

## **Life in Turabdin**

### **Why is Turabdin<sup>1</sup> Important?**

Turabdin had always been an important area for the Syriac Christians and it continues to remain the heartland of the Syriac tradition even today. It has been home to numerous ancient churches and monasteries that have left a great impact on the life of the Christians in the area and framed their way of life accordingly. Turabdin has been one of the most important spiritual and cultural centres of Syriac Christianity and remains an invaluable spiritual and cultural centre not only for Syriac Christianity, but also to the whole Christian tradition. It is here that the Syriac language, which is very close to the dialect of Aramaic that Christ would have spoken in the first century, continues to be nurtured in both its dialects: the written Syriac which is used in the liturgy and the colloquial Syriac which is spoken by the Christians in their daily life. The latter dialect is referred to as *Turoyo* i.e. native of Turabdin by the local Christians.

In all likelihood Christianity reached Turabdin as early as the late 1<sup>st</sup> century or early 2<sup>nd</sup> century; according to church tradition Beth Zabday (today Idil which is right on the border of Turabdin) already had a bishop in 120 AD. From what we read in the life stories of the local saints, by the 4<sup>th</sup> century almost all Turabdin had embraced the Christian faith.

Life in Turabdin is a simple life that is based on basic needs for life. There are just less than 3000 Christians living in both Dioceses of Turabdin and Mardin today. They are mostly located in the towns of Midyat and Mardin and in about 40 villages around them. They continue their life by being engaged in their work.

In this paper I will speak on Life in Turabdin:

1. Political aspect
2. Economic aspect
3. Social aspect and
4. Religious aspect of life

### **1. Political Aspect of the Life of Christians in Turabdin**

The Syriac people were hardly engaged in political activities until recent years, although people are exposed to politics even if they are not interested. Those who happen to be in politics were for the most part forced into this political activity against their will. This would usually lead them to start a life outside the country and continue their political activities in the diaspora where they would have a better opportunity to work for their intended policies.

Today however, things have changed. There are now a few examples of Syriac Christians who are in politics because they wished to be in politics. We have a Syriac Christian from Turabdin in the national parliament, a fact that we would not have dreamed about some 20

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<sup>1</sup> Turabdin is an area in southeast Turkey which stretches from Mardin proper in the west to Cizre in the east and from Hasankeyf in the north to the plain of Nisibis in the south.

years ago, when a Christian could not be, not only a member of parliament but even the lowest civil servant. So the Christians may participate in politics, but there are very few who do so; they prefer a safer way of life outside politics.

Life was not easy for the Christians in Turabdin in the past. They still have a vivid picture of this in their mind. They have learned to act carefully when dealing with their neighbours of other faiths for they were mistreated every time they trusted them. Christians still bear the scars of the last few decades, especially of the 1990's and that will take time to heal. It wasn't easy to be caught in the cross-fire of a very sensitive situation, one about which I prefer not to go into detail. The political instability and the chaotic situation of the 1990's caused many Christians to seek a safe haven abroad mainly in Europe, but also in Australia and the US. So there were hardly any young people left in the area and those who stayed did not know whether they would survive. They lived on a daily basis, each day not knowing whether they would remain to live the following day. Thank God those difficult days have passed now. The situation may have improved and life may have taken a new dimension, however, it is still difficult to leave the past behind. The lack of political stability in the area still causes a great worry for the Christians in the area.

With the situation improving after the year 2000, the Christians from Turabdin who live abroad began to consider returning to Turabdin, which had been entrusted to the older people who did their best to maintain the Christian presence in the area. Staying in Turabdin at the cost of risking their life, the older people have played a great role in rebuilding Turabdin. Being old, they were not targeted directly in the way that the young people were. The young were pressured and exposed to danger and intimidation in the attempt to drive them out. If today we have Christians coming back to Turabdin, it is mostly due to the presence of the older people who remained in their villages. The return process was of course encouraged by the improving situation and by the moral and practical support offered by the active monasteries in the area. The older people in the villages could not do much to offer practical help, but their presence was some kind of a measurement for the political situation and a means for those abroad to visit their home with the intention to return to their villages. The older people served as mediators to encourage the Christians abroad to take further steps towards a return to their homeland.

