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### A Brave Dream Interrupted: Jesuits Create Innovative Interfaith Presence in Baghdad, 1932-1969

Charles H. Allen S.J.

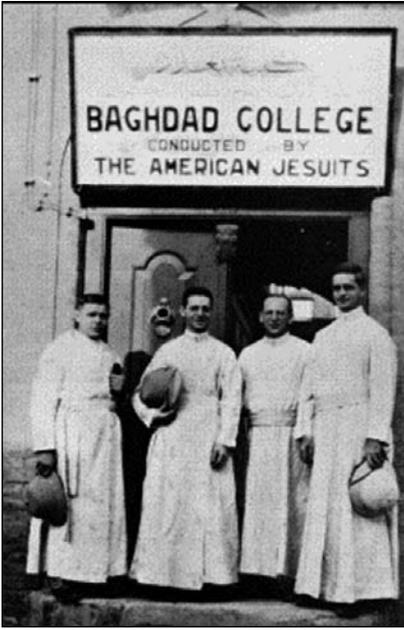
Walter Pelletier S.J.

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The four founders of Baghdad College came from four provinces: New England, New York, California, and Chicago. Photo courtesy of Fairfield University.

# A Brave Dream Interrupted

## *Jesuits Create Innovative Interfaith Presence in Baghdad, 1932-1969*

**By Charles H. Allen, S.J., and Walter Pelletier, S.J.**

In 1932 Pope Pius XI, at the request of the Iraqi bishops, asked the New England provincial to start a high school in Baghdad, Iraq. Four Jesuits were sent. They purchased 25 acres of land in the northern part of the city and started Baghdad College. The high school became such a great success that in 1955 the government gave the Jesuits 170 acres of land about 14 miles south of the college on which to build a new university, to be called Al Hikma (Arabic for “wisdom”). Although Muslim boys were admitted to both schools, the objectives of the mission never included proselytizing Muslims. In fact, many Muslim graduates have stated publicly that their Jesuit training made them better Muslims.

Over a period of 37 years, 145 Jesuits served in Baghdad and in so doing developed a strong love for the people of Iraq and for their culture. Baghdad College’s enrollment grew to 1,100 students with 10 buildings, and Al Hikma grew to 700 students, with 5 buildings. All 15 buildings were designed and constructed by the Jesuits.

During the turbulence of the Second World War, most Americans left Iraq. The fact that the Jesuits made no effort to depart impressed the prime minister so much that he brought his two nephews to enroll at Baghdad College. After that, sons of prime ministers, governors, sheiks, and professional men

chose the discipline and learning imparted by the Jesuits fathers and brothers.

The student population of the two schools was roughly half Muslim and half Christian. Here on these two campuses Christians and Muslims found a place where real friendships could develop as well as a deeper understanding of each other’s religion.

The year 1967 was the most promising year ever for the mission. The pioneering years dedicated to survival were over, and earlier Muslim suspicions had disappeared. Wonderful opportunities indicated a stable future, not only for the two schools, which had grown beyond expectation,

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*Charles Allen, S.J., entered the Jesuits in 1959, and spent many years as a teacher of math and religion at various Jesuit high schools. For the past 21 years, he has been the university chaplain and special assistant to the president at Fairfield University.*

*Walter Pelletier, S.J., entered the Jesuits in 1947; until the Jesuits were expelled from Baghdad in 1969 most of his teaching career were at Baghdad College. Since 1969 he has been a teacher and counselor at Fairfield Prep.*

but also for the Islamic apostolate, the ecumenical work with the various Christians, the spiritual direction of alumni, the lay apostle program and the opening of a major seminary, as well as a Jesuit novitiate.

The lay apostle program each year brought about a dozen young American and European college graduates to work on the mission for a few years. By 1967, 60 lay apostles had participated, and they had a marvelous effect on the student body as well as on the Jesuit community. Iraqi students learned a great deal from these dedicated Catholic laymen.

