



Members of the Christian Communities of the Middle East Cultural Heritage Project Team, including (from left) Robin Darling Young, Ryann Craig, Andrew Litke, Shawqi Talia, and Kevin Gunn, examine manuscripts from the University's Institute of Christian Oriental Research. Not pictured: Sam Russell, graduate student research assistant, and Clifford Patterson, web developer and designer.

## WITH VIDEO CAMERAS AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS, UNIVERSITY SCHOLARS AIM TO SAVE THE PERSONAL MEMORIES OF CHRISTIANS PUSHED OUT OF THE MIDDLE EAST.

The video opens on a man in a clerical collar, sitting in an office in Holy Martyrs Church in Sterling Heights, Mich. Looking just past the camera and speaking in a calm, rich voice, Father Manuel Boji answers the first question.

“So I was born on Aug. 1, 1946, in Telkaif. After seven days exactly, I was baptized. They used to baptize kids every Thursday at that time.”

After describing his early childhood, Father Boji speaks about his vocation.

“I was too young, but I felt the feeling, or the call to be a priest,” he says. “I entered the seminary when I was only 12. It was in Mosul for two years, then the seminary moved to Baghdad. ... I was ordained a priest on June 2, 1968.”

The interviewer asks another question: “Can you tell us about your mother?”

“My mother didn’t know how to read and write, any language, and she didn’t dial a telephone all her life,” he says. “We didn’t have a telephone until the late ’70s, in all of Telkaif. And we didn’t have electricity, in all of Telkaif, until 1956.”

One by one, the questions continue.

“Can you tell us about special occasions and holidays?”

“How did you entertain yourself? Did you sing songs? Did you tell stories?”

Father Boji, who moved from Iraq to the United States in 1987, is Iraqi and a member of the Chaldean Catholic Church, a sect of Christianity that has been in existence for almost 2,000 years. Sitting on the other side of the camera is Robin Darling Young, associate professor of spirituality in the School of Theology and Religious Studies (STRS). As the interview continues, the pair discuss varied topics, ranging from the games he played as a child to school subjects he studied and the songs his mother would sing to him at night.

Though the questions are personal, they address something much larger: the details and intricacies of a culture on the verge of extinction. As violence in the Middle East has escalated over the past 13 years, millions of people, including many Muslims as well as Chaldean Catholics and other Eastern Christians, have been uprooted and left to restart communities in other parts of the world. In Iraq, the Christian population has dwindled significantly from 1.4 million in 2003 to less than 500,000 today.

In the United States, many Chaldean Catholics have made their way to the suburbs of Detroit where a thriving community has existed for decades. According to Young, the area between Detroit and Toronto is home to somewhere between 150,000 and 200,000 Chaldean Catholics. As they begin to acclimate to their new lives in the United States, they are losing cherished traditions and a language that has been spoken for millennia.

Outfitted with video cameras and interview questions, Young and a team of other Catholic University researchers are working to preserve as much of that history as possible. Their hope is to create an online library of photos and video interviews, compiling hundreds of personal stories and memories.

“I think there’s a certain urgency about gathering the memories and putting them down to show what was a lively and very deep, very intricate community with a 2,000-year history,” said Young. “There’s a tremendous amount of labor and creativity and beauty in that tradition, which, if it isn’t recorded, will just be lost.”

### A DISAPPEARING CULTURE

The study of Eastern Christianity, including the stories of Chaldean Catholics like Father Boji, has long been of interest to Young. Since earning her Ph.D. in the history of Christianity from the University of Chicago in 1982, Young has published and lectured widely on the early days of the faith, focusing primarily on the cultures and languages that existed long before the Middle Ages and the rise of Islam. At that time, cultural groups expressed themselves using the Greek, Syriac, or Aramic languages.

Chaldean Catholics, who trace their culture back to ancient Mesopotamia (what is now Iraq), are particularly interesting to Young because of their Neo-Aramaic language. Today, they are one of the few remaining Christian communities who speak a form of Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus Christ.

