

Catholic News Agency Written Interview January 13, 2025

What motivated you to write this book?

A few years ago, I was transitioning to pre-retirement, and I had more time available to channel my creative talents in new ways. I had read a good deal of Pope Benedict's writings about how beauty opens the soul to God. I felt inspired to write something beautiful that would touch souls. I also wanted to contribute to the new evangelization by crafting stories which would attract people to the beauty of faith.

There were very specific events which lead to the creation of *Nazar's Journey*. I had been in the business world for many years when 9/11 happened. One of my clients, a young father and husband, was killed in the Twin Towers. Terrorism had crossed my path. Later, I read articles in The National Catholic Register and Columbia magazine about ISIS sweeping through the Nineveh Plains of Iraq. The genocide declaration caught my attention, along with interviews by Archbishop Warda. The final motivating factor – the straw that broke the camel's back for me – was watching an interview by Father Ben Kiely about how ISIS would paint the letter N on the doors of innocent Christians in Mosul. If the letter N was painted on your door, you could be financially penalized, physically harmed, or killed by ISIS.

I decided that the first story I would create-- during this new season of my life-- would be about the tragic events of 2014 in the Nineveh Plains of Iraq. In my consciousness was a story I had written during my senior year at Yale which was set in the Vietnam war. It was about a boy who was searching for his father amidst the chaos of war. I decided to take some of the elements of that story and include them in this novel. As it turned out, Nazar is much older than the boy of my previous story. Also, because of the huge historical differences, many plot and character elements are completely new in *Nazar's Journey*.

What were your objectives as an author? What did you want to accomplish when you began this project?

My first goal was to express my esteem and admiration for the Christians of Iraq who had persevered through the horrific experiences of multiple wars, as well as

the persecution of ten years ago. I also thought that by including themes of hope and God's protection in the narrative, my book could offer consolation and healing.

My second objective was to use the Nineveh Plains as a microcosm for many other global situations where similar events of persecution and displacement are occurring today. I wanted to reinforce that this suffering is real, not a fantasy. For example, the western world is not paying attention to the bloodshed and persecution that the Christians of Nigeria have experienced in the last several years.

Thirdly, even though I display the evil of terrorism in my book, which is ISIS, wanted to create a scenario of cooperation and dialogue between peaceful Christians and moderate Muslims. Without spoiling the plot, readers are saying that this worked out well. A Muslim scholar from the Religious Freedom Institute in DC wrote one of the endorsements for *Nazar's Journey* and appreciated this dimension of my story.

Finally, because I am a Catholic Christian, I have woven Christian themes into the narrative with the aim of touching hearts. Like a good musical composition, I wanted the story to impact people on the deeper level of their souls. In his introduction, Joseph Pearce also touches on some of these themes.

If I am correct that you never visited Iraq and never went to the Middle East, how did you create authenticity and realism in your novella?

I am an Italian American and am familiar with Europe. I speak French and Italian, so a little bit of this shows up in the novella. I have visited Israel, but I have never been to Iraq or any other country in the Middle East.

I was able to create realism by doing very specific research. Also, I was privileged to be able to communicate in English with Chaldeans from Iraq who are now in the United States— this was essential since I don't know Arabic, Aramaic, or Sureth.

For research, in addition to the articles and interviews I have already mentioned, I was very influenced by a book by Christian Sahner: *Among the Ruins- Syria Past*

and Present which pointed out how Christians and Muslims were able to live and work cooperatively in many different cultural situations and historical periods. I wanted to show that this kind of peaceful cooperation is not an impossibility in our world --even though today people seem mesmerized by the evil of terrorism.

The Cave, a National Geographic documentary about a group of heroic doctors in the war zone of Syria, was also very helpful to me because of its realism. The scene where the doctors are celebrating a birthday with popcorn and lettuce, while pretending to eat pizza, is mirrored in my novel when Amira and Nazar pretend to celebrate Yousif's birthday with a very special Iraqi dish which is not available under the circumstances. This is all purely imaginary, but it adds some comic relief to the story.

The Disappearing People- The Tragic Fate of Christians in the Middle East by Stephen M. Rasche was pivotal for me. The book explains how the population of Christians in Iraq has decreased significantly since the beginning of the US Operation Desert Storm over twenty years ago. Sad stories are told of people who returned to the Nineveh Plains two years after the events of my story, completely rebuilt and restored their homes, and then felt compelled to once again leave Iraq due to the uncomfortable presence of Iranian military personnel patrolling in their vicinity.

