

# OMI NETWORK ACCOMPANIES REFUGEE FAMILY FROM QUETTA, PAKISTAN TO SKOKIE, IL

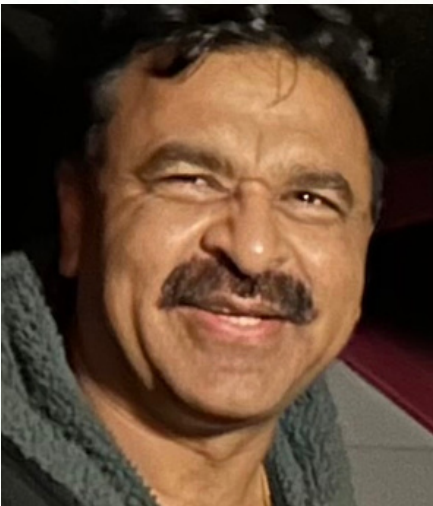


*(L to R) Saira (mother), Unss, (younger son) Fr. Séamus Finn, OMI, Tim Higgins & Rumaan (older son), Amir (father) (see photo next page)*

**Report by Fr. Séamus Finn, OMI**







*Amir, the Sharifs' husband & father*

My recent visit to Chicago provided an opportunity after three years of the Covid disruption, to visit with the family that we helped to settle in the US more than 8 years ago. The story and photo of their arrival and welcome is captured in the article below from the Chicago Catholic: <https://www.chicagocatholic.com/chicagoland/-/article/2017/02/12/refugee-family-shares-experiences-of-fleeing-persecution>

Their journey before arriving in Chicago began in Quetta, Pakistan and was made possible through an Oblate and Catholic network that took them for a period to St. Maggona, Sri Lanka, where they were warmly received and temporarily housed by the Oblates of the Colombo province. After applying for refugee/asylum status through the United Nations, they were accepted for resettlement by the US and landed in Chicago, IL in 2015.



*Fr. Séamus Finn, OMI visiting the Sharif family in 2018*







*Sharif family with their local Bishop at Rumaan's confirmation*

The OMI USA JPIC office was instrumental in drawing on the network of Oblate relationships in Chicago and especially through Tim Higgins, Fr. Kevin Feeney and the students at the Shiel Catholic Center at Northwestern University in Evanston IL. The support of the Shiel community has been invaluable in helping them navigate all the hurdles and challenges that is faced by immigrants on a daily basis.

With the sustained support and generosity of many, they were eventually successful in purchasing a house in Skokie, IL where they moved and have continued to live since 2018.





# BACKGROUND ON THE SHARIF FAMILY'S JOURNEY TO THE U.S.

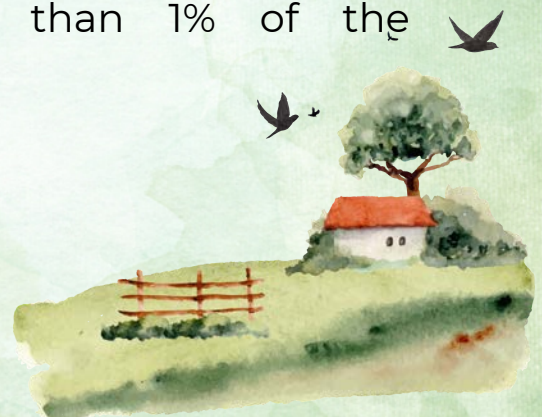
*Article appeared in the Oblate World Magazine,  
Spring 2016*

## A JOURNEY OF FAITH

We Americans tend to take our freedoms for granted. We don't often stop to wonder if it is safe to send our children to school – or even step outside to retrieve the mail. But for many refugees who relocate to this country these fears are all too real.

The Sharif family – Amir, Saira, and their two young sons Rumaan and Unss– have lived in Chicago since May. On the outside they look like any other family. Amir works as a Family Reunification Specialist for a refugee agency that reaches out to undocumented children, while Saira is a teacher's assistant at a Catholic school. And like many of their neighbors, they live in a humble apartment and dream of a good life for their young family.

