

Iraq and Jordan: A Jesuit Adventure

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by

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Introduction

It is a pleasure to be with you this evening, at this informal gathering of Georgetown University Library Associates, to talk about the Jesuit Adventure in Iraq and Jordan. It is a special pleasure to give this talk under Georgetown University auspices, because the first Jesuit to visit Baghdad at the start of this modern adventure in 1932 was from Georgetown University.

Beginnings of the Baghdad Mission

Before I get to modern times, let me mention that the first official Jesuit visit to Baghdad was more than a century and a half ago, when two Jesuits were sent to Baghdad to see whether it might be possible to start a school there. Apparently their caravan across the Syrian desert was robbed twice, and they eventually reported to Rome that it would not be advisable to begin anything in the region.

By 1921, conditions had apparently improved, and the head of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Iraq, Patriarch Emmanuel II Thomas, himself a graduate of the Jesuit-run Université Saint Joseph in Beirut, asked Rome for a Jesuit college in Baghdad. Further requests came to the Holy See from the Chaldean, Syrian, and Armenian bishops in the country, as well as from various Catholic priests of the Middle Eastern rites & other Christian leaders. By the end of the 1920s, Pope Pius XI accepted the request and asked the Jesuit Superior General at the time, Father Ledochowski, to take on the task. Father Ledochowski turned to the American Jesuit Provinces for assistance in the project.

Georgetown's Fr. Edmund A. Walsh was chosen to prepare a proposal. After an initial briefing in Rome, at which he was apparently assured that the Jesuits could supply the personnel for a school and the funding could come from the Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA, for which he was both a fund-raiser and an officer), Father Walsh arrived in Baghdad on March 7, 1931, to see what could be done.

Father Walsh recommended that the new school should be “under the patronage and the auspices of four high standing Catholic American universities such as Georgetown, Fordham, St. Louis and Boston College” (quoted from Gallagher, 1959, p. 138, by Joseph MacDonnell, S.J., *Jesuits by the Tigris: Men for Others in Baghdad*, Boston: Jesuit Mission Press, 1994, p. 17; ***please note that, throughout these sections about the Jesuits’ Baghdad mission, I am heavily dependent on MacDonnell’s book, as well as on various oral reminiscences of Jesuits who served in Iraq***). Father Walsh proposed the formation of a corporation, an educational association made up of one representative of each university, with the Jesuit conducting the school having full power to act in the name of this corporation.

Because of a recent treaty between the United States and the Kingdom of Iraq that gave Americans full freedom to found and run schools in the country, Father Walsh easily obtained the government’s approval to open a secondary school. A year later, on March 5, 1932, after the government was informed that Iraq-American Educational Association was ready to begin its work, Abdul Hussein Chalabi, the Minister of Education, sent a cable to Father Walsh at Georgetown with formal permission for the foundation of a secondary school.

The Church’s Oriental Congregation in Rome wanted the project to be initially limited to a boarding house rather than a school, but after vigorous lobbying from the Iraqi bishops through Father Walsh, the congregation reluctantly allowed the college to proceed. However, there was some political fallout from this controversy, and the congregation shifted responsibility for the funding from CNEWA to New York’s Cardinal Hayes, and he informed Father Walsh that he would have no further role in the project!

As a result of Father Walsh’s report, the presidents of eight American Jesuit universities had formed an association to sponsor and aid the educational project in Iraq. The universities (in alphabetical order) were Boston College, Georgetown University, Loyola University in Chicago, Loyola University of New Orleans, St. Louis University, the University of Detroit, and the University of San Francisco. Fr. Aloysius Hogan, the president of Fordham, decided not to sign, and so Fordham was not involved in the association.

A few months later, this initial association was replaced by the Iraq-American Educational Association, duly registered with and approved by the Ministry of Interior in Baghdad, and also incorporated in the District of Columbia; the actual incorporators in Washington were Jesuit Frs. W. Coleman Nevils, Edmund A. Walsh, and Joseph A. Farrell (then president, vice president, and treasurer of Georgetown University). That certificate of incorporation, dated April 9, 1932, lists the duration of the term for which the corporation is organized as “perpetual”! That came in very handy a few years ago, when the corporation was deemed to be still alive, in spite of its long absence from Iraq, and therefore competent to sue for the return of or compensation for the properties seized illegally in 1968 and 1969.

