NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Iraqi Muslims, Christians wish to live together in peace again

Brooke Anderson Catholic News Service | Mar. 8, 2011

Armed guards inspect people as they enter St. Joseph Chaldean Catholic Church in Sulaimani, Iraq, Feb. 26. (CNS photos/Brooke Anderson)

SULAIMANI, Iraq -- On a sunny afternoon in this quiet city in northern Iraq, a young veiled Muslim woman from Baghdad kneels to pray -- at a Catholic church.

The church keeper, a woman also from Baghdad, enters the sanctuary and welcomes the visitor.

"Don't worry, pray in your own way," she tells the visitor.

The Muslim woman removes her shoes and kneels before a statue of Mary, then lights candles offered to her by the church keeper. Before leaving, she lights several more candles and, through tears, says, "It's just so hard."

Walking the visitor to the gate, the church keeper says, "You're always welcome here. This is your home."

With the images of sectarian violence having dominated news from Iraq since the U.S.-led invasion of the country in 2003, the appearance of a Muslim woman praying at a Christian church might seem unusual. But Muslim and Christian Iraqis say they lament the increasing segregation of their neighborhoods and villages along religious lines. When a mosque or a church is attacked, both communities mourn.

"Anyone can come and pray here, even Muslims. There's no difference. It's one God," said Fr. Ayman Aziz Hermiz of St. Joseph Chaldean Catholic Church in Sulaimani. The community is home to a large percentage of the 1,300 Christians families who fled north after the bombing of a Syrian Catholic church in Baghdad in November.

St. Joseph's became a temporary shelter for some of the displaced Christians from the Iraqi capital. Most have since found homes around Sulaimani. Despite the tragedy, Hermiz said he believes Iraqis can live together peacefully.

Others share the same desire.

"When the situation becomes safe, it can be so easy for us to live together again. The balance of different cultures and religions is good for society," said Ali Kamal, 22, a business student at the American University of Iraq-Sulaimani and a Shiite Muslim who fled Baghdad in 2006 for the safety of the North.

Kamal said that before the war, it mattered little whether his friends and classmates were Muslim or Christian, Sunni or Shiite. Now, he said, it is different.

"People think about it more and more," he explained. "They want their children to marry within the same sect."

Religious coexistence is part of Iraq's history and a point of pride for many people in the North, who often bring up their mixed family background, their friends from different religions and the country's rich archaeology, which documents layers of civilizations that lived together in the area.

"Our prophet lived with Christians and Jews," said Bakr al-Hashimi, 22, a Sunni Muslim from Baghdad who is a student at the university. "My religion teaches me to be tolerant."

He recalled his childhood before the war, before most of his Christian friends and classmates fled the capital.

"The only difference between us is that we had religion class and they didn't," he said. "We envied them for that."

Al-Hashimi and others from the Iraqi capital hope to return to the city of their childhood, where people gave little thought to their religious differences.

But their dreams of returning to peaceful coexistence will not be easy as long as questions over security remain.

"If the government continues like this, the Christians will be like the Jews of Iraq. The community will one day leave Iraq. We'll lose this heritage, this treasure," al-Hashimi predicted.

Between 2003 and 2008, more than half of Iraq's 1.4 million Christians fled the country. Others fled Baghdad for the relative security of the North.

Al-Hashimi said he does not blame Christians for leaving.

"It's good for them to leave, but it's not good for Iraq to lose them. They leave because they see there's no future for them in Iraq," he said.

Before the war, Iraqis of different faiths and ethnic groups lived in relative security but with little freedom to assert their identities.

"We all lived together. We had a dictatorship, but we lived safely," al-Hashimi recalled.

Today, such freedom has come at a price, with many Iraqis settling in increasingly homogenous neighborhoods and villages, often because of circumstance rather than choice.

"It's sad because we're brothers," Hermiz said.

But he expressed gratitude for the relatively peaceful pocket in the North, where Iraqis of different backgrounds live together.

"There's a good relationship between Muslims and Christians," he said. "Thank God we're not afraid here."

For more coverage of Iraqi Christians, see Brooke Anderson's other story: **Christians in northern Iraq find themselves in flux** [1]

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