Chapter 9

An Auspicious 35th Anniversary: Great Expectations

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Matthew 5:6

An auspicious year of academic promise

The year 1967 preceding the dismissal was the most promising year for the Baghdad Jesuits. The pioneering years dedicated to survival were over and previous suspicions had dissipated. Wonderful opportunities indicated a promising future, not only for the two schools which had grown beyond expectation, but also for the ecumenical work with the varied Christian Churches, the spiritual direction of alumni, the Lay Volunteer program, and the opening of a Jesuit novitiate.

Baghdad College was proud of its slogan: "an Iraqi school for Iraqi boys". Offering five years of English, mathematics, history and Arabic as well as three years of physics, chemistry and biology for the science section, it also boasted of a commercial section. With an enrollment of about 1100 it accepted very capable applicants from the top 10% of the primary schools. Tuition was only ID 50 and more than 20% of the students received financial aid. The graduates had wonderful success in the government-run baccalaureate exams which determined a
student's future and which college would take them; Medical, Engineering, Business or Law. In 1967 while only 45% of the 30,000 Iraqi students taking these exams passed, 96% of the Baghdad College students passed, and seven out of the top ten in the country came from Baghdad College. When the local newspapers reported that the first six highest marks were scored by government school graduates, General Rashid Mukhlis who had been a Minister in several past government Cabinets wrote in to a leading newspaper protesting this false propaganda. He wrote: "The top three students in Iraq were from Baghdad College. The second of them just graduated from there. I know him. He is my son." This notice appeared a few days before the 7/17/68 revolution.

Some of the learned scholars who did so well in the government exams

All firearms had to be surrendered
Al-Hikma was in its 11th year and was one of the earliest Jesuit Universities to become co-educational. In 1962; already one fifth of its 700 students were women. The number of good applicants was steadily increasing and alumni were getting impressive jobs after graduation. Some Al-Hikma professors were involved in the UNESCO revision of mathematical education for all the Arab states. Another favorable sign was the growth of the Jesuit Lay Volunteer program bringing annually about a dozen young American and European college graduates to work on the mission for a few years.

Of all the previous 36 years of the mission, perhaps the most encouraging was this school year 1966-67. The pioneering years dedicated to survival seemed to be over because earlier Muslim suspicions of proselytizing efforts had generally disappeared. The promise of future opportunities (more than the absence of past dangers) made that year very encouraging: opportunities for Baghdad College, Al-Hikma University, Islamic studies, ecumenical work with the various Christians of Iraq and the spiritual direction of alumni.

Even misunderstandings were taken care of with more dispatch than any other time in the previous 35 years. An example concerned Fr. Nash's photography for the Al-Hikma Yearbook.

I had just admitted to the University the son of an Iraqi General who thanked me and was about to leave the office when three white shirts (C.I.D.) burst into the room to arrest me for interrogation at Rashid Military Camp. The general did not like this intrusion and spoke to the white shirts, slapping the swagger stick against his thighs. They convinced him there was no mistake and that "those were their orders". He left the room, I went with the white shirts and we arrived at Rashid Camp to be ushered into the office of the Camp Commander, Abu Jibben. Present also were two civilian judges and another military officer. Abu Jibben started the interrogation in a very intimidating manner "Why are you taking pictures of my airfield?" I denied that I was, acknowledging that I took pictures of our campus from the roof of the building on Al-Hikma property. His airfield happened to be in the distant background and when the photo was printed in the yearbook I had replaced the airfield with a false sky. He had the Yearbook on his desk along with the false sky.

Just then the phone rang. Abu Jibben kept saying "Yes Sir!" "Yes Sir!" and as he hung up the phone his manner softened and he let me leave. I learned afterwards that the Field General had gone to the Minister of Defense and demanded
to know "Why are you interrogating that Father who just admitted my son to his University?" (Fr. Nash)

1967: Baghdad College's 35th anniversary

Things looked so promising during the year of 1967 that staging was purchased for the graduation exercises. Henceforth, for the first time the graduations would be held on the Baghdad College campus instead of in the rented Gardens of Baghdad. So all the equipment necessary was purchased and the stage was set up on the great lawn between the administration building and the chapel.

