



## Ragheed Ganni

Fr Ragheed Ganni is well remembered in Ireland for his work at Lough Derg. Shortly after his return to Iraq he was cruelly murdered after Mass. Fr **John Murray**, parish priest of Downpatrick, relates some of his life story.

'Ragheed's been shot! Ragheed's been shot', my colleague in the parish yelled as he burst into the room. Distressed, I hoped that his news was not true.

Soon we knew more. Fr Ragheed Ganni and his three deacons had finished Mass and were getting into their car when gunmen suddenly appeared and ambushed them. All four were left dead.

A group of Islamist fighters shot the four men near the Chaldean Holy Spirit Church where Fr Ganni was parish priest. He had just celebrated Mass there on Trinity Sunday 3 June 2007. As the group walked away from the church, the armed men stopped them, warning Fr Ganni to close the church.

Fr Ganni replied, 'How can I close the house of God?' The gunmen ordered Deacon Isho's wife to flee, demanded that the four men convert to Islam and, when they refused, took their lives. The car was then rigged with explosives to prevent the bodies being recovered, but a bomb disposal team managed to defuse the devices, allowing the corpses to be buried.

Thousands of people attended the funeral of the four men the following day.

'The example and witness of Fr Ragheed inspired me from the moment I heard of his martyrdom, one of so many noble martyrs of the great

new persecution in the Middle East,' said Fr Benedict Kiely, founder of a charity for persecuted Christians. ISIS had ransacked Karemlash, Fr Ganni's hometown, during their occupation from 2014–2016. They vandalised Fr Ganni's tombstone but left his resting place untouched. Fr Kiely recalled that to walk into the desecrated church last year and discover his tomb 'was a beautiful blessing and sign from Heaven to continue to remind the world of the suffering Christians in the cradle of Christianity.'

The Iraqi priest martyred by Islamist fighters in Mosul in 2007 remains an inspiration for many Christian victims of persecution.

The Vatican has formally opened the canonisation cause of Iraqi Chaldean Fr Ragheed Aziz Ganni and three deacons Basman Yousef Daud, Wahid Hanna Isho and Gassan Isam Bidawid.

Fr Ragheed Ganni was well known in Rome and lived at the Irish College between 1996 and 2003. Having completed his formation he was ordained a priest of the Chaldean Catholic Archeparchy of Mosul in 2001. After ordination Fr Ganni continued his studies at the Pontifical Irish College, and he gained a Licentiate in Ecumenical Theology from the Pontifical University of St Thomas, the Angelicum. In 2003 he elected to return to



his home country of Iraq.

Fr Ganni made strong friends with Irish seminarians and also spent summers in Lough Derg since he could not go home. The Irish seminarians arranged for the Irish hierarchy to offer him a parish after he was ordained in 2001. He had the opportunity but refused. He was needed at home. 'That is where I belong, that is my place', he said.

Fr Ganni had first come to international notice two years before his death, in 2005, when he spoke in Bari, Italy, at a Eucharistic congress.

'On 20 June of last year, a group of young women were cleaning the church to get it ready for Sunday service. My sister Raghad, who is

nineteen, was among them', he said. 'As she was carrying water to wash the floor, two men drove up and threw a grenade that blew up near her.'

It was a miracle that she survived. 'For me and my community, my sister's wounds were a source of strength so that we, too, may bear our cross', Fr Ganni said. '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.'

After the 2003 US-led invasion ousted Sunni leader Saddam Hussein, Iraq became hostile territory for Christians. The Islamist violence was pervasive, targeting stores at first, then churches,

then Christians everywhere. In his 2005 remarks, Fr Ganni said, 'Last August in St Paul's Church, a car bomb exploded after the 6 pm Mass. The blast killed two Christians and wounded many others'. The event was a 'miracle' because only one bomb of many planted in a car went off. 'Had they all gone off together the dead would have been in the hundreds since 400 faithful had come on that day.'

'The terrorists might think they can kill our bodies or our spirit by frightening us, but, on Sundays, churches are always full', he said. 'They may try to take our life, but the Eucharist gives it back.'

'There are days when I feel frail and full of fear. But when, holding the

Eucharist, I say "Behold the Lamb of God, Behold him who takes away the sin of the world," I feel his strength in me', he said. 'When I hold the host in my hands, it is really he who is holding me and all of us, challenging the terrorists and keeping us united in his boundless love.'

At that same Eucharistic congress in 2005 Pope Benedict spoke of another occasion – in the year AD 304 – when soldiers broke into a barn in Abitene (Tunisia) where Christians were celebrating the Eucharist. When ordered to stop the priest spoke those same incredible words, 'without Sunday we cannot live'. Fr Ganni knew those words and paid the price for making them true. ♡

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