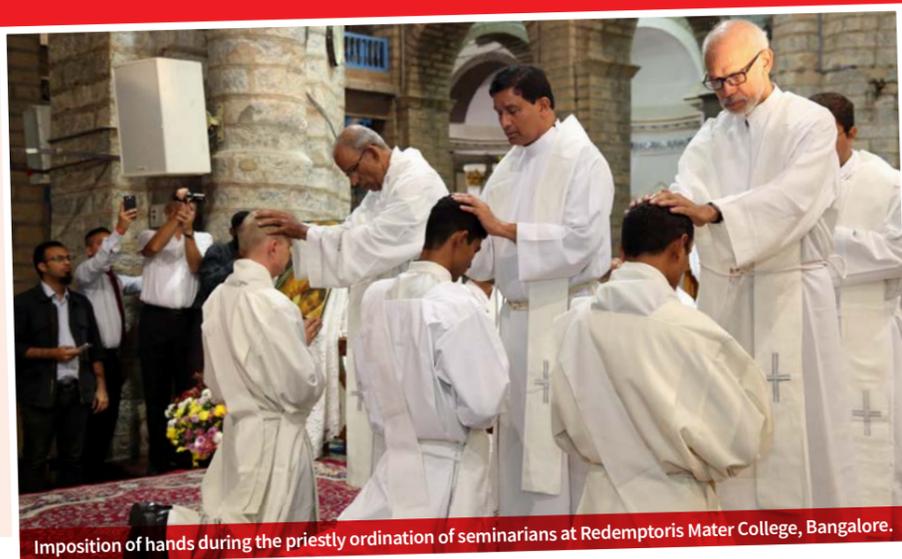


On your bike....



In Odisha's Rayagada Diocese, catechists brave enormous distances to reach the faithful living in the forests and valleys beyond the reach of public transport. At the moment they cover the vast area on foot. But bicycles for the catechists would change all that: ACN has agreed to donate nearly €1,712 for 30 bicycles to bring Christ among the people. ✚

To minister among a scattered flock



Imposition of hands during the priestly ordination of seminarians at Redemptoris Mater College, Bangalore.

Every year up to 1,000 priests are ordained in India. They belong to 172 dioceses and serve in over 10,000 different parishes. The number of seminarians is growing – today there are more than 15,000. But the country's poorest diocese, Buxar, has only 10. Its 15 diocesan priests minister to some 25,000 Catholic faithful.

All the Catholics here were Dalits and live scattered out in the countryside. These young seminarians will be working in these scattered villages after ordination – and they are looking forward to helping people in often trying situations. We have promised €1,857 to support their seminary training this year, to help the Faith flourish. ✚

Tested by fire

Strengthening and supporting India's persecuted Christians



Seeking the Lord: A group of women praying together in Jharkhand State.

There were 740 attacks against Christians in 2017 – a sharp rise from the previous high of 365 recorded in 2016. Not only has the number of attacks grown, but they have increasingly become characterised by impassioned hatred – especially in the north of the country.

In Madhya Pradesh Province extremists have entered Catholic schools and disrupted classes and priests and seminarians were assaulted as they sang Christmas carols – as police stood by before

arresting the carollers.

The rise to power of the nationalist BJP political party has emboldened extremists who see India as a Hindu country for Hindus. Christians are often portrayed as a threat to national unity. And increasingly Christians have been accused of blasphemy, as in neighbouring Pakistan.

In this report you will read about how Aid to the Church in Need is helping to strengthen and support a community under attack. We are helping train seminarians in poor

dioceses, providing bicycles for catechists travelling to remote areas, and reprinting Bibles in an area where Christian homes found with a Bible in them were burned down.

Growing numbers of new Christians in remote areas were formerly Dalits – the lowest Indian caste subject to degrading treatment – and we are turning around their lives through the work of Small Christian Communities.

At a time when the Church is under attack your help can transform the lives of our suffering brothers and sisters. ✚





In a culture where Dalit women are downtrodden, the Church has given dignity to Swetha and her daughters.

