

## INTERVIEW

# His Beatitude Raphael I Bidawid, Patriarch, Chaldean Catholic Church in Iraq

*His Beatitude Raphael I Bidawid is the highest authority of the large Catholic community in Iraq, and from this position serves as the spokesman for all Christians there. He has been an outspoken critic of the New World Order policy, and has been active in supporting relief efforts for the Iraqi population, starved by the ongoing embargo. Among these efforts is the Committee to Save the Children in Iraq, initiated by Helga Zepp-LaRouche for the Schiller Institute. His Beatitude Raphael I Bidawid was a co-founder of the Committee, together with Mrs. LaRouche and Dr. Prof. Hans Koechler, President of the International Progress Organization of Vienna. Muriel Mirak-Weissbach, who has coordinated work for the Committee since its inception last May 1991, was in Baghdad and met with His Beatitude at the Patriarchate on April 29 and 30, 1992. On that occasion, the Patriarch had the following to say.*



EIRNS

**Fidelio:** Can you tell us something about the Christian community in Iraq and its relations to other communities?

**Patriarch Bidawid:** Out of a population of eighteen million, one million are Christians; eighty percent of them Catholics, and ninety percent of them, Chaldeans. We have the Patriarchate

here in Baghdad and eight dioceses, with churches in Al Basrah, Kirkuk, Sulaymaniyah, Arbil, Mosul, Al Kosh, Dora, Amadiyah, and Zakho in Kurdistan. Our relations with others are very good because we are one people; some became Christians, some later became Muslims, but we are the same

population. Therefore we live peacefully together, Christians, Muslims, and even a small community of Jews (about two hundred families). In addition to the Chaldeans, there are a number of sects, the Mandaeans, faithful of St. John the Baptist. This small sect, whose members say they are our cousins because St. John was the cousin of Christ, are the descendants of the Essenes, and live by rivers, because many of their rituals, including baptism, require ablutions with natural waters. There are even some so-called fire-worshippers, the Zoroastrians, who, because they intermarry, have limited descendants. They are often called "devil worshippers" and worship a metal peacock.

**Fidelio:** The Vatican's initiative to lift the embargo against Iraq has been widely publicized. I understand you had an important role in this.

**Patriarch Bidawid:** Yes. This embargo is being implemented against the population for no reason whatsoever. The war is over; so the embargo should be over as well. On March 23, I was received by His Holiness, Pope John Paul II in Rome, and briefed him on the effects of the embargo. Following that meeting, he sent Alois Wagner with a high level delegation



EIRNS/Stuart Lewis

*Committee to Save the Children In Iraq: Committee coordinator Muriel Mirak-Weissbach (right) holds press conference with Iraqi children arriving in the U.S. for medical treatment, April 1992.*



EIRNS/Jim Duree

*Committee to Save the Children in Iraq demonstrates against the embargo, Los Angeles, June 1991.*

to Iraq. They saw the situation with their own eyes, returned to Rome with a report on a Sunday, and on the following Wednesday, the Pope made a declaration in his weekly audience. The situation was so urgent that the Pope did not want to lose time.

We do the best we can, in political channels. Contacts with American and European leaders have continued, but they always run up against a wall. The only authority which remained close to Iraq was the Vatican. Even the Arab countries—with the exception of Jordan—did not move. Jordan was the only one to show a noble attitude, that of King Hussein, who made a famous speech, for which he was threatened. Syria betrayed us, for understandable reasons. The Vatican was the only authority which defended us against the war and against the embargo.

What I did was simply my duty, as head of the Christians in Iraq, to try to defend the population, and I mean the entire population, Christian and Muslim alike. They are all my brothers, a Muslim baby is like my baby. I tried to explain this to people recently in Germany, but they are full of preconceived notions. The Muslim versus Christian conflict which they have fixed in their minds, does not exist. I told them: there is no religious conflict.

I lived in Lebanon for twenty-three

years, lived through the whole war. What Israel did in Lebanon, what it did in Iraq, was to try to show the world that religious coexistence is impossible. When the president of Lebanon, in the name of all Arabs, gave the example of his country as a model for coexistence among Christians, Muslims, and Jews, Israel began the war against Lebanon, a war which created an abyss between Christians and Muslims. Israel says, "it's a chimera to think the religions can live together in peace." But Lebanon lived for forty years in religious peace.

