



In Iraq, an Easter Resurrection for Christian Communities

Posted GMT 4-12-2009 23:9:2

Baghdad -- In what was once one of Baghdad's most dangerous neighborhoods, Iraqi Christians openly celebrated Easter for the first time in three years on Sunday.

In addition to honoring the resurrection of the Christ, the service in Dora also marked the resurrection of their battered community.

Dora is one of several neighborhoods in the Iraqi capital where Christians are beginning to return after being driven out by violence and extremists. A small minority in Iraq, they are estimated to make up less than 3 percent of Iraq's population today. More than 300,000 of Iraq's 800,000 Christians are believed to have left since 2003.

The faithful ventured out Sunday to reaffirm their faith in Iraqi communities which trace their roots back to the earliest days of Christianity. The majority of Iraq's Christians are Chaldeans, Eastern Rite Catholics who believe they are descended from the Babylonians. In the south Baghdad neighborhood of Dora, at the Chaldean church of St. Peter and Paul, auxiliary Bishop Shlemon Warduni of the Patriarchate of Babylon celebrated mass in Arabic and Aramaic -- the language of Jesus.



In an Iraqi community that traces its roots back to the earliest days of Christianity, a woman receives communion from auxiliary Bishop Shlemon Warduni at the first Easter mass since 2006 at the damaged Chaldean church of St. Peter and Paul.

It was the first time mass had been said in the church since 2007, after it was damaged and looted in fighting which raged through Dora.

"Today is Easter but we also have another reason to celebrate -- in this area that was damaged and families displaced," Bishop Warduni told the congregation, which last celebrated Easter together in 2006, while gunmen from the Iraqi Ministry of Interior stood watch on the roof. "I remember this church being full and the outside field full, and the hall full of good people," he said.

Workers have spent weeks patching up bullet holes and repairing the building. An adjacent monastery, which was looted after being occupied by US forces, is still vacant.

"In the past two years, we stayed home at Easter and watched the services on TV," says Luay Bedaweede, one of about 200 of the faithful who streamed into the newly renovated church Sunday. He said that, back then, communion wafers were brought to worshippers' homes.

Official support for Christians

In a sign of the Iraqi government's desire to reassure Christians that they are welcome, an Iraqi police general brought greetings from the Minister of Interior. He and a leader of the volunteer security force, the Sons of Iraq, sat in the front row of the Dora church.

"You are messengers of peace. Tell everyone that Christians want only peace," the Bishop Warduni told the security officials.

Young women in denim jeans and sequin-studded T-shirts knelt in prayer next to relatives with their hair partially covered with lace scarves. One of the congregants, Watha Shaba, who had been kidnapped three years ago, reverently unwound a cloth from the bishop's gold and silver scepter. A wide-eyed altar boy furiously rang a bell as incense filled the church.

"Christ is risen," the worshipers recited -- the ancient words in an ancient language.

Ousted by Al Qaeda

During the sectarian violence that erupted in 2006, Dora became a stronghold of Al Qaeda in Iraq. In addition to the Sunni-Shiite violence, fliers told Christians that they would be killed if they openly worshipped, and demanded that they convert to Islam.

When Shiite militias stepped in to fight the Sunni extremists, the neighborhood became too dangerous for almost anyone to stay. "We

Assyrian International News Agency

used to have 3,000 Christian families here -- now there are maybe 500," says Gorgis Orawawa, who recently brought his family back from northern Iraq.

Today, the church was filled with families who have had relatives emigrate in the last six years.

"It's a big surprise to see so many people here," says Randa Sabbagh, a college student who returned to Dora with her parents six months ago. They had been living in another Baghdad neighborhood. One brother emigrated to Australia and another went to Syria.

Bishop Warduni blames much of the emigration on European countries and the United Nations, who he says have helped Christians leave Iraq rather than improving conditions for them within the country.

"Instead of searching for jobs for them and helping to bring peace, to bring reconciliation to the country, they accept the immigration. This is bad," he said in an interview earlier this week.

Attacks on Christians in Mosul in November led to another exodus north to Iraqi Kurdistan and beyond Iraq's borders. But a spate of attacks during the last week in Baghdad, which was believed to have become safer in recent months, has many worried.

"One week ago, we were thinking it is much better. But what happened... makes us a little apprehensive because if we have these car bombs it will be no different," the bishop said.

But he vowed that there would always be a Christian community in Iraq.

"This is our country, no one can push us out," said Bishop Warduni. "We were here before everything."

By Jane Arraf
Christian Science Monitor

© 2011, Assyrian International News Agency. All Rights Reserved. [Terms of Use.](#)