Here I would like to mention with gratitude the invaluable support the Christians received from Christian groups such as the Friends of Turabdin and that of the Solidarity Group of Turabdin which were initiated by the esteemed persons Rev. Prof. Hans Hollerweger from Austria and Rev. Horst Oberkampf from Germany respectively. The moral support these groups offered to the Christians who remained in Turabdin is immense and their financial support helped them keep going with their daily life.

The role of the monasteries in the area should not be underestimated. The support the monasteries offered in the return process, especially that of the Monastery of Mor Gabriel, the heart of Turabdin, is immeasurable. Their service was not limited to offering accommodation to many of the Christians who had no relatives left in Turabdin. The communities in these monasteries in fact were a source of moral support to the Christians in the diaspora and

offered them a very efficient practical service by helping them with their bureaucratic matters and giving them much good advice on how to follow the procedure for their return. Many of these Christians, especially those who had no relatives left in the area had become almost foreign to the system of the country and the way of life in the area.

There had been a number of Christian villages that were evacuated due to the difficult situation. The inhabitants of many of these villages immigrated abroad but there were also those that managed their stay in a neighbouring Christian village using the empty houses left by the immigrants until they were allowed to resettle in their own villages. They started a new life in the village, usually with few families until others gradually came and joined them from abroad. Resettlement for Christians from villages that were not entirely Christian has been more difficult, because their houses and other properties were already occupied by the people of other faiths who were not willing to give them back. Some even threatened the owner of the property to stop them from initiating a legal procedure. There are hardly any Christians who returned to these villages, because they feared intimidation by the occupiers.

A number of Christian villages that were completely evacuated in the Izlo area, have now been partially resettled by a number of families who stay there for most of the year or live there permanently. The villagers in the villages of Kharabmeshke, Sederi, Badebe, Ehwo, Arbo and Kafro Tahtayto (Lower Kafro) have built new houses or repaired their old ones. The inhabitants in these villages are joined by some other families for the most of the year, especially by retired couples and by others who spend their yearly holiday there. It is good to have these Christian families visiting in Turabdin, even though it may only be for a certain period of the year. It is important that these people come and see the places they left behind; not only for boosting the morale of the Christians present there, but it also helps these families themselves to consider a resettlement in the future. Many of these villages, although they are crowded during the holidays, in the winter however, are left with a couple of families. There are of course other villages in Turabdin with similar situation.

The example of the villagers of Kafro Tahtayto is different from the rest of the resettlements. Like some other villages, Kafro Tahtayto was completely evacuated in 1995 due to difficulties and all its inhabitants had moved to Europe. However, the villagers planned their return for years beforehand and took more subtle and stable steps for resettlement in their village. Before resettling in the village, they built new houses and prepared the infrastructure ahead of their arrival. They built a new village beside the old one. The village was re-inhabited by 15 families in 2005 and they are living there since then.

The cadastral work which was done in 2008 has left a great damage on the Syriac Christians who had come to believe that the situation has improved and they can come back. The cadastral process was re-registration of land deeds, many of them ancient, based on new satellite technology. However, during this registration in 2008 many of the Christians lost properties to the state, which registered them as forest area or just as treasury property and those that were registered to people were mostly registered in a chaotic mess. Many Christians who had returned to Turabdin at the beginnings of the first decade of the 2000's also lost land.

This has greatly discouraged Syriac Christians in Europe considering a return to Turabdin and created kind of a panic among them and renewed their mistrust to the state.

## **2. The Economic aspect of the life of Christians in Turabdin**

Since the 2000's the country's economy was doing quite well until a couple of years ago, but now it is slowing down. The economic slowdown discourages Christians from returning as it brings their morale down and makes their life in Turabdin difficult. The economic slowdown surely affects the newly resettled Christians more than those who have been continuously in Turabdin.

The economic life of Christians in Turabdin is mainly based on farming and livestock in the villages. In the towns however, one may see all kinds of other professions run by Christians. In the last decade we have seen a great revival in tourism which adds to the economic growth in the area and this helps many families with income.

