

*Fr Michael D. Linden, a Jesuit from the New England province, has a challenging job. Living at the Jesuit Center in Jordan, he keeps exploring ways for the 'restoration' of the Society in Iraq. In this interview he speaks to Victor Edwin, SJ for Jivan.*

**Fr Michael, as Fr Provincial's Assistant for International Ministries in Jordan, what is your work? What does the Jesuit Center do?**

The Jesuit Center began as a new apostolate of the Jesuits of the New England (U.S.A) Province in 1987. For nearly 20 years, many of the New England Jesuits who had worked in Baghdad remained in the Near East in various ministries. The Latin Church in Jordan was growing,



Second, the Center supports the faith-formation of Jordanian Christians through Bible courses, catechetics, workshops in-house and in rural areas. It is entirely Jordanian in scope. Soon we hope to partner with Bethlehem University for a process which will enrich Christians who are teaching

together and tend to have very cordial relations. The Jordanian Christian community is considered to be the "most Arab" of the Near East. It is often thought that matters of Arab culture are automatically Islamic, but not entirely so here; the Christians are very Arab in outlook, practice and living. But in spite of this Christians and Muslims embody deep cultural prejudice and antipathy toward each other. Old age hatreds are easily picked up by the young who pay the price with stress and tendencies toward fundamentalism.

**I heard it is your responsibility to find ways for restoring the Jesuit presence in Iraq. Jesuits were in Bagdad from 1932 to 1962. Why did they have to leave Bagdad?**



## Can Jesuits return to Iraq?

and one of our Jesuits began a library for the Christians such as is found in many areas of the Muslim world. Soon, the bishop asked the Jesuits to consider ministries among the English-language Christians, which began in 1987. Two years after that, the Jesuits established a Center for adult faith formation.

Presently, the Center now has three major foci. Firstly, the English-language parish, Sacred Heart, is a "personal" parish of the Jesuits, and has a Jesuit pastor. The parish has no building, no assets, no income – it is a pastor and people who assemble in five locations each weekend for Eucharist and the Word of God. Many members are workers from other countries, working in Jordanian households, embassies, agencies, and businesses.

in parishes, church and state schools. Third, the Center is the administrative home for the Jesuit Refugee Service in Jordan, which organizes special projects like 'Jesuit Commons' where refugees can obtain university credit for various types of learning done at the Center.

**Prince Ghazi of Jordan, at the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute, Jordan has taken a number of initiatives for Dialogue with Christians. 'A Common Word Initiative' was said to be a major one. Does the Jesuit Center establish contact with the Prince and the institute?**

Christian-Muslim relations in Jordan is at high levels presently. Little goes on at level of mosque/church, the neighborhoods. Notwithstanding this, Christians and Muslims grow

Fr General asked American Jesuits to establish a school in Iraq in 1932 based on a joint appeal by the King and the Patriarch of the Chaldeans. So Baghdad College opened, staffed entirely by the young New England Province. It had a fine reputation among both Christians and Muslims. Many prominent Iraqi leaders were its students. Iraq grew in political and social ways, oil was discovered, the monarchy decreased in influence, and secular Baathist thought, violence and tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims grew. Christians were largely exempt from this, and Jesuit graduates were contributing to various growing Iraqi realities: oil, the military, government, business, finance, religion. Jesuits and their school remained tied to monarchical

and merchant-class interests, and they even opened a university called Al Hikma in 1959.

Secular Baathist political power grew, the monarch was assassinated, and the 1967 Israeli aggressions against Jordan and Egypt radicalized Iraqi life substantially, and American Jesuits were given short notice to leave, in two separate waves, in 1968 and 1969. Both schools eventually were wrapped into the state system of schools, and the U.S. Jesuits and the few Iraqi Jesuits filtered to other parts of the Near East or repatriated to the U.S.