Some of the Chaldeans I was able to communicate with about their Iraq experiences are in the Boston area, such as Mother Olga, Deacon Sermed Ashkouri, and Fady Aqrawi. I also had help from the Chaldean Cultural Center in Michigan, thanks to the Executive Director, Weam Namou, and from my artist, Qais Al-Sindy, currently in San Diego, who had studied engineering in Baghdad and also got his Masters in Fine Arts degree there. He arrived in the US soon after the start of Operation Desert Storm. I had help with the Sureth phrases in my book from a very skilled translator who also assists the government.

What are some of the spiritual themes you have woven into your narrative?

There are several, but here are the three main ones:

The most important is the theme of Nazar searching for Baba [his father], which suggests humanity's search for the love of God, and for redemption. Nazar is

wounded at the start of the story. This is depicted on the cover of the book. So, in essence, we are all Nazar --every human being is broken due to original sin and needs healing and redemption.

The second theme is represented by the Skylark, who is a pivotal player in my story. The Skylark is also shown on the cover and in many of the paintings of the book. Besides being suggestive of the Holy Spirit, the Skylark represents humanity's quest for the serenity and beauty of heaven. One dimension of heaven is knowing the profound and everlasting love of God the Father, which we cannot obtain on our own—it must be received as a gift.

The third theme is highlighted in the scene under the stars, with the dialogue between Amira and Nazar, and in the painting by Qais Al-Sindy titled "He Will Conceal You in His Wings." Inspired by Psalm 91, this scene is intended to portray how God's love and protection are generously given to us, even in situations of great suffering and adversity.

Are there global themes which would apply to crisis situations in other cultures and nations?

Yes, there are three global themes: the wounds of war, the reality of persecution, and the alienation of displacement. These are themes that any person from any culture or nation could relate to. Qais Al-Sindy, who did nine expressionist paintings specifically for Nazar's Journey, has created images which convey the sufferings endured in Iraq and currently in many other global crisis situations.

What ages would be appropriate for readers of your book?

I designed the book for the adult reader, but it can easily be read by 7th and 8th grade students, as well as high school and college students. It is short, so it is suitable for small groups to read and then have a discussion together. I think it is important that younger generations are exposed to the reality of Christian persecution, even the young Chaldeans here in the US. I would like, at least, to introduce many people in the west to the unspeakable challenges the Iraqi people faced due to war and terrorism. In their own protected lives, they might not even be able to imagine what it would be like to go through such a test of faith.

What lessons do you want your readers to never forget once they have finished your story?

Firstly, love Mary. She is an important part of my story. I wanted the reader to experience her genuine maternal love and care for each Christian, and for the suffering Church. I experienced Mary's intercession throughout this project.

Secondly, we who call ourselves Christians in the western world, where peace now prevails, must never forget that we are the Body of Christ. Even if our persecuted or displaced brothers and sisters in Christ are thousands of miles away from us, and out of sight, we can still remember them in our prayer as individuals and in our parishes. We can also remember to do ongoing acts of charity and generosity. As Bishop Brennan of Brooklyn has said, "We are not powerless to help them."

Thirdly, the treasure of our Christian faith is a profound and intimate relationship with God the Father, purchased for us by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Let us be grateful for this treasure and say yes to the Lord's invitation every day of our lives.

The suffering of Christians in Iraq inspired you to write this novel. Have you visited Iraq and met real people there? What did they tell you?

As I said earlier, I regret that I have never been to Iraq. Not yet at least. However, I have had some very moving conversations with Chaldeans from Iraq about their experiences. For example, I listened to a very devout Catholic woman who told me she had lived through four wars in Iraq, and then came to the US to begin a new life. Regardless of her faith, which is inspiring and deep, she described to me the traumatic memories she still must deal with. If she gives these memories too much attention, they distract her from her professional obligations. She also continues to have horrific nightmares, even though many years have gone by since she left the areas of conflict. I found this very moving because, clearly, her deep faith had not completely eradicated this suffering from her life. She had to live with the suffering and not let it cripple her. Some of these conversations shaped my portrayal of Nazar's traumatic nightmares, along with his own feelings of being overwhelmed by grief from the loss of loved ones.

You seem to have a particular sensitivity to the pain of the innocent victims of war and conflict situations? When you were in college you wrote about a boy

searching for his father in the Vietnam war. Where did this awareness come from?

