



Merry Christmas & Happy New Year!

We at the Office for Refugees would like to extend to you and your family our warmest wishes for a Blessed and Holy Christmas and a Joyful New Year. We would also like to extend our thanks to the many countless volunteers who have given of their time, talent and treasure to ease the plight of refugees. May the Lord bless you for your kindness!



2023 Allocations

ORAT is pleased to announce that we have completed all our submissions for 2022, having used the entirety of the allocation provided to us by Immigration Canada. In total, we have sponsored 696 refugees this year or 309 families.

Our office has already begun its work on 2023 cases, holding a number of Introduction to Resettlement information sessions for specific communities that have been affected by the global refugee crisis. ORAT has a program for members of the general public who wish to sponsor their relatives for resettlement to Canada. Details about this program will be announced on our website (www.orat.ca) in the new year.

IRCC Has Begun Issuing Application Numbers (G Numbers)

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) has been overwhelmed with responding to the Afghan refugee crisis and for those displaced by the war in Ukraine. This has caused considerable delays in IRCC’s processing of Private Sponsorship applications and the issuance of application numbers (G#) for submitted cases.

Please note that ORAT has submitted all of its 2022 cases to Immigration Canada. As such, we ask all cosponsors to continue to exercise patience as we wait for IRCC to issue the application numbers.

We have seen some good progress in recent weeks but there are still a considerable number of our cases that are without application numbers.

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Mission Trip to Thailand

By Simolen Tala-Jumbam

The Office for Refugees (ORAT) went on a mission trip to Bangkok, Thailand, in early December 2022. This was the second time ORAT was embarking on a mission trip to Thailand in response to the plight of Pakistani Christian refugees fleeing persecution, that they faced within the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. The first trip was in 2019, and as during the first trip, ORAT worked in collaboration with a Jesuit program in Thailand, run by Fr. Michael Kelly, to identify vulnerable cases that needed resettlement to Canada.

A little background to the reason why Christian refugees flee Pakistan; Christians and other non-Muslim minority groups in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, governed by sharia law, are often victims of false accusations and trumped-up blasphemy charges. The blasphemy laws in the country are leveraged to accuse minorities of insulting their prophet Mohammed or the Quran, which is punishable by death. This was unfortunately the common theme in most of the stories we heard from the refugees we encountered in Thailand.

The heat, humidity, congestion, and varieties of competing smells from street food to underground sewers made up the embrace that greeted our arrival in Bangkok. An embrace I personally cherished since it triggered nostalgia for my childhood days, and for the city I grew up in. The day after arrival, our generous hosts Nadeem and Gul and their families, themselves Pakistani Christian refugees, welcomed us with a three-course meal dinner which is a true testament of Pakistani hospitality. In addition to feeding us, they were fellow colleagues working on behalf of the Jesuit refugee program, our tour guides, and our interpreters during our meetings and presentations with the Pakistani refugees.

The first day of work, December 5th, was a civic holiday in Thailand. It was the former King's birthday and also Father's Day. Nadeem and Gul had provided us yellow shirts to wear on that day since yellow was the former king's favourite color.

This gesture of wearing yellow was met by approvals ranging from salutes and thumbs up from police officials to compliments from restaurant hosts. The reality of the plight of the Pakistani Christian refugees in Thailand was felt keenly from listening to individual stories of the refugees during the four days of presentations and interviews with refugees. The refugees were not safe even in Thailand since majority of them were in the country illegally, having overstayed their visitor visas.

Nadeem and Gul cautioned them about going home in groups as they could be easily picked up by the Thai police and detained in Immigration Detention Centres, under harsh, overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. Despite the uncertainties they face daily from being in Thailand, the hope the refugees have of God providing a solution to their situation never fades. ORAT is able to provide that hope to some of the families thanks to the generous donation of parishioners to the Project Hope funds for refugee resettlement. This trip was a beautiful reminder of why we do the work we do at ORAT, and also a humbling reminder of the effects of our work - it never is about us, but about the refugee families we have the privilege of serving.



