

VICE-PROVINCE OF MIDDLE EAST

A LITTLE HISTORY

In the history of the Congregation's presence in the Middle East, the obstacles and problems in sowing the charism were enormous: not only because of differences in mentality, language, customs, or religious rites but also because of epidemics that decimated the population. Some sisters died, also because of poverty and times of famine; more significantly because of the constant years of violence and barbarism, to the point of carrying out massacres of entire villages. Let us remember that when the Congregation arrived in Mesopotamia, the region belonged to the Ottoman Empire, whose method of government was absolutism.

However, the sisters were and are faithful to the charism of Marie Poussepin in all the missions founded: those in which the Congregation is no longer present, such as Turkey and Syria, or in which we are no longer present as a Vice-Province, such as Jerusalem; and those in which we have been serving for many years: Iraq (1873), Lebanon (1964), Jordan (2007). In them, we find works of education for the youth and care for the sick; the two sides of the charism without distinction of religion, economic level, or social status, but with a preference for the most needy and women. Ali Al Wardi, the great Iraqi sociologist (1913-1995), affirmed that the development of culture in his country is due to the contribution of women and that the Presentation Sisters have formed women in Iraq.

The sisters taught in classrooms without roofs or desks, in small, simple schools or orphanages, and little by little, with the help of numerous benefactors, in moderately equipped schools. There was no lack of human promotion of children, youth, and adults, contributing significantly to the dignity of women.



As for the health service, the sisters cared for and cured the sick with home visits, or in the dispensaries that were gradually equipped, they elaborated or acquired medicines. They trained the first Iraqi nurses in the school founded by the Congregation.

The sisters and the Dominican friars contributed significantly to the evangelization of Christians, helping many families define themselves by faith in Jesus Christ; the different rites were respected and catechized. It has even been said that the Sisters of the Presentation brought about a cultural revolution in ancient Mesopotamia.

With the First World War, the Ottoman Empire collapsed. The political situation in the region changed, but the wars continued.

The geographical location and the enormous oil wealth made the Middle East a place of continuous wars: civil, inter-religious, and international ethnic wars:

World War II (1939-1945); civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990); Iraqi-Iranian war (1980-1988); the Gulf War (1990-1991); the embargo on Iraq (1990-2003); Israeli attack on Lebanon (2006); invasion of Iraq (2003-2011) with the coalition of 10 countries; Islamic State in Mosul (2014-2017); explosions in the port of Beirut 2020.

Every war causes displaced people, orphans, famine, disease, ignorance, and death, but the sisters have remained close to the people, taking on significant missionary challenges.

At present, Iran dominates the Iraqi country through its militias.

