Chapter 2

Beguiling Challenges Beckoned Jesuits for Centuries

The real optimist is the one with the conviction that God knows, can do and will do what is best for mankind. Christians must live for others.


Early apostolic ventures in Mesopotamia

Various religious orders

The brief span of 37 Jesuit years at Baghdad College contrasts with the centuries of Christian presence and was only the latest in a long line of efforts made by other Jesuits and other religious orders.

Members of the Dominican Order have been in the northern part of Iraq since 1748 and the Carmelites came to Baghdad in 1623, but, the Capuchins had been there before either order. The ancient church of the Carmelites in the center of Baghdad, testifies to the Carmelite's long tenure in Iraq. They founded Catholic primary schools of high quality while attending to the pastoral needs of the Latin Catholics. They founded the St. Joseph school in 1737. In the magazine Baghdad (May, 1971, #3), published by the Ministry of Information, Dar Al-Jumhuriya calls attention to a learned and dedicated Carmelite scholar and Arabist, Fr. Anastase Maria of St. Elias, O.C.D. born in 1866, who published articles in
no less than 62 periodicals about the Arab World using 37 noms de plume. The Arab Academy in Cairo elected him among its first members in 1932.

Interest of the Jesuits in Islam

Ignatius Loyola was always interested in Muslims and dealing with Islam remained one of his highest priorities. He wanted to learn about Islam partly because Muslims controlled the Holy Land, and he sent Jesuits to Egypt in 1550 when the Jesuit Order was only 10 years old. There was a more profound interest in the Middle East at the beginning of the 19th century with the apostolate dealing mostly with dissident Christian groups but always with an interest in Islam. There were numerous Christian massacres, especially during the four centuries of Turkish rule which ended in 1918. Jesuits had been working in Syria and in Turkey, and before the Armenian massacre in 1915 Turkey had 11 Jesuit houses. Both the Jesuit General Wlodimir Ledohovsky, S.J. and Gerhard Bowering, S.J. commented on the modern Jesuit interest in Islam.

Worldwide, quite a number of Jesuits today have the privilege of being teachers of Muslim students. The guiding principle of a changing attitude toward Muslims on the part of the Catholic Church in today's world can be found in the declaration Nostra aetate of Vatican II. The document looks on the Muslims with respect and recognizes their worship of the one God, merciful and almighty, who created heaven and earth and has spoken to human beings. It commends the Muslims for their submission to God, their veneration of Jesus and Mary, their moral conduct, and their life of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. It evokes the example of Abraham as a common bond of faith and invites both Christians and Muslims to overcome centuries of mutual hostilities and cooperate toward justice and peace. The Church explicitly exhorts not only to dialogue but also to collaboration with the followers of Islam. "God's saving will also embraces those who acknowledge the Creator, and among them especially the Muslims, who profess the faith of Abraham and together with us adore the one God, the Merciful One, who will judge men on the Last Day." (Bowering, 1993, pp. 1-3)

St. Ignatius even thought of founding colleges for this purpose in Sicily and Malta where future missionaries could devote themselves to the study of the Arabic language; if the Society had permitted it, he would very gladly have given the last days of his life to this peaceful and apostolic Mission. . . . I
have determined to establish at Rome in the Pontifical Oriental Institute a scientific center dealing with questions relating to Islam. (Ledohovsky, 1937, pp. 719-723)

Baghdad was a very important center in the Muslim world, near Najaf and Karbala and with Muslim dominated countries for hundreds of miles in every direction. At the request of the Vatican in 1850, two Jesuits joined a caravan heading for Baghdad to investigate the feasibility of starting a school there. Their caravan having been robbed during each crossing of the Syrian desert, they notified Rome that the time was not yet opportune to embark on such a project. Shortly after many Jesuits were killed by the Druzes during the 1860 massacre of Christians in Syria.

Interest of the Jesuits in other Christians

The Jesuits had always been convinced that the Oriental Christians themselves are the most effective apostles of the faith when they present a vigorous Christianity to the Muslims. This they certainly had accomplished in the sixth through the ninth centuries when they preached the faith in a campaign that extended to China and included the countries in between. This is related in the book Nestorian Documents and Relics in China by P. Y. Sacki.

