***The Religious Impact of Immigration***

***on European Societies International***

**The Church in Iraq: History, Growth, and Mission**

**From the Beginning to the Present**

*Budapest, National University of Public Service, 17 February 2016*

1. European societies have never been a «*unicum*». They were not one yesterday, they are not one today, and they will not be one tomorrow.

Europe is more like a container where history has brought us to see in the events of the past, diverse peoples, languages, cultures, conflicts, subjugations, boarders drawn up then shredded and then reconfigured.

Notwithstanding this diversity, three elements have played a unifying role in Europe. The first one, ***religion***, was itself not infrequently a source of conflict and division. The second one, the concept of ***right*** *linked to the person* developed in the context of post-renaissance European thought. The third element is fascinating because it sometimes gave rise to admiration and emulation, and at other times to envy. Indeed, it was often itself a bone of contention. I am referring to ***beauty and art***.

These three factors – religion, human rights, and finally, art – have indelibly formed the peoples, nationalities, and ideals in Europe.

Current modern and post-modern European societies, which have cut themselves off from one of these roots, are now vainly searching for proper identities.

But is this really possible? I mean, within the general state of crisis in our society, which is considered to be “liquid,” is it even possible to erect barriers; to fence oneself in; to take on a kind of “resistant” stance as a defense against diversity, which gives rise to apprehension, discomfort, and insecurity?

Can the attraction of every intimate and deeper human desire – to be well and to live in peace – be smothered so that we become strangers and indifferent to those who are fleeing from war, or are searching for salvation, or who have no work?

When we see our European societies becoming the hope and dream of the infinite masses of peoples coming from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Iraq, Kurdistan, Palestine, and Sub Saharan Africa, I ask myself: but these are, for the most part, peoples who profess Islam, peoples afflicted by wars and civil conflicts, peoples without work or any real perspectives for a better life. Why do they come to Europe, or why do they seek a home in the United States, Canada, or Australia? Why don’t they migrate, for instance, to regions with which they are more likely to share political, religious and linguistic similarities; regions that are rich in oil and today stand for the greatest of opulent societies? Obviously, *man does not live on bread alone*!

European societies are attractive because they were founded on the anthropological principle of the person, on the post-17th century common ideals of liberty, fraternity and equality, in which religion is no longer a factor for war, nor does it play any coercive role. European societies have overcome the dangerous marriage of religion and politics and now frequently have recourse to political-electoral systems, in which people have the freedom of association, without fear of reprisal or violence. It is for these reasons that European societies appear to offer these migrating peoples a more attractive life with guarantees of liberty, unlike the assertive theocratic societies, which they no longer trust.

For many years I resided in the Middle-East and I noticed that the appeal of a welcoming and free West has, for many, become practically irresistible. Young people are fleeing theocratic and domineering societies.

On the other hand, if European societies *were* in the hands of a dictatorship (of any type) would they exert the same charm and fascination? Would they continue to be the goal to reach, even at the risk of losing one’s life?

However, the core reason that has brought about an exodus of biblical proportions of peoples leaving the Middle-East for Europe is the ***absence of peace***! Everyone has a right to live in peace, which represents the greatest of all aspirations. All great migrations begin with war. Can this right to peace be denied? Were not these rights to liberty and to peace also present in the hearts of the Hungarian people only some thirty years ago?

Searching for peace is like a common puzzle game in which “peace” is the elusive central figure that needs to be discovered. But this “figure”, if it is to be well understood, needs to be freed from ambiguities; for example: the Latins say, “*if you want peace – para bellum – prepare for war*”; others think that peace can be gained by *eliminating diversity*, as if this was the source of instability. Some others are thinking of peace in terms of *negating the rights of others*, either civil or religious. People even think that peace may be reached by making every individual capacity to think differently flow into a so-called *single mindset*.

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1. These words now lead me to speak about the Church in Iraq, a small, ancient Christian Community, which, for two thousand years lived in the region of Mesopotamia. In this region a hundred years ago Christians counted up to 15% of the total population. Today they are down to 1 or 2%! From the time of the Armenian Genocide (1,200,000 victims) and the killing of 250,000 Chaldeans, Armenians, and Syrians, both Catholic and Orthodox, which started an exodus of peoples from the region, these mass migrations have accelerated well into the present day, provoked by wars, discrimination, lack of peaceful coexistence and lack of work.

I wrote the book in order to bring attention to the beautiful history of this ancient Oriental Church, known also as the *Chaldean Church*. I thought it necessary to write this book because I was not able to find a complete history of this Church, traced from its origins until today. In fact, the title speaks for itself:

***The Church in Iraq: History, Growth, and Mission From the Beginning to the Present.***

I think that a knowledge of the history of Christianity in the Middle-East - today Iraq – is not some idle cultural extravaganza, but rather an approach that allows one to understand the reasons for, and the dramatic events, of this region and to appreciate its life and culture, as well as the testimonies of faith and the motives behind the attachment of Christians to this very land, and also the hatred of their enemies. At the same time, one understands the nobility of soul of this people, which has been tempered by two fundamental realities: *being a minority*, which generates strong ties to one’s own values, to ones origins and culture, and *being the heirs of martyrs and confessors of the Faith*, bearers of values intrinsic to the Faith of the Fathers, that no one else can boast of in the same way.