Names from left to right: Deacon Rudy Ovcjak, Gul Zaib, Ildy Sziladi, Simolen Tala-Jumbam, Nadeem Inayat

Red Wednesday Unveils Horrors Faced by Persecuted Christians

By Michael Swan, *The Catholic Register*

Forced conversions, lost childhoods, years of hiding, living in limbo — the persecution Christians face around the world was given specific, concrete shape by the testimony of survivors at the annual Red Wednesday vespers in Toronto’s St. Michael’s Cathedral Basilica.

“The first thing they did was forcefully convert us to Islam,” said a 16-year-old Nigerian survivor of kidnapping by Boko Haram, the northern Nigerian terror group whose name means “Western Education is forbidden.” Taken with 21 other children when she was seven-years-old, Maryamu Joseph is recovering in a trauma centre set up by the Diocese of Maiduguri with help from Aid to the Church in Need. Aid to the Church in Need sponsors the annual Red Wednesday event to commemorate persecuted Christians worldwide. The annual event sees cathedrals and parish churches around the world bathed in red light after dark. St. Michael’s and Montreal’s Mary Queen of the World Basilica were Canadian churches taking part in the Nov. 16 event.

Joseph’s testimony about how she suffered because she was a little Christian girl was read from the ambo by Aid to the Church in Need-Canada’s executive director Marie-Claude Lalonde. But other testimonies came from Christians now living in Canada thanks to refugee sponsorship by the Archdiocese of Toronto.

Dena Salmoon recalled a childhood spent under the shadow of war in Iraq. She was eight years old when the second Gulf War brought down the government of Saddam Hussein and opened up the country to chaos and ethnic strife. The terror and uncertainty reached new heights in 2014 when Islamic State armies swept through the Christian villages in the centre of Iraq, after Salmoon’s family had already fled into the Kurdish-controlled sanctuary in the north of the country.

At 27, Salmoon has graduated from university and works in health care, but she will carry her memories of growing up against the backdrop of fear because she was born into a Christian family.

“I was in Erbil, where I witnessed firsthand the horrific scenes of displaced and injured people,” she told the darkened St. Michael’s Cathedral with a sparse crowd of worshippers spread out among the pews. “The churches were filled with thousands of people in fear — something I will never forget.”

Toronto’s Cardinal Thomas Collins led the prayers, seated behind an altar illuminated in the red light of two spotlights. He reminded the assembly that Christians are “the most persecuted people in the world,” and that martyrdom is central to Christian history and identity. “We celebrate Mass over the tombs of the martyrs,” he said.

The altar of St. Michael’s Cathedral stands over the tomb of the Archdiocese of Toronto’s founding Bishop Michael Power, whom Collins called a “martyr of charity.” Power died while ministering to Irish typhoid victims in the fever sheds on Toronto’s waterfront in 1847.

“We pray that the witness of martyrs may inspire us,” Collins said. “We proclaim the radiant joy of the resurrection.”



(Photo courtesy Linda Couture): The Cathedral Basilica of Marie-Reine-du-Monde in Montreal, Quebec is seen illuminated for Red Wednesday, Nov, 16, 2022.

Roseline's Refugee Story

My name is Roseline. I am a mother to two wonderful children. I am from Lahore, Pakistan. In late summer of 2022, we arrived in Canada to start a new life, sponsored as refugees by the Archdiocese of Toronto. I want to share our story to highlight the plight of many, who are without a voice today, so that our experiences as refugees, might provide renewed hope and shine light amidst hopelessness for so many refugees.

I grew up in a modest Christian family, with limited means and we managed for ourselves. My husband is a Rickshaw driver and I a Nursery schoolteacher worked hard to raise our children. I was forced to leave Pakistan for Thailand with my family in 2014.

It all began with two Muslim friends of my husband, who used their friendship for ulterior motives. Their aim was to make us convert to Islam. One of them even put unbearable pressure on me to leave my husband, convert to Islam and marry him. When we strongly refused to deny our Christian faith, they became aggressive: their hostility knew no bounds and we became very afraid for our safety. On a couple of occasions, they beat my husband and mishandled me, while emotionally torturing us to extent of torment. Eventually, they publicly accused us of blaspheming against their prophet Muhammed. This kind of accusation can very quickly incite a lynching mob in Pakistan, a predominantly Muslim majority country. Matters grew worse as on one occasion these men even tried to abduct my daughter as she left school; they were only prevented from doing this by the parents and other good people who were waiting to pick up their children at the end of the school day.

