



Numerically small Middle Eastern Christian communities have long struggled to feel safe during the constant political upheavals of the region, but once Saddam Hussein fell to a US-led coalition in 2003, unprecedented chaos followed. The paperwork for the cause of the canonisation of Sister Cecilia was forwarded to the Vatican as part of a group of Chaldean Catholic martyrs who died in the years that followed her murder and the invasion. These include Father Ragheed Aziz Ganni, who was thirty-five when he was killed outside his church in Mosul after Sunday evening Mass on 3 June 2007, along with his three subdeacons, Basman Yousef Daud, Wahid Hanna Isho and Gassan Isam Bidawed. All four were heading for a car when they were stopped by gunmen who first demanded they close the church, and then that they convert to Islam. When they refused, they were shot dead.

Also in the joint Chaldean martyrs cause is Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho, leader of the Chaldean Catholics in Mosul. Father Ganni had been his secretary, but nine months after he was martyred, the archbishop's car was ambushed. He was abducted and bundled into the boot of another car, but had the presence of mind, and courage, to use his mobile phone to contact his office. He gave express instructions that no ransom should be paid for his freedom. His dead body was found several days later.

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Mass text

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

**Turn your ear, O Lord, and answer me;
save the servant who trusts in you, my God.
Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all
the day long.**

FIRST READING Joshua 24:1-2. 15-18

PSALM Psalm 33

RESPONSE **Taste and see that the Lord is good.**

1. I will bless the Lord at all times,
his praise always on my lips;
in the Lord my soul shall make its boast.
The humble shall hear and be glad. **R.**
2. The Lord turns his face against the wicked
to destroy their remembrance from the earth.
The Lord turns his eyes to the just
and his ears to their appeal. **R.**
3. They call and the Lord hears
and rescues them in all their distress.
The Lord is close to the broken-hearted;
those whose spirit is crushed he will save. **R.**
4. Many are the trials of the just man
but from them all the Lord will rescue him.
He will keep guard over all his bones,
not one of his bones shall be broken. **R.**

5. Evil brings death to the wicked;
those who hate the good are doomed.
The Lord ransoms the souls of his servants.
Those who hide in him shall not be
condemned. **R.**

SECOND READING Ephesians 5:21-32

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

**Alleluia, alleluia!
Your words are spirit, Lord,
and they are life:
you have the message of eternal life.
Alleluia!**

GOSPEL John 6:60-69

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

**Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood
has eternal life, says the Lord,
and I will raise him up on the last day.**

Next Sunday's Readings:
Deuteronomy 4:1-2. 6-8
James 1:17-18. 21-22. 27
Mark 7:1-8. 14-15. 21-23



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SISTER CECILIA MOSHI HANNA

Her family, with whom she had spent the day, tried to persuade Cecilia Moshi Hanna to stay the night at their home in Baghdad. It was 15 August 2002, and the whole city was on a knife-edge. The threat of an American-led attack on Iraq to topple the regime of Saddam Hussein was the only topic of conversation. However, this nun, who belonged to that part of the Assyrian Chaldean Church which is in full communion with Rome, insisted on leaving to return to the Sacred Heart Monastery where she lived with two sisters. The others were away, she explained, and they never left the monastery empty overnight.

When she got there, the seventy-one-year-old, who devoted her life to the poor and sick people of the city, was preparing for bed when three attackers forced their way into the building. She was alone and defenceless as they set about her, stabbing her repeatedly, slitting her throat and finally beheading her. The next morning was a nationwide day of retreat and the other sisters arrived at the monastery to find her mutilated body.

The Iraqi regime dismissed the attack as a burglary, and refused even to answer a letter from the Chaldean Patriarch of Baghdad, Mar Raphael BeDaweed, demanding an investigation into "this criminal and inhumane act". One man was briefly arrested. Those who know the details of this horrendous crime believe that the intruders had planned to find all three sisters in the monastery. Their deaths, on the eve of a gathering of Chaldean Catholics across the country, would strike terror in the hearts of all Christians in Iraq, and increase their fears of being targeted by Muslim extremists should the West topple Saddam Hussein, who had extended some protection to them as a minority. The manner of Sister Cecilia's death was, in this scenario, intended to raise the spectre of a bloodthirsty Muslim mob taking revenge on Christians.

Sister Cecilia knew all about the perils of being a Christian in Iraq. Born in Araden in the northern part of the country, the heartland of its ancient Christian community, she and her family had been forced in the 1960s, by fighting between Iraqi government forces and Kurdish separatists, to flee her birthplace, home to two of the oldest churches in Christianity, Mart Shmoni and Sultana Mahdokht, established in AD 325. They settled in the northern city of Mosul – then home to Iraq's largest and oldest Christian community, but taken over in 2014 by ISIS and destroyed in the battle to win it back from their tyranny.

Martyrs of our times



Peter Stanford tells the story of a religious sister, among the Chaldean Catholics martyred in Iraq.



22 AUGUST 2021

21ST SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK 1