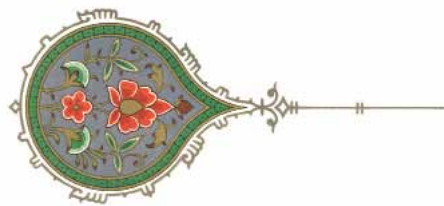


JESUITS in Baghdad



Before Saddam Hussein, long before American troops landed on the ground, five Holy Cross Jesuits arrived in Iraq as part of the Society of Jesus' global mission. And their experiences there may surprise you.

IN 1931 POPE PIUS XI, responding to requests from the Catholic bishops of Iraq, asked the Society of Jesus to open a secondary school for boys in Baghdad. Ultimately, the Jesuits of the New England Province were assigned this mission, and significant numbers of Jesuits went to Baghdad between 1932 and 1969. They established Baghdad College on a 25-acre campus, which included a library, laboratories and a chapel in addition to academic buildings. In 1956, they established another (and coeducational) school in Baghdad, Al-Hikma University.

Five of the men who accepted the Pope's call to work on the banks of the Tigris River came together at Holy Cross' Rehman Library to discuss their memories of that time. With Margaret Molloy '11, secretary of Alpha Sigma Nu, the Jesuit Honor Society, serving as interviewer, the panel explained the challenges of their work, the joys of experiencing the Muslim culture and their feelings on the eventual expulsion of the Jesuits

from Baghdad in 1968 under the Baathist government.

The panel consisted of **Rev. John J. Donohue, S.J.**, '48 who spent three years in Baghdad and more than four decades in the Middle East; **Rev. Charles J. Dunn, S.J.**, vice president emeritus, associate director of gift planning, who served for three years at Baghdad College; **Rev. J. Thomas Hamel, S.J.**, spiritual director, who holds a Ph.D. in Middle Eastern Language from the University of Michigan and spent six years teaching at Baghdad College and Al-Hikma University; **Rev. Paul F. Harman, S.J.**, special assistant to the president of the College and a former Holy Cross Trustee, who was in Baghdad from 1962 to 1965; and **Rev. Simon E. Smith, S.J.**, who served in Baghdad from 1955 to 1958 and continues to work with the Iraqi Student Project, helping Iraqi refugees pursue a college education in the United States.

Holy Cross Magazine listened in on the discussion, and what follows are highlights of the conversation.

MARGARET MOLLOY '11: Please tell us a little about the early days of the Jesuit school in Baghdad—in the 1930s.

FR. DONOHUE: When they first started it did not really take off. The second language in Iraq was English, and Iraqis with any money would send their boys to school in England. Then World War II came and travel was prohibited, so these people decided the best alternative was the Jesuits. Once the better-off people started coming, the other people followed them and we became a success.

We had about 1,000 students and we tried to keep it a balance between Christian and Muslim, though it was slightly heavier on the Muslim side. We tried to recruit among all the communities, but certain communities weren't too open to sending their boys to study.

MOLLOY: How did you handle the language barrier?

FR. DONOHUE: We hired a number of local professors to teach the Arabic language, Arabic history, Arabic geography, Arabic social studies. There were only a few Jesuits at the beginning who knew any Arabic. As time went on, some learned and were able to use it in the classroom.

FR. HAMEL: When I was studying Arabic, I kept wishing that I had begun at the age of 1½ rather than 26 or whatever it was. I had the great advantage of being taught by Islamic scholar Fr. Richard McCarthy, S.J.

The sound of the language is mesmerizing—you have to hear it. I used to go out and preach on Sundays and hear confessions; it was an on-going lifetime commitment and I fell in love with the language because it gives you a sense of belonging to the people. I could walk through the streets of Baghdad and know I could speak to people in Arabic a little bit and I could read Arabic a little bit. I find that a great blessing in my history, I appreciate that.

MOLLOY: What was the religious education in the curriculum, and how did that balance between Islam and Christianity?

FR. DUNN: There was religious education for Christians. The Christians were not all Roman Catholics, there were quite a few Orthodox there—Greek, Armenian—all different types. When I returned to the States to study theology, I appreciated the opportunity we experienced in Baghdad to meet, in the 20th century, the living descendants of these first Christians.

All Christians attended religion classes and we taught the

Roman Catholic faith. The Muslim students did not attend any religion classes. This was school policy.

FR. HARMAN: Muslim families, understandably, would not want their sons attending religion classes at a Christian school, and if a Muslim student expressed interest, he would have been discouraged from attending a religion class because Muslim parents and the Iraqi government might interpret this as our wanting to proselytize.

