

First Christmas in Canada for the ISHAQ Family

Paul Lee

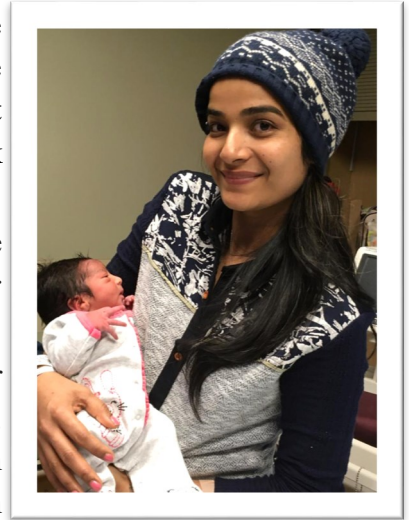
Time flies and it seems not too long ago that the team members of the Sponsored Families Supporting Group of Canadian Martyrs Parish welcomed the ISHAQ family at Vancouver International Airport on March 20, 2019. It is almost a year since this family settling in Canada. Sohail started to work in a truck manufacturing company and Sana stays at home to look after their son, Moses.

When I first met Sohail and his family last year, I could not imagine that he and his spouse, Sana, would soon add a new member to their family, bringing their five-year old son, Moses, a precious gift – a new-born baby sister.

Seven years ago, the family fled from Pakistan to Bangkok and sought for refugee status due to religious persecution in their motherland. Three years later, Sohail's over-stay in Thai was captured by the police. He was sent into a detention centre where he was remained custody for two and a half years. Life was harsh in the centre and it was described as 'hell' by Sohail. I cannot imagine how 200 'prisoners' or more were solely provided with a single washroom.

"May we go to the Church for our thanksgiving prayers," Sana made her first request to our Supporting Group prior to their family's arrival in Vancouver. It was an emotional moment for Sohail and his family to kneel in front of the altar to pray whole-heartedly to God who gave them hope and led them to go through the moments of darkness. After a Thanksgiving prayer, our sponsored Syrian families prepared traditional Syrian dishes as their contribution — offering a small taste of home to the newcomers.

For the first few months in Canada, the family had been adapting to their new life and adjusting to their new home. **"We feel safe here, we feel happy here...it's good to be in a country like Canada. But we miss our parents and siblings in Pakistan..."** Though happy to be here, there are still hurdles. Helping the family handle issues like finding accommodation, doing language assessment, registering for language classes, application for relevant documents, searching for family doctors and helping their overall transition to Canada, etc., our group members were happy and honoured that we were the representatives of Canadian Martyrs Parish to welcome and render support to them.



Diane is the co-ordinator of the refugee sponsorship program run by the Archdiocese of Vancouver. She helps our four sponsored families with the documentation they need to come to Canada, and helps them assimilate once they have arrived.

Sohail met his wife, Sana, in Pakistan — both of them are Catholics. They received death threats from Muslims in their home town. "Because I got married and continued to work as a flight attendant, I received really strong opposition from family members until I quit my previous job and started to work as a babysitter from home." Sana told her story to the members of the supporting group. Trouble came when the children saw Sana

making a sign of the cross while praying. These children imitated what Sana did and their parents became furious and then assaulted her and her husband rigorously, with repeated attacks with weapon, this urged Sana and Sohail to leave their hometown and to flee to Bangkok, Thailand for finding their asylum there.

"When you are accused of blasphemy to Muslim by signing a Christian Cross, the people in Pakistan would

threaten and even punish you to death. You are supposed not to go back to your house because you might not be safe anymore,” said Sana. Having waited desperately in Bangkok for years, Sohail and his family were finally accepted by Canada as refugees. Sohail was released from the detention centre and the family finally arrived in March, 2019.

After arriving in Canada, Sohail said that although he had moved to a new country, to start a new life, he wouldn't forget those people from all walks of life who helped his family in many ways. On December 21, Sister

Elisa and several members of our supporting group visited the family to celebrate their first Christmas in Canada. The family furnished and decorated their home beautifully, a place filled with Christmas atmosphere. We sang Christmas carols and prayed together, sharing the joyous moment with each other. Moses was so excited to talk much and to show his lovely toys to all visitors.

On Boxing Day, Sana rushed to Richmond General Hospital where her second child was born there. The family named the baby girl Grace because they really experienced the grace from God throughout the year. Sohail and Sana really want to express their gratitude to those parishioners who have helped their family in every aspect, especially those donors who have given them money and household items of different kinds. May God bless the family and the new-born baby girl in the year 2020, a year full of challenges and opportunities for them.