The economic activities for the people in Turabdin are primarily meant to provide the families with income to meet their basic needs although there are few businesses owned by Christians that focus on making money in a large scale. Syriac Christians live a modest life that does not require many expenses. They are good hearted and do not refrain from helping others who are in need. The villagers of Marbobo, Birguriye and Gunkukshukru every year send a lorry full of wheat to the monasteries in Turabdin and of course if there are other families in need, they are also provided with their yearly need for crop. It is common to see families that have enough of a certain product, offer from that particular product to the less fortunate families. This can be simply anything from lending them a field or vineyard to providing them with fresh milk or other dairy products; from crop to fruit and vegetables, simply any product the families have and that are needed by the less fortunate families.

The farming has moved from a primitive style towards a more advanced farming style leaving the heavy work to the machines, although in some places simple farming is still present. Today, although the farming and the livestock are mostly done to provide the family with basic income, there are also those who do it for commercial purposes.

In the towns they are engaged in all kind of businesses. The towns of Midyat and Mardin are renowned for gold and silver work, especially with filigree work, although there is not the former demand for it. Cheap machine work has replaced much of it. They are usually successful in their businesses due to the fact that they do fine work and are trustworthy. Today we see a noticeable increase in the off license shops for selling wine in the area. In the 1990's a Christian was killed just because he owned an off license shop, but now we see several workshops producing wine in the area. The wine is sold in retail shops in the area as well as marketed outside Turabdin, especially in the big cities like Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. The workshop owners plan to even export the wine abroad.

## **3. The Social Life of Christians in Turabdin**

The social and religious life at present goes on quite well, but this does not mean that at times Christians do not feel a lack of safety. Just as in the past, the Church today remains the main promoter of Syriac social life which is mostly centred on the religious life. The church has done well to keep the people together and maintain their Christian life; it quenches their thirst and is the main regulator of the community's religious and social life. The newly formed associations do try to undertake part of this role, but they cannot replace the role of the church, not at least with the present conditions. All that these associations do is to work to promote and care for the development of their villages and support them partially with their projects.

If the young could not meet together, how could they relate to one another? In the 1990's there was a huge disconnection between the community members, the people in one village would hardly know those in another village. This was due to a lack of communication. It was partly not safe to travel but also not easy to form meetings. So the social life was almost dead, limited to family members or just the location where they lived. If the church did not work to tackle the issue many of the grown young people would hardly know about their faith, their language and identity. They would be bound to assimilate and to live a life of lies.

The church has done a great work; if this was not to be credited to church authorities, then God must have worked the issue in a miraculous way. The monasteries served as an engine to keep the life of the community going. They were not only the prayer and spiritual centres but also powerful motivating centres that would boost the morale of the Christians and help them keep going at times when even travelling between the villages and forming activities such as football tournaments were seen as a serious concern by the authorities, who did their best to stop them. The young people had nothing to do except go to Church and work, with a rare chance to meet on religious occasions at the monasteries.

Today the social and religious life of the community has changed considerably. Although not as free as they wish, Christians have the opportunity and can meet provided they stay out of politics. They can form meetings in which they may learn a new language or church hymns and they can organize activities like football tournaments and do other non-political activities. There were hardly any activities done for children before. They were imprisoned at home, because their parents would not feel safe to let their children go unattended in the streets. Now they can go to church school, which although unofficial, nevertheless is an efficient and safe place for Christian children to go outside their homes. There they have the chance to learn how to read and write their mother tongue and have the opportunity to play with friends and enjoy their time together.

The young people are usually engaged with their work. In their free time from work they may exchange visits to friend's houses after supper or meet at a cafe to either converse or play cards together or do some leisure activities together. There are no cinemas or pubs, no discos or night clubs in Turabdin. Those who stay at home, either watch TV or spend the night with the other family members to converse and talk about any topic which may be a story or a legend, usually told by an older member of the family. If they are lucky enough to have

someone who reads Syriac in the family, they may also read some passages from the Bible or from the life story of a saint.

