

Running from ISIS:

The story of Monsignor Thair Sheikh

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BY Christian Bergmann



On Wednesday 24 November, Red Wednesday was observed across Australia, an initiative of Aid to the Church in Need. It was an opportunity to raise awareness for persecuted Christians across the world. A prayer vigil was held in Melbourne, with Monsignor Thair Sheikh of Our Lady Guardian of Plants Chaldean Catholic Parish delivering the homily. Fr Thair arrived in Melbourne in February 2019, prior to which he was a parish priest in Baghdad, Iraq, where he was ordained in 2002. Fr Thair graciously gave his time to Melbourne Catholic to tell us a little bit of his story.

Fr Thair was born in Baghdad in 1977. Iraqi Christians have one of the oldest and most well-established Christian cultures in history, having been present since the first century. Christians in Iraq are predominantly ethnic Chaldeans, and by the early 1980s made up nearly nine percent of the population. Much of this would change with the 2003 American invasion, which resulted in the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime, whose relationship with Christians was tenuous.

'After that we thought everything would be alright,' Fr Thair said, 'but we didn't know that the worst stage we were facing was coming.' After the invasion, Iraq effectively fell into civil war, with the various Islamic sects and their foreign allies working against each other. One of these was the Islamic State (IS). According to Fr Thair, in Iraq there were at least ten highly organised militia groups that controlled their own territories, making movement between them quite difficult.

They put Iraq in a situation that was very bad, because a lot of countries they work to make a conflict between our groups, our ethnic groups, and between our religions as well. They started with the Christian people because we were at that time a good number.'

Kidnappings

The Christians in Iraq refused to participate in the sectarian struggles, which meant they were often accused of being 'pro-American', or 'pro-Western'. Despite the fact that some Christian leaders in America viewed this invasion as a kind of religious crusade, for Iraqi Christians life became intolerable. Their churches were systematically destroyed and many were forced to flee to other countries, making the Christian population now less than ten percent of what it once was. They were often the victims of kidnappers who wanted money either for their own interests or for weaponry to use against the American army. Fr Thair knew 22 priests who were kidnapped, and on at least two occasions groups tried to kidnap him, succeeding once in May 2005.

It was really hard time. They put cover on my face, and they took my car. During that time, I was very quiet, and I was praying, because I thought it was my time, I thought it was last minute for me.'

Fr Thair showed them his priestly collar – a sign that he wasn't a member of any other militia – but they accused him of being a fake, saying he was working for someone else. 'One of them, they give me a slap, and another one spit on me. But I was very quiet.' During that time, Fr Thair thought his time had come to an end and that death was approaching. But for whatever reason they released him. To this day he doesn't know why.

The second kidnapping attempt came in 2006 when, while driving, he was chased by another vehicle. 'There were four people in the car, they were armed, and they told me I have to stop. I didn't stop.' They tried to push him off the road but he drove faster than they did, so they opened fire and practically destroyed his car. Miraculously, not a single bullet touched him. When he returned to his church, he kept himself hidden for eight months, never once going out because it was so dangerous. One of the groups searching for Fr Thair even kidnapped a young man who worked for the church, interrogating him about the priest's whereabouts, burning him all over with cigarettes. When he was finally returned, the young man moved out of Iraq for good.

Fr Thair himself decided to leave Iraq, too. After 2006, he went to Germany, hoping to stay on a protection visa. This wasn't an easy decision, and it didn't last long – only two months:

It wasn't easy for me to stay in Germany, because I was always thinking of my community, of my friends, and of my people, in Iraq. For that I decided to go back and stay with my parishioners. And I said, 'That's it. I will go. I will stay there. If anything happens, it's my life. I can't leave my people.'

This whole period of time was difficult for Fr Thair to relive because it was such a prolonged duration of distress. 'It's not just one hour or one day or one month,' he said, 'it's many years, between 2003 and 2009. It was a really terrible time for priests in Iraq.' Although they had something of a support network, trying to encourage each other against the intense pressure of it all, it never became easier.

Every few weeks, someone was being kidnapped. At one point, Fr Thair was the mediator trying to negotiate the release of a friend of his. Their initial demand was half a million dollars and he spent eleven days trying to shave them down, eventually paying only fifty thousand for his release.

It's really hard, when you have to negotiate for a person.'

Fr Thair has looked after three parishes throughout his time in Iraq, with a lot of people under his care. In his very first parish he tended for 150 families; in his second, he cared for 600 families; and in his last, from 2005 onwards, he cared for upward of 2000 families.

Freedom in Australia

Since coming to Australia in February 2019 (at the request of the Church), Fr Thair has been learning a lot more English. There is a real freedom here to truly live what he believes, and for this he is deeply grateful. In Iraq, 'you have to be very careful, especially when talking with other people, otherwise they will eat you,' he said. Australia has challenges of its own, he thinks, and in some respects he considers them to be more dangerous. Even though the threats to religious freedom are not against the lives of people, the threats are 'covered' in such a way that make it difficult to see their true harm.

When it's covered, it's more dangerous. We have to go inside the things. We can't accept anything easily. We have to dig deeper to see what it came from.'

He is referring here to different ideologies or ideas that, while appearing good on the outside, are actually counterintuitive to the faith. Catholics in Australia, he said, need to have clarity about their faith. We need to 'try to make it clear for ourselves, and to know, "This is something against my faith, and this is against what I believe."'

I think they have to be aware for their faith. Because the faith is, like Jesus said, it's like a jewel, no? You have to keep it. To keep it, that means you have to take care of it, tend it, otherwise you will lose it. There are a lot of people who want to take it from you.'

There are many more Iraqi Christians who are waiting to come to Australia. Fr Thair spends his time ministering to his parishioners and raising awareness about international religious persecution.

According to Aid to the Church in Need's recent 2021 report, there are less than 250,000 Christians left in Iraq, although numbers are difficult to confirm considering how dangerous it is to be a Christian there. The Chaldean [Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil has said](#) that Christianity in Iraq 'is perilously close to extinction,' and that 'those of us who remain must be ready to face martyrdom.'

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[INTERVIEW MONSIGNOR THAIR SHEIKH RELIGIOUS FREEDOM RED WEDNESDAY](#)



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