Thanks in part to her interest in the community, Young struck up a friendship with Shawqi Talia, a lecturer in the Department of Semitic and Egyptian Languages and Literatures at Catholic University and a member of the Chaldean Catholic Church. Talia’s native language is Neo-Aramaic. Over the years, they spoke often about the history of the Church, its culture, and its literature. As violence escalated in the Middle East, their conversations took a more serious turn.

In June 2014, the terrorist group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) crossed the border of Iraq to invade Mosul and the Nineveh Plains, where Chaldeans have long resided. Since then, people in those areas, including many Christians, have faced incalculable suffering. Homes have been stolen, churches have been burned, and many have been told to convert to Islam, pay a tax, or leave. While many civilians have been murdered or sold as slaves, hundreds of thousands have simply fled, trying to get away from the terror in any way possible.

As the fate of the Chaldean Church began to appear more and more tenuous in Iraq, Young and Talia decided to take action in the only way they could: by building a virtual history of the communities and cultures being left behind.

# THE THINGS THEY REMEMBER

By Katie Bahr

“There was the whole question of whether Christianity will survive in the Middle East, so we decided to try and gather as many records as we could,” Young said. “We wanted to get samples of the Neo-Aramaic language, as well as stories and recollections of the lives of the Christian communities. . . . We hope to create as complete a record as we can of the modern life of the Chaldeans and other Christian communities before the recent war.”

“I think, especially for Christianity in Iraq and Syria, I feel it is in its twilight,” said Talia. “The saddest thing is not that it’s happening, but that it’s happening within a short time. That is a great impetus time-wise, emotionally, and historically, to have some kind of preservation of this great heritage of a community that has been there since the first century.”

### A MULTIDISCIPLINARY EFFORT

In order to complete the large-scale digital humanities project Young and Talia had envisioned, the pair reached out to other members of the University community for help.

Ryann Craig, a Semitics doctoral student who had previously spent time researching Iraqi Jewish communities at the National Archives, was recruited to be the Chaldean Heritage Collection’s project manager. Kevin Gunn, coordinator of religious studies and humanities services for Mullen Library, was pulled in as a digital archivist for the project, along with Sam Russell, a graduate of the Department of Library and Information Sciences, who is now pursuing his master’s degree in American history.

The project, now known as the Christian Communities of the Middle East Cultural Heritage Project, became a joint partnership between STRS and the University’s Institute of Christian Oriental Research (ICOR), a research auxiliary of the Semitics department.

The effort marks a return to the roots of ICOR and the vision of its founder, Henri Hyvernat. In 1888, Hyvernat traveled to the northern parts of Iraq and documented the Christian communities and monasteries he found there. His personal library became the cornerstone for ICOR’s world-renowned library, which has since grown to include 50,000 books and journals as well as antiquities, photographs, and archival materials documenting early Christianity in the Middle East.

“His was more of a study of a community and of a history, these places like Assyria and Nineveh that show up in the Bible,” said Talia. “We look at our work now as trying to save a heritage and really bring it to the web so that the public at large can appreciate it and understand its history.”

Using Talia’s connections to the St. Thomas Chaldean Catholic Diocese in Detroit, the team began working with Chaldean Bishop Francis Kalabat to find people willing to share their stories about life back in Iraq.

Prior to conducting any interviews, the team also consulted with representatives from the Library of Congress and the National Holocaust Museum on methods of obtaining personal histories. There they learned about the best questions to ask to find out what neighborhoods looked like, how religion was practiced, or even how favorite foods were prepared. The result was a list of 57 concise and open-ended questions touching on everything from favorite jokes to shared family resemblances.

Since then, team members have traveled to Detroit five times and conducted more than 33 video interviews in both Arabic and English, in places like churches, nursing homes, personal residences, and businesses. They’ve spoken with people who have lived in America for many years, as well as recent refugees, gaining valuable insights into the Iraq of generations past.