A lot of this sensitivity comes from my father, who was a medical doctor. I dedicated the book to him. He supervised several clinics in Normandy, France during World War II. He always lamented how tragic it was to see so many thousands of young lives cut short in war, so that their talents and gifts could never be shared with the world.

During the Vietnam war I was a student in college. The draft was going on under President Nixon and I was number 32, which meant I was likely to be called for service as a soldier. I went before the draft board and applied for conscientious objector status, and received it as a Roman Catholic, which is unusual. I never had to leave college and do the two years of community service, however, because--soon after that --Nixon ended the draft.

Of course, my position has changed a good deal over the years on this issue. I esteem the thousands of brave soldiers who defeated Hitler during World War II. So, I am not opposed to all wars. But my book points out how completely innocent civilians are often trapped in war situations. Through no fault of their own, they face the horrific consequences of choices, choices which were not theirs to make.

Would you like to write a new novel about the people who overcame the pain and tragedy of the ISIS occupation and returned to their homes to establish a new life?

Many people are asking me to write a sequel. They want to know what will happen next to Nazar, Amira, and Baba. The Afterword of the book by Stephen Rasche provides some interesting factual information about what happened to the refugees once they reached the safety of Erbil.

I am currently working with a publisher about a Christmas story showing the wonder of the incarnation from a child's perspective. So, it may be a while before I start writing a sequel. In the meanwhile, I will talk with Chaldeans and other Iraqis and gather ideas. I am mulling over what will happen to the characters—Would they wind up in a refugee camp in a foreign country? How long would they be stuck there? Would they then travel to Lebanon or Syria for a long while before eventually going to the US or Germany or some other location to start a

new life? Or, as you suggest, would they return to their villages in the Nineveh Plains and rebuild them?

Tell us a little about the artist and the artwork in your book?

Qais Al-Sindy is an internationally acclaimed expressionist artist. I was very blessed to have contacted him, thanks to Weam Namou of the Chaldean Cultural Center in Michigan. As I said earlier, he has an engineering degree and a MFA which he received in Baghdad before coming to the US. The nine paintings he created for Nazar's Journey will stop you in your tracks. They connect you to the suffering of the Iraqi people-- as well as to millions of other people in global conflict situations. You cannot view them and be indifferent. Because I found them so compelling, I included in my book a description of each of his paintings and their symbolism-- to help the viewer appreciate the details. My dream was to have an artist from Iraq create illustrations, as another way to link my story to the real-life experiences and sufferings of the people. Qais was the answer to my prayer, and my dream fulfilled. His paintings went way beyond my expectations.

Tell us about the name Nazar and why you selected it for your main character? [as the name Nasser might have been better for Arabic readers. . .]

I asked people who knew Iraq well for a few suggestions of names used by Chaldean Christians in the Nineveh Plains area. Four stood out to me—Samir, Basim, Aram, and Nazar. I loved them all. I selected Nazar for my main character primarily because I knew, at least for readers in the English language, that Nazar sounds incredibly close to the word Nazareth, so that the Christian reader in English would immediately make the association between Nazar and Jesus of Nazareth. As Joseph Pearce notes in the introduction, because of his virtues and his selflessness, Nazar can be seen as a Christ figure. He can also be viewed, as I said earlier, as an Everyman figure- a symbol of humankind searching for redemption. This kind of thing happens in literature, for example, Tolkien's Frodo is both a Christ figure and an Everyman figure. Also, Nazar- or Nazarius- is a saint in the history of the Church, and when you look at the Latin origins of the name, the connection with Nazareth is also there. However, I realize that for the reader

who is fluent in Arabic, and for the Muslim reader, the name Nazar has other meanings and derivations which don't associate it with Nazareth.

I also chose Nazar because it begins with the letter N. Amira explains to Nazar that the letter N was painted on the doors of Christians to target them as followers of the Nazarene, as disciples of Jesus of Nazareth.

The other three names which I loved—Samir, Aram, and Basim—I was also able to use in my story. Samir is Nazar's brother, Basim is his uncle, and Aram is the butcher in the village of Karemlash.

Based on my experience, as I was in Iraq at the time of the setting of your story [August 2014] I do not believe any bombing affected Karemlash, but your story paints a different picture? Did you communicate with people who knew the events in detail or are they all from the writer's imagination?

