

Obituary

Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho

Brave Iraqi Christian leader determined to stand with his flock

- Anthony O'Mahony
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The death, at the age of 65, of Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho, leader of the Chaldean Catholic church in northern Iraq, will only deepen the insecurity felt by Iraq's Christian community, who increasingly see no future in the country. The archbishop, whose body has been found in a shallow grave, was kidnapped in February by armed gunmen who ambushed his car just after he had led the stations of the cross procession at the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit in his see of Mosul. His driver and two companions were killed during the abduction.

The cause of death is still not known. The archbishop suffered poor health and needed daily medication, following a heart attack some years ago. He may have been dead for several days before his body was recovered. Thousands attended his reburial in the village of Kremlis, an ancient Christian settlement near Mosul.

Since even before the 2003 US-led invasion, Christians in Iraq were becoming deeply anxious about the rise of radical Islamic tendencies in both the Shia and Sunni communities. In 2006, Archbishop Rahho expressed disquiet at the inclusion of some aspects of sharia law in the new Iraqi constitution.

The targeting of Christian intellectuals, professionals and priests - and the bombing of churches - has been seen as an attempt to destabilise the community and encourage it to leave Iraq. Along with Baghdad, Mosul has been a centre of this violence. On the eve of the Chaldean church synod last June, an armed group killed Fr Ragheed Ganni and three deacons in front of the church of the Holy Spirit in

Mosul, where Ragheed was parish priest. In 2005, the Syrian Catholic Archbishop of Mosul, Basil George Casmoussa, was abducted at gunpoint only to be released 24 hours later unharmed. Church officials denied a ransom had been paid.

It is estimated that since the 2003 invasion the percentage of Christians in Iraq's population has declined from approximately 7% (1,200,000) in 1980 to less than 3% (maybe under 500,000) today. An estimated 300,000 have fled the country permanently.

Rahho himself was born near Mosul into a Chaldean Catholic family which had its roots in the ancient church of the east. He entered St Peter's junior seminary, Baghdad, in 1954, aged 12, and graduated to the major seminary at 18. He was ordained a priest in 1965 and soon afterwards was appointed to St Isaiah's church, Mosul. Chaldean Catholic priests, as with most eastern rite Catholic churches, can be married, but the future archbishop did not choose this option. The episcopate, as with all of eastern Christianity, is chosen from celibate clergy or monks.

Apart from a brief spell as a parish priest in Baghdad, and further study in 1977 at the Pontifical University of St Thomas Aquinas, the Dominican university in Rome, Rahho spent his career as a local pastor to his community of around 20,000 Christians in Mosul. He built the church of the Sacred Heart in the district of Telkif, and the bishop's residence, and opened an orphanage for children with disabilities. He was ordained archbishop in 2001.

A warm, humble and compassionate man, he was famous for his jokes - something often remarked on by his brother bishops. What no one doubted was his courage in defence of his flock. On at least two previous occasions, he had faced down harassment and threats. In August 2004, he was frogmarched out of his official residence and forced to watch as the building was set ablaze. On another occasion, he was accosted by gunmen in the street, but walked on, daring them to shoot him. Even while imprisoned in the boot of his kidnappers' car, he managed to pull out his cellphone and call his church, instructing officials not to pay a ransom.

As well as working with other Christian leaders to show unity in the face of rising Islamic terrorism, he sought to forge good relations with local Muslims. After his residence was burned down, a local imam offered him accommodation at a mosque complex. But he also talked about the dilemmas facing Christians being pressurised to leave, convert to Islam or stay and pay the jizya, a tax imposed on non-

Muslims. He told Asia News: "We, Christians of Mesopotamia, are used to religious persecution and pressures by those in power. After Constantine, persecution ended only for western Christians, whereas in the east threats continued. Even today we continue to be a church of martyrs."

The church to which Rahho belonged represents one of the three main groups of Iraqi Christians: the majority Catholics, mainly of the eastern churches; non-Catholics, the church of the east, Syrian Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox; and the Protestants and Anglicans. In practice, the Chaldean Catholics are the most influential.

Their origins are located in a group of bishops who dissented in 1552 from the practice of hereditary patriarchal succession (passing from uncle to nephew). Instead, they elected their own Patriarch Simon VIII "of the Chaldeans" and sent him to Rome to arrange a union with the Catholic church. After being recognised by Pope Julius III, Simon returned home to initiate reforms but was captured by the pasha of Amadya (modern-day Diyarbakir in Turkey), tortured and executed.

For over 200 years, there was much turmoil and changing of sides as the pro- and anti-Catholic parties struggled with one another. The situation finally stabilised only in 1830, when Pope Pius VIII confirmed Metropolitan John Hormizdas as head of all Chaldean Catholics, with the title of Patriarch of Babylon of the Chaldeans, with his see in Mosul. In 1950 the see moved to Baghdad after substantial migration of Chaldean Catholics from northern Iraq to the capital.

Should Christianity disappear from Iraq, it would mean the end of the Syriac language (close to that spoken by Jesus) and a heritage of customs, rites and culture dating back to the first century AD. As the conservative north American National Review stated at the time of the US-led invasion, Iraqi Christians are "the canaries in the coal mines".

• Paulos Faraj Rahho, priest, born November 20 1942; found dead March 13 2008