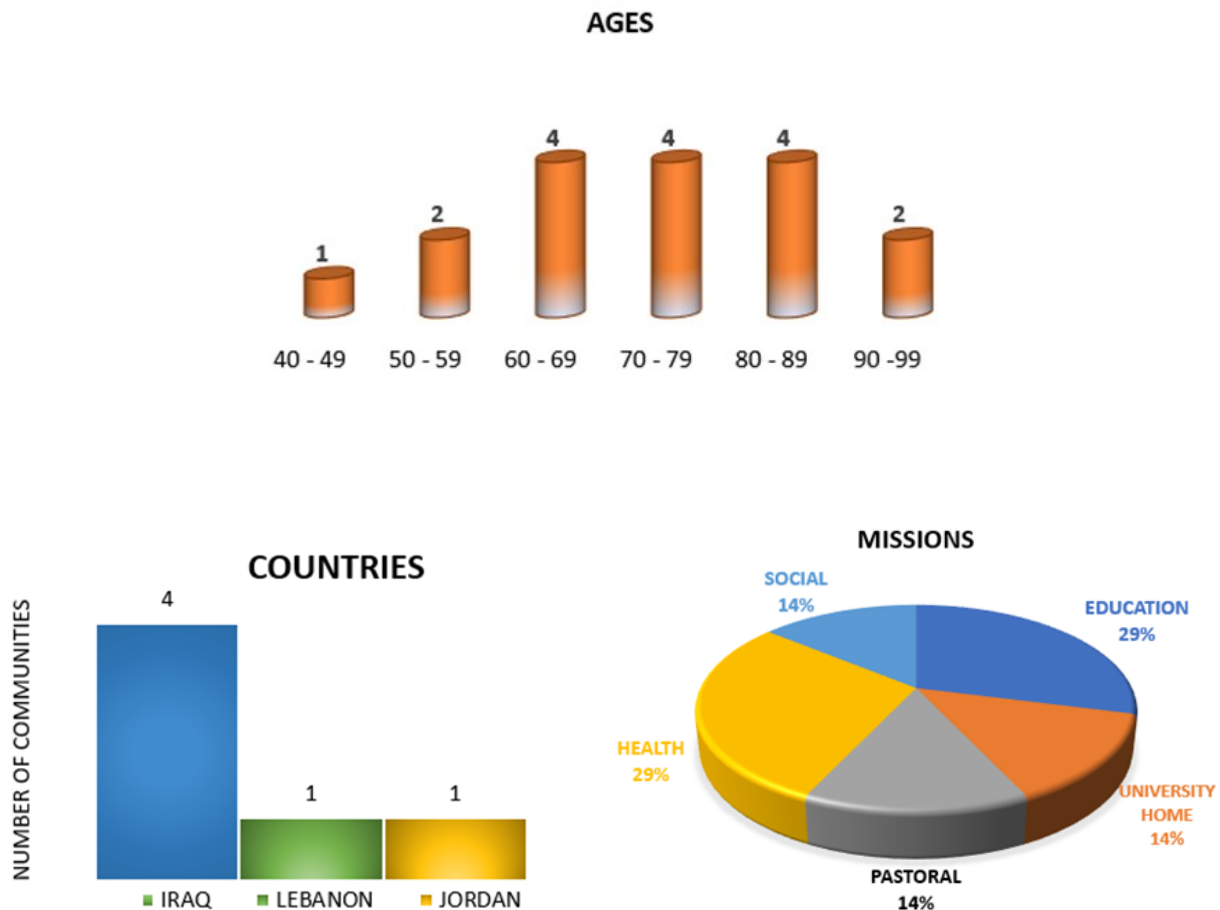
These violent situations have provoked a massive exodus of Christians, those who remain in their place of origin, live in very complex situations; the few job opportunities aggravate the absence of their loved ones, the daily hostilities of the Muslims, and labor legislation that disadvantages them. For them, the sisters have been and are like the oasis in the desert: a serene and strong presence, a refuge and protection, a reference in the experience of faith

Even in the situation of impoverishment and instability, the Arab countries welcome immigrants and refugees, to whom also comes the mercy learned from Marie Poussepin; in the institutions of the Vice-Province, they find a dignified job and a just salary, which allows them to live with respect and to cover the needs of their families abroad.



Basrah: Sr. Anaïs and Sr. Adèle.

On the religious level, Muslims, divided into two irreconcilable branches (Sunni and Shiite), strive to prevent fundamentalism on both sides from invading them. On the other hand, among Christians, there is an excellent variety of ways of living the faith due to rites that hinder evangelization and, at times, unity.



A. MISSIONARY REALITY

The palm tree (*Phoenix dactylifera*) is the symbol of Iraq. It is impossible to talk about Iraq and the Middle East without considering its palm trees.

Palm trees are beautiful and elegant plants, but above all, resilient.

The resilience¹ of palms is evident during storms and hurricanes; in Iraq, they are resistant to high temperatures (50°C and more). Today, they face drought and soil salinization.

Perhaps our missionary reality is much like the palm trees: the small number of sisters has hindered the growth of our missionary work, the lack of vocations has led to desertification, the wars of the last two decades and the exodus of Christian families are like salinization in the transmission of the faith.

¹ Resilience is the ability to remain standing during and after difficulties.

