourad in Syria — liberated in the fall — the elections in Nigeria, as well as the visit of the Pope to Africa. All occasions for each of our 21 national offices to present the face of our partners and to recall the three key words of the organization: Prayer, information, action!

An “unprecedented” potential for telling a story

“Our responsibility is therefore to be faithful to this voice [of the Church],” recalls Mark Riedemann, Director of the Communications department for Aid to the Church in Need. “As these are projects which are at the heart of our communications work — whether through television, print or social media — our target audience identifies with our project partners and recognizes Aid to the Church in Need as the channel through which we meet the pastoral needs of the suffering and persecuted Church.”

“The potential to tell the story of the suffering Church — so that it is not isolated in its suffering — and to make our work known is unprecedented,” he says.

A recognizable and desirable quality!

The audiovisual quality of the documentary production of Catholic Radio Television Network (CRTN) — audiovisual production company and partner of our work — is reflected in the increasing number of television networks requesting our programming.
Where God Weeps and Donde Dios Llora, flagship programs produced for both television and radio, were once again produced. Over time, this show has grown, now reaching eight Catholic television networks in five countries, and the Spanish version is already reaching six Catholic television networks in 19 countries. Seven documentaries, in four languages, also helped to present the work of the Church across the world. CRTN also renewed the existing broadcasting agreement, or signed new ones, with 62 Catholic television stations throughout the world: 27 television networks in places where national offices are located, and 35 additional Catholic or public television networks in 19 countries other than those represented by national offices.

In Canada, the national office still produces some forty radio shows, Vues d’ailleurs, a francophone program, is broadcast on the Catholic station Radio VM. The winter-spring season ended in April, and new shows will be produced as of August. In English, Salt and Light TV and EWTN continue to present Where God Weeps and the documentaries produced by CRTN.

Raising awareness: a marathon which bears fruit

Defending the interests of persecuted Christians is part of our DNA. It is sometimes necessary to raise awareness of the situation among parliaments everywhere. Over the course of 2015, we organized 43 concrete actions, including 17 interventions – with project partners – for events in the European Parliament. Our organization was also invited to the United Kingdom and to Poland by the European Parliament to present Persecuted and Forgotten 2013-2015? during conferences with European Christian democrats and conservatives.

Thanks to the background work done by ACN in recent years, the European parliaments have finally acknowledged that there has been genocide on the part of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq toward the religious minorities in these countries, namely the Christians. The American Congress also acknowledged this state of affairs in March 2016. In Canada, a call to acknowledge the ongoing genocide, launched by National Director Marie-Claude Lalonde, remains unanswered by the government.

Among the many results that we thankfully achieved, we would like to mention one in particular, when the president of the European Parliament, Martin Shultz, declared, during a conference on the persecuted Christians that: “. . . for a long time, we supposed that Christians didn’t need protection, but throughout the years, I learned that I was wrong. The European Parliament will do all it can in order for Christians to live in peace.”

*Report on the Religious Freedom of Christians prepared every two years
Informing - Praying - Giving
...to be and to become merciful