



Francis in Iraq

SPEECHES, HOMILIES
AND PRAYERS OF
POPE FRANCIS IN HIS
APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
TO IRAQ
MARCH 2021

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GREETING TO JOURNALISTS ON THE FLIGHT TO BAGHDAD, IRAQ

March 5, 2021

Good morning, and thank you for the company. Thank you for coming. I am happy to resume the trips, and this is an emblematic journey. It is also a duty towards a land that has been tormented for so many years. Thank you for accompanying me. I will try to follow the instruction and not shake hands with anyone, but I do not want to stay far away: I will come round to greet you at closer quarters. Many thanks.

[The Pope makes a “tour” of the journalists]

I wish you a good journey. I would just like to... They had said to me that it was the birthday of one of you today, but perhaps it was a mistake... And the second thing I would like to say is that there are absences that are keenly felt, and today the role of “dean” of the press corps has pass from Valentina [Alazraki] to [Philip] Pulella. Valentina’s absence makes me rather sad, because she has accompanied us, the Popes, for 40 or 50 years... But I hope she will be with us on the next journey. And Pulella is our dean for this journey. Thank you!

**MEETING WITH THE AUTHORITIES, CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE
DIPLOMATIC CORPS**

Hall of the Presidential Palace (Baghdad)

March 5, 2021

Mr President,
Members of Government and the Diplomatic Corps,
Distinguished Authorities,
Representatives of Civil Society,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am grateful for the opportunity to make this long-awaited and desired Visit to the Republic of Iraq, and to come to this land, a cradle of civilization closely linked through the Patriarch Abraham and a number of the Prophets to the history of salvation and to the great religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

I express my gratitude to His Excellency President Salih for his invitation and for his gracious words of welcome, offered also in the name of the other authorities of the nation and its beloved people. I likewise greet the members of the diplomatic corps and the representatives of civil society.

I greet with affection the bishops and priests, men and women religious and all the faithful of the Catholic Church. I have come as a pilgrim to encourage them in their witness of faith, hope and love in the midst of Iraqi society. I also greet the members of other Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities, the followers of Islam and the representatives of other religious traditions.

May God grant that we journey together as brothers and sisters in “the firm conviction that authentic teachings of religions invite us to remain rooted in the values of

peace... mutual understanding, human fraternity and harmonious coexistence” (Document on Human Fraternity, Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019).

My visit is taking place at a time when the world as a whole is trying to emerge from the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has affected not only the health of countless individuals but has also contributed to a worsening of social and economic conditions already marked by fragility and instability.

This crisis calls for concerted efforts by all to take necessary steps, including an equitable distribution of vaccines for everyone. But this is not enough: this crisis is above all a summons to “rethink our styles of life... and the meaning of our existence” (Fratelli Tutti, 33). It has to do with coming out of this time of trial better than we were before, and with shaping a future based more on what unites us than on what divides us.

Over the past several decades, Iraq has suffered the disastrous effects of wars, the scourge of terrorism and sectarian conflicts often grounded in a fundamentalism incapable of accepting the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic and religious groups, different ideas and cultures.

All this has brought in its wake death, destruction and ruin, not only materially: the damage is so much deeper if we think of the heartbreak endured by so many individuals and communities, and wounds that will take years to heal. Here, among so many who have suffered, my thoughts turn to the Yazidis, innocent victims of senseless and brutal atrocities, persecuted and killed for their religion, and whose very identity and survival was put at risk.

Only if we learn to look beyond our differences and see each other as members of the same human family, will we be able to begin an effective process of rebuilding and leave to future generations a better, more just and more humane world. In this regard, the religious, cultural and ethnic diversity that has been a hallmark of Iraqi society for millennia is a precious resource on which to draw, not an obstacle to be eliminated. Iraq

today is called to show everyone, especially in the Middle East, that diversity, instead of giving rise to conflict, should lead to harmonious cooperation in the life of society.

Fraternal coexistence calls for patient and honest dialogue, protected by justice and by respect for law. This task is not easy; it demands hard work and a commitment on the part of all to set aside rivalries and contrapositions and instead to speak with one another from our deepest identity as fellow children of the one God and Creator (cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, 5).

On the basis of this principle, the Holy See, in Iraq as elsewhere, tirelessly appeals to competent authorities to grant all religious communities recognition, respect, rights and protection. I appreciate the efforts already being made in this regard, and I join men and women of good will in calling for these efforts to continue for the benefit of the nation.

A society that bears the imprint of fraternal unity is one whose members live in solidarity with one another. “Solidarity helps us to regard others... as our neighbours, companions on our journey” (Message for the 2021 World Day of Peace). It is a virtue that leads us to carry out concrete acts of care and service with particular concern for the vulnerable and those most in need. Here, I think of all those who have lost family members and loved ones, home and livelihood due to violence, persecution or terrorism. I think too of those who continue to struggle for security and the means of personal and economic survival at a time of growing unemployment and poverty.

The “consciousness that we are responsible for the fragility of others” (Fratelli Tutti, 115) ought to inspire every effort to create concrete opportunities for progress, not only economically, but also in terms of education and care for our common home. Following a crisis, it is not enough simply to rebuild; we need to rebuild well, so that all can enjoy a dignified life. We never emerge from a crisis the same as we were; we emerge from it either better or worse.

As governmental leaders and diplomats, you are called to foster this spirit of fraternal solidarity. It is necessary, but not sufficient, to combat the scourge of corruption,

misuse of power and disregard for law. Also necessary is the promotion of justice and the fostering of honesty, transparency and the strengthening of the institutions responsible in this regard. In this way, stability within society grows and a healthy politics arises, able to offer to all, especially the young of whom there are so many in this country, sure hope for a better future.

Mr President, distinguished authorities, dear friends! I come as a penitent, asking forgiveness of heaven and my brothers and sisters for so much destruction and cruelty. I come as a pilgrim of peace in the name of Christ, the Prince of Peace.

How much we have prayed in these years for peace in Iraq! Saint John Paul II spared no initiatives and above all offered his prayers and sufferings for this intention. And God listens, he always listens! It is up to us to listen to him and to walk in his ways.

May the clash of arms be silenced! May their spread be curbed, here and everywhere! May partisan interests cease, those outside interests uninterested in the local population. May the voice of builders and peacemakers find a hearing! The voice of the humble, the poor, the ordinary men and women who want to live, work and pray in peace.

May there be an end to acts of violence and extremism, factions and intolerance! May room be made for all those citizens who seek to cooperate in building up this country through dialogue and through frank, sincere and constructive discussion. Citizens committed to reconciliation and prepared, for the common good, to set aside their own interests.

Iraq has sought in these years to lay the foundations for a democratic society. For this, it is essential to ensure the participation of all political, social and religious groups and to guarantee the fundamental rights of all citizens. May no one be considered a second-class citizen. I encourage the strides made so far on this journey and I trust that they will strengthen tranquility and concord.

The international community also has a role to play in the promotion of peace in this land and in the Middle East as a whole. As we have seen during the lengthy conflict in

neighbouring Syria – which began ten years ago these very days! – the challenges facing our world today engage the entire human family. They call for cooperation on a global scale in order to address, among other things, the economic inequalities and regional tensions that threaten the stability of these lands.

I thank the countries and international organizations working in Iraq to rebuild and to provide humanitarian assistance to refugees, the internally displaced and those attempting to return home, by making food, water, shelter, health care and hygiene services available throughout the country, together with programmes of reconciliation and peacebuilding.

Here I cannot fail to mention the many agencies, including a number of Catholic agencies, that for many years have been committed to helping the people of this country. Meeting the basic needs of so many of our brothers and sisters is an act of charity and justice, and contributes to a lasting peace.

It is my prayerful hope that the international community will not withdraw from the Iraqi people the outstretched hand of friendship and constructive engagement, but will continue to act in a spirit of shared responsibility with the local authorities, without imposing political or ideological interests.

Religion, by its very nature, must be at the service of peace and fraternity. The name of God cannot be used “to justify acts of murder, exile, terrorism and oppression” (Document on Human Fraternity, Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019). On the contrary, God, who created human beings equal in dignity and rights, calls us to spread the values of love, good will and concord.