Here in Iraq, the same thing. I am a Christian, but my lawyer is a Muslim, for example. Israel has a policy of encouraging emigration, and the Jewish people who left our country, claimed they were persecuted—because if they did not say so, they would not have been accepted. But they did not leave because they were persecuted. Why do Italians leave for the United States? Because they are persecuted? No, because they are seeking a better life or jobs. There is a worldwide propaganda campaign waged against Iraq, organized by Zionist institutions. The world does not understand this. I was in the United States, and said these things. One person asked me, "Aren't you afraid of speaking out against Israel? If I said these

things, I wouldn't dare walk outside." What a disgrace!

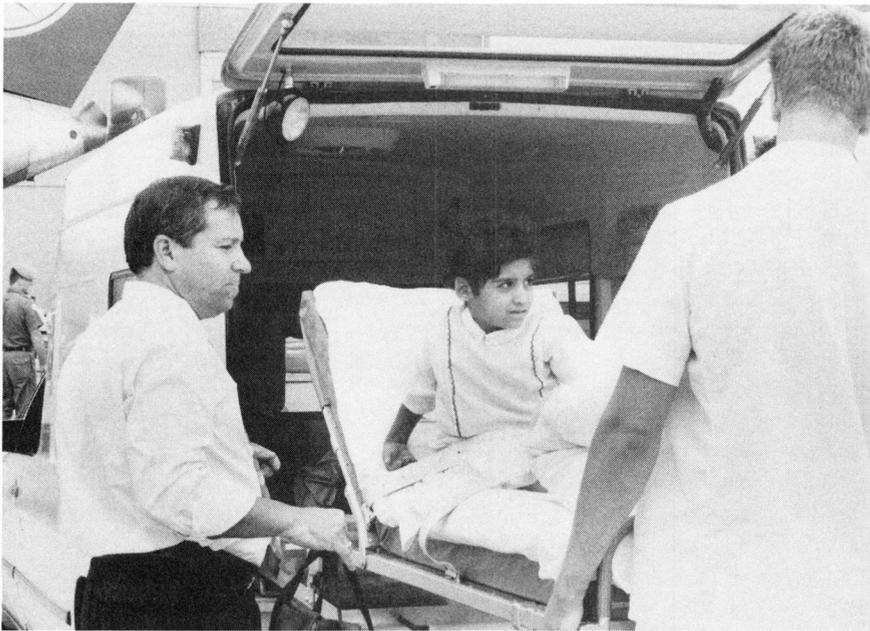
**Fidelio:** Can the Vatican intervene into the Israeli situation?

**Patriarch Bidawid:** The Patriarch of Jerusalem told us, at a recent meeting of the Patriarchs, that it is very difficult to imagine how bad the situation of the Christians in Israel is. If there were 100,000 before the war, now there are about 20,000 Christians there, and they are persecuted, degraded—not by weapons, but otherwise. It is possible that one day there may be no Christians left on the land where Christ was. The Patriarch is not well liked in Israel—he lives in Jerusalem—but he has a lot of courage. The West does not want to hear this.

**Fidelio:** But there are "peace negotiations" going on, at least officially.

**Patriarch Bidawid:** Israel will never accept Christians at the same level, but will continue to treat them as second-class citizens. All these negotiations are idle chatter. What sense does it make to negotiate, while Israel is continuing with new settlements? This is the New World Order of George Bush: Arabs are living there, then a Russian immigrant arrives, and the Arab is thrown off the land.

Saddam Hussein said he would



EIRNS

Committee airlift brings children to Germany for medical treatment, July 1991.

**‘Saddam Hussein said he would withdraw from Kuwait, on condition that Palestine, Lebanon, the entire region, were discussed all together. But Baker said *no linkage*, and that led to the war. Now the world has to admit the injustice done to Iraq.’**

withdraw from Kuwait, on condition that Palestine, Lebanon, the entire region with all its problems, were discussed together. But Baker said “no linkage,” and that led to the war. Now the world has to admit the injustice done to Iraq. The United States was the only one calling the shots; the U.S.S.R. no longer existed, and no one else even raised a finger. In Bonn, when I expressed this, a former ambassador told me, “Beatitude, I accept what you say completely, but, you know, I cannot say this, because others would say that I was going against the U.S.” They cannot speak against the U.S. or against Israel! I said the same thing to Giulio Andreotti, telling him, “You’ll pay dearly one day for this alliance with America, when one day Europe is united. You will see what that means, when America controls the flow of oil, and can turn on and turn off the faucet for oil flowing to Europe.”