The youth organize football tournaments from the Christian teams in Turabdin every year, which helps bring young people from different locations together. The players may only be boys, but all kinds of people, parents and children, boys and girls come to watch and support their team.

At certain times of the year, especially in summer, in some of the villages, the youth may also form separate teams, at times mixed, boys and girls, to play volleyball, usually in the late afternoon or towards evening before the supper.

Smart phones and internet are of course available to the youth in Turabdin and have changed the way of life considerably. They have opened the world to the young and helped towards making life bearable for them in one aspect and of course they also brought isolation to some of them in another aspect.

#### **4. The Religious Life of Christians in Turabdin**

The Christians in Turabdin are attached to their faith and hold to it dearly. Nothing may come between them and their Lord and Saviour. They have suffered greatly for their faith and they are happy to have endured so many difficulties for the sake of their religion. Many of those who remained in Turabdin are living martyrs and live a kind of a monastic life. No wonder we see many practices like those of the monks -prayer and fasting- at the centre of their life. They attend church services three times a day (in some locations like Midyat twice a day) and keep all the fasting days set in the church calendar, just like the monks do. There are among the older people those who pray 7 times a day like the monastic practice. They attend church when they can make it, and when not they say their prayers privately at home.

It is considered a kind of pilgrimage to visit a monastery or a church and Syriac Christians are very generous towards benefaction of a church or monastery. In former days when there were no cars, people walked to the monasteries on their feast days, usually chanting hymns during their journey. The older ones would ride on the back of a mule or a donkey. They would spend the night in the monastery keeping vigil for most of the night reading the life story of the particular saint for whom the monastery was named and from time to time singing hymns and reading passages from the Bible. This practice may be less performed today compared with older days, but it is still in effect. There are today 8 active monasteries in the Diocese of Turabdin and 1 in the Diocese of Mardin. The most active ones being the Monastery of Mor Gabriel in Turabdin and that of Mor Hananyo (Deyrulzafaran) in Mardin, both of which are the diocesan seats for their respective dioceses. There are also over a hundred churches – many only partially in use – that belong to the Diocese of Turabdin and another dozen in the Diocese of Mardin which are cared for by two bishops, 2 archpriests and 5 parish priests and 10 priest monks.

The veneration of the Virgin Mary and the Saints is an important dimension of Christian life in Turabdin. Besides the common feast days set in the church calendar the Christians preserve the feast days of their patron saint and many keep vigils on those days until late at night, usually sleeping in the church.

Sunday is very special for the Christians in Turabdin. It is the Lord's Day and held with great respect together with the other feast days. Christians attend the Morning Prayer followed by Mass in the early morning. All businesses are closed on that day and no one engages in any trading, except for those who work in a hospital or in another place where they must work.

The Christians in Turabdin keep all the fast days set in the church calendar. During the fast days no animal products are consumed, the people go completely vegan. On the three days of Nineveh Lent and the 50 days (40 days plus the holy week) of the Great Lent in addition to being vegan for the whole period, most of the people eat and drink nothing until midday, there are some who break their fast in the evening, eating vegan food only once a day. There are those who don't fast as well, but they are few. Except for the 50 days after Easter and Sundays and feast days, there is a tradition among Christians in Turabdin to kneel when the services are said at church. And by kneeling I do not mean the way that one remains on their knees for a prolonged period of time in worship. Rather, in our tradition, this is a quick movement of lowering oneself to the knees and then touching one's head to the ground, before immediately rising to a standing position and crossing oneself. Except for the period of Great Lent and the Lent of Nineveh, the kneeling has remained a practice only in the monasteries today.

### **In Conclusion**

The Christians in Turabdin are generally happy about the way of their life. Fasting or going to church does not worry them; on the contrary it makes them feel happy and recharged. However, what worries them is the political instability and the uncertainty in the area. They do not know what to expect tomorrow, or what might happen to them in a couple of months or years. This may make them think a bit, but it surely does not put them in a desperate situation, as they put their trust in God and they feel sure that God will come to their aid when necessary.