Baghdad College

The first four Jesuits assigned to start the new secondary school, called Baghdad *College* in the European style, arrived in pairs, Fr. William A. Rice from New England (later vicar apostolic and bishop in Belize) and Fr. Edward F. Madaras from Chicago on March 9, 1932, and Edward J. Coffey from New York and Fr. John A. Mifsud from California on July 27 of the same year. Three more Jesuit priests came a year later, another the next year, and three more priests, two scholastics, and two brothers the following year.

Conditions in Baghdad were only relatively stable. After four centuries of Turkish rule and 14 years under the British Mandate, during which Faisal I was made King of Iraq in 1921, Iraq became a member of the League of Nations in 1932. There were many changes of government during Iraq’s first decade of independence, including seven internal insurrections between 1937 and 1941. King Faisal I died of a sudden heart attack in Geneva on September 7, 1933, and his 21-year-old son Ghazi (who disliked the British) took the throne. On April 4, 1939, King Ghazi was killed in a mysterious car accident that many privately blamed on the British. Ghazi was succeeded by his infant son, Faisal II, but power was placed in the hands of a regent, Faisal’s uncle, Abdul-Ilah, the brother of Ghazi’s wife, and also Ghazi’s own cousin. As often still today, inner-family marriages are often a way of keeping power and resources within a family.

In the midst of this relative instability, the Jesuits rented two houses on the east bank of the Tigris. Of 375 boys who applied in response to newspaper ads, 120 were accepted; about 100 survived the first year. Student ages ran from 13 to 20 (average age around 15), divided into four grades (5th and 6th elementary, and 1st and 2nd intermediate). Besides the four Jesuit priests, there were five other teachers (a Chaldean priest and four laymen). Classes were held six days a week, Monday through Saturday, from 8:00 am to 4:10 pm in winter and from 7:00 am to 1:00 pm in summer (when the weather is very hot). One special feature of the new school was its library (with all books as donations) that soon became the best in the city.

An alumnus, Ramzi Hermiz, noted years later that “the boys were surprised to learn that they could actually take home to read whatever book they wanted, free of charge” (MacDonnell, p. 27). Many had never seen real black boards, maps, or projectors.

After two years, in 1934, the Jesuits purchased a 25-acre property in Sulaikh, four miles north of the center of the city, and the school and Jesuit residence were moved to a large rented house in the neighborhood, while a permanent campus was constructed. The administration building was ready for occupation in 1938, the residence for Jesuit faculty and boarders a year later, and two years after that a 1500' brick wall enclosed the entire property. Eventually nine major buildings and some minor ones were built on the site, and the school remained there until it was taken over by the government in 1969.

In 1936, when ground was broken for erection of the first building, school enrollment fell from 132 to 86 students, because of complications due to a new military conscription law. When the school finally received a requisite new certification from the government, its students were exempt from conscription, and enrollment began to rise again.

The school was not large by any standards during those early years. At the fifth graduation ceremony, on June 23, 1940, 20 boys graduated and made an alumni total of 70 for the first five graduations. While the school was established to provide Christian boys an opportunity for secondary education, it had also admitted Muslim and a few Jewish students from its earliest years. It proposed to be a school of excellence for the best students in the country, and it was soon seen to be meeting this ideal.

The Muslim religion forbids its adherents to convert, and proselytizing is strictly prohibited. From the start, the Jesuits scrupulously refrained from any effort to convert their students, but they also taught religion to the Christians and ethical principles to all the students. They gradually gained great respect for this, and many Muslim alumni of Baghdad College still speak highly of the morality they learned from their Jesuit teachers.

In the spring of 1941, World War II spread into Iraq with an unsuccessful anti-British coup by former and new Prime Minister Rashid Ali. He deposed the regent, appointed another, and formed a new cabinet. Eventually the British forced Rashid Ali into exile, restored the earlier Prime Minister, Nouri el-Said, along with the regent, and executed or imprisoned many supporters of Rashid Ali. The resulting discontent festered below the surface until 1958, when the young officers who overthrew the regime saw themselves as completing the task left unfinished since 1941.

The Jesuits at Baghdad College managed to stay free of involvement with the 1941 coup and counter coup, and this plus new travel restrictions were factors in the subsequent increase both in Muslim enrollment and in the number of boarding students. The initial enrollment of 103 in 1932 had risen to 132 by 1935, had then fallen to 86 the following year, rose to 105 in 1938, to 139 the following year, and to 179 in 1941. In 1942, the year after the coup, it jumped to 245, and by 1945, the number of students had increased to 419. Of these, almost half (202) were Chaldean or Syrian Catholics, 89 (21%) were Muslims, and the rest were "other" (mostly Catholics or Orthodox of other rites, plus 4 Iraqi Jews).