In Iraq too, the Catholic Church desires to be a friend to all and, through interreligious dialogue, to cooperate constructively with other religions in serving the cause of peace. The age-old presence of Christians in this land, and their contributions to the life of the nation, constitute a rich heritage that they wish to continue to place at the service of all. Their participation in public life, as citizens with full rights, freedoms and

responsibilities, will testify that a healthy pluralism of religious beliefs, ethnicities and cultures can contribute to the nation's prosperity and harmony.

Dear friends, I would like to express once again my heartfelt gratitude for all you have done and continue to do in building a society of fraternal union, solidarity and concord. Your service to the common good is a noble one.

I ask the Almighty to sustain you in your responsibilities and to guide you in the ways of wisdom, justice and truth. Upon each of you, your families and loved ones, and upon all the Iraqi people, I invoke an abundance of divine blessings. Thank you!

**MEETING WITH BISHOPS, PRIESTS, RELIGIOUS,
CONSECRATED PERSONS, SEMINARIANS, CATECHISTS**

Syro-Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of Salvation (Baghdad)

March 5, 2021

Beatit Your Beatitudes, Your Excellencies,

Dear Priests and Religious Sisters,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I embrace all of you with a father's affection. I am grateful to the Lord who in his providence has made it possible for us to meet today. I thank His Beatitude Patriarch Ignace Youssif Younan and His Beatitude Cardinal Louis Sako for their words of welcome.

We are gathered in this Cathedral of Our Lady of Salvation, hallowed by the blood of our brothers and sisters who here paid the ultimate price of their fidelity to the Lord and his Church. May the memory of their sacrifice inspire us to renew our own trust in the power of the cross and its saving message of forgiveness, reconciliation and rebirth.

For Christians are called to bear witness to the love of Christ in every time and place. This is the Gospel that must be proclaimed and embodied in this beloved country as well.

As bishops and priests, men and women religious, catechists and lay leaders, all of you share in the joys and sufferings, the hopes and anxieties of Christ's faithful.

The needs of God's people, and the daunting pastoral challenges that you daily face, have been aggravated in this time of pandemic. What must never be locked down or reduced, however, is our apostolic zeal, drawn in your case from ancient roots, from the unbroken presence of the Church in these lands since earliest times (cf. BENEDICT XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*, 5).

We know how easy it is to be infected by the virus of discouragement that at times seems to spread all around us. Yet the Lord has given us an effective vaccine against that nasty virus. It is the hope born of persevering prayer and daily fidelity to our apostolates.

With this vaccine, we can go forth with renewed strength, to share the joy of the Gospel as missionary disciples and living signs of the presence of God's kingdom of holiness, justice and peace.

How much the world around us needs to hear that message! Let us never forget that Christ is proclaimed above all by the witness of lives transformed by the joy of the Gospel.

As we see from the earliest history of the Church in these lands, a living faith in Jesus is "contagious"; it can change the world. The example of the saints shows us that Christian discipleship is "not only something right and true, but also something beautiful, capable of filling life with new splendour and profound joy, even in the midst of great difficulties" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 167).

Hardships are part of the daily experience of the Iraqi faithful. In recent decades, you and your fellow citizens have had to deal with the effects of war and persecution, the fragility of basic infrastructures and the ongoing struggle for economic and personal security that has frequently led to internal displacements and the migration of many people, including Christians, to other parts of the world.

I thank you, my brother bishops and priests, for remaining close – close! – to your people, supporting them, striving to meet their needs and helping them play their part in working for the common good.

The educational and charitable apostolates of your local Churches represent a rich resource for the life of both the ecclesial community and the larger society. I encourage you to persevere in these efforts, in order to ensure that Iraq's Catholic community, though small like a mustard seed (cf. Mt 13:31-32), continues to enrich the life of society as a whole.

The love of Christ summons us to set aside every kind of self-centredness or competition; it impels us to universal communion and challenges us to form a community of brothers and sisters who accept and care for one another (cf. *Fratelli Tutti*, 95-96).

Here I think of the familiar image of a carpet. The different Churches present in Iraq, each with its age-old historical, liturgical and spiritual patrimony, are like so many individual coloured threads that, woven together, make up a single beautiful carpet, one that displays not only our fraternity but points also to its source. For God himself is the artist who imagined this carpet, patiently wove it and carefully mends it, desiring us ever to remain closely knit as his sons and daughters.

May we thus take to heart the admonition of Saint Ignatius of Antioch: “Let nothing exist among you that may divide you... but let there be one prayer, one mind, one hope, in love and in joy” (*Ad Magnesios*, 6-7: PL 5, 667). How important is this witness of fraternal union in a world all too often fragmented and torn by division!

Every effort made to build bridges between ecclesial, parish and diocesan communities and institutions will serve as a prophetic gesture on the part of the Church in Iraq and a fruitful response to Jesus’ prayer that all may be one (cf. *Jn 17:21*; *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*, 37).

Pastors and faithful, priests, religious and catechists share, albeit in distinct ways, in responsibility for advancing the Church’s mission. At times, misunderstandings can arise and we can experience certain tensions; these are the knots that hinder the weaving of fraternity.

They are knots we carry within ourselves; after all, we are all sinners. Yet these knots can be untied by grace, by a greater love; they can be loosened by the medicine of forgiveness and by fraternal dialogue, by patiently bearing one another’s burdens (cf. *Gal 6:2*) and strengthening each other in moments of trial and difficulty. Here, I would like to say a special word to my brother bishops.

I like to think of our episcopal ministry in terms of closeness: our need to remain close to God in prayer, close to the faithful entrusted to our care, and close to our priests. Be particularly close to your priests. Let them not see you as only an administrator or manager, but as true fathers, concerned for their welfare, ready to offer them support and encouragement with an open heart.

Accompany them with your prayer, your time, your appreciation for their work and your efforts to guide their growth. In this way, you will be for your priests a visible sign and model of Jesus, the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep and gives his life for them (cf. Jn 10:14-15).

Dear priests, men and women religious, catechists, seminarians preparing for future ministry: all of you have heard the voice of the Lord in your hearts and like the young Samuel you have answered, “Here I am” (1 Sam 3:4). May that response, which I invite you to renew daily, lead each of you to share the Good News with courage and zeal, living and walking always in the light of the word of God that we have the gift and responsibility to proclaim.

We know that our service necessarily has an administrative component, but that does not mean we should spend all our time in meetings or behind a desk. It is important to go out among our flock and offer the gift of our presence and accompaniment to the faithful in our cities and villages.

I think especially of those who risk being left behind: the young, the elderly, the sick and the poor. When we serve our neighbours with dedication, as you are doing, in a spirit of compassion, humility, kindness and love, we are really serving Jesus, as he himself told us (cf. Mt 25:40).

And by serving Jesus in others, we discover true joy. Never step back from the holy people of God into which you were born. Remember your mothers and grandmothers, who, as Saint Paul says, raised you in the faith (cf. 2 Tim 1:5).

Be pastors, servants of the people, not civil servants. Ever a part of the people of God, never apart, as though you were a privileged class. Do not renounce that noble lineage which is the holy people of God.

Let me mention once more our brothers and sisters who died in the terrorist attack in this Cathedral some ten years ago and whose cause for beatification is underway. Their deaths are a powerful reminder that inciting war, hateful attitudes, violence or the shedding of blood are incompatible with authentic religious teachings (cf. Fratelli Tutti, 285).

I also want to remember all the victims of violence and persecution, regardless of the religious group to which they belong. Tomorrow, in Ur, I will meet with the leaders of the religious traditions present in this country, in order to proclaim once again our conviction that religion must serve the cause of peace and unity among all God's children.

This evening I want to thank you for your efforts to be peacemakers, within your communities and with believers of other religious traditions, sowing seeds of reconciliation and fraternal coexistence that can lead to a rebirth of hope for everyone.

Here I think especially of the young. Young people everywhere are a sign of promise and hope, but particularly in this country. Here you have not only priceless archeological treasures, but also inestimable treasure for the future: the young! Young people are your treasure; they need you to care for them, to nurture their dreams, to accompany their growth and to foster their hope.

Even though they are young, their patience has already been sorely tried by the conflicts of these years. Yet let us never forget that, together with the elderly, they are the point of the diamond in this country, the richest fruit of the tree. It is up to us to cultivate their growth in goodness and to nurture them with hope.

Brothers and sisters: first through your baptism and confirmation, and later through your ordination or religious profession, you were consecrated to the Lord and sent forth to be missionary disciples in this land so closely linked to the history of salvation.

