

The Last Christians

A PHOTO ESSAY

Andreas Knapp

A poet, priest, and popular author in Germany, Andreas Knapp left a secure position as head of Freiburg Seminary to live and work among the poor as a member of the Little Brothers of the Gospel, a religious order inspired by Charles de Foucauld. Today he shares an apartment with three brothers in Leipzig's largest housing project, and ministers to prisoners and refugees. His latest book, *The Last Christians*, recounts the stories of refugees in his neighborhood and of displaced people in camps in Kurdistan, northern Iraq.

T

hree years ago, Andreas Knapp began to meet newcomers in the Leipzig neighborhood where he lives and works as a member of the Little Brothers of the Gospel, a Catholic religious order dedicated to service of the poor. The new arrivals were Christians from Iraq and Syria, who had made the dangerous passage into Europe to escape targeted violence in their war-torn countries. On the invitation of one of these refugees, Knapp traveled in November 2015 to Iraqi Kurdistan, where tens of thousands of Assyrian Christians—uprooted by a decade of persecution from Islamist militants, culminating in the Islamic State’s conquest of Iraq’s Christian heartland—are currently sheltered. While visiting Kurdistan, Knapp witnessed the hardship of a people recently dispossessed of their homes and encountered one of the last places on earth where

Iraq's indigenous Aramaic speakers are preserving a vestige of ordinary community life.

Upon returning home to Germany, Knapp's social work put him in contact with many more refugees. Hearing them relate their stories, he became increasingly impressed by the eastern churches' commitment to nonviolence—even those who lost family members rejected militarism and expressed compassion for their attackers. Inattention to the plight of Middle Eastern Christians, Knapp fears, will deprive the world of this valuable example and of what may be its final chance to halt a process of ethnic and religious cleansing that threatens to silence the Aramaic language forever. Together, these stories and conclusions form the basis of his book, *The Last Christians* (Plough Publishing House, 2016). The following excerpt and images are reprinted with permission.

From Chapter 18: "Easter Comes Early"

After the Good Friday service, I cycle over to Grünau-North. Another family from Mosul moved in there a couple of weeks ago, and I would like to discuss registering their little girl, Suhayla, for kindergarten. Besides their daughter, Shatha and her husband, Nasir, also have three sons, two of whom are already grown up, and Boulos, who is just thirteen. I was recently alerted to the family by my friend Yousif.

I ring the bell. A man of around fifty opens the door and invites me into the living room. With his shiny bald head and round figure, Nasir makes a congenial impression. The equally round Shatha hastens to serve hot tea and cookies on a low glass table. As Good Friday is a day of fasting for Catholics, I haven't eaten anything so far and gobble one cookie after another while fishing in my bag for a form and starting to enter a few details. Boulos sits next to me, acting as interpreter. His curly black hair is cut short and he looks at me attentively with warm, dark eyes.

Once I have gathered all the details, I sit back, and a request springs spontaneously to my lips: "I don't know anything about you yet. Tell me your story."

Nasir starts to talk and Boulos translates, though he soon takes over the narrative without waiting for his father's prompts. By now, Boulos's older brothers have joined us, and add their own contributions to their brother's account.

The family, it seems, lived in Mosul for generations, and belongs to the Syriac Orthodox Church. Like his father, grandfather, and ancestors before them, Nasir is a carpenter—an occupation as old as Christianity itself—and ran a small, flourishing family business in Mosul. In 2003, the Americans took the metropolis almost without a fight, but fanatical Muslim movements were busy organizing an underground resistance which made a point of targeting local Christians.

One fateful morning, Nasir found a threatening letter stuck to his front door containing a blunt demand for money. The sum was so high that Nasir wasn't able to raise it immediately. A few days later, his brother was stopped in the street by jihadists and forced at gunpoint to show his passport. Seeing the word "Christian," they opened fire without further comment and killed him with five bullets to the head, his six-year-old boy standing by.

Nasir knew he had to get himself and his family to safety as quickly as possible. But he wasn't quick enough. The very next day, masked men burst into his workshop, firing indiscriminately. Nasir had a young son, Nimrod, who happened to be celebrating his seventh birthday that day and was playing in the adjacent timber yard. When the first shot was fired, Nasir instinctively threw himself to the ground behind the counter. The terrorists then left the shop through the yard, from where a loud crash was heard, followed by a high-pitched scream—a death scream. Nasir rushed into the yard to find that the terrorists had knocked over a pile of heavy planks, burying the little boy beneath them.

