

Camrose parish welcomes Iraqi Christian refugees to safety in Canada

As Salwan and Katrin Yousif prepare to start their new life in Camrose, the young couple said they felt hope for the first time since fleeing from persecution and death threats in Iraq more than two years ago.

“It was very hard at first,” said Salwan Yousif through a translator. “But the people here helped us, and God protected us and saved us. I was always praying, and God listened to me.”



Salwan and Katrin Yousif hold their six-month old son Matthew during Mass at St. Francis Xavier parish in Camrose, April 22.

Salwan, Katrin and their six-month old son Matthew have arrived in Canada thanks to the sponsorship of St. Francis Xavier Parish. They are among the 18 refugees officially welcomed by the parish during Mass April 22, more than two weeks after they arrived in Canada.

Since 2011, St. Francis Xavier Parish has sponsored 38 refugees, finding homes

for the families and supporting their financial needs. Eighteen have made it to Canada and 20 are on their way.

The families are relatives of the first two families sponsored by the St. Francis Xavier community in 2011, after Catholic Social Services encouraged parishes in the Edmonton Archdiocese to help refugees fleeing the wars in Syria and Iraq.

Christians, like Salwan Yousif and his family, are frequently persecuted in Iraq. They are often told to leave the country – even under the threat of death – because of their faith.

“They (ISIS) said, ‘You have to be with us or you have to leave. You are Christian, you are not allowed to be in Iraq,’” said Yousif.

For Binyamin Yokhanis – who also came to Canada from Iraq with his wife Linda and their three children – the small community of Camrose is a far cry from the life his family was forced to leave behind.

“In Camrose, people have lives here. Back home, there is no life there,” said Yokhanis, who was threatened if he didn’t join ISIS.
“Everybody dies.”

Instead, the two families fled their homeland. Initially living in Turkey, Binyamin Yokhanis – a mechanic, and Salwan Yousif – who worked in the restaurant industry, struggled to find jobs before applying to the United Nations for entry into Canada.



Joe McMorrow Chris Berthelot, Grandin Media

Joe McMorrow, who helped organize the sponsorship effort, says that the families chose Canada since it is one of the more welcoming nations for refugees, and they have given up everything to be here.

“What they lost was their property, their homes, their occupations,” McMorrow said.

St. Francis Xavier Parish raised more than \$40,000 in three weeks through collection drives and church donation envelopes to help the refugee families.

“It was a do-or-die situation: either we raised the money, or we weren’t sponsoring refugees,” said McMorrow, adding that he wasn’t surprised by the parish’s generosity.

The Archdiocese of Edmonton also contributed \$30,000, and the Catholic parishes in Cold Lake donated \$11,000 to St. Francis Xavier, allowing them to sponsor more refugees.

The original families are helping the new arrivals settle in their home, said McMorrow, and helping them find food and work, the first steps in planting roots in a country that they see as their new, permanent home.



Erick PrezaChris Berhelot, Grandin Media

Erick Preza, a St. Francis Xavier parishioner who fled El Salvador, said he joined the parish’s sponsorship committee as a way to give back to other refugees.

“When (my family) first moved here, we had help from the community. We were welcomed, just like I feel this parish has really welcomed the new refugees,” said Preza.

Ramona Parent-Boyd, a parishioner who teaches English internationally, said that seeing the original families help the new families brings a smile to her face.



Ramona Parent-Boyd Chris Berthelot, Grandin Media

“I’m sure for the new families there’s going to be challenges. But we are very, very blessed that we have the original Iraqi families to support them,” said Parent-Boyd.

Now in Canada, Salwan Yousif and Binyamin Yokhanis say that now that their families are free from the dangers of their old life in Iraq, the only obstacle now is finding a job and learning English.

They also want to give back to the community that helped them start a new life.

“We want to volunteer and help other refugees and the parish,” said Yokhanis. “Like we were helped.”