

Father Jens Petzold, monk, builder, refugee worker

After twelve years in Syria, Fr Petzold assisting refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan

Claire Lesegretain, *Global Pulse*, 12 April 2016



Fr Jens Petzold. (Photo: [Christian Aid UK](#))

When Zurich-born Father Jens Petzold arrived at Souleymaniye, a relatively quiet town in Iraqi Kurdistan, in spring 2012, little did he imagine that he would soon be sharing his daily life with dozens of refugee families.

Together with other members of the Al-Khalil community founded by Italian Jesuit, Paolo Dall'Oglio, Fr Petzold's original aim was to bring new life to the Deir Maryam Al-Adhra monastery (Virgin Mary Monastery).

"I was sent as a forward scout with a view to eventually recruit other monks and to develop a second Mar Moussa here," he jokes.

The Swiss priest had previously lived for twelve years at the Syrian Catholic monastery of Mar Moussa, 100 kilometers north of Damascus, where he worked closely with Fr Dall'Oglio, who disappeared after being abducted in July 2013.

In fact, the Mar Moussa monks had begun to envisage the possibility of moving their monastery to eastern Iraq as soon as war broke out in Syria. In the end, however, a massive influx of Christians fleeing ISIS from Mosul, Karakosh and the Plain of Nineveh led Fr Petzold to open up the monastery to refugees in August 2014.

Responding to the emergency, Brother Jens – as he is known here – took over several neighboring homes abandoned by their Christian proprietors, who had left to seek a better life elsewhere. Eight more families were installed on the upper floor of the monastery.

With so many people continuing to arrive, he was soon forced to create private spaces in the chapel to house another seven families behind curtains made from sheets. Meanwhile, he maintained a small separate space for an altar where he prayed the daily office – in Arabic for the displaced and in English for the visitors.

In total, 64 people, including many children, lived there for more than a year, with women cooking collectively in the cloister, while the men labored to rebuild the monastery and restore the neighboring houses.

With the aid of German and French NGOs, the handyman monk was able to purchase the neighboring homes. “The price per square meter is expensive here and I didn’t have a cent,” he laughs.

Since then, extra rooms have been built on the terraces to provide classrooms for the children, meeting rooms for adults and leisure spaces for all. The rooms also serve for English and Kurdish courses offered by several motivated volunteers, and as a creche/kindergarten for children.

“We have even launched our own little multiethnic, multilingual and multireligious theatre!” Fr Petzold says, referring to the creation of a new music group.

Nearby, Fr Petzold also established a camp for “caravans”, which are a kind of two-room construction hut. This was soon followed by a second similar camp which was officially opened by the governor and local dignitaries on March 8. This latest venture has been so successful that the monastery is no longer required for housing families.

Nevertheless, this has not stopped the Swiss religious from continuing to assist 180 Christian, Yazidi and Muslim refugees by helping them to pay for their medical expenses, electricity bills and schooling.

Meanwhile, two more nuns arrived at Deir Maryam to join Sister Frédérique, a trained post-traumatic therapist. These were Sister Carola, a psychologist, and Sister Dina, an experienced social worker.

In the newly freed space in the monastery, Fr Jens now intends to develop a spiritual center for personalized retreats. Most of all, he hopes to find the finance necessary to purchase a piece of land neighboring the monastery, where he plans to open “an interreligious research library and a 200-seat center for intercultural gatherings.”

Following in the footsteps of the Mar Moussa experience, Deir Maryam will gradually take up its true vocation of Islamo-Christian dialogue through living together and spiritual sharing.

“Only by building bridges between Christianity and Islam can we build a future for the Middle East,” Br Jens insists.

Indeed, religious leaders from the Institute for Formation of Imams at Souleymaniye, with the support of local authorities, have already requested the Deir Maryam community to help them to counter the message of ISIS.

Taking Islam seriously

“I discovered the Mar Moussa monastery in 1995 when I was 32,” explains Fr Jens Petzold. “As part of a personal spiritual search, I decided to leave my job at the Swiss post office after finishing my business studies in order to go and experience zen in China or in Japan...

“Eventually, I arrived in Jordan where I lived for three months with the Bedouins. From there I traveled to Damascus, Syria, where a friend introduced me to the community of Fr Paolo Dall’Oglio.

“I stayed there for a few days. Which became three weeks. Then another two months during which I took part in an Ignatian retreat. Finally, I decided to stay for a year and ask for baptism which occurred at Easter 1996.

“As soon as I returned to Switzerland, however, I understand that henceforth my life belonged at Mar Moussa. What always enthused me there and what I want to develop here is dialogue with Islam by taking it seriously. That is the key!”

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