

Bassam and Raghad: "Welcome Home"

Olivia and Thimothée have seven children and live in a small village in France. They have welcomed a family of Iraqi Christians into their home: Bassam and Raghad, with their three children aged 9, 7 and 3 years old, who were forced to flee Karakoch in August.

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**Text of Pope Francis' appeal on the
welcome of refugees**

Olivia recalls: “In mid-August, we received a call from a priest friend who informed us of the serious situation faced by hundreds of Iraqi Christians who had taken refuge in Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan. He was looking for host families in France. These Christians had been forced to flee during the night, leaving everything behind.”

Bassan, Raghad and her three children had left the city of Karakoch, where most of the Iraqi Christian community gathered near Mosul. Islamic jihadists State had seized Karakoch. Tens of thousands of people in the region fled to escape the violence.

The Chaldean Patriarch, Louis Sako, said more than 100,000 Christians have fled the violence, and in cities held by the jihadists “churches are occupied and the crosses have been removed.”

Karakoch was an entirely Christian town between Mosul, the main town held by the Islamic State in Iraq, and Erbil, the capital of the autonomous region of Kurdistan.

“The situation was tragic” Olivia continued, “and we were really moved by this call for help. We feel in solidarity with our brothers and sisters, baptised Christians like us and persecuted because of their faith. Overnight they had become destitute.”

“However, I must admit, we were also a bit reluctant to host them: we have seven children, the house is not huge.... We weighed the pros and cons and it was clear that our comfort would be affected.”

"Our priest friend was seeking places of welcome for nine families. While we were still thinking it over, my in-laws had already agreed to receive a group. Seeing this family, we decided

that we couldn't hesitate any longer. Our older children, 15 and 14, encouraged us to accept. 'We can make room,' they said. 'We will organize the house differently and we can get help.'"

Given the urgency of the situation, France has facilitated the granting of asylum to Eastern Christians. Administrative procedures were easy. "So far it has been an extraordinary adventure. Bassam and Raghad and their three children arrived shortly after, thanks to our endorsement with the consulate."

"We prepared rooms for them in our house, and we planned out our time together. Of course, they do not speak French, but fortunately Bassam's father was an English teacher in Iraq, and so we can communicate."

"They arrived on a Saturday, which I'll never forget. We were all very

excited. We feel very close to them, we are united by baptism. I have often put myself in their situation, and I see that it is the obvious thing to receive help.”

“In just a few days, the children started to go to school. They were well received and are now fully integrated there. The parents, Bassam and Raghad, are studying French and are gradually organizing their life. My husband and I often tell each other how happy we are to have been able to welcome them, and how proud we are to have taught our children so much by this gesture.”

“Gradually, the friendship between our families is growing. We share many moments: meals, travelling to school, shopping. The children get along and play together.”

“Raghad and Bassam are very keen to settle down in France and find work. Living with a welcoming

French family will make it easier for them to assimilate our culture.”

“Our life is going well thanks to their great refinement. There have been no complaints at all, and when little difficulties arise, the spirit of Opus Dei (to which my husband and I belong) helps us to find God’s will in the small annoyances of daily life, and stay in good spirits. Thankfully, our two families share the same joy.”

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