You are part of that history, faithfully bearing witness to God's never-failing promises as you strive to build a new future. May your witness, matured through adversity and strengthened by the blood of martyrs, be a shining light in Iraq and beyond in order to proclaim the greatness of the Lord and to make the spirit of this people rejoice in God our Saviour (cf. Lk 1:46-47).

Once again I am grateful that we have been able to be together. May Our Lady of Salvation and the Apostle Saint Thomas intercede for you and protect you always. I cordially bless you and your communities. And I ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you!

INTERRELIGIOUS MEETING

ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS

Plain of Ur

March 6, 2021

Dear brothers and sisters,

This blessed place brings us back to our origins, to the sources of God's work, to the birth of our religions. Here, where Abraham our father lived, we seem to have returned home. It was here that Abraham heard God's call; it was from here that he set out on a journey that would change history.

We are the fruits of that call and that journey. God asked Abraham to raise his eyes to heaven and to count its stars (cf. Gen 15:5). In those stars, he saw the promise of his descendants; he saw us. Today we, Jews, Christians and Muslims, together with our brothers and sisters of other religions, honour our father Abraham by doing as he did: we look up to heaven and we journey on earth.

1. We look up to heaven. Thousands of years later, as we look up to the same sky, those same stars appear. They illumine the darkest nights because they shine together. Heaven thus imparts a message of unity: the Almighty above invites us never to separate ourselves from our neighbours. The otherness of God points us towards others, towards our brothers and sisters.

Yet if we want to preserve fraternity, we must not lose sight of heaven. May we – the descendants of Abraham and the representatives of different religions – sense that, above all, we have this role: to help our brothers and sisters to raise their eyes and prayers to heaven. We all need this because we are not self-sufficient.

Man is not omnipotent; we cannot make it on our own. If we exclude God, we end up worshipping the things of this earth. Worldly goods, which lead so many people to be unconcerned with God and others, are not the reason why we journey on earth. We raise our eyes to heaven in order to raise ourselves from the depths of our vanity; we serve God in order to be set free from enslavement to our egos, because God urges us to love.

This is true religiosity: to worship God and to love our neighbour. In today's world, which often forgets or presents distorted images of the Most High, believers are called to bear witness to his goodness, to show his paternity through our fraternity.

From this place, where faith was born, from the land of our father Abraham, let us affirm that God is merciful and that the greatest blasphemy is to profane his name by hating our brothers and sisters. Hostility, extremism and violence are not born of a religious heart: they are betrayals of religion. We believers cannot be silent when terrorism abuses religion; indeed, we are called unambiguously to dispel all misunderstandings.

Let us not allow the light of heaven to be overshadowed by the clouds of hatred! Dark clouds of terrorism, war and violence have gathered over this country. All its ethnic and religious communities have suffered. In particular, I would like to mention the Yazidi community, which has mourned the deaths of many men and witnessed thousands of women, girls and children kidnapped, sold as slaves, subjected to physical violence and forced conversions.

Today, let us pray for those who have endured these sufferings, for those who are still dispersed and abducted, that they may soon return home. And let us pray that freedom of conscience and freedom of religion will everywhere be recognized and respected; these are fundamental rights, because they make us free to contemplate the heaven for which we were created.

When terrorism invaded the north of this beloved country, it wantonly destroyed part of its magnificent religious heritage, including the churches, monasteries and places of worship of various communities. Yet, even at that dark time, some stars kept shining.

I think of the young Muslim volunteers of Mosul, who helped to repair churches and monasteries, building fraternal friendships on the rubble of hatred, and those Christians and Muslims who today are restoring mosques and churches together. Professor Ali Thajeel spoke too of the return of pilgrims to this city.

It is important to make pilgrimages to holy places, for it is the most beautiful sign on earth of our yearning for heaven. To love and protect holy places, therefore, is an existential necessity, in memory of our father Abraham, who in various places raised to heaven altars of the Lord (cf. Gen 12:7.8; 13:18; 22:9).

May the great Patriarch help us to make our respective sacred places oases of peace and encounter for all! By his fidelity to God, Abraham became a blessing for all peoples (cf. Gen 12:3); may our presence here today, in his footsteps, be a sign of blessing and hope for Iraq, for the Middle East and for the whole world. Heaven has not grown weary of the earth: God loves every people, every one of his daughters and sons! Let us never tire of looking up to heaven, of looking up to those same stars that, in his day, our father Abraham contemplated.

2. We journey on earth. For Abraham, looking up to heaven, rather than being a distraction, was an incentive to journey on earth, to set out on a path that, through his descendants, would lead to every time and place. It all started from here, with the Lord who brought him forth from Ur (cf. Gen 15:7).

His was a journey outwards, one that involved sacrifices. Abraham had to leave his land, home and family. Yet by giving up his own family, he became the father of a family of peoples. Something similar also happens to us: on our own journey, we are called to leave behind those ties and attachments that, by keeping us enclosed in our own groups, prevent us from welcoming God's boundless love and from seeing others as our brothers and sisters.

We need to move beyond ourselves, because we need one another. The pandemic has made us realize that "no one is saved alone" (Fratelli Tutti, 54). Still, the temptation to withdraw from others is never-ending, yet at the same time we know that "the notion of

‘every man for himself’ will rapidly degenerate into a free-for-all that would prove worse than any pandemic” (ibid., 36).

Amid the tempests we are currently experiencing, such isolation will not save us. Nor will an arms race or the erection of walls that will only make us all the more distant and aggressive. Nor the idolatry of money, for it closes us in on ourselves and creates chasms of inequality that engulf humanity. Nor can we be saved by consumerism, which numbs the mind and deadens the heart.

The way that heaven points out for our journey is another: the way of peace. It demands, especially amid the tempest, that we row together on the same side. It is shameful that, while all of us have suffered from the crisis of the pandemic, especially here, where conflicts have caused so much suffering, anyone should be concerned simply for his own affairs.

There will be no peace without sharing and acceptance, without a justice that ensures equity and advancement for all, beginning with those most vulnerable. There will be no peace unless peoples extend a hand to other peoples. There will be no peace as long as we see others as them and not us. There will be no peace as long as our alliances are against others, for alliances of some against others only increase divisions.

Peace does not demand winners or losers, but rather brothers and sisters who, for all the misunderstandings and hurts of the past, are journeying from conflict to unity. Let us ask for this in praying for the whole Middle East. Here I think especially of neighbouring war-torn Syria.

The Patriarch Abraham, who today brings us together in unity, was a prophet of the Most High. An ancient prophecy says that the peoples “shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks” (Is 2:4). This prophecy has not been fulfilled; on the contrary, swords and spears have turned into missiles and bombs.

From where, then, can the journey of peace begin? From the decision not to have enemies. Anyone with the courage to look at the stars, anyone who believes in God, has no

enemies to fight. He or she has only one enemy to face, an enemy that stands at the door of the heart and knocks to enter. That enemy is hatred.

While some try to have enemies more than to be friends, while many seek their own profit at the expense of others, those who look at the stars of the promise, those who follow the ways of God, cannot be against someone, but for everyone. They cannot justify any form of imposition, oppression and abuse of power; they cannot adopt an attitude of belligerence.

Dear friends, is all this possible? Father Abraham, who was able to hope against all hope (cf. Rom 4:18), encourages us. Throughout history, we have frequently pursued goals that are overly worldly and journeyed on our own, but with the help of God, we can change for the better.

It is up to us, today's humanity, especially those of us, believers of all religions, to turn instruments of hatred into instruments of peace. It is up to us to appeal firmly to the leaders of nations to make the increasing proliferation of arms give way to the distribution of food for all. It is up to us to silence mutual accusations in order to make heard the cry of the oppressed and discarded in our world: all too many people lack food, medicine, education, rights and dignity!

It is up to us to shed light on the shady maneuvers that revolve around money and to demand that money not end up always and only reinforcing the unbridled luxury of a few. It is up to us to preserve our common home from our predatory aims. It is up to us to remind the world that human life has value for what it is and not for what it has. That the lives of the unborn, the elderly, migrants and men and women, whatever the colour of their skin or their nationality, are always sacred and count as much as the lives of everyone else! It is up to us to have the courage to lift up our eyes and look at the stars, the stars that our father Abraham saw, the stars of the promise.

The journey of Abraham was a blessing of peace. Yet it was not easy: he had to face struggles and unforeseen events. We too have a rough journey ahead, but like the great

Patriarch, we need to take concrete steps, to set out and seek the face of others, to share memories, gazes and silences, stories and experiences.

