Since serving in the Diocese of Whitehorse, I’ve kept in contact with Bishop Gary Gordon, who presently pastors the Diocese of Victoria, BC. I found this remarkable interview with one of his parish priest. Fr. Alraban offers great insight into the plight of Mid East Christians.

Fr. Karam Alraban: pastor and refugee

“When God saved my life in Iraq, I believe it was because He had a mission for me, and that mission was not then being done.”

Fr. Karam Alraban is pastor of Ascension Parish in Parksville. As a refugee from Iraq, Fr. Karam has a unique perspective on the current refugee situation.

I was born in Baghdad, the capital of Iraq. I am part of a Catholic family of four: my parents, my younger brother and me. My family was a practicing family who took me to Church every Sunday. I was impressed by the priest and the way he led us in prayer, and with his pastoral mission. So I had the desire to be a priest from the age of seven. I joined the minor seminary where I lived while I went to middle school and high school. Then I joined the major seminary, where I attended the Pontifical Babel College for philosophy and theology. I graduated with a Bachelor’s degree in theology.

Was the war in Iraq always a factor in your life?
The war in Iraq was not one war, but a series of wars. I was born during the war with Iran, then I experienced the war with Kuwait, then the US economic sanctions for 13 years. That was followed by the US invasion and occupation in 2003. Next came the terrorists who conducted attacks on the people of Iraq. For me personally, and for the Iraqi Christian community, these challenges were not obstacles to our faith, but, as St. Paul said, “for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). I learned that carrying the cross is a deep experience which always leads to resurrection.

Were the Syriac Christians always in fear of practicing their faith?
As minorities, Christians of all denominations in Iraq, just as throughout the Middle East, identified themselves simply as ‘Christian’. We had to be united because, as a minor community, we were always treated as lower class even though we had a very positive presence in all areas of life in Iraq. Therefore, Christians in Iraq had very limited rights. They were not allowed to celebrate their faith in public; for example, they could not have processions outside of the church. They were subject to frequent and widespread religious-based insults to which they could not reply except at risk of being charged under the law. A Christian in Iraq, even if well educated and well qualified, cannot obtain a good job for the government.

The Canadian Council of Catholic Bishops (CCCB) has offered suggestions of ways for Catholics to respond to the refugee crisis. What are your thoughts about the refugees, and how we should respond?
I strongly endorse the initiative of the CCCB which is really thoughtful and continues the journey of mercy that Pope Francis started. From my humble perspective, the fourth point of the CCCB response to the Refugee crisis, Be Informed, is an important starting point because people cannot be properly involved or respond without having adequate and accurate information.

What are your impressions of your new home and parish?
What impresses me most are the kindness, thoughtfulness and hospitality of the people. Being here fills me with joy. When God saved my life in Iraq, I believe it was because He had a mission for me, and that mission was not then being done. I believe that mission is to be in Canada, and I will always be grateful to Canada, to the Canadian people and to God for bringing me here.