

Pakistani lay Catholics run Ramadan kitchen

Christian burger joint owner starts initiative to feed Muslim and Christian families during COVID-19 lockdown

Kamran Chaudhry, Lahore, Pakistan, *La Croix International*, 4 May 2020



Women waiting for free meals at VIP Food Point in Lahore. (Photo: Kamran Chaudhry)

It's 6 o'clock in the evening and people have started lining up at VIP Food Point in Youhanabad, a predominantly Christian district of Lahore in Pakistan, to collect *iftar* meals for breaking fast. The staff are packing dates, bread and curry in plastic bags. Iron barriers have been placed on both sides of the roads to separate the queues.

The burger shop owner Raja Walter is giving instructions via microphone.

"Greetings in the name of Christ. Kindly cooperate with the administrations. Give priority to our Muslim brothers. Women can cover their faces with *dupattas* (long scarfs). Do not bring children. Keep distance," he announces. Wearing face masks and gloves, his staff check the visitors with thermal guns and clean their hands with sanitizer. Hymns are played along the distribution that starts at 6.30pm with a Christian prayer. Free dinner is also served later.

Zahid Iqbal, a Muslim laborer from a nearby medicine factory, greets the staff with a smile. "I have been coming here since the beginning of Ramadan (the Islamic holy fasting month). Only Muslims used to host *iftar*, now non-Muslims are doing same. We pray for them," he told UCA News.

Iqbal supports the organizers by donating hand sanitizers. "We are allotted two bottles every day from the factory. I bring mine to disinfect the poor lining here for food amid the virus lockdown," he said. "I am still earning 15,000 rupees (US\$94) per month for packing medicines. Our jobs are secure as people need medicines but laborers in other industries are suffering. A friend of mine moved with his family to his parents. He could not afford to turn the stove on."

Iqbal is among more than 100 people who get free food from the food point every day. These include about 30 Muslims, most of them laborers and transporters struggling amid the prolonged lockdown as the country's tally approaches 19,103 with 440 deaths.

Walter, 45, started the initiative last month when the government suspended church Masses and closed public areas. "My father retired as a catechist with only 1,500 rupees. He served the Church and I wanted to serve people knowing their challenges. God chose us," said the father of two.

"Many cannot afford even two time meals. We wanted to provide rations in mosques but they were also restricting old people and large congregations. It is our duty to help them."



Raja Walter (right) with Father Francis Nadeem and Muhammad Asim Makhdoom (middle) handing out iftar meals to the poor in Lahore. (Photo courtesy of Father Nadeem)

The challenges

Walter dropped out of grade 10 to start his own book shop and later the burger shop that is located a few meters from Christ Church, one of the two churches attacked by suicide bombers in 2015, killing 15 Christians including women and children. Pieces of shrapnel from the bomb are still stuck in the shutters of his book shop, closed since the tragedy.

Some 42 Christians were jailed for lynching two suspected terrorists in riots after the attacks. They were acquitted this January after a deal to pay "blood money" to the victims' families. The Ramadan kitchen has been featured on both Christian and national TV channels. "In tough times of lockdown and coronavirus, *iftar* is arranged for 30 days for Muslim community," states a large banner over the restaurant. A similar banner is emblazoned on the gates of the colony.

Ejaz Alam Augustine, minister of human rights and minorities affairs and interfaith harmony, donated 50,000 rupees to the project. Shunila Ruth, parliamentary secretary for religious affairs and interfaith harmony, donated 10,000 rupees.

Despite its popularity, the kitchen has been criticized by a few. "What about that day when two Muslims were burned to death. Even their burnt bodies were disrespected," commented Facebook user Ali Raza Sabri. "It is *haram* (forbidden) to eat the food cooked by Christians. It is also *haram* to eat something given by them," stated another.

"One caller accused me of turning people into beggars. I invited him to visit the houses of our beneficiaries. Their broken doors tell their tales. Some leaders come only for photo session," said Walter. "But everybody is welcome. We shall continue working till lockdown and keep sending out a positive message. There is no time for Facebook feuds."

Charity group Saylani Welfari has faced accusations that Christian and Hindu families are excluded from its door-to-door-distributions. Last month more than 100 Christian families from Punjab's Kasur district were reportedly excluded from food aid distributed by a village committee comprising Muslims. In another incident, Christians were denied food on April 2 in a village near Lahore.

A delegation from the Catholic Bishops' National Commission for Interreligious Dialogue and Ecumenism (NCIDE) prayed for "interfaith harmony and more resources" for the project last month. Father Francis Nadeem, executive secretary of NCIDE, and two clerics joined Walter in handing out ration bags.

"The expression of hatred by a few rich Muslims is regrettable. They should end negativity and support deserving people irrespective of their faith. We thank the philanthropist for respecting our traditions," said Muhammad Asim Makhdoom, chairman of the board of Kul Masalik Ulema and an NCIDE member.

Archbishop Sebastian Shaw of Lahore also visited the restaurant last week.

"In 1982, I worked as a priest with Babu (catechist) Walter. We thank God for good catechists who are giving a valuable education to their children. This gesture of love and mercy started in Lent and continues in Ramadan. Such efforts show our respect for people of other faiths," he said.

"Even with fewer resources, we have strong faith and big hearts. We have to be united in the face of the pandemic. This is the need of the time."