I was struck by the testimony of Dawood and Hasan, a Christian and a Muslim who, undaunted by the differences between them, studied and worked together. Together they built the future and realized that they are brothers. In order to move forward, we too need to achieve something good and concrete together. This is the way, especially for young people, who must not see their dreams cut short by the conflicts of the past!

It is urgent to teach them fraternity, to teach them to look at the stars. This is a real emergency; it will be the most effective vaccine for a future of peace. For you, dear young people, are our present and our future!

Only with others can the wounds of the past be healed. Rafah told us of the heroic example of Najy, from the Sabeian Mandaean community, who lost his life in an attempt to save the family of his Muslim neighbour. How many people here, amid the silence and indifference of the world, have embarked upon journeys of fraternity!

Rafah also told us of the unspeakable sufferings of the war that forced many to abandon home and country in search of a future for their children. Thank you, Rafah, for having shared with us your firm determination to stay here, in the land of your fathers. May those who were unable to do so, and had to flee, find a kindly welcome, befitting those who are vulnerable and suffering.

It was precisely through hospitality, a distinctive feature of these lands, that Abraham was visited by God and given the gift of a son, when it seemed that all hope was past (cf. Gen 18:1-10). Brothers and sisters of different religions, here we find ourselves at home, and from here, together, we wish to commit ourselves to fulfilling God's dream that the human family may become hospitable and welcoming to all his children; that looking up to the same heaven, it will journey in peace on the same earth.

INTERRELIGIOUS MEETING

THE PRAYER OF THE CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM

Plain of Ur

March 6, 2021

Almighty God, our Creator, you love our human family and every work of your hands:

As children of Abraham, Jews, Christians and Muslims, together with other believers and all persons of good will, we thank you for having given us Abraham, a distinguished son of this noble and beloved country, to be our common father in faith.

We thank you for his example as a man of faith, who obeyed you completely, left behind his family, his tribe and his native land, and set out for a land that he knew not.

We thank you too, for the example of courage, resilience, strength of spirit, generosity and hospitality set for us by our common father in faith.

We thank you in a special way for his heroic faith, shown by his readiness even to sacrifice his son in obedience to your command. We know that this was an extreme test, yet one from which he emerged victorious, since he trusted unreservedly in you, who are merciful and always offer the possibility of beginning anew.

We thank you because, in blessing our father Abraham, you made him a blessing for all peoples.

We ask you, the God of our father Abraham and our God, to grant us a strong faith, a faith that abounds in good works, a faith that opens our hearts to you and to all our brothers and sisters; and a boundless hope capable of discerning in every situation your fidelity to your promises.

Make each of us a witness of your loving care for all, particularly refugees and the displaced, widows and orphans, the poor and the infirm.

Open our hearts to mutual forgiveness and in this way make us instruments of reconciliation, builders of a more just and fraternal society.

Welcome into your abode of peace and light all those who have died, particularly the victims of violence and war.

Assist the authorities in the effort to seek and find the victims of kidnapping and in a special way to protect women and children.

Help us to care for the earth, our common home, which in your goodness and generosity you have given to all of us.

Guide our hands in the work of rebuilding this country, and grant us the strength needed to help those forced to leave behind their homes and lands, enabling them to return in security and dignity, and to embark upon a new, serene and prosperous life. Amen.

HOLY MASS

HOMILY OF POPE FRANCIS

Chaldean Cathedral of St. Joseph (Baghdad)

March 6, 2021

Today the word of God speaks to us of wisdom, witness and promises.

Wisdom in these lands has been cultivated since ancient times. Indeed the search for wisdom has always attracted men and women. Often, however, those with more means can acquire more knowledge and have greater opportunities, while those who have less are sidelined.

Such inequality -- which has increased in our time -- is unacceptable. The Book of Wisdom surprises us by reversing this perspective. It tells us that “the lowliest may be pardoned in mercy, but the mighty will be mightily tested” (Wis 6:6). In the eyes of the world, those with less are discarded, while those with more are privileged. Not so for God: the more powerful are subjected to rigorous scrutiny, while the least are God’s privileged ones.

Jesus, who is Wisdom in person, completes this reversal in the Gospel, and he does so with his very first sermon, with the Beatitudes. The reversal is total: the poor, those who mourn, the persecuted are all called blessed.

How is this possible? For the world, it is the rich, the powerful and the famous who are blessed! It is those with wealth and means who count! But not for God: It is no longer the rich that are great, but the poor in spirit; not those who can impose their will on others, but those who are gentle with all. Not those acclaimed by the crowds, but those who show mercy to their brother and sisters.

At this point, we may wonder: if I live as Jesus asks, what do I gain? Don't I risk letting others lord it over me? Is Jesus' invitation worthwhile, or a lost cause? That invitation is not worthless, but wise.

Jesus' invitation is wise because love, which is the heart of the Beatitudes, even if it seems weak in the world's eyes, in fact always triumphs. On the cross, it proved stronger than sin, in the tomb, it vanquished death. That same love made the martyrs victorious in their trials – and how many martyrs have there been in the last century, more even than in the past!

Love is our strength, the source of strength for those of our brothers and sisters who here too have suffered prejudice and indignities, mistreatment and persecutions for the name of Jesus. Yet while the power, the glory and the vanity of the world pass away, love remains. As the Apostle Paul told us: “Love never ends” (1 Cor 13:8). To live a life shaped by the Beatitudes, then, is to make passing things eternal, to bring heaven to earth.

But how do we practice the Beatitudes? They do not ask us to do extraordinary things, feats beyond our abilities. They ask for daily witness. The blessed are those who live meekly, who show mercy wherever they happen to be, who are pure of heart wherever they live. To be blessed, we do not need to become occasional heroes, but to become witnesses day after day.

Witness is the way to embody the wisdom of Jesus. That is how the world is changed: not by power and might, but by the Beatitudes. For that is what Jesus did: he lived to the end what he said from the beginning. Everything depends on bearing witness to the love of Jesus, that same charity which St. Paul magnificently describes in today's second reading. Let us see how he presents it.

First, Paul says that “love is patient” (v. 4). We were not expecting this adjective. Love seems synonymous with goodness, generosity and good works, yet Paul says that charity is above all patient. The Bible speaks first and foremost of God's patience.

Throughout history, men and women proved constantly unfaithful to the covenant with God, falling into the same old sins. Yet instead of growing weary and walking away, the Lord always remained faithful, forgave and began anew.

This patience to begin anew each time is the first quality of love, because love is not irritable, but always starts over again. Love does not grow weary and despondent, but always presses ahead. It does not get discouraged, but stays creative. Faced with evil, it does not give up or surrender.

Those who love do not close in on themselves when things go wrong, but respond to evil with good, mindful of the triumphant wisdom of the cross. God's witnesses are like that: not passive or fatalistic, at the mercy of happenings, feelings or immediate events. Instead, they are constantly hopeful, because grounded in the love that "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (v. 7).

We can ask ourselves: how do we react to situations that are not right? In the face of adversity, there are always two temptations. The first is flight: we can run away, turn our backs, trying to keep aloof from it all. The second is to react with anger, with a show of force.

Such was the case of the disciples in Gethsemane: in their bewilderment, many fled and Peter took up the sword. Yet neither flight nor the sword achieved anything. Jesus, on the other hand, changed history. How? With the humble power of love, with his patient witness. This is what we are called to do; and this is how God fulfils his promises.

Promises. The wisdom of Jesus, embodied in the Beatitudes, calls for witness and offers the reward contained in the divine promises. For each Beatitude is immediately followed by a promise: those who practice them will possess the kingdom of heaven, they will be comforted, they will be satisfied, they will see God... (cf. Mt 5: 3-12).

God's promises guarantee unrivalled joy and never disappoint. But how are they fulfilled? Through our weaknesses. God makes blessed those who travel the path of their inner poverty to the very end. This is the way; there is no other.

Let us look to the patriarch Abraham. God promised him a great offspring, but he and Sarah are now elderly and childless. Yet it is precisely in their patient and faithful old age that God works wonders and gives them a son. Let us also look to Moses: God promises that he will free the people from slavery, and to do so he asks Moses to speak to Pharaoh. Even though Moses says he is not good with words, it is through his words that God will fulfil his promise.

