

# The New Struggle of Refugees and Displaced Persons

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The unconditional welcome of refugees and displaced persons is essential, fundamentally rooted in the DNA of Christians. It is just as much our duty to think about the causes of these forced departures, on average 44,000 every day.<sup>1</sup>

Welcoming refugees, while essential and Christian, is not always the only solution. For example, when the crisis in Syria began the media here spoke about the continuation of the Arab Spring, which seemed to be burgeoning all over the entire Middle East. But very rapidly, it was discovered that the Syrian conflict was proving to be the beginning of a much more complex period in this country, a country that is known to be the cradle of Christianity. "Stormy times ahead" was what many people predicted.

Today, at the time of writing these lines, the tornado of abuses created by the various belligerent factions in Syria is almost over. The loss of the Islamic State (IS), the most stronghold group in Syria (announced March 1, 2019), will now put an end to the long sought-after caliphate. The IS will go back into hiding, for better and for worse...

## Reconstruction Campaign

Christians can finally return home. Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), along with other partners on the ground, are now starting a rebuilding campaign based on the model of what ACN has already accomplished in Iraq on the Nineveh Plains which was the historical land of Christians.

Since 2017, nearly 46% of the Christian families who had fled the rapid advance of the IS in August 2014 have returned home. This means that some 9,108 families have returned to their hometowns or villages.<sup>2</sup> A so-called ecological Lamborghini, given to Pope Francis in November 2017, was auctioned off for more than a million dollars. The ACN received \$300,000 of that sum, which enabled the rebuilding of a daycare centre run by the Church. The second project is a parish hall that will also be open to the entire population of the region, regardless of their religious denomination.

## To Leave or to Stay?

Without the ACN, families returning to the Nineveh Plains would have perhaps gone to North America or Europe. One could easily predict that no one would have returned to their historical bastion.

In 2014, the call for help from local churches was simple: help the displaced families in Erbil, capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. More than 1,000 containers thus enabled the creation of the so-called Werenfried Village, in honour of the founder of the ACN, who was himself familiar with the plight of refugees. Today while Werenfried's international organization supports mostly projects of a pastoral nature (whose dimension is broad!), it sometimes returns to the origins of its creation with respect to assisting refugees with infrastructural needs, especially when the local Church asks for it.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

<sup>2</sup> This 'return home' occurred as of January 11, 2019

## The “Bacon Priest”

Europe, 1945 to 1947. The Yalta agreements are established. The conquerors carve up Europe among themselves, particularly the state of Germany. As a result, some 14 million people are going to flee Soviet forces from the Eastern zone (Soviet) to the Western zone (American and British).

Father Werenfried van Straaten recounts: “There were so many arrivals that the admission requirements were getting harder and harder.” He met a woman whom the British had turned away, forcing her back to the zone’s border. Refusing to return to the hell of Soviet forced labour, she slit her wrists. “I still feel that the desperation that reigned everywhere was intentionally provoked by Stalin,” Father Werenfried would later say. “He wanted to reinforce the chaos in this defeated Germany in order to unleash a new revolution.”<sup>3</sup>

From these experiences and from testimonies given by refugees was born a work dedicated to feeding bodies — thousands of kilos of pork collected in a few weeks in the Flemish countryside! — but also a work to replenish souls. Priests with backpacks would go out on bicycles with provisions, but also with what was necessary for prayer and comfort. This work helped to contribute to an unprecedented period of peace in Europe that still continues today. Following this, a number of Caritas organizations in the world took up the helm.

Father Werenfried, who was fascinated by the message of Fatima, would build to feed the souls. He would be one of the first in the West to denounce the ravages of the communist regimes, from which religious persecution emerged and became one of the bitterest fruits.

## Emergency Support

Today, the ACN provides emergency support to refugees and displaced persons at the request of local churches. Most of these communities are located in areas of extreme conflict: Nigeria, South Sudan, the eastern portion of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), but also in Syria and Iraq.

This support emphasizes the essential presence of Christians for the societies in which they live. It is a proven fact that in the countries of the Middle East, the genocide desired by the IS could have happened, were it not for the presence of local Christian communities. The Christians both present in the Nineveh Plains and in Syria since the beginning of Christianity would be nothing more than a beautiful museum memory.

In eastern DRC, people panic when they are told the good news: your region is rich in natural resources! “War is coming,” they respond. The same phenomenon is increasingly seen further north, in the beautiful Central African Republic. The smoke screen? Wars of religion. The real reasons behind the conflicts? Groups want control over natural resources.

Just as Father Werenfried denounced the perverse effects of the communist regimes of time, daring to denounce or *inform*, as it referred to at the ACN, can sometimes enable support to be provided to those who have no choice but to leave. Iraq, Syria, DRC, Central African Republic area are all countries where we help the Church that is supporting the emergency and allowing people to stay.

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<sup>3</sup> Excerpt from *Père Werenfried, un géant de la charité (Father Werenfried, A Giant of Charity)*, by Jean Bourdarias, Fayard, 1997

Leaving is legitimate. Fighting to stay is just as legitimate. With 68 million displaced people and refugees around the world, the struggle to go back home is only just beginning.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>