In his History of the Jesuits, Bangertrelates the Jesuit efforts to bring about the reunion of Catholic and Orthodox Christians in spite of the fact that a war-torn Middle East had made communication between the Maronites and Rome a practical impossibility for centuries. For one of the early missions Pope Gregory chose two Jesuits, Tommaso Raggio and Gianbattista Eliano, both Hebrew and Arabic scholars. They made their report to Rome in 1580 and Pope Gregory was so delighted by the success of the mission, he founded in Rome the Maronite College and placed it under the supervision of the Society of Jesus. Pope Gregory depended on the Jesuits to continue these delicate discussions with other groups but these later efforts were less successful.

In March, 1583, three Jesuits, counselors to Bishop Leonard Abel, left Rome to meet with leaders of the separated groups. These and other Jesuits who followed held conferences in many of the ancient cities of the Levant, but they were dealing with men who were custodians, and consciously so, of old and not readily discarded traditions which reached back to the days of Nestorius and Dioscorus. Success, which often seemed within their grasp, eluded them like a wraith. The patriarch of the Jacobites was willing to accept papal supremacy but not the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon; the patriarch of the Armenians made a profession of Catholic faith
only to be hailed to Constantinople and to have his decision reversed; conferences with the Melkites at Damascus broke down under pressure of the hostile Turk; the entourage of the patriarch of Jerusalem resisted his desire to renounce schism; in Egypt a new patriarch annulled the letter of submission to Rome sent by Gabriel VIII; the patriarch Elias VIII of the Chaldeans (in Mosul), after bringing the Jesuits to his country, informed them that there was nothing to change in his creed. Cairo, Mosul, Damascus, Jerusalem, Edessa, all became for the Jesuits scenes of blighted hopes. (Bangert, 1986, p. 149)

Other Middle East Jesuit schools

Arab and French Jesuit colleagues had been conducting a celebrated college in Cairo for more than a century along with other missionary congregations and were working in the same field. There was ample opportunity for Catholic education for the Christians in Egypt, however, the Christians of Iraq were not so fortunate. Their country, freed from 400 years of Turkish rule after the First World War, was becoming the modern Kingdom of Iraq, and Baghdad, as its capital was undergoing a tremendous revival. There was not a single Catholic secondary school in the country and it was to remedy that situation that Baghdad College was established by the American Jesuits in the first place.

The Jesuit objective in Baghdad was to help form an active Christian community through sound Christian education. At the same time, by educating a number of Muslim young men they would encourage greater tolerance and understanding of the faith, which would work to the mutual advantage of Christians and Muslims alike.

Though Muslims were admitted to Baghdad College, the objectives of the mission never included proselytizing Muslims. A loyal supporter of the Baghdad Jesuits, Boston's Cardinal Cushing, never seemed to grasp this idea and expressed his opinion to his Jesuit friends: "This mission has to be the biggest waste of money and manpower in the history of the church - not a single convert from Islam!"

Nonetheless, the Baghdad Mission always had a special place in the affections of the New England Province and a particular claim to its spiritual and material support because the "Baghdadi Jesuits" seemed to exemplify the spirit and the traditions of the whole Jesuit Society.
Recent apostolic ventures in Iraq

Petitions from the Baghdad Christians

As far back as 1921 the Chaldean Patriarch, Mar Emmanuel II Thomas, who graduated from the Jesuit University of St. Joseph in Beirut, petitioned Rome for a Jesuit college in Baghdad. Also the Chaldean, Syrian and Armenian bishops together with Catholic priests of the different Middle Eastern rites as well as the leading Christian leaders of the country requested Pope Pius XI to send religious to open a Christian secondary school for boys in Baghdad. At the time only a few Catholic primary schools for girls and a few small primary schools for boys existed. Pius XI thought the time had come and passed the request on to Father General Ledochowski who accepted the undertaking with its numerous responsibilities. His first call was to the American provinces of the Society since English-speaking Fathers were most needed and Americans were more plentiful.

In his dissertation on the history of the early days of Baghdad College, Charles Bashara describes good relations between the Patriarch and the King which made the invitation to the Jesuits more secure. He draws his data from the Chaldean Patriarch's correspondence as well as from the New England Province archives.

