Iraq certainly isn’t a nation known for its Catholics.

About 1% of the population is Eastern Rite Catholic, Chaldean specifically, and they number less than 300,000.

However, the population of Catholics has survived and thrived over the years because the people have a deep love for God and have allowed that love to transform them. This has kept them going strong despite the ongoing persecutions that Catholics sometimes face there, for they know that God is with them and are determined to live their faith without fear.

Among the priests who served in Iraq is Servant of God Ragheed Aziz Ganni. As a young priest he was newly returned from seminary in Rome, where he played soccer for his seminary and made many visits to Ireland with his classmates. Once ordained, he became popular with the youth in his parish and gave talks at local youth rallies. With a bachelor’s degree in civil engineering and some military service before entering the seminary, he was very relatable for the people of his parish.

Tragically he’d lose his life to terrorists at the age of 35.

Those who knew him would say it came as no surprise.

Fr. Ragheed was Iraqi, a Chaldean Catholic priest serving in Mosul. Returning home shortly after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, he knew the kind of danger he would be in. When he asked why he had returned, he admitted his fear, saying: “I am afraid. But I have always prayed that God’s will be done. Here in Mosul is my diocese. I had to return because people need spiritual fathers.”

With the heart of a father, he returned to his people, though he was in danger as soon as he got back home. There were frequent terrorist attacks on Christians in Mosul, which was considered the second-most dangerous city in Iraq. In the 4 years Fr. Ragheed was a parish priest, his sister was wounded when a grenade was thrown into a church, a car bomb after Mass killed 2 Christians, and the bishop’s residence was bombed. Fr. Ragheed’s parish was attacked at least 10 times, but the people continued to return. After one Saturday bombing, Fr. Ragheed expected the church to be empty the following day; instead, there were 500 people at the Divine Liturgy.

It was clear to him why. As he said: “Without the Eucharist, the Christians in Iraq cannot survive.” At an Italian Eucharistic Congress, Fr. Ragheed spoke with great honestly. “Sometimes I myself feel frail and full of fear,” he told the faithful. “When, holding the Eucharist, I say ‘Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,’ I feel his strength in me. I hold in my hand the host, but in reality, it is he who keeps me and all of us, defying the terrorists and keeping us united in his boundless love.”

The constant threat of terrorist attack wasn’t enough to thwart his pastoral efforts. He taught his people theology, got involved in youth ministry, and served the poor and the sick. While he mourned the loss of friends and relatives, he taught his people to unite their sufferings with Christ’s, to be sanctified by their pain. And whatever the threats, whatever the destruction, the faith of the Chaldean Catholics could not be shaken. Children walked through bombed-out streets and braved checkpoints to attend catechism classes in preparation for their first Holy Communion. And there were always, always people at Mass.

For Fr. Ragheed, as for the rest of the Chaldean Catholics, the Eucharist was what really helped them, as it was non-negotiable. He said “we will not

stop celebrating Mass" when attending Mass became increasingly dangerous in Mosul. "We will do it underground where we are safer." On another occasion, he spoke from the heart of his people: "Mosul Christians are not theologians; some are even illiterate. And yet inside of us for many generations one truth has become embedded. Without the Sunday Eucharist, we cannot live."

It was in the Eucharist that Fr. Ragheed found the strength to resist and to hope. And it was for the Eucharist that he died. The terrorists have demanded that he close the church. He refused. And so, one Sunday, he and three subdeacons (his cousin, Basman Yousef Daud, and friends Wahid Hanna Isho and Gassan Isam Bidawed, all now declared Servants of God as well) were returning from Mass with Isho's wife when they were stopped by a group of armed men. Ordering them out of the car, one of their captors began screaming at Fr. Ragheed: "How many times did we tell you to close the church? How many times did we tell you not to pray in the church?"

Fr. Ragheed responded quite simply, "How can I close the house of God?"

It was too much. The armed men demanded that the group of Catholics convert to Islam. When they refused, the terrorists killed the 4 Christian men. Isho's wife escaped, bringing to her people a tale of horror and heroism, of the priest who had so often spoken to them of the Eucharist and had died for love of Jesus.