During its 11 years Al-Hikma had impressed many Iraqis. Since 1960 under General Abdul Karim Qasim, Prime Minister and Leader of the Revolution, it had become the custom for a high Iraqi Government official to be present at Al-Hikma graduations. Al-Hikma had so impressed the Baghdad bishops that they wanted an inter-ritual major seminary under the auspices of Al-Hikma. During that same Spring of 1967 the possibilities in the Islamic apostolate were quite encouraging. Fr. Richard McCarthy, S.J., was well known to Muslim scholars for his books in Arabic on the theologians of Islam, al Ashari and al Baqillani. Fr. John Donohue, S.J., was becoming a familiar figure to the leaders of the Shiite (Shee'a) sect of Muslims and was a welcome visitor to their holy places in Karbala and Najaf. In 1967 construction of the Oriental Institute began on the campus of Al-Hikma. It was to be a place for pursuing research into Islamics, oriental languages and the many manuscripts on early Christianity buried in the museums and religious houses of the northern parts of Iraq and Syria and southern part of Turkey.

Al-Hikma Jesuits enjoying Christmas
Aerial view of Al-Hikma looking west towards the Tigris River

Apostolic work in the Christian community also was quite hopeful in the Spring of 1967. Seven of the Baghdad Jesuits were bi-ritual; members of the Latin rite as well as of one of the various oriental rites of the Catholic Church. Some Jesuit were now available to celebrate Mass in the Chaldean, Syrian, Melkite and Maronite rites. A larger number of Jesuits went to some of the Baghdad parishes to celebrate Sunday Mass, although not many were able to preach in Arabic. A big event for Baghdad Christians was the annual Novena of Grace run by the Jesuits in the Chaldean Cathedral, where the services seemed to be more crowded than at any other time of the year. The retreat movement (open and closed) among Christians in Iraq was flourishing. Apart from the regular retreats for the students, about 10 smaller closed
retreats a year were given to alumni and adults on the two campuses.

During the spring of that year, 1967, the lay volunteers had sorted out all the details for a summer camp for the Baghdad College students to work with the youth of Iraq, combining athletic events and studies. For many students it would have been the first time the hot summer months were put to good use.

Some imaginative and creative undertakings

That same spring (1968) there was much optimism in the air and plans were being made by so many for a very busy summer. Other proposals are mentioned in Appendix D but here are listed some specific projects.

In addition to their academic camp, the lay volunteers were preparing a soccer football league on Baghdad College campus for the poor boys of the city. Plans were being formed for reunions of various classes of alumni with discussion groups for the Muslims and retreats for the Christians. Candidates were being examined for the entrance into the new Jesuit novitiate. Fr. Guay constructed two geodesic dome houses for the families of our watchmen who patrolled the Al-Hikma campus night and day and had given years of faithful service since the University opened. Fr. Guay also submitted plans for a small chapel with a unique design that featured three geodesic domes.
Increase in alumni activities

In the late sixties, on their return visits to the Fathers, the alumni spoke of the hardships and setbacks in facing the many difficulties and problems of everyday life in Iraq. They spoke of a need not only of Jesuit encouragement but that of their former classmates to fill the lack of intellectual and spiritual stimulation. The students felt that they left school at an age too immature to carry out the principles and ideals they learned by themselves but would be helped greatly by continual contact with the Fathers and older alumni. They organized a program at regular intervals of meetings and activities for alumni. They would be broken down into groups according to age and profession and whatever Jesuits were familiar with a certain group would devote their time and energy to that group, be it medical or engineering students, or graduates of a certain class.

Opening the Novitiate

Each year several of our graduates expressed the desire to become Jesuits, but parental opposition proved to be too much for the young men. Their desires were frustrated by parents who were justifiably apprehensive about their sons being moved to another country 8000 miles away and foreign to their own. There had been no Iraqi Jesuit vocation since 1956 and only six Jesuit vocations in the 37 years of the mission. Part of this parental opposition arose from the parents' desire that their son add to the prestige of the family by becoming a doctor or engineer.