“I think it’s just fascinating to learn what these communities were doing 50 and 75 years ago,” said Young. “They went from a very nonindustrialized way of life to an ultramodern way of life in just two generations and they have living memories of the way it was in these really isolated Christian towns.”

Young said she feels particularly connected to the older women who have been interviewed. Often, they speak about domestic life, including cooking and feeding their children.

“There’s an interesting tradition in this community of women singing poetry,” she said. “We have recorded some women’s compositions, including one that was a wedding song that had been passed down from mother to daughter.”

For Craig, the most moving interviews were those of recent refugees, which were often conducted in Arabic.

“I don’t speak Arabic fluently, but I study it and understand it enough and just what they conveyed through human emotions, you can understand that they’re really recovering, that they have just come out of very traumatic experiences,” she said.

“I think just being there to listen to them is really important because they don’t feel like they’re valued by anyone. They would often end the interviews by telling us how much it meant to them that we would come and sit with them and listen to their stories.”

### HISTORY THAT LIVES AND BREATHES

As the team continues to interview Chaldean Catholics, it is also looking ahead.

The website for the project, CCMideast.org, which launched in late September, will continue to be a virtual storage center for the histories and photos for years to come. Young hopes the project will grow to include histories of other Eastern Christian communities. Because the interview process is so replicable, it could easily be taken on by another group of tech-savvy scholars, even overseas.

In addition, the team plans to release a documentary about the Chaldean Catholics, as well as books documenting their history and migration process. This work is being funded in part by a \$25,000 grant from the Michigan Humanities Council.

“There are impressive scholarly materials coming out of this project,” said Gunn, the archivist. “We want it to be for historians so they can get that sense of what happened 40, 50, 60, or 70 years ago and you get that snapshot of people’s lives. Each interview by itself is nice, but once they come together, I think people will get a richer sense of that heritage.”

Young believes that Christian scholars, especially, will be interested to hear firsthand what life was like for a community living alongside Muslims and Jews in the Middle East for hundreds of years. Though Chaldean Catholics are in communion with the Roman Catholic Church, they have their own traditions and a different way of expressing their theology.

*Artwork courtesy of the Institute of Christian Oriental Research from photographs, Photostats, and postcards acquired by Henri Hyvernat in his 1888–1889 travels in the Middle East. From top left: an Armenian family in Van; Christian women of Urmia; the Dominican boys’ club in Mosul; the Dominican Mission in Van: Rev. Jacques Rhetoré, O.P. and Rev. Duplan, O.P.; the Dominican school for boys in Mosul; Henri Hyvernat, Rev. Duplan, O.P., Rev. Jacques Rhetoré, O.P., and Paul Müller-Simonis in Van; the Chaldean Monastery of Our Lady of Seeds near Alkosh; and the Mosul Syro-Chaldean Seminary of St. John. Watermark: CUA ICOR Syr.Ms.4 Hudr. East Syriac office book. 15th century. Go to [semitics.cua.edu/res/docs/TravelsExhibitiny1.pdf](http://semitics.cua.edu/res/docs/TravelsExhibitiny1.pdf) for more on Hyvernat’s travels.*





"It's very important to understand how different Christianity is from one place to another," she said. "This is a Christianity which has always lived with other religions. That's something that is very unusual for our eyes."

For Talia, who lived as a teenager in Iraq and still remains very much involved with his Chaldean community, the project is a way to give back to his community and the University where he has studied and worked since the late 1970s.

"I feel this is a department that has kept my heritage for almost 100 years by teaching the history, language, and theology of the Chaldeans and other Syriac-speaking Christians," he said. "I feel this is a small commitment that I can make to the Semitics department, to Catholic University, as well as to our future students so they will have the opportunity to say, 'These are the people whose history, theology, and patristics go back to the dawn of Christianity in Mesopotamia. So this is how they lived.'"