**Are the present authorities favorable to Jesuits returning to Iraq?**

Actually, virtually anyone we have spoken to is favorable. Many remember the schools and "the good old days" of course, and that approach would be unrealistic now. However, there are good and supportive persons, Christians and Muslims, secularists and devout, who express hope and welcome to the Jesuits.

**What will be the nature of Jesuit presence in Iraq in the future?**

This is hard to predict. Some would like the U.S. Jesuits to parachute with a full Jesuit staff and system from the 1950's back to Baghdad College. Some believe this is possible!

More realistically, Jesuits have learned in Amman that faith formation and service to migrant workers is important in the Near East. Close collaboration in the pastoral goals of the local Bishops is important. This can probably be replicated in Iraq. Also, Iraqi Christians are a "giving" people, and there will be Jesuit vocations from Iraq. These Iraqi Jesuits will eventually make the major discernment about their identity and work; perhaps it will include schools, perhaps not.

**The Christian population is said to be depleting alarmingly in Iraq. What is the impact of this demographic change on the socio-cultural fabric of Iraq and the neighboring regions?**

I don't know the facts, but I hear this often. One Iraqi bishop told me, "Yes, I have lost half of my people. But I still have half of them! I will always be working for them and their faith." I am sure that social fabric in Iraq is rapidly changing. Terrible violence has led to loss, resentment, revenge, and resistance or flight. And some types of violence remain on-going in Iraq. Some Christians do impute this gangsterism to Muslim theology or leadership or culture. I suppose victims of violence have a right to offer such interpretations but they must be balanced. Virtually every leader in the region, including Iraq, says Christians are rightful members of the community, but some Christians reject it as "lies." Demonization of perceived oppressors is normal. I expect that a commitment to these difficult societies, as Christians, might be more helpful; it is often difficult to see what the Christians choose to contribute to these evolving societies, but it is very easy to hear their complaints and to catalog their perceived losses.

**How is it going to affect Christian-Muslim relations in general in the West Asian Region?**

The demographic changes in the Christian-Muslim mix in communities has been fairly normal in the past. Jews were superseded by Christians, and Muslims diffused from Arabia throughout the region to supplant the Christians and Jews. Political ideology and competing claims to ancestral territories will be violent as has been in the past. Clearly, the minority which assesses itself as oppressed by a power will be seeking redress by any means - media, negotiation, diatribe, finance, sensationalism, political action, violence.

Since most regard themselves as oppressed victims, if the stress is characterized as "Christian-Muslim" then relations between them will be threatened and weakened. Perhaps there are Christians and perhaps there are Muslims in some societies who might recognize together that something else is the oppressive force.

**In what ways do you think the Asian Jesuits could lend a helping hand in Jordan and in Iraq in the future?**

Hopefully Jesuit work can truly internationalize. There are, of course, very important reasons for Jesuits to work within their own culture, and both Iraq and Jordan might produce Jesuits who would be very important to the work of the Society of Jesus.

It would be mistake to keep the work of Jordan or of Iraq in the hands of one culture. Americans are usually awkward, it is true. Others are arrogant, it is true. Others are indifferent to culture. Many are judgmental of customs. These problems among "missionaries" are as old as the mission movement. One solution is a healthy mix of international Jesuits who have to live out their cultural tensions in their own community while they remain open and sensitive to the needs and opportunities they discover in their context - and the cultural strengths they bring and find. Can Indians work with Arabs? Can Canadians work with USA Jesuits? Can Vietnamese work with Filipinos? Let us do it!

**You mentioned that *Jivan* is a familiar magazine to you. Do you read *Jivan* regularly? What do you like the most in *Jivan*? What is your message to its readers?**

*Jivan* appeared in my mailbox for years when I worked in Washington at the Jesuit Conference and in Boston for the New England Province. I welcome it in Amman and, later, in Baghdad! I have enjoyed learning about the South Asian growth and thinking for many years; I enjoy the occasional spicy criticism of the "good old days" which really are "bad old days." And there is a subtle pressure to evolve "mission consciousness" and elements of missiology through narrative and interview. These are the strengths of the magazine that help our mission. ■