More often, however, a genuine concern for the welfare of the boy prevented consent. Parents feared they would not see him for seven years; that he was not old enough for such a sudden change of culture and environment so different from their own; that if he left the Jesuit Order in America, he would be too ashamed to return to his family in Iraq; that seminarians have a subnormal and arduous life.

To confront these objections the Fathers decided that same year, 1967, to start a Jesuit Novitiate in Baghdad. It began the following year in September 1968 at the Superior's residence of St. Joseph in the middle of Baghdad. The idea was that the novices would be separated, but not distant from their parents; that they could receive their early training amid the environment in which they would later work and in accordance with the decrees worked out by the Thirty-First Jesuit General Congregation (held in 1965-1966). [A General Congregation is a deliberative body of Jesuits chosen as representatives of all the Jesuit provinces throughout the world.]

Jesuit Novices could keep up social contact with their
contemporaries and at the same time study Arabic and take on Novitiate programs more suited for their future apostolate in this country. Most especially their life would be seen as a dignified and happy life and so might well act as a catalyst for future vocations. In its first year when one novice had plunged himself into the program with enthusiasm, many of the objections voiced before the project was undertaken evaporated. Anti-American feelings had hampered such efforts so it was remarkable to get the Novitiate started at all in those trying times.

Fr. John McCarthy directing the choir

On January 5, 1968 a decision was made to open a Novitiate and Fr. Morgan was sent to explore oriental Jesuit Novitiates in Bombay, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan. On September 5, 1968 at the age of 18 Steve Bonian came accompanied by his father and sister to start his novitiate (the superior’s residence) at Rawaf St. in Bettaween. Steve was Chaldean and was born in Iran while his two sisters, Svetlana and Mariella were born in Iraq. He began his long retreat the next day at Sulaikh. During the Novitiate he studied Arabic and theology at Al-Hikma, took Chaldean lessons and did pastoral work at the Cathedral in Bettaween.

On June 26, 1969 Steve Bonian left Baghdad with Fr. Morgan and went to Bikfiah to finish his first year. In September it was decided that he go to Ireland to finish his other year of the novitiate. He pronounced his vows a year later and was ordained
February 27, 1982 in the Chaldean, Maronite and Latin rites at the Maronite church in Jamaica Plain, MA. He is now doing pastoral and catechetical work in Jerusalem where he lives at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Jerusalem.

Opening day of school began with Mass for all Christians

Oriental Institute

On July 4, 1968 in a quiet ceremony, Fr. Richard McCarthy laid the corner stone for the Oriental Institute. It was to be built by Fr. Guay with funds donated by the Gulbenkian Foundation and was expected to be completed by the end of the 1969 Summer.

The Oriental Institute was the dream of Fr. McCarthy who planned each detail, composed a convincing rationale for it and found a way to make it happen. It was meant to be an integral part of Al-Hikma University with the same general objectives proper to every true university: the communication, diffusion, and enrichment of human knowledge with a view to equipping the student to live as rich and fruitful a life as possible, both as an individual human person and as a member of a particular society which has a definite role to play in the perfecting of the larger society which embraces the whole human person.

The Oriental Institute had for its principal objective the promotion of inter-cultural understanding, esteem, and cooperation. East and west can meet on cultural and intellectual levels for mutual enrichment and profit. The entire work of the Institute would help to achieve this through the medium of special lectures, conferences, seminars, and meetings both local and
regional. It would work toward undergraduate and graduate training in the various fields of study; training in methods of research and finally publications of the results of research projects.

This year gave all the Jesuits and their colleagues a warm sense of self confidence because of all the reasons noted above: the struggle for survival and disruptive suspicions seemed to be a thing of the past. Both schools had grown beyond expectation and wonderful opportunities in a spiritual and scholarly direction, ecumenical work especially with the varied Christian Churches, religious vocations and the lay volunteer program were all tremendously encouraging.

As it turned out this year was merely the calm before the storm.

*The last building started by the Jesuits: the Oriental Institute shown on a postcard sent by Fr. James Larkin to his sister Helen*