The family's Catholic faith is one of the main reasons why they ended up in Chicago. In 2013 they lived in the province of Balochistan in Quetta, Pakistan. Balochistan is the largest province in Pakistan, with about 40% of the total land mass. Quetta is home to about 32,000 Catholics, which represents less than 1% of the population.







The family's troubles began when a group of Muslims broke into their home. Amir wrote, "That reached up to the verge of blasphemy accusation. I survived all that, but when it became life-threatening for me and my family, due to my fear I had to leave everything behind to save our lives. Otherwise, my family would have been killed. In Pakistan, Muslims use blasphemy law against Christians as a weapon to settle down their personal issues."

Bishop Victor Gnanapragasam, O.M.I. Vicar Apostolic of Quetta, is aware of the dangers Christians face in Quetta. "This volatile province has witnessed in the recent past suicide bombings, sectarian violence and, at times, religious-based discrimination as well," he said.

Because of attacks and bombings at churches in Pakistan, the Oblates there have been forced by local law enforcement to take certain measures to keep themselves safe. In recent months they have raised their privacy walls, attached razor wire, cameras and gates, and employed watchmen at several of their facilities.





## SHARIFS GET SUPPORT FROM OBLATES IN SRI LANKA

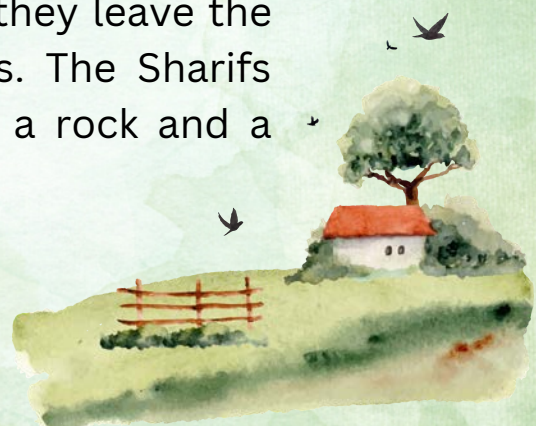
Father Eric Lakman, O.M.I. of Sri Lanka is an Oblate who used to serve the people of Quetta. Though he has returned to his native Sri Lanka, he remembers fondly the Catholics of Pakistan. "The Christians in Pakistan are people of tremendous faith," he said. "The very persecutions make them strong in their faith and commitment to Jesus. There are mission stations, far away from the parish house, where we visit once every six months. Still, they are very strong in their Christian faith."

"Because of the misuse of the blasphemy law by extremists, many non-Muslims suffer and live in fear," Fr. Lakman explained. "Non-Muslims are not safe. Many of them leave Pakistan as asylum seekers."