Let us look to Our Lady, who under the Law could not have a child, yet was called to become a mother. And let us look to Peter: he denies the Lord, yet he is the very one that Jesus calls to strengthen his brethren. Dear brothers and sisters, at times we may feel helpless and useless. We should never give in to this, because God wants to work wonders precisely through our weaknesses.

God loves to do that, and tonight, eight times, he has spoken to us the word *ṭūb'ā* [blessed], in order to make us realize that, with him, we truly are “blessed”. Of course, we experience trials, and we frequently fall, but let us not forget that, with Jesus, we are blessed. Whatever the world takes from us is nothing compared to the tender and patient love with which the Lord fulfils his promises.

Dear sister, dear brother, perhaps when you look at your hands they seem empty, perhaps you feel disheartened and unsatisfied by life. If so, do not be afraid: the Beatitudes are for you. For you who are afflicted, who hunger and thirst for justice, who are persecuted.

The Lord promises you that your name is written on his heart, written in heaven! Today I thank God with you and for you, because here, where wisdom arose in ancient times, so many witnesses have arisen in our own time, often overlooked by the news, yet precious in God's eyes. Witnesses who, by living the Beatitudes, are helping God to fulfil his promises of peace.

**GREETING FROM POPE FRANCIS BEFORE THE PRAYER OF SUFFRAGE
FOR THE VICTIMS OF WAR**

Hosh al-Bieaa / Church square (Mosul)

March 7, 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Dear Friends,

I thank Archbishop Najeeb Michael for his kind words of welcome and I am especially grateful to Father Raid Kallo and Mr Gutayba Agha for their moving testimonies.

Thank you very much, Father Raid. You told us of the forced displacement of many Christian families from their homes. The tragic diminution of Jesus' disciples here and across the Middle East does incalculable harm not just to the individuals and communities concerned but also to the society they leave behind.

Indeed such a richly diverse cultural and religious fabric as this is weakened by the loss of any of its members, however small. As in one of your intricately designed carpets, one small thread torn away can damage the rest. Father, you told us of your fraternal relationship with Muslims after returning to Mosul.

You were met with welcome, respect and cooperation. Thank you, Father, for having shared these signs that the Spirit is making blossom in the desert, and for showing us that it is possible to hope in reconciliation and new life.

Mr Agha, you reminded us that the real identity of this city is that of harmonious coexistence between people of different backgrounds and cultures. I especially welcome, then, your invitation to the Christian community to return to Mosul and to take up their vital role in the process of healing and renewal.

Today all of us raise our voices in prayer to Almighty God for all the victims of war and armed conflict. Here in Mosul, the tragic consequences of war and hostility are all too evident. How cruel it is that this country, the cradle of civilization, should have been afflicted by so barbarous a blow, with ancient places of worship destroyed and many thousands of people – Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, who were cruelly eliminated by terrorism, and others – forcibly displaced or killed!

Today, however, we reaffirm our conviction that fraternity is more durable than fratricide, that hope is more powerful than hatred, that peace more powerful than war. This conviction speaks with greater eloquence than the passing voices of hatred and violence, and it can never be silenced by the blood spilled by those who pervert the name of God to pursue paths of destruction.

PRAYER OF SUFFRAGE FOR THE VICTIMS OF WAR

Hosh al-Bieaa / Church square (Mosul)

March 7, 2021

Before we pray in this city of Mosul for all the victims of war, in Iraq and in the entire Middle East, I would like to share with you these thoughts:

If God is the God of life – for so he is – then it is wrong for us to kill our brothers and sisters in his Name.

If God is the God of peace – for so he is – then it is wrong for us to wage war in his Name.

If God is the God of love – for so he is – then it is wrong for us to hate our brothers and sisters.

Let us now join in praying for all the victims of war. May Almighty God grant them eternal life and unending peace, and welcome them into his fatherly embrace. Let us pray too for ourselves. May all of us – whatever our religious tradition – live in harmony and peace, conscious that in the eyes of God, we are all brothers and sisters.

Most High God, Lord of all ages, you created the world in love and never cease to shower your blessings upon your creatures. From beyond the sea of suffering and death, from beyond all temptations to violence, injustice and unjust gain, you accompany your sons and daughters with a Father's tender love.

Yet we men and women, spurning your gifts and absorbed by all-too-worldly concerns have often forgotten your counsels of peace and harmony. We were concerned only with ourselves and our narrow interests. Indifferent to you and to others, we barred the door to peace. What the prophet Jonah heard said of Nineveh was repeated: the wickedness of men rose up to heaven (cf. Jonah 1:2).

We did not lift pure hands to heaven (cf. 1 Tim 2:8), but from the earth there arose once more the cry of innocent blood (cf. Gen 4:10). In the Book of Jonah, the inhabitants of Nineveh heeded the words of your prophet and found salvation in repentance. Lord, we now entrust to you the many victims of man's hatred for man. We too implore your forgiveness and beg the grace of repentance:

Kyrie eleison! Kyrie eleison! Kyrie eleison!

(Brief moment of silence)

Lord our God, in this city, we see two signs of the perennial human desire for closeness to you: the Al-Nouri Mosque, with its Al-Hadba minaret, and the Church of Our Lady of the Hour, whose clock for more than a century has reminded passersby that life is short and that time is precious.

Teach us to realize that you have entrusted to us your plan of love, peace and reconciliation, and charged us to carry it out in our time, in the brief span of our earthly lives. Make us recognize that only in this way, by putting it into practice immediately, can this city and this country be rebuilt, and hearts torn by grief be healed.

Help us not to pass our time in promoting our selfish concerns, whether as individuals or as groups, but in serving your loving plan. And whenever we go astray, grant that we may heed the voice of true men and women of God and repent in due time, lest we be once more overwhelmed by destruction and death.

To you we entrust all those whose span of earthly life was cut short by the violent hand of their brothers and sisters; we also pray to you for those who caused such harm to their brothers and sisters. May they repent, touched by the power of your mercy.

Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them.

May they rest in peace. Amen.

VISIT TO THE QARAQOSH COMMUNITY

Church of Immaculate Conception (Qaraqosh)

Sunday, 7 March 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters, good morning!

I am grateful to the Lord for the opportunity to be among you this morning. I have looked forward to this time together. I thank His Beatitude Patriarch Ignace Youssif Younan for his words of welcome, and Mrs Doha Sabah Abdallah and Father Ammar Yako for their testimonies.

As I look out at you, I can see the cultural and religious diversity of the people of Qaraqosh, and this shows something of the beauty that this entire region holds out to the future. Your presence here is a reminder that beauty is not monochrome, but shines forth in variety and difference. At the same time, with great sadness, we look around and see other signs, signs of the destructive power of violence, hatred and war. How much has been torn down! How much needs to be rebuilt!

Our gathering here today shows that terrorism and death never have the last word. The last word belongs to God and to his Son, the conqueror of sin and death. Even amid the ravages of terrorism and war, we can see, with the eyes of faith, the triumph of life over death.

You have before you the example of your fathers and mothers in faith, who worshipped and praised God in this place. They persevered with unwavering hope along their earthly journey, trusting in God who never disappoints and who constantly sustains us by his grace. The great spiritual legacy they left behind continues to live in you. Embrace this legacy! It is your strength!

Now is the time to rebuild and to start afresh, relying on the grace of God, who guides the destinies of all individuals and peoples. You are not alone! The entire Church is close to

you, with prayers and concrete charity. And in this region, so many people opened their doors to you in time of need.

Dear friends, this is the time to restore not just buildings but also the bonds of community that unite communities and families, the young and the old together. The prophet Joel says, “Your sons and your daughters shall prophecy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions” (cf. Joel 3:1). When the old and the young come together, what happens? The old dream dreams, they dream of a future for the young. And the young can take those dreams and prophecy, make them reality. When old and young come together, we preserve and pass on the gifts that God gives.

We look upon our children, knowing that they will inherit not only a land, a culture and a tradition, but also the living fruits of faith that are God’s blessings upon this land. So I encourage you: do not forget who you are and where you come from! Do not forget the bonds that hold you together! Do not forget to preserve your roots!

Surely, there will be moments when faith can waver, when it seems that God does not see or act. This was true for you in the darkest days of the war, and it is true too in these days of global health crisis and great insecurity. At times like these, remember that Jesus is by your side.