Anyone who has lived among this people or has read and knows them cannot but love them, because knowledge binds and makes one able to share and participate.

History is a victory over ignorance, obscurantism, and intolerance; it promotes respect and is a stimulus to not repeat errors. It is for these reasons that I thought writing this history might be useful.

History allows one to understand that these communities survived centuries of imposed pressure, burdensome taxes, pre-arranged marriages, prohibitions, discrimination, hatred, intolerance, jealousies, and finally even persecution! Notwithstanding all of this, Christians were able to survive without conceding anything regarding the Faith because of an incredible capacity for endurance, as well as for practical and cultural adaptation. When the Lord returns will he find faith on this earth?

The present volume, currently available in Italian but soon to be translated into English, Spanish, as well as into Arabic, hopes to offer a better understanding of the birth, evolution, and development of the Christian Community in Mesopotamia. But it also hopes to show its beauty and the crises and humiliations it has had to endure, which, within the socio-political context, explains its powerful resoluteness and testimony of faith in the face of, and in the midst of actual persecution. This Christian Community, like the one that emerged in the Apostolic era, bears the experience of twenty-one centuries of love for Christ and His Church; a community that is ready to leave everything rather than bend and capitulate to the surrounding vanquisher. This is a heroic Church, as it has been defined by Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. Without it, that is to say, with *them* – I’m thinking of all of the Churches of the Middle-East as equally bearing the same hallmark – this region would not be the same. Furthermore, it is not possible for me not to think about the other ethnic and religious minorities, so-often persecuted and suffering in this region. Here we have a mosaic of nationalities, religions, and confessions, without which this land would be devastated forever; a fact acknowledged even by eminent Muslim authorities, as well as by simple citizens, as was repeated to me many times. And this is something positive. Nevertheless, it must be added that the continuity and life of minorities in this region needs to be facilitated.

When in August of 2014 Pope Francis sent me as his personal representative to Iraq to see, encounter, speak with, embrace, pray, and be in solidarity with the intensely suffering victims of the Islamic fanaticism of Isis, I was profoundly moved and filled with emotion.

This book was written to bear testimony to these victims that I met in Iraq - both Christian and non-Christian, women, and men - and to say to them: “Thank you for your courage!” Thank you also to those, who with love and sacrifice, have lessened their fears and anguish. May their courage and hope never fail!

The book itself counts 255 pages, which I decided to arrange in the following manner:

Introduction

Geo-Political Framework

Chapter I: **The Ancient Christian Community**

1. The beginnings of evangelization. Formation of the Church of the East.
2. Heresies. Separation and Isolation of the Church of the East.

Chapter II: **The Church of the East. Arabic Period (637-1258), Mongol Period (1258-1410) and Turkoman Period (1410-1508)**

1. The Arab conquest and domination. Expansion of the Church of the East: splendor and decline.
2. Mongol and Turkoman Periods. Decadence of the Church of the East. Attempts of contact with Rome.
3. The schism of the Church of the East. The Chaldean Church.

Chapter III: **The Latin Church in Mesopotamia**

1. Warning Signs for the Latin missions in Persia and Mesopotamia.
2. Instructions to the Dioceses of Isfahan and of Babylonia (or Bagdad) of the Latins. The Bishops of the Persian period (XVII and XVIII centuries).
3. The Bishops of the Mesopotamian period (XVIII and XIX centuries). Carmelite, Capuchin, and Dominican missionaries.
4. The Apostolic Delegation of Mesopotamia, Kurdistan, and Armenia Minor. The case of the *Reversurus* and the Vatican Council. Crisis between the Chaldean Patriarchate and Rome. The *Malabar Affair*.

Chapter IV: **The XX Century: Geographical and Demographical Upheavals. The Birth of Iraq**

1. The great demographic crisis among Christians. Renewed attention of the Apostolic See towards oriental Catholics.
2. The Hashemite Kingdom. The Republic. Crisis and development of the Church in Iraq.
3. Iraq: Instability and war. The complex role of the Church.
4. The fall of Saddam Hussein.

Chapter V: **The Holy See and Iraq**

1. In defense of peace and people’s rights.
2. Which Iraq?
3. Christians today in Iraq.

The book ends with an overall summary regarding the evolution of this Church, intended to facilitate its study by the reader.

In conclusion, let us not forget that “*the story of this land is an intertwining of persons and events. Its present cannot disregard its past. Some aspects seem to repeat themselves: the many invasions of Mesopotamia, the terrible wars that soaked it with blood, the despotisms that violated it, and the greed that devoured it. Grandeurs and miseries, devastations and raids, abductions and extortions, love and death: all of this is present here since time immemorial! The Bible recounts it, the ruins speak of it, sand storms cry it out and books and chronicles of today record it*.”

My last question is: *will there still be a good future for this country and for its inhabitants, including its Christians*?