This was the final straw. As a parent, I was so concerned for the safety of our children. It was no longer safe for us to live safely within Lahore or move to other parts of Pakistan. My husband wanted us to leave for the sake of our lives. As we did not have enough money, my children and I decided to escape to Thailand. My husband had to stay behind, hoping to join us at a later date. Ever since that painful departure, we have not seen or heard from him, and we wonder what those supposed friends-turned extremists might have done to him.



While in Thailand, life was difficult and challenging. We had no legal status to work as asylum seekers. Our travel visas to Thailand had expired. We had no legal protections as refugee claimants either. The Thai immigration authorities do not allow persons who've overstayed their visas to live in their country. You are immediately rounded up, arrested, and kept in crowded Immigration Detention Centres (IDCs). The conditions in the IDCs are horrible and treatment of detained asylum claimants is inhumane. No human beings ought to be treated in that manner. However, as asylum seekers without legal protections in Thailand, we are without a voice or any rights. Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention on Protection of Refugees' Rights.

We spent eight years in exile in Thailand, always living in trepidation that the police would arrest us and throw us in jail or deport back to Pakistan. These were years of struggles, hardship, fear, anxiety, isolation, and much weeping. However, along the way, my daughter and son were forced to find some work to seek out a living. In these desperate moments, we always found strength in our faith and hope in God who makes the seemingly impossible, possible.

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Roseline's Refugee Story (cont'd)

In 2019, a group of people from the Office for Refugees, Archdiocese of Toronto came on mission, to witness the situation of Pakistani refugees in Bangkok. A Jesuit priest in Bangkok, whom we trusted, Fr. Michael, referred us to the Office for Refugees (ORAT), whose representatives were on mission trip to meet with refugees in Bangkok.

My family, along with other refugees met with representatives of the Office for Refugees. They interviewed us and we shared our sad stories and prayed together. We were grateful that someone unknown to us had come to listen to our stories. Their presence gave us hope and a renewed faith to keep living.

After the Office for Refugee representatives returned to Canada in the months that followed, I was informed that people of the Archdiocese of Toronto had heard about our suffering and wanted to help sponsor us to Canada. My family was matched with one of the churches in the Archdiocese of Toronto, that became our sponsors for resettlement to Canada.



The application process was complicated and long but was our only hope out in Thailand. We completed different immigration forms and waited for our applications to be processed by Immigration Canada. We attended our interviews and waited anxiously for a final decision on our immigration application from Immigration Canada.

Everything was suddenly paused by COVID-19 travel restrictions imposed on by countries, including Canada. This was the most difficult period without any news. Our church group in Toronto kept regular communication with us.

We shared our fears and worries with them; they in turn offered prayers and Masses for us. This went on until 2022, when we received news that we had been approved for resettlement to Canada.

I am so glad to be in Canada and proud that Canada is my new home. I feel safe and am surrounded by a loving community. My children's future is going to be secure, and I pray constantly for those Pakistani refugee families still in Thailand.

Holy Mass Celebrated at St. Michael's Cathedral for the Eritrean Bishop and Companions

On Sunday December 19, 2022, St. Michael's Cathedral welcomed the Eritrean community to celebrate Mass in the Ge'ez Rite. Prayers were offered for the imprisoned Eritrean bishop and 2 priests in Eritrea. Despite many interventions by the Vatican and other states, the Eritrean government has not disclosed the location and the reason for abducting the bishop and priests. The Holy Mass was celebrated by Rev. Fr. Keflemariam. Rev. Fr. Mussie Abraham, mcej concelebrated and Archbishop Thomas Cardinal Collins was the homilist. His Excellency Bishop Robert Kasun, and Deacon Rudy Ovcjak were also in attendance. Click [here](#) to view the Mass.

Catholic bishop, priest released after two months in Eritrea prison

By Kevin J. Jones, Catholic News Agency

Security agents had arrested Bishop Tsalim and two priests Oct. 15 at Asmara International Airport upon the bishop's arrival from Europe. The three clergymen were detained at Adi Abeto prison, according to Agenzia Fides.

After more than two months in detention in Eritrea, Bishop Fikremariam Hagos Tsalim and Father Mehereteab Stefanos have been released, several sources reported Thursday. Click [here](#) to read the full article.

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