



Nineveh, U.S.A.

Chaldean Catholic communities flourish in the American southwest

by Joyce Coronel with photographs by Nancy Wiechec

Newly ordained, the Rev. David Stephan receives a kiss from his aunt during a reception at St. Peter Chaldean Cathedral in El Cajon. A Dominican Sister of St. Catherine of Siena, she traveled from Iraq to be with the family for his ordination.

Zinah Marzana's blue-green eyes fill with tears as she recalls the moment her life changed forever. It was December, and she was holding her infant son as her husband, Zergo, drove along the road outside Tel Kaif in northern Iraq's Nineveh Plain. Her brother sat in the front seat beside her husband. Somehow, they'd lost their way.

"My husband asked for directions from another driver," Ms. Marzana says. At that point, the family discovered the men in the other car were armed. "They asked where we came from and if we were Christian. We told them yes. My husband — he stepped on the gas to try to get away."

But it was too late. The other car sped after them. Bullets ripped through the air, striking and killing her husband. Ms. Marzana was also badly injured by a bullet that lodged in her spine. Paralyzed for six months, she was unable to care for her son, Fadi. Her voice breaks as she describes the helplessness she felt.

"I was nursing my son at the time and I heard him crying. I heard some ladies at the hospital asking, 'Who will feed him?'"

It was an agonizing two years before the soft-spoken, petite woman could walk normally. At that time, in 2009, she and her family decided to leave Iraq.

"I couldn't stay there — it was too hard," Ms. Marzana says quietly.

Her younger sisters nod, relieved to be far from a place where mortal danger is an everyday fact of life. Vian, 19, sums up their feelings: "Our religion — it means everything to us. We were so scared there."

Aunts, uncles and cousins of the family number among the tens of thousands of Christians, as well as Yazidi and other Iraqi minorities, forced from their homes by ISIS in August 2014, who now live in makeshift housing or in camps in Iraqi Kurdistan, or further afield.

Ms. Marzana and her sisters hope to be reunited one day with their displaced family in their new home: a quiet suburb outside Phoenix, Arizona, a world away from the violence that drove them from their native Iraq.

Before finding their way to Arizona, Ms. Marzana and her family first settled in El Cajon, California, home to some 60,000 Chaldean Catholics, most of whom hail from Iraq.

For decades, Chaldeans have been building communities in the southwestern region of the United States. Now, as ISIS drives Christians from their homes in Iraq, these communities have grown into a base of support and hope across the globe.

Over the years, El Cajon, which lies east of San Diego, has taken on the shape of its growing community of Iraqi Christians. Signs in many of the city's shops and restaurants are in Chaldean or Arabic, leading some to dub East Main Street, "Little Baghdad." A stroll through the grounds of St. Peter Chaldean Cathedral is more reminiscent of the ancient city of Babylon, with sculptured lions of Ishtar guarding the entrance to the hall.

From this city, Bishop Sarhad Jammo, a native of Baghdad, leads the Chaldean Eparchy of St. Peter the Apostle, a jurisdiction spanning 19 states in the west of the country. Second only to Michigan — the cradle of the nation's other Chaldean eparchy — California has grown into a major Chaldean hub, with ten parishes and two missions. El Cajon alone also boasts two convents, a monastery and a seminary alongside a catechetical program serving 1,000 children, who learn to pray and celebrate the Qurbana, the eucharistic liturgy of the Chaldean Church, in a modern form of the Aramaic language.

