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“Now is the time to invest in young people” - ACN is launching a major new project for Iraq

ACN is backing the future of young people in Iraq. To mark the forthcoming papal visit to the country, the international Catholic pastoral charity and pontifical foundation ***Aid to the Church in Need (ACN International)*** announced this week a new and ambitious programme of 2.3 million AUD to support young Christian students in the country. The programme will involve offering university scholarships to 150 students at the Catholic University of Erbil, the capital of the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan, for the next four years. The aim of the project will be to promote social cohesion among the different religions and provide young Christian students with better employment prospects in the future.

“Without a doubt, the Catholic University of Erbil (CUE) is a beacon of light and a symbol of hope, especially for the younger generation. Helping the CUE financially, by means of scholarships, will be an immense support. "This aid will not only benefit a limited number of young people, who are hoping for a better future but at the same time gives a clear future through education for the Christians, all other minorities and for the disadvantaged,” explains Chaldean Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil, who is the founder of the university.

Most of the students at the CUE are refugees or internally displaced from various other parts of Iraq, including Baghdad, Basra, Diala, Duhok, Kirkuk, Nineveh/Mosul, Sinjar and Sulaimaniya. "We believe that this project will support the Pope’s message in favour of social cohesion and reconciliation. The University is centred around diversity – with 72% Christians, 10% Muslims and 18% Yazidis. Here young people of different creeds can learn to live together in harmony”, explains Thomas Heine-Geldern, the executive president of ACN.

Within Iraqi Kurdistan, the Christian minority is able to live in a relative but by no means absolute degree of security. There is a persistent underlying sensation of insecurity, owing above all to the tense economic situation. As a result, young people are faced with the dilemma of staying put or emigrating. The number of Christians in the country has decreased dramatically in the past 10 years. The CUE, which was founded five years ago, is seeking to offer a different solution by providing young people with better prospects for the future.

“The Catholic University of Erbil is a project of crucial importance for those Christians who wish to stay on in northern Iraq and Kurdistan since it will help them to remain. The Christians would not

think of abandoning their country if they did not feel obliged to do so by forces beyond their control. If young Christians can be given an opportunity to gain a good education, then they will remain. ACN has already done everything possible to help the Christians to stay on in their native land, by investing in the reconstruction of their homes, their churches and essential infrastructure. Now is the time to initiate this major project, which is a very ambitious one for us, and invest in the young people of the country,” Mr Heine-Geldern continues.

To date, the CUE is the only Catholic university in the country and offers a range of subjects to degree level, including architecture and civil engineering, for example. 54% of the students are female and 46% male. Currently, there are 170 students enrolled, but the archbishop would like to increase this number over the next four years. ACN’s financial support is indispensable, given the current difficult economic and political situation in Iraq.

“I have always deeply appreciated the work ACN has done for us for many years, and especially after ISIS. To have ACN as the first foundational core donor for the scholarship programme is most appropriate and most welcome. We need to bring good news to the people here during the papal visit; to be able to announce the vision to have 1000 students by 2025, giving us a significant voice and a clear future for our young people and their parents, brings great hope,” said Archbishop Bashar Warda.

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