In August 1968, following a bloody coup d'état by the Baath Socialist Party, Al Hikma University was nationalized. On November 25, the 28 Al Hikma Jesuits were given five days to leave the country. Baghdad College was nationalized the following August with no reason given and no compensation offered. The Baath Socialist government, whose ideology prohibited private education, confiscated the Jesuits' property of 195 acres with 15 major buildings, including the contents of two libraries and seven modern laboratories. Because of the atmosphere of terror created by the Baath Party, no one was in a position to protest these expulsions.

Since Baghdad College was easily the best feeder school for Baghdad University, Iraqi members of the university faculty pleaded, in vain, with the country's new leaders, "You cannot treat the Jesuits this way; they have brought many needed innovations to Iraqi education and have enriched Iraq by their presence."

The most important part of the Baghdad Jesuit adventure does not concern buildings or campuses but rather the students, their families, the Jesuits, and their colleagues. It is the people of Iraq who make this mission such a happy memory. Over the years, many graduates came to Canada and to the United States. They formed an alumni association and have conducted 13 biennial four-day reunions in various North American cities.

Attempts are being made for the return of the two campuses to the Jesuits. To date, these efforts have not succeeded. The presence of the Jesuits, including a number of former Baghdadi Jesuits, in the Middle East continues. The college and the university may be gone, but the Jesuits remain. Three Iraqi Jesuits are still living and working in New England: Fr. Stephen Bonian, S.J., Fr. Clarence Burby, S.J., and Fr. Solomon Sara, S.J. One thing is clear: the Jesuit mission to the Iraqis did not end in 1969.

### ***One Jesuit's Experience***

Fr. Walter Pelletier, S.J., of the Fairfield Jesuit community, is one of the last living members of the Baghdadi Jesuit community. In July, 1947, immediately after graduating from Fairfield Prep "Fr. Pell" entered the Society of Jesus. Now, almost 70 years later, Fr. Pell is still an active member of the Fairfield Jesuit Community serving the community in a variety of ways.

In 1954 when the "status" for new regents (the teaching period before ordination) was posted, Mr. Pelletier discovered that he had been assigned to the Baghdad mission. When he called his parents to tell them, their first question was, "Where is Baghdad?" (The Jesuit scholastics were known as "Misters," and Mr. Pelletier soon became Mr. Pell and later Fr. Pell).

According to Fr. Pell the trip to Baghdad was really something! The three new regents traveled to Beirut the old-fashioned way, namely by ship from New Jersey to Beirut. From there they took a bus to Damascus and then another bus for the overnight trip across the desert to Baghdad. There were no roads. The bus drivers navigated by the stars.

**W**hen they arrived in Baghdad they were greeted by all the Jesuits there, assigned to living quarters in the Cronin Building, and given their full schedule of classes and extracurricular activities. Among other assignments Mr. Pell coached the school basketball team and managed to win the Baghdad City championship. The young and eager regents were always doing something, and the days flew by. The one break was in the summer, when most of the community moved out to avoid the heat. One summer, Mr. Pell stayed at a Maronite seminary in Beirut. The next summer he spent about two months in Jerusalem.

After his three years of regency were completed Mr. Pelletier returned to New England to begin his theological studies at Weston College in Weston, Massachusetts. Ordained by Cardinal Richard Cushing in June 1960, he would spend one more year at Weston College and then complete his Jesuit studies with tertianship at Pomfret, Connecticut. He was given permission by superiors to study counseling at Boston College where he received a Master's Degree. It was now 1963 and time to return to Baghdad.

Despite having a degree in counseling, he was first appointed the Dean of Discipline at Baghdad College and later the assistant to the principal. Not the work that he had been preparing for, he remembered the advice from his father: "When you are given a job to do, do it as well as you can." According to Fr. Pelletier: "I must have been doing a good job." In the student yearbook I saw beneath my picture the words, 'Hated by all Baghdad College students.' At least I was feared."

During the summer of 1969, Fr. Pelletier returned to New England. All Baghdad Jesuits were required to have a physical check-up at the Lahey Clinic every six years. Al Hikma had already been nationalized, and so it came as no surprise when he learned that the Jesuits at Baghdad College had been expelled. Fr. Pelletier would never return to Iraq, but he was now on his way to a highly successful career as a math teacher and administrator at Fairfield Prep where his Jesuit story had begun. ■