In this area, the sisters have been a witness to universality and respect:

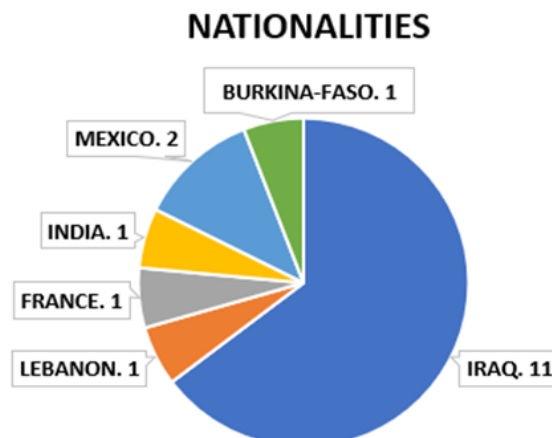
- In dispensaries or hospitals where, we care for Muslims and Christians with the same dedication, professional level, and mercy (even in times of war).
- In schools and university residences, children, adolescents, young people, and adults receive formation and education in human values from the sisters that unite hopes and desires for peace and to live together 'with normality.'

We thank the Lord for allowing us to share His Mission with Him.



Karrada School of nurses

OUR TODAY IN GRAPHICS



However, we remain resilient:

Last year, we closed Casa Famiglia (originally a home for orphans); in turn, we started an experience of hosting some young women in the same house in Karrada (Baghdad) but in a different section.

Thanks to God and the solidarity of the Congregation, we have reconstituted the Lebanese Community in Ghodrass. The sisters will provide various services in the area and organize a project to put the house's facilities at the service of Christians.

We continue to be present at the Italian Hospital in Amman, Jordan.

We continue to be resilient in the kindergarten and social mission of the Saint Joseph Community in Basrah, in the "Guardian Angel" University Residence in Duhok, in Saint Raphael's Hospital, and in the Presentation School in Baghdad. The latter increased by one grade in 2023.

We decided to remain "standing," like the palm trees.



From left to right, first row Sisters: María de los Angeles Flores, Henriette Myriam, Maryanne Pierre, Aliya Hikmat, Bernadette Youssef, Sultana Sana, Thérèse Hélène. Second row, Sisters: Patricia Hernández, Nour, Rajni Indwar, Nejla Thomas, Catherine Ouédraogo, Nahida Youssef, Souad Nersi.

B. CHALLENGES

1. Witness our faith daily, with joy and hope, despite the complex and violent situation in the Middle East.
2. To be present in the lives of Christians, in their sadness and hopes, provoked by the progressive and massive exodus of family and friends.
3. To initiate the formation process of lay people in the charism of Marie Poussepin.
4. To continue organizing the orientation process of the 56th General Chapter (vulnerability, synodality, transformation).
5. Regulate how free care is given at St. Raphael's Hospital (give criteria, establish standards, and determine how and when to implement them).
6. Elaborate on a vocation ministry project.
7. To be able to administer the real estate of the Vice-Province of Iraq despite the political and economic difficulties.
8. What will we do in the medium term with the apostolic works directed by a single Sister?



C. PROJECTS

To carry out the corresponding study and research in order to elaborate the missionary project for the Ghodrass House. It is foreseen to be a house for youth ministry and prayer for consecrated and lay people.

PROGRESS IN THE PROCESS OF RESTRUCTURING

Maria Escayola Coris, General Superior, particularly during the Canonical Visitation (September - October 2023) and the Vice-Provincial Assembly; counting on her close accompaniment, we are in the last part of the road that leads us to become a Region of the Province of Europe.

'...We want to inform you that, at the end of the Chapter, in the month of August 2024, the transition from the Vice-Province of the Middle East to the Region of the Province of Europe will take affect' (Circular of Sr. Maria Escayola Coris, Superior General, Prot. 050/2024, dated February 10, 2024).

This restructuring will take place after the 56th General Chapter.



From left to right Sisters: Bernadette Youssef, Nour, Suzanne de l'Immaculée, Souad Nersi, María Escayola, General Superior, Sultana Sana, María de los Angeles Flores, Nejla Thomas y Ana Patricia Londoño, General Councillor.