**Fidelio:** Then what sort of perspective do you see?

**Patriarch Bidawid:** They accused Hitler of saying “might is right,” of using the principle of power as a principle of law, but they are worse than Hitler. We are in a situation now, where a former German ambassador tells me he cannot say such things. It

reminds me of a proverb we have, “You can’t tell the lion that his breath smells.” Why? Because he would devour you. No one dares tell the lion.

So, what are the perspectives? The Lord needs our help. We cannot do anything, if Europe remains passive. As for the U.S., the problem is one of moral degeneracy. When I was in the U.S., I saw a marriage performed on television, between two men! What can one expect from that kind of a world, where such perversion is legalized? It’s like the Roman Empire in its collapsing phase. And the tragedy is that Europe, which has a glorious civilization, lets itself be guided by people who have lost all moral sense.

**Fidelio:** Perhaps there is some hope that the U.S. situation will change through the elections coming up.

**Patriarch Bidawid:** There are always good people, who have the power of reason. But what influence do they have?

We talk about “democratic life,” but it does not really exist in practice. Take the example of Italy: it used to be Catholic, then it abolished religion, it took Christian teaching out of the schools, it legalized abortion and divorce, all through “democratic” means. “Democracy” in this case means doing evil. But freedom is the

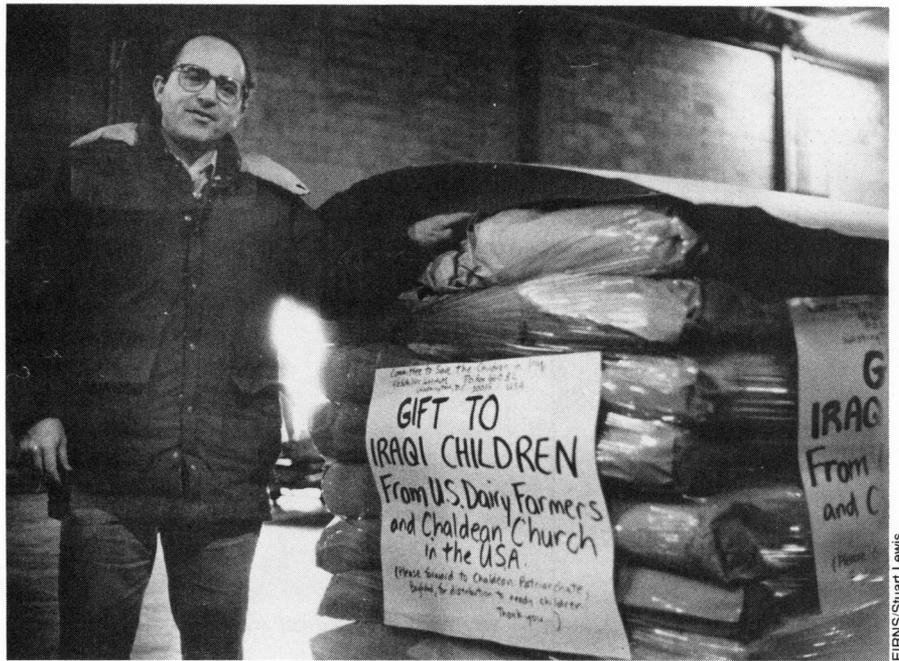
freedom to do good, not evil. In the West, there is no democracy, only the most abject slavery. One is ashamed to walk through the streets of Rome, to see the scenes one sees. I know an ambassador in Rome who fears for the well-being of his children, who may see such things. I have a nephew, who wanted to go to Paris to study at the Sorbonne. I said, that was crazy: he should study in Beirut, get a law degree, then, when he was older, married, he could go to Paris!

**Fidelio:** Regarding the political situation in the Arab world, clearly the kind of “democracy” we see now in the West cannot be appropriate, considering the history of the region and its culture.