Do not stop dreaming! Do not give up! Do not lose hope! From heaven the saints are watching over us. Let us pray to them and never tire of begging their intercession. There are also the saints next-door, “who, living in our midst, reflect God’s presence” (Gaudete et Exsultate, 7). This land has many of them, because it is a land of many holy men and women. Let them accompany you to a better future, a future of hope.

One thing that Doha said moved me deeply. She said that forgiveness is needed on the part of those who survived the terrorist attacks. Forgiveness; that is a key word. Forgiveness is necessary to remain in love, to remain Christian.

The road to a full recovery may still be long, but I ask you, please, not to grow discouraged. What is needed is the ability to forgive, but also the courage not to give up. I know that this is very difficult. But we believe that God can bring peace to this land. We trust

in him and, together with all people of good will, we say “no” to terrorism and the manipulation of religion.

Father Ammar, in recalling all that happened during the terrorist attacks and the war, you thanked the Lord who has always filled you with joy, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. Gratitude is born and grows when we remember God’s gifts and promises. Memory of the past shapes the present and leads us forward to the future.

At all times, let us offer thanks to God for his gracious gifts and ask him to grant his peace, forgiveness and fraternity to this land and its people. Let us pray tirelessly for the conversion of hearts and for the triumph of a culture of life, reconciliation and fraternal love between all men and women, with respect for differences and diverse religious traditions, in the effort to build a future of unity and cooperation between all people of good will. A fraternal love that recognizes “the fundamental values of our common humanity, values in the name of which we can and must cooperate, build and dialogue, pardon and grow” (Fratelli Tutti, 283).

As I arrived on the helicopter, I saw the statue of Mary on this Church of Immaculate Conception. To her I entrusted the rebirth of this city. Our Lady does not only protect us from on high, but comes down to us with a Mother’s love.

Her image here has met with mistreatment and disrespect, yet the face of the Mother of God continues to look upon us with love. For that is what mothers do: they console, they comfort and they give life. I would like to say a heartfelt thank-you to all the mothers and women of this country, women of courage who continue to give life, in spite of wrongs and hurts. May women be respect and protected! May they be shown respect and provided with opportunities!

And now, let us pray together to our Mother, invoking her intercession for your needs and future plans. I place all of you under her intercession. And I ask you, please, not to forget to pray for me.

HOLY MASS IN ERBIL
HOMILY OF POPE FRANCIS

Franso Hariri Stadium

March 7, 2021

Saint Paul has told us that “Christ is the power and wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:22-25). Jesus revealed that power and wisdom above all by offering forgiveness and showing mercy. He chose to do so not by displays of strength or by speaking to us from on high, in lengthy and learned discourses. He did so by giving his life on the cross. He revealed his wisdom and power by showing us, to the very end, the faithfulness of the Father’s love; the faithfulness of the God of the covenant, who brought his people forth from slavery and led them on a journey of freedom (cf. Ex 20:1-2).

How easy it is to fall into the trap of thinking that we have to show others that we are powerful or wise, into the trap of fashioning false images of God that can give us security (cf. Ex 20:4-5). Yet the truth is that all of us need the power and wisdom of God revealed by Jesus on the cross. On Calvary, he offered to the Father the wounds by which alone we are healed (cf. 1 Pet 2:24).

Here in Iraq, how many of your brothers and sisters, friends and fellow citizens bear the wounds of war and violence, wounds both visible and invisible! The temptation is to react to these and other painful experiences with human power, human wisdom. Instead, Jesus shows us the way of God, the path that he took, the path on which he calls us to follow him.

In the Gospel reading we have just heard (Jn 2:13-25), we see how Jesus drove out from the Temple in Jerusalem the moneychangers and all the buyers and sellers. Why did Jesus do something this forceful and provocative? He did it because the Father sent him to cleanse the temple: not only the Temple of stone, but above all the temple of our heart.

Jesus could not tolerate his Father's house becoming a marketplace (cf. Jn 2:16); neither does he want our hearts to be places of turmoil, disorder and confusion.

Our heart must be cleansed, put in order and purified. Of what? Of the falsehoods that stain it, from hypocritical duplicity. All of us have these. They are diseases that harm the heart, soil our lives and make them insincere. We need to be cleansed of the deceptive securities that would barter our faith in God with passing things, with temporary advantages. We need the baneful temptations of power and money to be swept from our hearts and from the Church.

To cleanse our hearts, we need to dirty our hands, to feel accountable and not to simply look on as our brothers and sisters are suffering. How do we purify our hearts? By our own efforts, we cannot; we need Jesus. He has the power to conquer our evils, to heal our diseases, to rebuild the temple of our heart.

To show this, and as a sign of his authority, Jesus goes on to say: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (v. 19). Jesus Christ, he alone, can cleanse us of the works of evil. Jesus, who died and rose! Jesus, the Lord!

Dear brothers and sisters, God does not let us die in our sins. Even when we turn our backs on him, he never leaves us to our own devices. He seeks us out, runs after us, to call us to repentance and to cleanse us of our sins. "As I live, says the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek 33:11). The Lord wants us to be saved and to become living temples of his love, in fraternity, in service, in mercy.

Jesus not only cleanses us of our sins, but gives us a share in his own power and wisdom. He liberates us from the narrow and divisive notions of family, faith and community that divide, oppose and exclude, so that we can build a Church and a society open to everyone and concerned for our brothers and sisters in greatest need. At the same time, he strengthens us to resist the temptation to seek revenge, which only plunges us into a spiral of endless retaliation.

In the power of the Holy Spirit, he sends us forth, not as proselytizers, but as missionary disciples, men and women called to testify to the life-changing power of the Gospel. The risen Lord makes us instruments of God's mercy and peace, patient and courageous artisans of a new social order.

In this way, by the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit, the prophetic words of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians are fulfilled: "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's wisdom is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1:25). Christian communities made up of simple and lowly people become a sign of the coming of his kingdom, a kingdom of love, justice and peace.

"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (Jn 2:19). Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body, and about the Church as well. The Lord promises us that, by the power of the resurrection, he can raise us, and our communities, from the ruins left by injustice, division and hatred. That is the promise we celebrate in this Eucharist.

With the eyes of faith, we recognize the presence of the crucified and risen Lord in our midst. And we learn to embrace his liberating wisdom, to rest in his wounds, and to find healing and strength to serve the coming of his kingdom in our world. By his wounds, we have been healed (cf. 1 Pet 2:24). In those wounds, dear brothers and sisters, we find the balm of his merciful love. For he, like the Good Samaritan of humanity, wants to anoint every hurt, to heal every painful memory and to inspire a future of peace and fraternity in this land.

The Church in Iraq, by God's grace, is already doing much to proclaim this wonderful wisdom of the cross by spreading Christ's mercy and forgiveness, particularly towards those in greatest need. Even amid great poverty and difficulty, many of you have generously offered concrete help and solidarity to the poor and suffering.

That is one of the reasons that led me to come as a pilgrim in your midst, to thank you and to confirm you in your faith and witness. Today, I can see at first hand that the Church in Iraq is alive, that Christ is alive and at work in this, his holy and faithful people.

Dear brothers and sisters, I commend you, your families and your communities, to the maternal protection of the Virgin Mary, who was united to her Son in his passion and death, and who shared in the joy of his resurrection. May she intercede for us and lead us to Christ, the power and wisdom of God.

I greet with affection His Holiness Mar Gewargis III, Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, who resides in this city and honours us with his presence. Thank you, dear Brother! Together with him, I embrace the Christians of the various denominations: so many of them have shed their blood in this land! Yet our martyrs shine together like stars in the same sky! From there they call us to walk together, without hesitation, towards the fullness of unity.

At the conclusion of this celebration, I thank Archbishop Bashar Matti Warda as well as Bishop Nizar Semaan and my other brother Bishops, who worked so hard for this Journey. I am grateful to all of you who prepared and accompanied my visit with prayer and welcomed me so warmly. In a special way, I greet the beloved Kurdish people.

I am particularly grateful to the government and the civil authorities for their indispensable contribution, and I thank all those who in various ways cooperated in the organization of the entire Journey in Iraq, the Iraqi authorities – all of them – and the many volunteers. My thanks to all of you!

In my time among you, I have heard voices of sorrow and loss, but also voices of hope and consolation. This was due in large part to that tireless charitable outreach made possible by the religious institutions of every confession, your local Churches and the various charitable organizations assisting the people of this country in the work of rebuilding and social rebirth. In a particular way, I thank the members of ROACO and the agencies they represent.