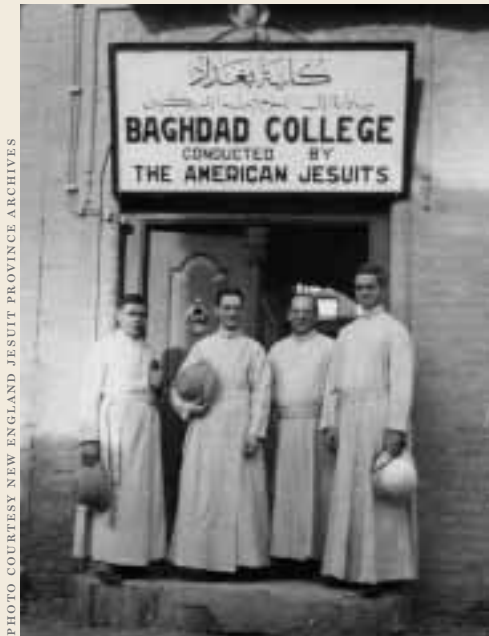
MOLLOY: What are some of your other personal memories from living and teaching at the schools?

FR. HARMAN: My most predominate memory is of the hospitality of the people, and the eagerness of the students. They were very excellent, excellent students. I admired them for their quick ability to learn English since my ability to learn Arabic was not that quick!

The other very strong memory that I have—and it stays with me even now—is observing Muslims at prayer. This is one of the most beautiful and moving memories that I have. For me, the image of a Muslim at prayer is the image of a human being turning his or her whole life over to God.

PHOTO COURTESY NEW ENGLAND JESUIT PROVINCE ARCHIVES

An aerial view of Iraq's Baghdad College, established in 1932 by the Society of Jesus, and staffed by Jesuits until 1969.



Jesuits John Mifsud, Edward Madaras, William Rice and Edward Coffey are considered the “Four Founders” of Baghdad College.

And because I was there when John F. Kennedy was assassinated, I have a very powerful memory of the reaction of people, ordinary people on the streets, who came up to offer their condolences and their sympathy for the loss of our president. At the time, the United States did not have formal diplomatic relations with Iraq, but there was a memorial service at the Swiss Embassy where there was a book where you could express your sympathies. And I remembered, driving down the streets with all the embassies, and all the flags were at half-mast, with one exception, and that was the flag of China. That was a powerful memory.

FR. SMITH: For me the highlight was when King Faisal II, came to visit the campus. We were there at the sufferance of the government. It didn't bother us all that much—we were aware that we were guests. But his visit to our campus at the 25th anniversary of the school sort of affirmed us; gave us

tremendous confidence that we were there at the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing. And it was extraordinary, if you stop and think about it, for the king of Iraq, a Muslim country, to make a formal visit to a Catholic, foreign school. I shall never forget that moment and the lift it gave us all.

FR. HAMEL: The first house where I lived was in a place called Saaduun, and our next-door neighbors were in a mud village, separated by a bit of a field, and of course they had no running water. So we invited them to come to our house to get water, and it was a great experience to see these people, especially to meet the children. The beauty of children is they speak to you even though you can't speak to them ... they don't mind talking to you all the time, and you pick up the sound of the language. I was also impressed by people living in the mud village with no running water, no electricity, and a man would come out in the morning all dressed up in a uniform. He must have been a sort of policeman in his circle, and he would direct traffic, very dignified. The women, too, were very well dressed. I never got over the dignity of these people who lived in a mud village.

The second year we moved to another house in Saaduun, a much larger house, and I remember distinctly Palm Sunday. We had a little chapel in the house, and I was reading, proclaiming the gospel of the Passion in Arabic. In front of me was this elderly woman, very pious, who came regularly to Mass. She was right in front of me as I was reading out loud, and she was one or two words in ahead of me—she knew this from memory, she was illiterate. I was taken by the culture of the people who heard the word of God from memory who couldn't even read ... I was taken by the reverence they had for the word of God.

FR. DUNN: I recall the focus that the Jesuit community apostolate had—we knew clearly why we were there. The Jesuits had been invited by the Pope to train Christians for future leadership roles. That was our focus. We knew that the Muslims were there, of course, and friendships were established, but we had our focus. And the wisdom and policy not to proselytize Muslims.

Today we say, “Men and women for others.” That's sort of generic—that's peace, justice and so forth. Back then, in 1949, there was one direction, and the direction was AMDG: for the greater honor and glory of God, for the salvation of souls. That included Christian and non-Christian, but primarily it was to help and assist the Christians so that these young men would have the opportunity to become leaders in Iraq and be able to compete in all areas with their fellow Iraqis.