The school continued to grow rapidly from the late 40s through the 60s, until it was taken over by the government in 1969. In 1950, the total enrollment was 556 (including 157 Muslims and 3 Jews); in 1960, it had risen to 797 (including 357 Muslims and 9 Jews); and in 1965, it reached its highest level of 1097 (including 514 Muslims and 5 Jews). In the next two years, the total enrollment fell back a bit (to 1083, but with a small increase to 522 Muslims, in 1966; then to 1018, including 509 Muslims, in 1967, the last year for which I have good figures).

Al-Hikma University

As Baghdad College grew and made a major impact on the slowly improving education scene in Iraq, the Jesuits began to receive many requests from Christian and Muslim families to begin an institution of higher learning. There were many arguments for and against such a proposal. It would be an increased drain on the New England Jesuit Province, which had long been the main source of Jesuits for the Iraq mission, but eventually the majority in the Province supported the move to start an institution of higher education because of its importance for the Iraqi Church, Iraqi Christians, and all Iraqis.

In 1955, when the Jesuit superior requested permission to start a university, together with land on which to build it, the Iraqi government quickly approved the proposed new institution, Al-Hikma (or Wisdom) university, with four-year courses in Engineering Physics and in Business Administration, and soon agreed to allocate land. By March 19, 1956, two adjacent parcels of land (a total of 168 acres) had been granted by royal decree, and the government supported the Jesuits' requests for financial assistance from various foundations to help support the new university. Several grants totaling \$850,000 were soon received, and construction could begin.

Fr. Joseph A. Ryan was the dean and eventually academic vice president for the new institution, and he gradually assembled a faculty. In the 1964-65 academic year, the faculty consisted of 12 American Jesuits, 8 visiting professors from America, 24 Iraqi professors, and one professor each from Iran, India, Holland, and the Philippines. From an opening enrollment of 45 in 1956, the student body had grown to 530 in 1964, and when the Jesuits were expelled in 1968, the enrollment had reached 656. Forty of the 98 graduates in the first five graduating classes were accepted for graduate studies in their respective fields at various universities in the United States.

By 1965, the Al-Hikma University library contained some 35,000 volumes in a new library building built to accommodate more than 200,000 volumes. There was a spread of extra-curricular programs for the students, including academic, religious, athletic, and social activities.

When Jesuit General Pedro Arrupe visited the Baghdad Mission on December 21-22, 1965, the Community had grown to 60 Jesuits, and he is said to have met them all. There were serious scholars in the group, as well as dedicated teachers at all levels of secondary and higher education. The Jesuit investment of personnel in Baghdad was extraordinary.

During the 60s, Fr. Joseph LaBran, the chaplain at Holy Cross College, and others in America helped establish a Lay Volunteer program to bring college graduates, mainly from America, to live in the Jesuit community for two years and to teach their speciality (mainly English and mathematics). From the initial Holy Cross graduate who came as a volunteer in 1960-61, the program quickly grew to around 13 volunteers a year. By 1969, when Baghdad College was taken from the Jesuits by the government, 90 Lay Volunteers had participated in the Jesuit educational work in Baghdad.

The Brilliant Calm Before the Storm

In 1967, Baghdad College had shown itself to be an outstanding embodiment of its slogan “an Iraqi School for Iraqi boys”. It offered five years of English, mathematics, history, and Arabic, three years of physics, chemistry, and biology for the science section, and a commercial section. With an enrollment of more than 1100, it accepted many fine candidates from the top 10% of the city’s primary schools. Tuition was relatively low, and more than 20% of the students received financial aid. In 1967, in the government-run baccalaureate exams to determine university admission and placement, while only 45% of 30,000 Iraqi students passed the exams, 96% of the Baghdad College students passed, and seven of the ten top students in the country were from Baghdad College.

Al-Hikma was in its eleventh year and was one of the first Jesuit universities to go co-educational; it had begun to accept women students in 1962, and by 1968, 20% of its 700 students were women. In 1967, after having received six vocations to the Society in its 37 years in Baghdad, the Jesuits decided the time was right to organize an in-country novitiate for Jesuit candidates. It began with one candidate, Steve Bonian, on September 5, 1968. Unfortunately, late the following June he would have to leave Iraq to finish his first year of novitiate in Lebanon and then do his second year in Ireland.

On July 4, 1968, with the support of funds from the Gulbenkian Foundation, Fr. Richard McCarthy laid the corner stone for the long hoped-for Oriental Institute. Truly it seemed that many dreams were on the verge of realization.