This week in the Gospel, we hear the words of John the Baptist as he says "behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." John says to the people that Jesus is the one whom will baptize with fire, and that Jesus is the Son of God.

We recognize these words from Mass, when the priest says them at the consecration. And each Mass is a reminder of the depth of God's love for us; that God Himself becomes the sacrificial Lamb, like the lamb in the Old Testament that was offered as a holocaust in the Temple to take the sins of the person upon it. To show us how much we are loved, God in Jesus stands with us to set us free.

This is what was at the heart of Fr. Ragheed's life; and it changed him. So, with that in mind, we think about how does it change us and how do we change one another?

The Eucharist is in a sense, a sacrifice, re-presenting what happened in Good Friday in a bloodless way. It's not just a commemoration or a memorial. Jesus' ultimate gift of love was on the Cross, but He wanted to leave us a visible sacrifice so that His sacrifice for us is presented again until the end of the world, and, our catechism says, the fruits of this sacrifice applied to the forgiveness of the daily sins we commit. In Holy Communion, Jesus again and again communicates this love for us. With Holy Communion, we are meant to be changed. Ideally, it deepens our charity; it brings us more deeply into the Church, and it also commits us to one another and separates us from sin. In a nutshell, it makes us better people, as evidenced by the love that the people in Mosul and all around the world have for the Eucharist. But as Christians, we need to remember this and make sure it's not something we just go through the motions to receive or take for granted. For the sacrifice to take effect, we have to be receptive to it. Applying that to our Lord in the Eucharist, we need to listen to John and truly behold the lamb of God, remembering that when we

spend time with God in Eucharistic Adoration; when we receive Him, the fruits of that can take root in our souls. We can come to Him with our problems, our sins, our struggles. We can pour our hearts out to Him. And we can leave Mass wanting to be more connected to others, doing exactly what Fr. Ragheed did, looking at those in need and making a difference. Jesus is perfect love for us; God made flesh. The more we receive Him, and the more we contemplate His love, the better we receive. But for that to happen, we have to make sure our relationship with Him is not just going through motions, or something we never think about, but rather something we take very seriously as a daily growing in love, like Fr. Raheed and all the people in his parish and Christians throughout the ages who have taken their faith seriously.

And then after Mass, we reveal what we receive - namely, Jesus. Our mission is to bring others to Jesus like the apostles did. In our second reading, Saint Paul says: “…called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God…to you who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy…Grace to you and peace..” Paul goes onto say that he preaches one thing: Christ crucified. Paul understands that he is a bearer of light to all nations, and that he is a servant of the servant. He follows in the path of

John the Baptist, who points the way to Christ. Paul builds churches, like the one at Corinth, because he wants people to be holy. He's ministering to the Gentiles, a sign that God came for all and not just some. This missionary aspect is important for us to remember, because we are called to be a light to the world. Like Paul, we are sent. We are set apart. The world will often act in the way, but our actions can do so much. All of us have the power to make a difference, to show kindness and love to others, to spread the faith. Opportunities are all around us, and what an impact we can have when we live our faith without fear, when we show others through our actions what the faith is all about, and when we, like Fr. Raheed, witness to the faith through fortitude.

Life brings with it many challenges, and sometimes when we look at how things are in the world, we may wonder where are you Lord. But as Saint John Paul II said, "In that little Host is the solution to all the problems of the world." How true that is, because the Lamb of God has indeed come to take away the sins of the world, and to transform us. This Lamb is sacrificed for us, and in so doing conquers evil and comes to shepherd his people. That's what Fr. Raheed knew which is why he trusted in Jesus even when he knew his life was in danger.

Christ is our brother, but more than that He is our Redeemer. He is the Lamb of God. He is present with us in our major suffering; but he is just as present with us in the lesser challenges. He is with us at all points: the life-changing moments and the less significant moments that make up the bulk of most of our lives. And he understands it all without exception, because he was there before us. His whole life was one great act of self-sacrificing love, one great act of solidarity with you and me. May we let Him journey with us, take away our sins, and in so doing be truly free.