FR. DONOHUE: My first night in Baghdad, to my surprise, they said, “Well, we sleep on the roof because of the heat.” They had the beds up there and a little bit of netting and so forth, and I innocently asked a question, “Well, what if it rains?” I was told it never rains in the summertime. That night it poured, first time in Baghdad.

The most important thing that I got out of going to Baghdad was that I saw the world from a very different perspective. I was born and brought up in Worcester, and Baghdad showed that the world was not exactly the same as it looked from Worcester. I can remember when I came back and was studying Arabic down at Weston [Mass.], I would get these images that were connected with the language. I'd say that my view of the world radically changed by going to Baghdad, and I think for the better.

MOLLOY: Could you describe the volunteer experiences that Holy Cross and Boston College alumni had in Baghdad?

FR. DUNN: Fr. Joseph LaBran returned from Baghdad in the mid-1950s, and talked to the students graduating here in 1960 about volunteering in Iraq. There was one in particular, he was a great athlete: Richard Wotruba '60, P94. Dick went in 1960. He was the first young layman to go as an alumnus from Holy Cross or from any place—to volunteer, teach, study and coach. The students loved athletics; they were good athletes. The Jesuits themselves did the coaching so when Wotruba came it was a great asset. Others followed him, and all together there were 28 Holy Cross alumni who gave 40 years amongst them ... they were a great help.

MOLLOY: Can you tell us more about Al-Hikma University?

FR. DONOHUE: Before the 1958 revolution, in 1956, the government asked us to open a university. There was a state university, Baghdad University, which was founded by the British—they had a lot of British professors and practically all the subjects were taught in English. The Iraqi minister of education and the prime minister thought it would be good to have a little competition for the state university, so they encouraged the Jesuits to open one. They gave us a large plot of land south of Baghdad, and we built buildings, and we taught business administration and civil engineering. It was not a large university ... when we closed down in 1969 we were in the range of 200 to 250 students. It was just beginning, really, but it was effective and it turned out some good students.

When we left in 1968 the university continued until the last class graduated, and then it was just abolished. It was an interesting operation but never really took off as it should have.

FR. HAMEL: Al-Hikma was also coed—great for the social life of the women. On holidays, the women would come back to school; especially the Muslim women, because otherwise they'd have to stay at home. But it was safe for them to come back to school, and be with the fathers and the students, so it helped the social life of the Muslim women especially.

MOLLOY: Let's talk now about when the Jesuits were expelled from Baghdad, and the closing of the schools.

FR. DONOHUE: The closing was sort of interesting in a way. Some people thought that we were accused of spying; this ac-

Audience members in Rehm Library listened as five Holy Cross Jesuits spoke of their experiences in Baghdad. They are (from left) Rev. Simon E. Smith, S.J., Rev. Charles J. Dunn, S.J., Rev. Paul F. Harman, S.J., Rev. J. Thomas Hamel, S.J., and Rev. John J. Donohue, S.J., '48.



TIMELINE

1917 Britain seizes Baghdad

1920 Britain establishes state of Iraq

1931 Pope Pius XI asks Jesuits to establish a school in Baghdad

1932 Iraqi independence following World War I, Jesuits establish Baghdad College

1939-1945 British once again occupy Iraq during World War II

1956 Jesuits establish Al-Hikma University south of Baghdad

1958 Military coup, Iraq declared a republic

1967 Six Day War

1968 Jesuits expelled from Baghdad, Al-Hikma University is closed

1979 Saddam Hussein becomes president of Iraq

1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War

1990 Iraq invades Kuwait, first Gulf War begins

cusation was in the Arabic newspapers. The university was on land south of Baghdad, near where the British had established a large army camp to protect the city against raids from the Shia tribes in the south. In order to get to the university you had to go through the army camp—everyone did—and this fueled the rumor that we were spies.

But the problem was there were two factions of the Baath party, one was in power, and the other looked around for something to attack the government on—and we were sitting there pretty. There were 60 American Jesuits teaching in the high school and in the university, and they said “What are Americans doing here teaching our sons, the Americans were behind Israel in the 1967 war!” The minister of interior was responsible for chasing us out in 1968. I think we were given 48 hours to leave.

The minister of education was a Muslim brother, supposedly an extreme Islamist, and he was for us. He said, “This is a disastrous mistake throwing you people out; you’re doing nothing but good for the country.”

But I think it was fortunate that we were expelled when we were because the years following that from 1969 to 1975 were terrible years in Baghdad. The Baath party was scared to death of being thrown out of power, so they were looking under every corner to find enemies. ... It was a terrible time—some very good friends were murdered in this panic of the Baath party, so if we hadn’t left then, they probably would have carried us out on stretchers little by little. The situation was so bad.