The End of a Bright Dream

On November 25, 1968, the 28 Jesuits working at Al-Hikma University were expelled from Baghdad with only 5 days warning! Nine months later, the 33 American Jesuits at Baghdad College were also expelled. Both schools were “Iraqized”; that is, the Iraqi government took control of the schools without compensation and without claiming ownership. The ideology of the new Baath Socialist Government of Iraq forbade private education, and so the Jesuits had to go, leaving behind two campuses, a total of 193 acres with 14 major buildings.

Iraqi Muslim professors from Baghdad University pleaded in vain with Iraq’s new president to take into consideration all that the Jesuits and their schools had contributed to the country’s educational development. Many students and alumni of the Jesuit institutions and their families also begged the government to change its decision, but it did no good. All the foreign Jesuits had to leave, and they were followed a year later by the two Iraqi Jesuits who had been left behind to try to maintain a Jesuit presence and control at Baghdad College.

Two major events outside the schools were significant factors in this change of fortune: one was the June 1967 war between Israel and the Arab States, during which American air cover and other technological support had been crucial to Israel’s total victory; the other was the coup d’etat of July, 1968, that brought the Baath Socialist Party into power in Iraq.

Some of the 61 Jesuits expelled from Iraq in 1968 and 1969, as well as others who were outside the country studying, gradually engaged themselves in ministries in America. Others found ways to continue their ministry in other Arab or Muslim countries, including the territory of the Middle East Jesuit Province (Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan). The two Iraqi Jesuits who left in 1970 also went initially to Lebanon. For some time there

would be an American Jesuit presence in the countries of the region, but no formal mission. The generous efforts of 145 Jesuits who had served in Baghdad, five of whom had died and been buried there, might seem to have blown away like desert sand, except for the extraordinary loyalty of their Iraqi alumni, who began in 1977 to hold biennial meetings in the United States and occasionally in Canada to renew their spirits and to express their continuing gratitude and devotion to the Jesuit Fathers, the *Fatheria* as they fondly called them, who had made such a lasting impact on their lives. Those meetings still continue, although the number of Jesuits able to attend has radically diminished.

A New Adventure in Amman

Another unexpected and somewhat delayed fruit of the Jesuit mission in Baghdad is now growing in Amman, Jordan. In 1984, after serving for two different periods of time in Beirut, Fr. Joseph L. Ryan, the first and only dean and academic vice president at Al-Hikma University, was asked by CNEWA (the original financial supporter of the Baghdad Mission) to come to Amman to serve as the first full-time director of a new branch office for the Pontifical Mission for Palestine (PMP), CNEWA's formal outreach to Palestinian refugees.

Early in his six-year stint as PMP's director for Jordan, Father Ryan noticed that the small local Jordanian Catholic and Christian community was stable but lacking many resources that we often take for granted in other parts of the world. So he contacted other Jesuit veterans of the Iraq mission to brainstorm about what might be done by the New England Jesuits as a continuation of their mission in Baghdad. The New England Jesuits were stretched rather thin with their educational institutions at home and in Jamaica, so it was quickly agreed not to suggest the establishment of a school in Jordan. Rather, the group proposed to the New England Provincial Superior that a modest commitment of 2-4 Jesuits be assigned to develop a Center in Amman to provide workshops, retreats, spiritual direction, and other services that might be requested or needed by the local church. The possibility of ministry to the growing expatriate community was also mentioned.

A year or so later, the Provincial gave his approval, and Father Ryan began to implement the proposal. He brought a significant part of the Jesuits' library from Baghdad to serve as the nucleus of a new library under PMP auspices for the local population. That library is now run by two Filipina members of the Teresian Association.

Father Ryan put aside some office space in the building occupied by PMP, and gradually two other Jesuits came to start workshops and other programs. Fr. Tony Paquet was a veteran of the Baghdad mission, and he chose to teach in the school run by Melkite Sisters in the immediate vicinity of the PMP. He also celebrated weekend Masses for expatriates in local Arab parish churches. Fr. Tom Fitzpatrick had not served in Baghdad, and he tried very hard to learn Arabic, but without much success. He served on several educational committees for the local church, celebrated weekend Masses for expatriates, and began to think about how best to extend the Jesuit influence in Amman in the absence of Arabic-speaking Jesuits.

Father Fitzpatrick began to identify local Arab Christians with academic promise, and he gradually arranged for several of them to study under Jesuit sponsorship at Boston College. The products of this initiative eventually returned to Amman, where a large private home had been found near the PMP to serve as the Jesuit Center, and they worked for different periods of time at or with the Center on programs of theology, religious education, and spirituality in Arabic for local Christians.