**Patriarch Bidawid:** Yes, but even in Europe, it took a long time for democratic forms to evolve.

Speaking of democracy: Consider how people look at the Arab world. They speak of “Muslim fanaticism”—they never speak of “Islam.” Yet I have seen among Protestants, more fanaticism. For example, when the Pope wanted to nominate a bishop in Geneva, the Protestants were up in arms, saying, no, that’s Calvin’s city! And this was Switzerland, the most “democratic” country in the world. Or when the U.S. President wanted to nominate

**'I tried to defend the population, and I mean the entire population, Christian and Muslim alike. They are all my brothers, a Muslim baby is like my baby. The Muslim vs. Christian conflict does not exist.'**



EPHRAIM SUART LEWIS

an ambassador to the Holy See, American Protestants objected, saying the President wanted to sell America to the Vatican!

Now, the European model is difficult to impose here, where the history of the region is so different. Here there have been chiefs, caliphs, princes, who have ruled. People say here, that one needs a benevolent dictator, because there is no other way to govern. And you see dictators throughout: in Turkey, in Iraq, in Saudi Arabia, etc.

People outside our region see the ethnic problems here in a false light also. They talk of Kurds and Shi'ites, but who is who? There are many ethnic groups, including Iranians and Turks here. Before the war, the government of Iraq had prepared the draft of a constitution for discussion in Parliament, which would have regulated the creation of political parties. Now, that has to be altered, to conform to the altered situation.

There is a possibility that parties may be introduced, but in a controlled way—otherwise there would be chaos. Egypt has political parties, officially, but it is a farce; we do not want to repeat that. Iraq already had political parties under the monarchy, so there is a tradition that can be revived, but it needs time. It is a bit like the situa-

tion in Eastern Europe. The will of the government does exist, and the population does want more democracy, but we have to be cautious. We are not living in a vacuum. Iran, Turkey and Syria will not leave us in peace. The Gulf Arabs have no influence. But Iran, Turkey, and the Saudis, spend billions on building up war machines.

**Fidelio:** How do you view the phenomenon of Islamic movements in power, which are often termed “fundamentalist,” and their religious dimension?

**Patriarch Bidawid:** If there is no religious spirit, there is nothing. In Iran, the soldiers, even the young children fourteen years of age, went to war for religious reasons. They believed that with a key on a string around their necks, they would go to paradise if they fell in battle. Simple people believe in religious leaders, who can, if they want, do harm. In Iran today, we are back in the Middle Ages, with a figure like the “Pope-King” which existed in the medieval West, and which caused suffering for the Church. Here in Iraq, the Islamicists cannot take power, because the government is secular, and there is a separation between Church and State.

**Fidelio:** Yet much is said about the Shi'ites in Iraq, particularly in the south, as being a threat.

**Patriarch Bidawid:** A lot had been done for the Shi'ites in the south, before the war. Then, the U.S. and its allies tried to foment a rebellion and it failed. How can they expect the people to overthrow the regime, when the armed forces are in the hands of the party? A *coup d'état*, which is what the U.S. wanted, was impossible. What they got was just the opposite: they wanted to create ill-feeling in the population, but now the population is closer to the government, because it sees that the U.S. wanted its ruin. People say quite openly now: Better in Hell with Saddam Hussein, than in Heaven with the U.S. The Kurdish leader Barzani said, you instigated us to revolt, then you abandoned us. As for the Shi'ites and the Kurds, do you know what kinds of massacres they perpetrated? How can I imagine they should come to power?

Certainly, we can live together in peace, but only if the U.S. and the British leave us alone. Many in the army were Kurds, many governors are Kurds. And Shi'ites—there have been great Shi'ite prime ministers. We had no problem living together. It was the British and the U.S. who created the



EIRNS/Stuart Lewis

*Committee to Save the Children in Iraq. Left: U.S. farmers send emergency powdered milk relief, January 1992. Above: Iraqi children arrive in U.S. for medical treatment, April 1992. Right: Medical supplies from Europe arrive at Red Crescent distribution center, Baghdad, July 1991.*

problem. I am from Mosul, and I can tell you that we never had any problem between Christians and Muslims. But as long as there are foreign powers in the country, there will be no peace. If they leave the area, then in two months, everything will be all right.

I certainly hope that they let us live in peace, because we know how to live in peace. Whether or not they will lift the embargo is an open question: ask Bush!



EIRNS