

Sixty years of support for the persecuted Church

Media Release – 18 December 2025

From a kitchen table volunteer effort to a well-loved charity raising \$7 million each year, *Aid to the Church in Need Australia and New Zealand (ACN)* is celebrating 60 years of support for persecuted and suffering Christians.

ACN, which traces its origins to post-World War II Europe, was founded in 1947 as the *Iron Curtin Relief Fund*, to assist Christians persecuted and displaced by communist regimes. Its Australian arm was established in Sydney in 1965 by Father Coenen, a close collaborator of founder Father Werenfried van Straaten.

Early fundraising efforts were modest, and volunteer-led almost single-handedly by the Collignon family. Over time, the organisation has grown into a respected national charity supporting pastoral projects across the world. The local office contributes its overall efforts to the global work of ACN, funding more than 5,000 projects internationally. These include subsistence help for clergy and religious, seminarian formation, church construction, pastoral transport, and emergency assistance for Christian refugees in areas where the local Church is affected by conflict, poverty and persecution.

In recent years, Aid to the Church in Need has seen increased engagement through initiatives such as Red November, with more than half the dioceses in Australia and New Zealand participating in 2025.

ACN is the only international Catholic charity dedicated to the service of suffering Christians wherever they are persecuted, oppressed or in pastoral need. It operates solely on benefactor donations, with no funding from Church or State.

To mark the milestone, **Bishop Vincent Long** of the Diocese of Parramatta celebrated Mass for staff of *Aid to the Church in Need*, acknowledging the charity's work and encouraging its mission as 'a bridge of love' between Australian Catholics and persecuted Christians worldwide.

President **Paul Woods** said the anniversary highlights the steadfast commitment of Australian Catholics.

"This year we celebrate humbly the 60th anniversary of the establishment of Aid to the Church in Need in Australia. Since the establishment of our national office in Australia, ACN has grown to the point where around 15,000 Australian benefactors donate approximately \$7 million annually. This year also marks an important

milestone for ACN in the Asia Pacific, as ACN Australia formally expands fundraising operations into New Zealand.

On behalf of the current board of trustees of ACN Australia & New Zealand, I thank the donors who support ACN's fundraising work for their generosity and prayers. I acknowledge gratefully the work of past National Directors of ACN Australia – Fr. Coenen, who established the national office in 1965, and members of the Collignon family – and current and past board members. I also extend my sincere thanks to the dedicated staff of ACN Australia & New Zealand, led by our National Director Bernard Toutounji, for their hard work and dedication to the charism of ACN."

Quote from Regina Lynch, Executive President of ACN International

"As Executive President of ACN International I am delighted to congratulate ACN Australia and New Zealand on celebrating 60 years of existence. What started out in Australia as an initiative to support priests of the persecuted Church behind the Iron Curtain, now reaches out through prayer and financial support to persecuted and suffering Christians in all parts of the world.

I thank and remember the tens of thousands of Australian and New Zealand benefactors past and present for making this possible. May God reward them for their generosity and faithful loyalty to this important mission of Aid to the Church in Need. You can be sure that those whom you help, include you in their prayers. We dare to count on your support for the future, as increasingly more persecuted Christians turn to ACN begging us to listen to their cries."

Quote from Ann Collignon, voluntary director from 1976-1990

"For the past 60 years, Aid to the Church in Need has been a significant part of my family life - both from my parents' time and then in our time, in those later years. It is so important to know that it is continuing on to support the persecuted church in so many parts of our world. May God continue to bless the work and all those who support this crucial pastoral aid."

Quote from Phillip Collignon, National Director from 1990-2017

"I thank God for the tens of thousands of Australian benefactors who have contributed so generously to help the pastoral work of Aid to the Church in Need over the past 60 years. It is God himself who helps His Church and motivates ACN's loyal benefactors to pray and support the work of the charity. If God did not touch the hearts of the benefactors, ACN would not have the means to help the work of the Church wherever she is poor, persecuted or forgotten. I believe this can be best

expressed in a simple but famous quote from our founder, Fr Werenfried van Straaten: “God is much better than we think and people, too, are better than we think.”

Quote from Bernard Toutounji, current National Director, 2018 – present

Bernard Toutounji, National Director of Aid to the Church in Need Australia and New Zealand, says he couldn’t be prouder of – or more humbled by – the generosity and faithfulness of Australians in the past 60 years.

As we celebrate 60 years of ACN in Australia and New Zealand, we recommit ourselves to the mission: to stand with the suffering Church, and to ensure the Gospel can continue to be lived and proclaimed even in the most difficult places. What makes ACN unique is that we don’t just offer aid – we work to keep the faith alive, both in the persecuted Church abroad, and in the hearts of our benefactors here at home. In all we do, we seek to serve the Church by helping bring Christ more fully into lives, families, and communities. It is a privilege to be a part of this work and to be part of the conduit between our wonderful benefactors and those Catholic communities that look to us.

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ABOUT

Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) is the only international Catholic charity dedicated to the service of suffering Christians wherever they are persecuted, oppressed or in pastoral need. Founded internationally in 1947, ACN is a pontifical foundation and provides vital aid for pastoral projects, religious education, and emergency relief in areas affected by conflict and poverty. ACN operates solely on benefactor donations, with no funding from Church or State.
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