For some years, the Center provided the organization and staff for an extension program of Bethlehem University, through which local university graduates could earn a certificate that was the equivalent of a second major in religious education to qualify them to teach religion alongside their primary speciality in local parochial and private schools.

In 1990, Father Ryan completed his term at the PMP, and Father Fitzpatrick was appointed to replace him as superior of the small Jesuit community in Amman. Not long afterwards, Father Ryan returned to the States, and he concluded his Jesuit life in early 1998 in the Province's retirement facility at Campion Center in Weston.

Some 20 years ago, Fr. Clarence Burby, one of the last two Jesuits in Baghdad, was asked to leave his ministry in Syria to join the staff of the Jesuit Center in Amman. A few years later, health problems forced Father Paquet to return to Boston, and the Jesuit Community was again down to two members. While the Provincial was looking for a third person for the mission, he asked me whether, in view of my previous involvement with biblical studies and archaeology in Israel, I would be interested in volunteering for Amman. I had recently finished another assignment and was helping the Province with fund-raising for a while, and I responded that I would be willing to go to Amman, if there was something that I could do, but that my limited Arabic might make it difficult for me to be useful.

Then, in 1995, the Catholic archbishop for Israel, Jordan, and the West Bank, His Beatitude Michel Sabbah, who rejoices in the venerable title of Latin Catholic Patriarch of Jerusalem, approached Father Fitzpatrick to ask if the Jesuits could start a personal or non-territorial parish for the rapidly growing English-speaking expatriate Catholic community in Amman. When that request was relayed to the Provincial, he approached me about it, and I told him that I would be happy to do that. So, in late March 1996, after all the details had been worked out between the Patriarch and the Provincial, I was appointed to create and run a non-territorial Jesuit parish for the expatriates in Amman.

That has become a second major focus of the Jesuit mission in Amman. The parish serves a huge population of Filipino Catholic domestic workers, nurses, and other workers, smaller numbers of similar Catholic workers from other Asian countries, English-speaking professionals and business people from all parts of the globe, and foreign wives and children of Jordanians.

In recent years, a third focus of the Center's activity has been aid to the large number of Iraqi refugee families in Amman. There is now an office of Rome-based Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS) in the Center, and the local director organizes a team of part-time Iraqi workers and volunteers from various countries to provide supplemental classes for Iraqi youngsters who have fallen several years behind in school, as well as classes and other programs for adults who are caught in limbo between the still-dangerous Iraq from

which they fled and the western countries that are hesitant to accept them as refugees. In addition, Father Burby serves as the local contact for a large program of family-to-family aid by the Chaldean Federation in Detroit. Each month, we receive as much as \$18,000 donated by Chaldean families in America for distribution in amounts of \$75 to \$100 to almost 200 specified Chaldean families currently stranded in Amman.

Several years ago, with the generous aid of benefactors and the New England Province, we were able to add an upper floor to the building that is the Jesuit Center. The addition contains two lecture halls seating around 65 and 120 people, respectively, as well as a chapel seating 42. These facilities are for our programs and also for use by various groups within the local Christian community. It has made a great difference in our work and in our service to other local groups that now meet at the Center.

In the past quarter century, at least ten Jesuits have worked for a year or more at the Jesuit Center, six of them veterans of the earlier Baghdad Mission. The most recent Jesuit addition is Bro Agnelo Vaz from India, who has taken over the task of overseeing the building and grounds. Many other Jesuits have worked here for shorter periods of time, including a number of novices who spent a few months of their novitiate training in some work within the local community, priests who volunteered to help in the parish for differing periods of time, and others who came to give lectures or workshops. Currently the Jesuit Center has three full-time Jordanians on staff, and we employ a Filipino couple as cook-housekeeper and as janitor, as well as an Egyptian part-time gardener.

Conclusion

Tonight, I have tried to give you an inevitably limited and somewhat sketchy introduction to the recent Jesuit Adventure in Iraq and Jordan. It has been a great adventure, and it greatly changed the lives both of the Jesuits involved and of those with whom they were privileged to work in Baghdad for 37 years and in Amman for the past 26 years. In the interests of time, I have had to speed by many features of our work, but perhaps some will come up in the discussion period. If you are a bit overwhelmed by the immensity and variety of the Jesuit Adventure in Iraq and Jordan, then I have had at least modest success in my task this evening. Thanks very much for sharing this adventure with us.