I worked hard to authenticate many of the details in my story. I was blessed because Stephen Rasche, who was the Vice Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Erbil in Iraq, [now he is the Vice Chancellor of the University of Erbil] was available to look over my manuscript carefully – and early in the process. He gave me some very good suggestions for revisions and improvements. Stephen is an American. We spoke together in English on several occasions. He has lived in Iraq for many years, spent time in Karemlash, and has worked closely with Archbishop Warda. He was also an eyewitness when Father Thabet and others returned to Karemlash two years after the events of my story. Together they surveyed the desecration of Mar Addai and the condition of the village. This is narrated in his Afterword of my book.

As you say, there was no fighting inside Karemlash. A large crater was found nearby the church of Mar Addai upon the return to the village, so evidently there was some damage, perhaps from RPGs, but probably not as dramatic as I describe it in my book. We also know that the church, along with many others in the Nineveh Plains, was desecrated. Desecration is a rather polite word to talk about the horror that was done to Mar Addai. Stephen took pictures of the destruction of the church when they returned. Some of these can be found in his book, *The Disappearing People*.

I selected Karemlash as the site of my story because of its proximity to the main road connecting Mosul and Erbil. Karemlash is not too far from that road, so it worked well with my plot of Nazar and Amira carrying an injured man by foot.

The description of the beheading of the statue of Mary, and the way the ISIS terrorists sliced off her hands, is a fact. So is the N on the door. However, I put this detail on the door of Amira's home in the village of Karemlash—while most of this happened in the city of Mosul. My story begins after the fall of that city, but I wanted to make sure this important detail was not left out. The escape to Erbil and the events of the checkpoint are factual, along with the many language problems there-- and the confiscation of vehicles. The fact that there were stragglers from Karemlash-- when mostly everyone else had evacuated --is also known. The stubborn old woman who refused to leave and gave the terrorists quite a hard time is a real person. And the flies on the lambs hanging outside the butcher shop—well, they too are real.

There are moments in my story where tragic events occur, but I have tried not to be too graphic, to not let the horror suffocate the Christian hope and beauty of the book. Joseph Pearce references Antonia Arslan in his Introduction. She wrote two books about the Armenian genocide. Arslan is far more graphic in describing the violence of those events than what you will find in *Nazar's Journey*.

What came as a complete surprise to me--after I had completed my manuscript -- was when I learned that the statue of Our Lady of Karemlash had been put back together and restored. It was then used as the symbol of the restoration of the Christian people of Iraq when Pope Francis visited the country in 2021. The very statue of my story, which Nazar wept over, was prominently placed near the altar in the stadium where the pope said Mass for thousands of people. It was a beautiful revelation of God's love to me, as I had no knowledge that this was going to happen when I began to write, selecting Mar Addai and Karemlash as the place where my story begins.

Have you read my articles published in AsiMina? Don't you think that they contain many inspiring stories that could be the seed for new novels? Like the story of the priest who carried the Holy Eucharist to remove it from Karemlash before ISIS arrived and was the first to return the Eucharist to bless the area after the liberation.

Yes, I read and was struck by your articles about the restoration and re-consecration of several Catholic Churches in Mosul, roughly ten years after the events of my story, and how you and so many others wept while witnessing this reality that had seemed impossible years ago. Having lived and grown up in Mosul with your family and having endured the devastation of June 2014, when Mosul fell, and then seeing the city restored and brought back to life—it must have all been an unforgettable experience. Maybe the priest, Father Martin Baani, who rescued the Eucharist and then returned it to Mar Addai along with Bishop Thabet and the others, should be in my sequel. It is an inspiring idea.

Please explain to the reader how your novel contributes to the support of Christians suffering around the world?

When I started writing my manuscript, I contacted Joop Koopman, who was then the Communications Director of the Aid to the Church in Need, an organization that, for 70 years, has helped persecuted Christians and displaced peoples in different parts of the globe. Their North American headquarters are in Brooklyn, NY. I called Joop on the phone as a stranger to update him about what I was working on, and to ask him if he might have contact with people in Iraq who could help me authenticate the details of my work. Eventually, thanks to Joop, this led to my reaching Stephen Rasche. Many doors were opened since then, with my meeting more and more Chaldeans who wanted their story to be told. They shared their expertise, helped me craft my book with language and cultural details, and I reached the finish line. Since the Aid to the Church in Need took my project seriously at the start, and because they were such an enormous help to me in painting my portrait of the suffering Church, I decided to donate all my proceeds as an author from the sales of *Nazar's Journey* to the ACN. So, besides raising awareness among westerners of the reality of the persecution of Christians in different parts of the globe, the purchase of my book will, in some small way, also be a financial contribution to the important work of the Aid to the Church in Need.