The Chaldean Patriarch, Msgr. Yusuf [actually Mar Emmanuel II], described a [1931] visit of King Faisal I to Mosul revealing his close connection to the King. "His Majesty lent a very attentive ear to me and was quite satisfied with the information which I gave him and, at the conclusion of our
interview I expressed to him the great attachment and profound submission of the Christians and especially the Catholics to the Iraqi Government, conforming to our holy belief and to the recommendations reiterated by our August Superiors and that as faithful subjects of His Majesty we did not desire anything but the security of life, the preservation of our rights and traditions, the free exercise of our religion, and the personal statutes, at least as in the time of the Turks.

His Majesty assured me of the great regard which he holds toward my humble person, his conviction of the loyalty of his Catholic subjects and of his strong disposition to supply all of our wants for the present and in the future. On the evening of the 5th [of June 1931] the Patriarch was invited to join the other notables of Mosul at the king's table and was given the place of honor at Faisal's right hand. Faisal . . . said to me with emotion: "Just as our forefathers tried to give unity to us by their good intelligence and mutual services, let us do the same for our grandsons and let us prepare them for a future full of peace and happiness." Faisal's visit boded well for the patriarch and his community, which escaped the massacre of the Church of the East communities in 1933. Yusuf [actually Mar Emmanuel II] was relieved to know that he enjoyed the confidence of the king and with that, felt secure in pressing Rome and the Jesuits to open the proposed school. (Bashara, 1985, pp. 25-28)

**Rome's response**

What was needed to begin such an enterprise, more than the talents of an educator and executive was the wisdom demanded in dealing with the leaders and the diplomats of an Arab country and of a suspicious Muslim public.
The 1931 arrival of the Proto-founder Fr. Walsh

Georgetown's Fr. Edmund A. Walsh, S.J. was chosen and sent to Rome for initial briefing and then to Baghdad as a Vatican representative. Pius XI emphasized with Fr. Walsh the dire need of a Catholic college in Baghdad, but the project was faced with a double difficulty, personnel and financial. Both agreed that the personnel problem could be solved with the help of the Jesuit Superior General and the second by using the reserves of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, a Vatican sponsored foundation of which Fr. Walsh was both a fund-raiser and an officer. Fr. Walsh had a practical plan involving the American Jesuit colleges.

In order to profit by the present tendency of looking toward America for direction and assistance, it would be highly advantageous to place the school under the patronage and the auspices of four high standing Catholic American universities such as Georgetown, Fordham, St. Louis and Boston College. This could be done by forming a corporation, an educational association made up of one man from each of the universities. The Father conducting the school would have full power to act in the name of this corporation. The reputation and the experience of the American universities would be a supporting influence for the school as well as a guarantee of prestige and of a high standard of studies. Moreover, in virtue of its affiliation with American universities, the school could look forward to them to assist in its development financially and otherwise.

The Government of Iraq would also be awakened to the realization that this particular part of its people belong to a great international family. This arrangement would likewise exclude any idea of a political protectorate. Its results would be noticed in a purely moral order and hence should be very effective. (Gallagher, 1959, p. 138)

Fr. Walsh arrived in Baghdad on March 7, 1931 and made his contact with the Iraqi Government. The government had no difficulty granting him permission to open a school of higher education and agreed that starting with a secondary school made sense. In a treaty which had recently been signed by the United States and Iraq, Americans were granted full freedom for founding and running schools in Iraq. It was not, however, until a year later on March 5, 1932, after informing Iraq that the Iraq-American Educational Association was ready to undertake
operations, that he received the following cablegram, as a confirmation of the one he had received nearly a year before but had not made public. A similar letter to Fr. Rice is found in Appendix D.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, BAGHDAD, IRAQ.
DATE 5/3/32 NO. 1350
To: Edmund A Walsh, Esq. S.J. Ph.D.,
Vice President, Georgetown University, Washington D.C.
Subject: - Permission to found a Secondary School.
Dear Sir,
Reference your letter of 14th January, 1931.
On 17th February, 1931 the following cablegram was dispatched to you.
"Permission foundation Secondary School granted conditional compliance with all Government requirements and regulations."

We take this opportunity to wish you complete success.
Yours sincerely, Abdul Hussein Chalabi,
Minister of Education.

