

"When you lack for nothing, it's easy to forget God!"

Special interview with Iraqi refugee, who explains how a precarious ordeal has strengthened his Christian faith



Saviu Dabol, an Iraqi refugee in Vaulx-en-Velin, February 24, 2021. (Photo by BRUNO AMSELLEM/DIVERGENCE POUR LA CROIX)

By [Mélinée Le Priol](#) | [France](#)

Pope Francis arrived in Baghdad on Friday for his long-anticipated visit to Iraq.

He is the first pope in history to visit the Middle Eastern country, birthplace of Abraham -- patriarch of the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Iraq has seen its Christian population shrink over the past three decades due to wars, jihadist terrorism and lack of security.

Many Christians have fled to neighboring countries in the region or to the West.

La Croix's Mélinée Le Priol is currently in Iraq to cover the papal visit. But before she left, she spoke with Iraqi native Saviu Dabol, a Syriac Catholic, who recounted his ordeal of

leaving his homeland in 2015 to search for a more secure future in France

La Croix: Back in August 2014, as the jihadists from the Islamic State (ISIS) were about to enter your town of Qaraqosh, you left in a hurry. And you've never been back. Tell us what life was like before you went into exile?

Saviu Dabol: There was a kind of routine, but I liked that life!

I was 20 years old and I had started studying English two years earlier in **Qaraqosh**.

I had hoped to become a high school teacher or a translator.

In my free time I worked in the carpet store run by my father and uncle.

I was in love with Diana, a 16-year-old girl who lived not far from my house.

On Sundays, we went to church with my parents and my three younger brothers, who were then 18, 15 and 11.

But in the summer of 2014, everything changed.

My life took a turn that I could never have imagined.

Even for vacations, I had never traveled further than Erbil, 65 km away! I was not prepared to leave Qaraqosh.

What happened?

On the afternoon of August 6, while I was working at the family store, I heard bombings.

I came straight home and that's when my father said, "We're leaving."

I thought it would be for just a few days until things calmed down, like what had happened a few weeks earlier. So I didn't take anything with me except my cell phone.

My mother, who had just turned on the washing machine, took out the clothes. They were clean, but still wet! She put them in the trunk of the car.

She also grabbed a couple of pictures hanging in the kitchen. We got into the car and left our past behind.

A few days later, the Kurds left the city and ISIS entered Qaraqosh.

Some of the residents remained, but we have never found a trace of them -- like my mom's brother.

We never went back there again.

Did you take refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan, like most Christians in the Nineveh Plain?

Yes, but not in Erbil.

The churches, schools and gymnasiums there were already occupied by thousands of refugees.

It was to Duhok, near the Turkish border, where my family and the families of four of my uncles went.

We stayed there for a few months, until we learned from an aunt living in Lyon that France was going to issue visas to religious minorities in Iraq.

The problem was that I didn't want to leave my country, let alone leave Diana!

One night, I went alone to the roof of the house where we were staying. For an hour, I prayed and cried.

"I have dreams here!" I blurted out to my parents when they found me. They agreed to go to Diana's parents to propose an engagement.

We got married in December 2014 in a church in Erbil, where we had ended up going so we could be closer to the French consulate.

It looked more like a kidnapping than a wedding.

There were only a few of us, with sad hearts because we had lost everything, over a glass of orange juice and cupcakes.

Two months later, my parents, my brothers, my 17-year-old wife and I arrived in France. It was February 2015.

Was it hard to get adjusted in France?

I immediately felt a lot of pressure because I was the oldest in my family and the only one who could speak English.

It started when we arrived at the huge airport in Istanbul.

I had never been on a plane before, but everyone was following me!

I had to get my family to the right door at all costs so we didn't miss our connection to Lyon.

We had sold our car to buy these seven plane tickets, and could not have bought another.

Once we arrived in Vaulx-en-Velin, at my aunt's house, I thought I could quickly find a job and a place to live, that Diana and I would have children, etc.

But everything was so complicated, starting with the fact that I didn't speak French and had to get papers for my family.

Also, my wife was depressed about leaving her parents in Iraq.

One day, shortly after we arrived, I wanted to take her to a local mall to get her a little gift. My father gave me €5, which wasn't even enough to take the bus together!

I became aware of the discrepancy with our life before... It was even harder because, over there, everything was about to start for me, especially my professional life.

I had to interrupt everything to start again from scratch.

I now work as a cashier at a supermarket, not exactly my dream.

Has your relationship with faith changed, too?

A lot! At first I felt angry with God, and didn't pray for months.

Things changed when I saw the way some French people helped us, especially to bring my wife's family to France.

I told myself that it was God who was inspiring strangers to act like this.

Today, I know that the Lord is preparing us. He makes us understand that we must not be too attached to this life.

In the end, leaving Iraq was a good thing for us. I don't want to live on this earth and get lost.

When you lack for nothing, it's easy to forget God! But in poverty we find our faith.

In Iraq, even though I went to church, I didn't believe as I do today.

Now we pray every night with our two sons [born in 2016 and 2019], and I ask God that they not be too attached to material things.