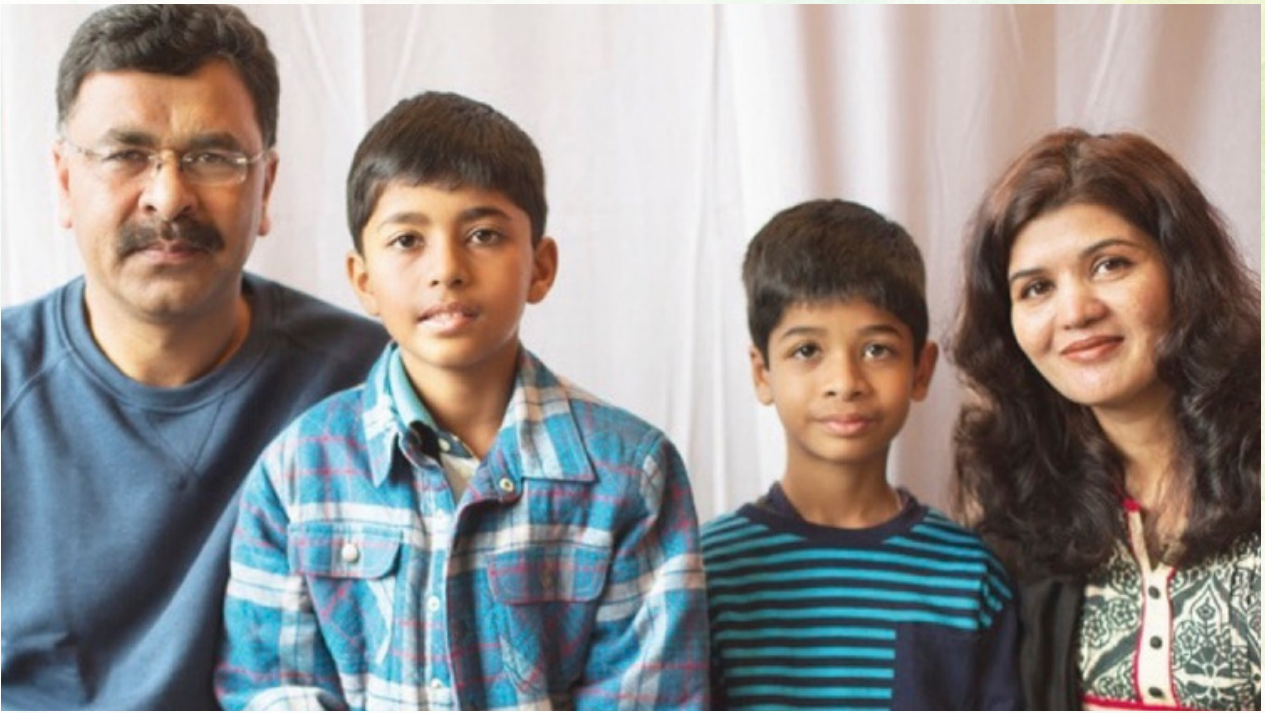
Father Lakman continued, "The Christian community in Pakistan taught me to be strong in faith and trust in Jesus; to be ready to suffer and go through any persecution but remain faithful to Jesus. They taught me how to be satisfied with what we have: simplicity of life, respect for elders, obedience to parents and hospitality to even strangers."

The Oblates supported the family while they could, but eventually the Sri Lankan government changed its policy on refugees and demanded that they leave the country and return to their homelands. The Sharifs once again found themselves between a rock and a hard place.

*Faith*







*Sharif Family*

The family first applied for refugee status in Canada, but without success. Still, the Oblates were not ready to give up hope. They asked their fellow Oblates in the United States for help.

In order to receive official refugee status in a country of asylum such as the United States, the Sharifs had to have left their homeland due to a well-founded fear of persecution. In addition, the United States offers access to the United States Resettlement Program (USRP) through referrals. In the Sharifs' case the referral was officially made by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and supported by the Oblates.







*Saira (wife) & Amir  
(husband) on the day they  
got their US Citizenship*

The Sharifs were granted refugee status in the United States in May 2015, and they settled in Chicago. Since that time, the Oblates have been keeping a close eye on them.

In addition to helping them find a place to live and decent jobs, the Oblates have made frequent trips to their home to make sure they have everything they need.

Father Seamus Finn, O.M.I. played an instrumental role in helping the Sharifs settle in the United States. “In so many ways the experience of the settlement of the Sharif family reminded me of the migration of my own family to the U.S. fifty years ago,” said Fr. Finn. “Theirs originated in very different circumstances, but accompanying them as they have gone through a process of learning and adjustment to life in the U.S. has been personally encouraging.”

Fr. Finn continued, “They have encountered numerous potentially confusing situations nearly daily, such as celebrating Halloween.

It is gratifying to recognize that the international Oblate missionary presence in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the U.S. made all this possible.”