Nasir gets out his smartphone and searches for a picture. I wince to see the little boy's face beaming back at me from the photo.

"That's Nimrod," says Boulos. And I can see the tears welling up in Nasir's eyes. I shouldn't have asked about their story, I think to myself uncomfortably. There is an oppressive silence in the room, and the family's grief is palpable. Good Friday feels very real.

We sit there in silence for a long time, and I continue gazing at the smiling child in the picture.

Then I pass the phone back to Nasir and Boulos resumes his tale.

The crushed body of little Nimrod was buried the very same day at one of Mosul's Christian cemeteries. Afterward, Nasir and the heavily pregnant Shatha packed the bare essentials, loaded them into their van, and left their home city in the middle of the night with their three remaining children. ♦



A refugee camp on the grounds of Mar Elya Church in Ankawa, a city in northern Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region. In addition to religious messages in English and Arabic, the tents display the Arabic letter *nun*, standing for *nasrani*—"Nazarene" or "Christian." The letter, used by ISIS fighters to mark Christian homes in occupied territory, has been adopted as a symbol of faith and solidarity. (Photograph by Allen Kakony)



Top Left: Recent arrivals from Qaraqosh wait for water in a Kurdistan refugee camp. Once Iraq's largest settlement of Assyrian Christians, Qaraqosh was overrun by IS in 2014, forcing tens of thousands to abandon their homes. (Photograph by Allen Kakony)

Top Right: A girl sleeps in Holy Spirit Church in Tel Keppe, Iraq. On August 6, 2014 Kurdish fighters abruptly withdrew from Qaraqosh, despite previous assurances that they would remain to defend the city. Under bombardment, residents had to run for their lives as IS closed in. Knapp writes: "The Christians who finally made it to the border had to enter on foot with nothing but the clothes they were wearing. Utterly exhausted from trekking ten to twenty miles in the blistering summer heat, people had to sleep in schools and churches." (Photograph by Allen Kakony)

Bottom Right: Two children play outside the entrance to their family's shelter. "The children lost their homes, their friends, their schools, their toys," Knapp writes. "They often asked their parents 'Mom, Pa, when can we return home?'"





Top Left: Priests of the Syriac Orthodox Church celebrate the Divine Liturgy in Aramaic. Christians in Iraq and Syria are the last speakers of the ancient Semitic language, which was once the lingua franca of the entire region and was famously the native tongue of Jesus and his disciples.

Bottom Right: The funeral procession of Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho, head of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Mosul and a prominent advocate for Christians in post-invasion Iraq, who was abducted and killed in 2008. As reported in *The Guardian's* obituary, Rahho had "expressed disquiet at the inclusion of some aspects of sharia law in the new Iraqi constitution." (Photograph by Allen Kakony)

Bottom Left: Women mourn at Archbishop Rahho's funeral in Mosul. According to the *New York Times*, a likely reason for Rahho's murder was his decision to stop his congregation's payments of the "protection money" insurgents routinely demanded from Christians in war-time Iraq. (Photograph by Allen Kakony)





Top Left: The Islamic State occupied the Nineveh Plain and its numerous Christian villages for a three-year period before the Iraqi-Kurdish counteroffensive of 2016. The barrier of stones and sand marks the boundary between free Kurdistan and IS-held territory.

Bottom Left: Longer-term refugee housing in Ankawa, complete with a school and playgrounds. Knapp writes: “Over the last decade, the Christian village of Ankawa has evolved into a smallish town with a population of around thirty thousand. Many Christians from Baghdad or Mosul sought refuge in the Kurdish autonomous region, some still cherishing the hope that Iraq might revert to normality at some point, and that they would be able to return to their homes and jobs.” Today, however, that hope has dimmed. “Even after the military defeat of ISIS, Christians do not see a future in their homeland, because there is no political plan to guarantee to them religious freedom and security of life.”

Bottom Right: Refugee tents in Ankawa, with the cross of St. Joseph's Cathedral illuminated in the background. “This can be read as a sign of hope,” Knapp writes. “The Christians who have lost all of their goods still trust in Christ, and the cross stands as a symbol of hope that faith in Christ can illuminate the world, when people listen to the Gospel of pardon and peace.”