Now the time draws near for my return to Rome. Yet Iraq will always remain with me, in my heart. I ask all of you, dear brothers and sisters, to work together in unity for a future of peace and prosperity that leaves no one behind and discriminates against no one.

I assure you of my prayers for this beloved country. In a particular way, I pray that the members of the various religious communities, together with all men and women of good will, may work together to forge bonds of fraternity and solidarity in the service of the good and of peace

Salam, salam, salam! Sukrán [Thank you]! May God bless all! May God bless Iraq! Allah ma'akum! [God be with you!].

**FULL TEXT OF POPE FRANCIS' IN-FLIGHT
PRESS CONFERENCE FROM BAGHDAD**

March 8, 2021

Pope Francis: First of all, thank you for your work, your company, your fatigue. Then, today is Women's Day. Congratulations to the women. Women's Day. But they were saying why is there no Men's Day? Even when [I was] in the meeting with the wife of the president. I said it was because us men are always celebrated and we want to celebrate women. And the wife of the president spoke well about women, she told me lovely things today, about that strength that women have to carry forward life, history, the family, many things. Congratulations to everyone. And third, today is the birthday of the COPE journalist. Or the other day. Where are you?

Matteo Bruni, Holy See press office director: It was yesterday.

Pope Francis: Best wishes and we should celebrate it, right? We will see how we can [do it] here. Very well. Now, the word is yours.

Bruni: The first question comes from the Arabic world: Imad Atrach of Sky News Arabia.

Imad Abdul Karim Atrach (Sky News Arabia): Holiness, two years ago in Abu Dhabi there was the meeting with the Imam al-Tayyeb of al-Azhar and the signing of the document on human fraternity. Three days ago you met with al-Sistani. Are you thinking to something similar with the Shiite side of Islam? And then a second thing about Lebanon, which St. John Paul II said is more than a country, it is a message. This message, unfortunately, as a Lebanese, I tell you that this message is now disappearing. Can we think a future visit by you to Lebanon is imminent?

Pope Francis: The Abu Dhabi document of February 4 was prepared with the grand imam in secret during six months, praying, reflecting, correcting the text. It was, I will say, a little assuming but take it as a presumption, a first step of what you ask me about.

Let's say that this [Ed. meeting with al-Sistani] would be the second [step] and there will be others. It is important, the journey of fraternity. Then, the two documents. The Abu Dhabi one created a concern for fraternity in me, *Fratelli tutti* came out, which has given a lot. We must... both documents must be studied because they go in the same direction, they are seeking fraternity.

Ayatollah al-Sistani has a phrase which I expect to remember well. Every man... men are either brothers for religion or equals for creation. And fraternity is equality, but beneath equality we cannot go. I believe it is also a cultural path.

We Christians think about the Thirty Years' War. The night of St. Bartholomew [Ed. St. Bartholomew's Day massacre], to give an example. Think about this. How the mentality has changed among us, because our faith makes us discover that this is it: the revelation of Jesus is love, charity, and it leads us to this. But how many centuries [will it take] to implement it? This is an important thing, human fraternity. That as men we are all brothers and we must move forward with other religions.

The [Second] Vatican Council took a big step forward in [interreligious dialogue], also the later constitution, the council for christian unity, and the council for religious dialogue -- Cardinal Ayuso accompanies us today -- and you are human, you are a child of God and you are my brother, period. This would be the biggest indication. And many times you have to take risks to take this step. You know that there are some critics who [say] "the pope is not courageous, he is an idiot who is taking steps against Catholic doctrine, which is a heretical step." There are risks. But these decisions are always made in prayer, in dialogue, asking for advice, in reflection. They are not a whim and they are also the line that the [Second Vatican] Council has taught us. This is his first question.

The second: Lebanon is a message. Lebanon is suffering. Lebanon is more than a balance. It has the weakness of the diversity which some are still not reconciled to, but it has the strength of the great people reconciled like the fortress of the cedars. Patriarch Rai asked me to please make a stop in Beirut on this trip, but it seemed somewhat too little to me: A crumb in front of a problem in a country that suffers like Lebanon. I wrote a letter and promised to make a trip to Lebanon. But Lebanon at the moment is in crisis, but in crisis -- I do not want to offend -- but in a crisis of life. Lebanon is so generous in welcoming refugees. This is a second trip.

Bruni: Thank you, Your Holiness. The second question comes from Johannes Neudecker of the German news agency Dpa.

Johannes Neudecker (Deutsche Presse-Agentur): Thank you, Holy Father. My question is also about the meeting with al-Sistani. In what measure was the meeting with al-Sistani also a message to the religious leaders of Iran?

Pope Francis: I believe it was a universal message. I felt the duty of this pilgrimage of faith and penance to go and find a great man, a wise man, a man of God. And just listening to him you perceived this. And speaking of messages, I will say: It is a message for everyone, it is a message for everyone. And he is a person who has that wisdom and also prudence... he told me that for 10 years, "I do not receive people who come to visit me with also other political or cultural aims, no... only for religious [purposes]." And he was very respectful, very respectful in the meeting. I felt very honored; he never gets up even to greet people. He got up to greet me twice. A humble and wise man. This meeting did my soul good. He is a light. These wisemen are everywhere because God's wisdom has been spread all over the world.

It also happens the same with the saints, who are not only those who are on the altars, they are the everyday saints, the ones I call "next door saints." Men and women who live their faith, whatever it may be, with coherence. Who live human values with coherence, fraternity with coherence. I believe that we should discover these people, highlight them, because there are so many examples. When there are scandals in the Church, many, this does

not help, but we show the people seeking the path of fraternity. The saints next door. And we will find the people of our family, for sure. For sure a few grandpas, a few grandmas.

Eva Fernandez (Radio COPE): Holy Father, it is great to resume the press conferences again. It is very good. My apologies, but my colleagues have asked me to ask this question in Spanish.

[In Spanish] During these days your trip to Iraq has had a great impact throughout the world. Do you think that this could be *the* trip of your pontificate? And also, it has been said that it was the most dangerous. Have you been afraid at some point during this trip? And soon we will return to travel and you, who are about to complete the eighth year of your pontificate, do you still think it will be a short [pontificate]? And the big question always for the Holy Father, will you ever return to Argentina? Will Spain still have hope that one day the pope will visit?

Pope Francis: Thank you, Eva, and I made you celebrate your birthday twice -- once in advance and another belated.

I start with the last question, which is a question that I understand. It is because of that book by my friend, the journalist and doctor, Nelson Castro. He wrote a book on [the history of] presidents' illnesses, and I once told him, already in Rome, "But you have to do one on the diseases of the popes because it will be interesting to know the health issues of the popes -- at least of some who are more recent."

He started [writing] again, and he interviewed me. The book came out. They tell me it is good, but I have not seen it. But he asked me a question: "If you resign" -- well if I will die or if I will resign -- "If you resign will you return to Argentina or will you stay here?"

I said: "I will not go back to Argentina." This is what I have said, but I will stay here in my diocese. But in that case, this goes together with the question: When will I visit Argentina? And why have I not gone there? I always answer a little ironically: "I spent 76 years in Argentina, that's enough, isn't it?"

But there is one thing. I do not know why, but it has not been said. A trip to Argentina was planned for November 2017 and work began. It was Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay. This was at the end of November. But then at that time there was an election campaign happening in Chile because on that day in December the successor of Michelle Bachelet was elected. I had to go before the government changed, I could not go [further].

So let us do this: Go to Chile in January. And then in January it was not possible to go to Argentina and Uruguay because January is like our August here, it is July and August in both countries. Thinking about it, the suggestion was made: Why not include Peru because Peru was bypassed during the trip to Ecuador, Bolivia, Paraguay, and remained apart. And from this was born the January trip between Chile and Peru.

But this is what I want to say so that you do not create fantasies of “patriaphobia.” When there are opportunities it must be done, right? Because there is Argentina and Uruguay and the south of Brazil, which are a very great cultural composition.

About my travels: I make a decision about my trips by listening. The invitations are many. I listen to the advice of the counselors and also to the people. Sometimes someone comes and says: What do you think? Should I go or not? And it is good for me to listen. And this helps me to make the decision later.

I listen to the counselors and in the end I pray. I pray and I think a lot. I have reflected a lot about some trips, and then the decision comes from within. It is almost spontaneous, but like a ripe fruit. It is a long way, isn't it? Some are more difficult, some are easier and the decision about this trip comes early.

