

# The Old Catholic Church of B.C. L'Église Vieille Catholique de C.B.

„Coast to Coast“

„D'un océan à l'autre“



Top picture:  
The  
Chaldean  
Priest Fr.  
Sarmad  
Yousef With  
Bishop  
Gérard  
LaPlante  
and Fr.  
Jürgen  
Schmode  
inside St.  
Raphael's  
Old Catholic  
Church

## Looking back...

Below is a picture of the visit of Fr. Emmanuel Koshaba in 1999, who is also a Chaldean Catholic Priest, originally from Iraq who is now serving the large and growing group of more than 20,000 Chaldean Catholics in Australia. He is the oldest brother of Mr. Angelo Koshaba, the proprietor of the well-known and popular Cravings Restaurant in Vancouver, BC.

Left to right: Fr. Jürgen Schmode, Fr. Emmanuel Koshaba, Bishop Gérard LaPlante, Fr. Gordon Hangerud.

**14 October 2007**

## Visit of Chaldean Priest at St. Raphael's Old Catholic Church

Fr. Sarmad Yousef is Chaldean Catholic from Bagdad, Iraq; he attended Holy Mass on Sunday together with other Iraqis from our Church. (see the following article regarding his life). Due to the ongoing conflict in Iraq many Christians fled to Canada, Australia, etc. The Old Catholic Church of BC sponsored the Mansoor family who lived many years in refugee camps in Turkey before finally being accepted as refugees into Canada.



## Iraqi Christians Find Safety in Syria

Courtesy of the San Francisco Chronicle  
19 July 2005  
By Joshua E.S. Phillips

(ZNDA: Damascus) Seated in his parish office, Father Sarmad Yousef reflected on his hard choices: to disobey his archbishop by remaining in Syria or to return to Iraq, where his name has appeared on a death list.

"After the Americans came, I was one of the people telling the Iraqi Christians not to leave," he said. "After the violence started, I stopped telling them that."



Special to The Chronicle / David Thorne

Father Sarmad Yousef, who left Iraq when he learned that his name was on a death list, celebrates Mass in Damascus. Photo by David Thorne, special to the San Francisco Chronicle.

Christians all over Iraq face a similar dilemma as relentless violence engulfs the country, some directly targeting them.

Staying in the midst of the threats is dangerous, yet leaving means abandoning communities, church property and a heritage with centuries-old roots.

Before the U.S.-led war, roughly 750,000 Christians lived in Iraq, out of a population of 25 million. Most were Chaldean and Assyrian, but there also were Armenian, Jacobite and Greek Orthodox Christians and a small number of Protestants. Most of them lived either in Baghdad or in northern Iraq around Mosul.

Since then, 15,000 to 20,000 Christians have fled to Syria, according to Christian groups, out of "about 700,000" Iraqis, most of them in flight from the war, according to the U.N. high commissioner for refugees.

Yousef, a 30-year-old Chaldean Catholic who came here in August 2004, was the parish priest of Baghdad's St. Pathion Church, with 800 families under his stewardship. Today, he occupies a simple

office in Damascus, decorated with small portraits of St. Therese, the patron saint of his new church, cradling a bouquet of pink roses.

He says he actively supported the United States when coalition troops first entered Baghdad in April 2003 and helped organize community meetings on their behalf. Such support came with grave risks, and he narrowly missed two drive-by shooting attacks.

But when the Abu Ghraib prison scandal came to light, Yousef says, his view changed. Nor was he alone.

"Before that, Iraqis loved Americans," said Yousef, his eyes lowered. "Directly after that -- those photos, that scandal directly destroyed the dignity of Iraqis." ...

One Sunday last August, a spate of bombings that struck five churches in Baghdad and one in Mosul left 11 dead and scores wounded. Yousef's church was spared, but he said Iraqi Christians increasingly had started to leave soon after.

When Yousef took a previously planned trip to Damascus, he learned his was one of 18 names on a death list. Thirteen of those people had been killed the previous month. "I decided not to go back -- I felt that I was too young to die," said Yousef.

He left behind friends, family and his parish. The archbishop of Baghdad instructed him to return to his post, but he stayed in Damascus to fill an opening at St. Therese.

Yousef's new church, wedged within Damascus' Old City of cobblestone streets and crumbling houses, overflows with worshippers during Sunday Mass. Of the 2,000 families now connected to St. Therese, 90 percent are recent Iraqi refugees.

Just outside the church doors, a group of parishioners from Yousef's old Baghdad parish discussed how their lives have changed.

"Life was better -- we didn't have any problems," said Jamila Tama, referring to the relative peace between religious sects under Hussein. "There's killing, bombing and kidnapping. We have nothing now -- even our house is sold."

Her son, Bassam Bahnam, was grateful for the haven in Syria. "But I have three boys who worked in Baghdad, and they're all unemployed now," he said.

Bahnam and his family want to return to Iraq -- when the violence ebbs. "Of course there's no place like home," said his younger brother, Hisham Bahnam. But he criticized Christian leaders' calls to stay in Iraq.

"They're asking us to stay, but they're not giving us any solution," he said. "Even Christian leaders need an army to protect them whenever they go outside."

George Abona, a former priest who attended a seminary with Yousef, agrees. "When my Christian leaders say, 'Don't leave your heritage,' what are they going offer me?" he said. "What will heritage do for me and my son?"

In Iraq, Abona worked for the United Nations for seven years, before and during the war, and was in its Baghdad compound when it was bombed in August 2003. He survived, but the blast killed his brother, along with the top U.N. envoy in Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello, and 20 other U.N staffers.

Then last October, he was kidnapped for 19 days. He was released after another brother paid a \$20,000 ransom.

Despite all that, he said, "The security issue is not a big issue -- it's that I'm not ready to raise my son in an extremist Islamic society."

Syria has relaxed immigration rules for its Arab neighbors. But aside from Palestinians, refugees are not allowed to hold jobs in Syria, forcing most Iraqi newcomers to live off their savings. Government assistance -- especially health care -- is limited, and the refugees must return home periodically to get their temporary visas renewed.

Yousef tries to provide his new community in Syria with food and money for medical needs. The main reason he and other Christians have fled Iraq, he said, is "because we don't feel it is our country any more."

"I have bad memories now," he said of events since the invasion. "Most of my friends were killed there, and we only saw cruelty and blood. I don't think I'll ever be able to go back."



At St. Therese, in Damascus, Syria, about 90 percent of the parish's 2,000 families are Iraqi refugees.

Special to The Chronicle / David Thorne