MOLLOY: What about the state of Christians in Iraq today?

FR. HAMEL: The culture of hospitality in the Arab world is so strong. When we’d visit the students and their families, they couldn’t be more gracious: “My home is your home, now and forever.” Now that so many Christians have left the country, the sense of loss of home in homeland must be terrible. Christians have had to leave and those who stay are threatened day by day. I don’t know what to say, but my heart goes out to them, those who are there, those who have already left because of their culture. Home is everything to them.

I couldn’t get over their hospitality. I remember one time going to the Baghdad symphony with Fr. McCarthy, and we had a car full of Iraqi nuns. On the way to the symphony we got a flat tire. I could never change a flat tire, and all of a sudden five young men came out of no place and changed the tire. I knew I could not give them any money, for that would be shame for them to accept. I thanked them profusely. It’s just their culture—a beautiful, beautiful culture.

FR. DONOHUE: The attacks on Christians are carried out

by fundamentalist Muslims who are really wild and run nothing but a negative program. The thing is, the Christians are in the position we were in 1968 and 1969. When you want to attack and embarrass a government you look for a weak point. We were the weak point between the two Baath factions. The Christians are the weak point now. So the people who are against the existing regimes, they can attack the Christians and nobody will react, they can embarrass the government but nothing will happen. Nobody cares about the Christians, really.

I think there’s so much pain today in the world ... that Iraq gets lost, except for those of us that have a personal connection. We have an alumni group, the Baghdad College and Al-Hikma alumni that has been meeting every two years since the 1980s. And as time goes on, the group dies off. We met a year ago last summer, and many of the alumni are in great pain as they seek to bring any relatives that they still have back here.

MOLLOY: Can you tell us about your involvement with the Iraqi Student Project, Fr. Smith?

FR. SMITH: The Iraqi Student Project brings Iraqi refugee students from Syria and Jordan over here to the U.S. They are in about 40 colleges across the country to continue their education. There is one student here in Worcester at Clark University and there is another coming to W.P.I. We have to raise the money to support them and stuff like that, but that’s what the support group does.

MOLLOY: What is the Society of Jesus’ hope for the future in Baghdad?

FR. HARMAN: The Society of Jesus obviously is looking at the whole world, and it isn’t for any of us to say what the future will be. The Jesuits have great devotion to the people of the whole Middle East, and other parts of the world too.

FR. SMITH: In March of 2006, I went back to Baghdad to see what might be possible. Al-Hikma University is pretty much in ruins, bombed. You can imagine who bombed it. The land itself is being used by another institution that has 43 buildings and 6,000 students, so we are not likely to get that land back, but we might get something in compensation. The secondary school, Baghdad College, is still functioning and is still a premier school of the country. Maintenance on the grounds has been poor, but it still produces terrific students. The land, however, is in the possession of the Chaldean Patriarch, at least the parts that we would like to have, which were the house where we lived, the

Special Concert Open to All



The Jesuits in Baghdad panel was part of the College’s programming to celebrate “Jesuit Heritage: Jesuits Around the Globe.” The next event will be the Jesuit Heritage Concert of Baroque Music at 3 p.m. on May 1, in St. Joseph Memorial Chapel. The afternoon will feature the Holy Cross Schola Cantorum, a chamber choir of 20 voices specializing in Gregorian chants, a cappella polyphonic motets and the great sacred choral masterpieces. The group will perform with the Ensemble Abendmusik, one of Boston’s premier period instrument orchestras. The program will consist of Baroque sacred works written for Jesuit churches throughout Europe and South America by Kapsberger, Byrd, Carissimi, Zelenka and others. They will perform under the direction of Distinguished Artist-in-Residence James David Christie. Holy Cross organ scholar Jennifer McPherson ’13 will perform works by the Italian Jesuit composer, Rev. Domenico Zipoli, S.J. The concert is free and open to the public. Visit the events calendar at holycross.edu for more information.

church, the cemetery that is there and the boarding house. There’s no possibility of getting those back. We have had meetings and meetings and meetings with the patriarch, and it’s clear to me that it’s not going to happen.

Meanwhile, however, the Provincial in New England has said, “Maybe we can put a presence in Baghdad—it certainly won’t be a school yet, but a presence there for people who are in pain and hurting from their own history.” But he hasn’t acted on that. I am too old for this but I would like to be the one to go back and do that.

For further reading: Jesuits by the Tigris: Men for Others in Baghdad (1994, out of print) by the late Rev. Joseph MacDonnell, S.J.