The iron rod of abuse – Swetha’s story

“When he hit me on the head with a heavy object, I was knocked unconscious”. Swetha was abused by her husband – abuse that increased when she became Catholic. Yet throughout it all she was determined to keep her Faith.

Swetha is a Dalit – and Dalit women have practically no control over their own lives, being at the mercy of their fathers and husbands.

Swetha said: “One time, as I was getting ready to go to church my husband came with an iron rod and hit me several times. **I felt that Jesus was with me, that He protected me from harm**, because I was not hurt.”

Swetha kept falling ill, worn down by the harsh treatment, but never gave up hope.

“I prayed for my husband every day and cried to God for help: ‘Despite the fact that he has hurt me and sinned, You, my God, have joined us in marriage. We

cannot separate from each other.”

And then a miracle occurred: **“He began to come with me to church. He could see the good that the Church and the Mass was doing to me.”** Soon both of them were attending a Catholic marriage seminar organised by a Small Christian Community (SCC). Today Swetha is no longer beaten.

SCCs help to strengthen and deepen the people’s faith and guide their daily lives. There are 85,000 SCCs across India organising Bible courses, prayer meetings, and other forms of outreach. **ACN is supporting these communities, along with numerous other projects in India.**

“There we learned that marriage is a holy relationship of three persons – husband, wife and God. These classes changed my husband and saved our marriage. If I had no struggle in my life, today I would not have known Jesus – and, that He came to save us.”



Swetha’s strong and courageous faith is nourished by the scriptures.

What it means to be a Dalit

The word “Dalit” comes from the Sanskrit and means “broken, , downtrodden, or oppressed”. It refers to members of the lowest caste who have carried the stigma of “untouchability” for centuries because they were only allowed to do the worst menial jobs like collecting rubbish or cleaning toilets. Although India’s constitution abolished “untouchability” many years ago, strong prejudice against Dalits persists especially in rural areas. Dalits continue to suffer oppression and extreme discrimination in work, education and social life. Dalits have to sit separately at school or while eating in public restaurants and use separate cutlery, cups and plates. In many villages and small towns, they are not allowed to enter public buildings - not even temples and shops - or non-Dalit homes. They cannot walk on public footpaths or ride bicycles. Dalits are not even allowed to wear clean, bright or fashionable clothes or sunglasses.

Strengthened by the Word of the Lord

“During the violence, houses were set ablaze with fire. People lost all their belongings and they lost their Bible – some were killed because they were found with the Bible.”

Bishop Kishore Kumar Kujur recalled the dark days 10 years ago when Hindutva extremists carried out a series of violent attacks on Christians in Odisha (then called Orissa). More than 4,500 houses and 250 churches were torched – and the official death toll stood at around 70, although some sources suggested it could have been as high as 500.

Many homes still have no Bible. When, in 2004, a revised version of

the New Testament was printed in the local language of Odiya, it rapidly sold out. Many people have been clamouring for a reprint – so Aid to the Church in Need is helping to print 50,000 copies.

Bishop Kujur said that reading of the Word of God sustains people even when the priests are not able to visit their far-flung villages, adding: “It is encouraging to see that the Christians, though suffering persecution at times, they are ready to die for their faith. They know that Christianity will grow and flourish in this place amidst persecution... The Church in Odisha embraces the Cross but is not annihilated.”



Khandamal Pastoral Centre, Odisha which was torched during the 2008 riots.

Dalits – the despised children of God

God said, “Let us make man in our image.” (Genesis 1:26)

Fr Prem Prakash says: “God has created everyone according to His image and therefore all are equal.”

Yet under India’s caste system Dalits, previously called ‘Untouchables’, were anything but equal. Although the caste system was abolished they are still considered to be the lowest of the low – often they are treated more like animals than human beings.

But, as Fr Prakash explains, there is hope: “These people are... liberated by accepting Christianity because Christianity has given them education, Christianity has given them food.” In the Church they experience dignity as human beings – made in God’s image.

