



From Deacon Mark Miller's Desk

Iraq. For the past 20 years the country figured prominently in the nightly news. It was the home of this bombing or that battle.

Baghdad and Basra, Mosul and Kirkuk are as familiar to us as the major cities in our state. Hearing and seeing 20 years of news reporting, we might think we know, at least, a little, about the country. We're probably wrong when it comes to Iraq's long history of Catholicism.

The most prominent of Iraq's 14 recognized Christian groups is the Chaldeans. Almost 80% of the country's Christians are Chaldeans. The Chaldean Church is one of the 24 Catholic churches in the world. They are affiliated with the Eastern Rite churches. The church formed in Mesopotamia in the very early centuries of the church. They are allowed to keep the ancient traditions and rituals that began in Mesopotamia.

The apostles St. Thomas and St. Jude (Thaddeus) brought the faith to the country in the first century. The apostle St. Simon the Zealot preached and brought souls to Christ. Even before their arrival, ancient Iraq was sacred ground.

We now know the first 11 chapters of the Book of Genesis are set in Mesopotamia; it's also the purported location for the Garden of Eden. The Jewish people were familiar with, and influenced by, the Mesopotamians. Acts 2:9 tells us they were present in Jerusalem for Pentecost. Documents from around 400 AD attest to Christianity's presence in the regions of Mesopotamia. As was true in the west, during those early centuries many were martyred, and it's said that "their blood nourished the church.

The names of the saints of Iraq may sound foreign to us, but their actions are familiar as they experienced the same persecution as our more familiar saints.

St. Polychronius, bishop of Babylon, along with three priests (Parmenius, Helimenas, Chrysotelus) and two deacons (Luke and Mocius) was arrested in the third century and ordered to offer sacrifice to idols; he refused and was stoned to death. His companions also lost their lives at the hands of the Emperor Decius.

St. Julian Saba (Saba meaning 'old man' in Aramaic), a Syriac-speaking hermit from the banks of the Euphrates River who entered monastic life at the age of

eight, helped the persecuted and constructed several monasteries before he died of natural causes in 367,

St. Marolus of Milan, born near Babylon on the banks of the Tigris is another of the Iraqi saints. He was born near Babylon, but his family was forced to move because of the persecution. He was raised in Syria and as a young man moved to Rome. He became friends with Pope Innocent I who installed him as bishop of Milan until he died of natural causes in 367.

St. Matthew the Hermit — especially loved by Iraqi Christians who know him as Mar Matta — was a 4th-century priest born in a village north of Amida in northern Mesopotamia. He was known to be a miracle worker. He healed the lowest beggar and King Sinharib of Assur.

St. Isaac of Nineveh was born around 610 near the country we know today as Qatar. He wrote extensively about theology and the spiritual life.

The conflicts of the past 20 years have given rise to many modern-day saints. The beatification cause is in process for 48 Chaldeans who were killed while worshiping. **Sister Cecilia Moshi Hanna**, brutally killed in Baghdad in 2002, Chaldean priest **Father Ragheed Ganni**, who studied in Rome in the 2000s, and his three deacons, all gunned down by Islamist terrorists in Mosul in 2007, and **Archbishop Faraj Raho**, Archbishop Najeeb's predecessor in Mosul, who was kidnapped and killed in 2008.

Other saints well-known in Iraq, mostly martyrs, include:

- Saint Ezekiel the Prophet
- Saint Asterius
- Saint Esdras the Prophet
- Saint Helimenas
- Saint Abo of Tblisi
- Saint Acuta

Pope Francis visited the region earlier this year. He made note of the dwindling Christian population in this ancient, apostolic, region. In 1987 there were approximately 1.5 million Christians – most of them Catholic. Today, that number has dwindled to only 250,000 and continues to decrease.