College vs. boarding house

The only sticky problem in Fr. Walsh's negotiations came neither from the hierarchy nor from the government of Iraq but from the Vatican's Oriental Congregation which wanted to start a boarding house not a school. The Jesuits as well as Iraq's bishops assumed that they were negotiating for a self sustained college while the Oriental Congregation used the peculiar word "convitto" or boarding house. Fr. Walsh's instructions from the Oriental Congregation limited the Jesuit work to a boarding house for students in government schools, apparently assuming that the Jesuits were not up to the task of starting and directing a college in Iraq. The Jesuits and the Iraqi bishops were shocked at the Congregation's very restricted plan which was so beneath their expectations. They were determined to have a secondary school which would possibly pave the way for a later college and university.

Fr. Walsh visited not only Baghdad but Mosul and Basra. He found the Christian leaders unanimous in demanding a school not a boarding house. Fr. Walsh represented the wishes of Iraq's bishops to the Congregation in a very forceful manner. The Oriental Congregation bowed to the wishes of the Iraqi bishops and reluctantly allowed the college to go forward. They did not take the reversal of their plans graciously, however, and blamed Fr. Walsh for being unwilling to settle for a mere boarding house. As a
result he was excluded from further business between the Congregation and the mission. In fact the plans for Fr. Walsh to lead four Jesuits to Baghdad to start the school were changed by the Oriental Congregation. Furthermore, the Congregation saw to it that the funds to start the school were not given directly to the Jesuits but were funneled to them through New York’s Cardinal Hayes. It was Cardinal Hayes who informed Fr. Walsh that his part in the project was over and done.

Fr. Walsh not only had to cope with Roman bureaucrats but during his journey to visit the Bishop of Mosul he met the head of a tribe associated with satanic influence. The head of the tribe measured his wealth in the number of his 5,000 sheep. He asked how many sheep the great White Father in Rome had. His eyes widened in awe and/or disbelief when Fr. Walsh answered: "about 320 million".

The Iraq-American Educational Association

As a result of Fr. Walsh’s report, the Presidents of eight American Jesuit colleges formed an association to sponsor and aid the educational work in Iraq. This corporation acted as a sort of holding company, to offer both moral support and representation, if such should be necessary. These eight institutions were: Boston College, the University of Detroit, Georgetown University, Loyola University in Chicago, Loyola University of New Orleans, St. Louis University, and the University of San Francisco. For some reason Aloysius J. Hogan, S.J., President of Fordham University, decided not to sign, so Fordham was not involved in the association.

This association was later replaced by the Iraq American Educational Association, duly registered with and approved by the Ministry of Interior in Baghdad. The legal certificate for the incorporation of the Iraq-American Educational Association is in the files of the Recorder of Deeds of the District of Columbia, dated April 9, 1932. A replica of this certificate with the names of the participants is found in Appendix D. One significant item in this particular document is that the term for which the corporation is organized is perpetual. The actual Incorporators were W. Coleman Nevils, S.J., Edmund A. Walsh, S.J., and Joseph A. Farrell, S.J., who were, respectively, the President, the Vice-President and the Treasurer of Georgetown University at that time.

Ever since Fr. Walsh had left Iraq, had reported to the Oriental Congregation and had visited Pope Pius XI and after all the Church and government permissions were in place, the bishops of Iraq were impatiently awaiting the arrival of the Jesuits from America, writing letters urging them to hasten their coming. In January, 1932, the Chaldean Patriarch of Babylon, Mar Emmanuel II Thomas wrote:
Not only many Christians, but notable Muslims as well, are asking 'Where is Father Walsh? When is he coming to begin the great work so necessary for the happiness and prosperity of our people?' We have heard that Father William Rice and four companions destined to begin the work in the Capital of Iraq await only the authorization of the Iraqi Government to set out for Baghdad, but after making inquiries at the American Consulate here, and at the Office of the Minister of the Interior, we can get no confirmation of the rumor. (Gallagher, 1959, p. 140)

They did not have long to wait. At this same time the American Jesuit provincials were busy picking four suitable men for the job. As for the authorization of the Iraqi Government, they anticipated no difficulty and left America without clearance sure that it would eventually arrive. They were right, it did.

The famous mosque of Kadhimain, near Sulaih