



Aid to the
Church in Need

ACN AUSTRALIA NEW ZEALAND

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Melkite Patriarch tours Australia & New Zealand as exodus threatens future of Christianity

The Melkite Catholic Patriarch, His Beatitude Joseph Absi, will visit Australia and New Zealand in November and December at the invitation of the Pontifical Foundation, *Aid to the Church in Need* (ACN). This is as the Patriarch tells ACN that desperate Christians in Syria and Lebanon “no longer have confidence in their country” and “there is no light at the end of the tunnel”.

His Beatitude – Patriarch of Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem, and all the East - has primarily been invited as one of the guest speakers at ACN’s Night of the Witnesses event at St Patrick’s Cathedral in Melbourne on 22 November. Night of the Witnesses is an evening of testimony, prayer and reflection honouring the courage and fidelity of recently martyred Christians. The other two guest speakers at Night of the Witnesses will be Dominican Sister Majella Dogonyaro from Northern Nigeria, and Mr Xavier Bisits, ACN’s head of projects for the Middle East.

The National Director of ACN Australia & New Zealand, Mr Bernard Toutounji, expressed his gratitude to the guests, “We are overjoyed that these fellow Christians will make the long journey to share with us their experiences and lives of witnesses. In our countries, where we mostly live the faith with such casualness, it can only benefit us to hear from those who very deliberately need to choose their faith every day. I hope many people will come to hear them speak, it is an opportunity we should embrace.”

In addition to Melbourne, the three speakers will tour Australia and New Zealand. They will speak in Brisbane on Friday 24 November, Perth on Saturday 25 November, Auckland, New Zealand on Thursday 30 November and Sydney on Saturday 2 December. All people are welcome at any of these events.

In speaking exclusively to ACN about his own region, His Beatitude, Patriarch Absi, revealed that Christians in the Middle East are continuing to leave their homelands despite the Church encouraging them to remain. He said that it is increasingly difficult to give hope to Christians in Syria and Lebanon, where most of his faithful live, and the young are particularly likely to leave.

The last six years have been a difficult period with the civil war in Syria, the pandemic and extreme economic hardship in both Syria and Lebanon.

The Patriarch told us that the faithful “are desperate” and “they no longer have confidence in their country.”

“That's why they are leaving. We did a lot at the beginning to keep them in the country, but the situation has not improved.”

“We are still doing everything possible to help our faithful, to provide them with essential services. But we cannot replace the governments.”

“There is no light at the end of the tunnel, we do not see a short-term solution. Without support we can no longer convince them to stay.”

Between 2016 and 2021, Syria's Christian population further decreased from 6.31 per cent to 3.84 per cent, according to ACN's 2023 Religious Freedom in the World Report.

The Patriarch said that the situation in Syria could be improved if the West lifted the sanctions which are negatively impacting the civilian population.

He echoed the appeal made by other Middle Eastern Christian leaders in July, explaining: “I think that our friends can exert pressure in one way or another on their governments, and sometimes even on the religious leaders, to help in this direction or to ensure that the sanctions are lifted.”

He added: “We have noticed that ACN has doubled, and sometimes tripled, its aid during the last decade.”

“The results are clearly visible, and we thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

“It is not just financial or economic aid, it's the spirit with which they [ACN] work, the generosity, the love, the smile.”

He concluded: “We give thanks to God for having sent us brothers and sisters of such calibre, who are committed Christians.”

To learn more about the upcoming tour around Australia and New Zealand, and to express interest in attending, visit www.aidtochurch.org/2023tour or call 1800 101 201.

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