

RELIEF FOR THE VICTIMS

Thousands of children are still poor in the land where the Christ Child was poor.

I saw them in the orphanages, the schools for the handicapped, in the refugee camps.

I saw one infant, three days old, who had been abandoned to die on the roadside, the very road Joseph and Mary trudged as they came to register for the emperor's census.

I saw other youngsters in the kindergarten at a refugee camp — their eyes wide with children's curiosity and trust. And then I saw their parents and grandparents, their eyes merely slits, wary and suspicious, locked in poverty from childhood.

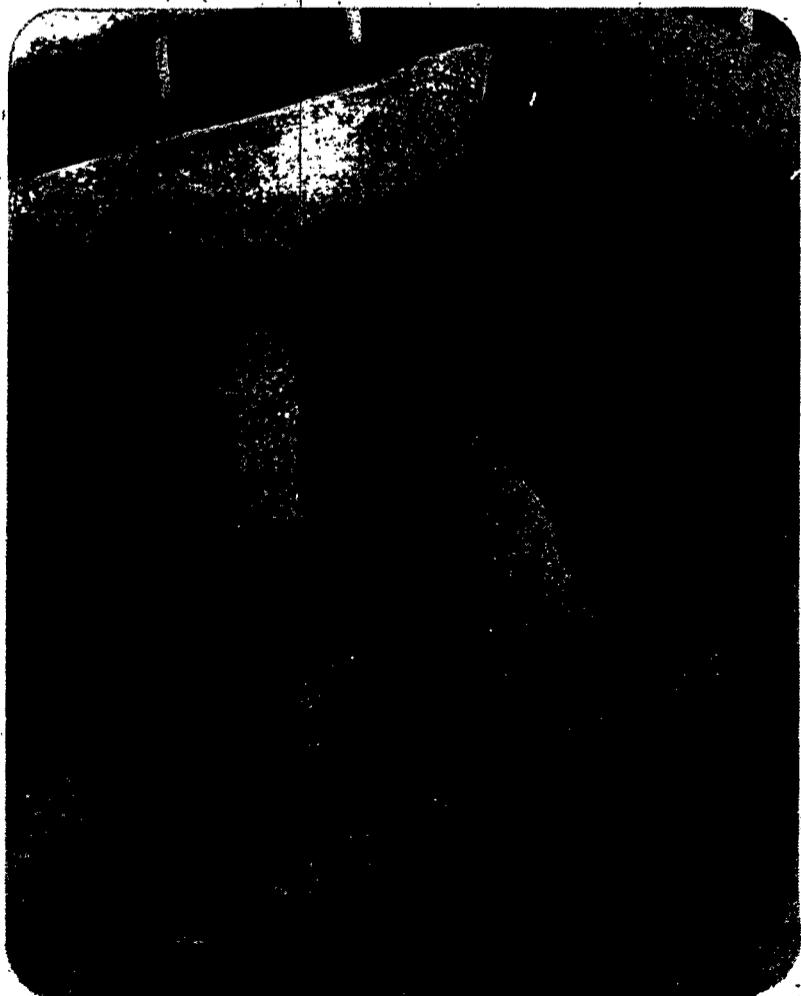
This is the Holy Land — a land ready to flare up in war once more and produce yet another wave of victims.

Suffering and sadness seem native to that land. Perhaps that is why Jesus spent so much of his life healing and comforting, rather than preaching. And his disciples today continue his works of mercy there.

I saw nuns from Ireland, Italy, France, Lebanon and Canada, who staff orphanages, clinics, hospitals and homes for the aged. These nuns have braved the bombs of one Middle East war after another to protect their charges, heal them and comfort them.

I saw young Americans, middle aged Englishmen and Frenchmen, Arabs and Israelis at work for United Nations relief agencies and other agencies to provide shelter, food, medicine, education, and jobs for these people whose lives have been warped and up-rooted by the turmoil of a lifetime of war.

Catholics can have the satisfaction of knowing that one of the chief agencies of mercy is the Pontifical Mission for Palestine, the Pope's relief agency in the Middle East, funded primarily by the American Catholic Near East Welfare Society, but this satisfaction is scant compared to the overwhelming needs that remain to be filled.



Text and photos by Father Henry Atwell. He recently visited Israel and other Middle East countries.