Even as they look ahead, members of the team try never to forget that the people they're interviewing are still here. The spirit and culture of Chaldean Catholics is one that is still living and evolving over time.

"That's something the community has expressed to us: they're not historical artifacts," said Craig. "These are their living experiences. As someone who studies classical texts all the time, it's rewarding to work on a project that is helping people here and now."

Once completed, the team believes the project will provide a way for the Chaldean Catholic community to remember its roots and the country many of them have left behind.

"We're not specialists in humanitarian aid, we're not working in those capacities. But what we could do is use our educational experiences and our resources to provide some kind of help," said Craig. "We want to find a way to help them remember how strong their communities were, and access what their life was like. ... I think that will go a long way to making them feel like they have something, like they have hope."

## Law Professor Advocates for Christians in the Middle East

In the fight for Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East, Professor Robert Destro is a key player.

Since 2002, Destro and colleagues in the Columbus School of Law have worked closely with Christian, Jewish, and Sunni and Shia Muslim religious and academic leaders to discuss issues of common interest in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Israel and Palestine, and Lebanon. In 2011, he began a collaboration with Carol O'Leary, a distinguished fellow at National Defense University, to conduct a survey of the various Christian communities living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

"We wanted to tell their stories: who they are, where they live, and whether they were indigenous to the KRI or internally-displaced persons fleeing from sectarian fighting in the South," Destro said. "Unless you understand the religious dynamics of the region, you will never understand the law and politics or the threat matrix."

The result of the survey was an interactive map with color-coded markings for each Christian community. The survey findings and conference videos can be found online at [www.mena-rf.org](http://www.mena-rf.org). "It is the only existing pre-ISIS map of those communities," said Destro. "Today, the landscape is completely changed."

Thanks in part to his findings, Destro was tasked last year with an even more serious project: partnering with senators and other members of Congress to make the legal case that ISIS's targeting of Christians and other religious minorities in Iraq, Syria, and North Africa is indeed genocide.

In August 2015, Destro and a team of law students and alumni began drafting genocide resolutions to be presented to the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate. Both resolutions were later passed unanimously.

Next, says Destro, came "the biggest political challenge" of convincing Secretary of State John Kerry to put the United States government on record condemning the genocide. Working with the Knights of Columbus, In Defense of Christians, and two of the leading religious liberty lawyers in the United States, the Catholic University team put together a 278-page report explaining how the persecution of these groups at the hands of Islamic extremists fits the United Nations definition of genocide: killing and other violence "committed with intent to destroy, in whole

or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group."

Framed as a formal petition to the secretary of state, the report details the many ways Christians and others are being persecuted by ISIS and its affiliates through acts of violence, displacement, theft, rape, hostage-taking, and sexual slavery. It includes a list of 125 Christian churches

attacked or destroyed and the names of more than 3,000 murdered Christians. "And that's just the first installment," Destro said.

Kerry accepted its findings on March 17, 2016, and put the United States on record condemning the genocide.

Now Destro and his collaborators are looking for more ways to help Christians in the Middle East. At Catholic University, he and a group of faculty members have formed the Eastern Christian Communities Effort to look at ways faculty and students from various schools and academic departments can lend their expertise to the cause. Projects underway include providing transitional housing for refugees, economic development projects, peace-building efforts, and international legal collaboration.

"This has been a major effort," said Destro. "Unless we act now to preserve and protect these living communities, they will disappear."

"University students, alumni, and faculty have been with me every step of the way," he said. "I'm incredibly proud of what we have accomplished to date, but we've only just begun. We are now working at the United Nations and in other countries to build support for special courts."

For more information on efforts to help Christians and other religious groups in the Middle East, or to get involved, go to [cuamagazine.cua.edu](http://cuamagazine.cua.edu). [CUA](http://cua.edu)