The first invitation of the ambassador, first, that pediatrician doctor who was the ambassador of Iraq, very good. She persisted. And then came the ambassador to Italy who is a woman of battle. Then the new ambassador to the Vatican came and fought. Soon the president came. All these things stayed with me.

But there is one thing behind my decision that I would like to mention. One of you gave me a Spanish edition [of the book] “The Last Girl.” I have read it in Italian, then I gave

it to Elisabetta Piqué to read. Did you read it? More or less it is the story of the Yazidis. And Nadia Murad tells about terrifying things. I recommend that you read it. In some places it may seem heavy, but for me this was the *trasfondo* of God, the underlying reason for my decision. That book worked inside me. And also when I listened to Nadia who came to tell me terrible things. Then, with the book... All these things together made the decision; thinking about all the many issues. But finally the decision came and I took it.

And, about the eighth year of my pontificate. Should I do this? [He crosses his fingers.] I do not know if my travel will slow down or not. I only confess that on this trip I felt much more tired than on the others. The 84 [years] do not come alone, it is a consequence. But we will see.

Now I will have to go to Hungary for the final Mass of the Eucharistic Congress, not a visit to the country, but just for the Mass. But Budapest is a two-hour drive from Bratislava, why not make a visit to Slovakia? I do not know. That is how they are thinking. Excuse me. Thank you.

Bruni: Thank you, Eva. Now the next question is from Chico Harlan of the Washington Post.

Chico Harlan (Washington Post): Thank you, Holy Father. I will ask my question in English with the help of Matteo. [In English] This trip obviously had extraordinary meaning for the people who got to see you, but it did also lead to events that caused conditions conducive to spreading the virus. In particular, unvaccinated people packed together singing. So as you weigh the trip, the thought that went into it and what it will mean, do you worry that the people who came to see you could also get sick or even die. Can you explain that reflection and calculation. Thank you.

Pope Francis: As I said recently, the trips are cooked over time in my conscience. And this is one of the [thoughts] that came to me most, “maybe, maybe.” I thought a lot, I prayed a lot about this. And in the end I freely made the decision. But that came from within.

I said: “The one who allows me to decide this way will look after the people.” And so I made the decision like this but after prayer and after awareness of the risks, after all.

Bruni: The next question comes from Philippine de Saint-Pierre of the French press.

Philippine de Saint-Pierre (KTO): Your Holiness, we have seen the courage and dynamism of Iraqi Christians. We have also seen the challenges they face: the threat of Islamist violence, the exodus of Christians, and the witness of the faith in their environment. These are the challenges facing Christians through the region. We spoke about Lebanon, but also Syria, the Holy Land, etc. The synod for the Middle East took place 10 years ago but its development was interrupted with the attack on the Baghdad cathedral. Are you thinking about organizing something for the entire Middle East, be it a regional synod or any other initiative?

Pope Francis: I’m not thinking about a synod. Initiatives, yes -- I am open to many. But a synod never came to mind. You planted the first seed, let’s see what will happen. The life of Christians in Iraq is an afflicted life, but not only for Christians. I came to talk about Yazidis and other religions that did not submit to the power of Daesh. And this, I don’t know why, gave them a very great strength. But there is a problem, like you said, with emigration. Yesterday, as we drove from Qaraqosh to Erbil, there were lots of young people and the age level was low, low, low. Lots of young people. And the question someone asked me: But these young people, what is their future? Where will they go? Many will have to leave the country, many. Before leaving for the trip the other day, on Friday, 12 Iraqi refugees came to say goodbye to me. One had a prosthetic leg because he had escaped under a truck and had an accident... so many escaped. Migration is a double right. The right to not emigrate and the right to emigrate. But these people do not have either of the two. Because they cannot not emigrate, they do not know how to do it. And they cannot emigrate because the world squashes the consciousness that migration is a human right.

The other day -- I'll go back to the migration question -- an Italian sociologist told me, speaking about the demographic winter in Italy: “But within 40 years we will have to

import foreigners to work and pay pension taxes.” You French are smarter, you have advanced 10 years with the family support law and your level of growth is very large.

But immigration is experienced as an invasion. Because he asked, yesterday I wanted to receive Alan Kurdi’s father after Mass. This child is a symbol for them. Alan Kurdi is a symbol, for which I gave a sculpture to FAO [the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations]. It is a symbol that goes beyond a child who died in migration. He is a symbol of dying civilizations, which cannot survive. A symbol of humanity. Urgent measures are needed so that people have work in their place and do not have to emigrate. And also measures to safeguard the right to emigrate. It is true that every country must study well the ability to receive [immigrants], because it is not only about receiving them and leaving them on the beach. Receive them, accompany them, help them progress, and integrate them. The integration of immigrants is key.

Two anecdotes: Zaventem, in Belgium: the terrorists were Belgians, born in Belgium, but from ghettoized, non-integrated Islamic immigrants. Another example: when I went to Sweden, during the farewell ceremony, there was the minister, of what I don’t know, [Ed. Alice Bah-Kuhnke, Swedish Minister of Culture and Democracy from 2014-2019], she was very young, and she had a distinctive appearance, not typical of Swedes. She was the daughter of a migrant and a Swede, and so well integrated that she became minister [of culture]. Looking at these two things, they make you think a lot, a lot, a lot.

I would like to thank the generous countries. The countries that receive migrants, Lebanon. Lebanon was generous with emigrants. There are two million Syrians there, I think. And Jordan -- unfortunately, we will not pass over Jordan because the king is very nice, King Abdullah wanted to pay us a tribute with the planes in passage. I will thank him now -- Jordan has been very generous [with] more than one and a half million migrants, also many other countries... to name just two. Thank you to these generous countries. Thank you very much.

Matteo Bruni: The next question is in Italian from the journalist Stefania Falasca.

Stefania Falasca (Avvenire): Good morning, Holy Father. Thank you. In three days in this country, which is a key country of the Middle East, you have done what the powerful of the earth have been discussing for 30 years. You have already explained what was the interesting genesis of your travels, how the choices for your travels originate, but now in this juncture, can you also consider a trip to Syria? What could be the objectives from now to a year from now of other places where your presence is required?

Pope Francis: Thank you. In the Middle East only the hypothesis, and also the promise is for Lebanon. I have not thought about a trip to Syria. I have not thought about it because the inspiration did not come to me. But I am so close to the tormented and beloved Syria, as I call it. I remember from the beginning of my pontificate that afternoon of prayer in St. Peter's Square. There was the rosary, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. And how many Muslims with carpets on the ground were praying with us for peace in Syria, to stop the bombing, at that moment when it was said that there would be a fierce bombing. I carry Syria in my heart, but thinking about a trip, it has not occurred to me at this moment. Thank you.

Matteo Bruni: Thank you. The next question comes from Sylwia Wysocka of the Polish press.

Sylwia Wysocka (Polish Press Agency): Holy Father, in these very difficult 12 months your activity has been very limited. Yesterday you had the first direct and very close contact with the people in Qaraqosh: What did you feel? And then, in your opinion, now, with the current health system, can the general audiences with people, with faithful, recommence as before?

Pope Francis: I feel different when I am away from the people in the audiences. I would like to restart the general audiences again as soon as possible. Hopefully the conditions will be right. I will follow the norms of the authorities in this. They are in charge and they have the grace of God to help us in this. They are responsible for setting the rules, whether we like them or not. They are responsible and they have to be so.

Now I have started again with the Angelus in the square, with the distances it can be done. There is the proposal of small general audiences, but I have not decided until the development of the situation becomes clear. After these months of imprisonment, I really felt a bit imprisoned, this is, for me, living again.

Living again because it is touching the Church, touching the holy people of God, touching all peoples. A priest becomes a priest to serve, to serve the people of God, not for careerism, right? Not for the money.

This morning in the Mass there was [the Scripture reading about] the healing of Naaman the Syrian and it said that Naaman wanted to give gifts after he had been healed. But he refused... but the prophet Elisha refused them. And the Bible continues: the prophet Elisha's assistant, when they had left, settled the prophet well and running he followed Naaman and asked for gifts for him. And God said, "the leprosy that Naaman had will cling to you." I am afraid that we, men and women of the Church, especially we priests, do not have this gratuitous closeness to the people of God which is what saves us.

And to be like Naaman's servant, to help, but then going back [for the gifts.] I am afraid of that leprosy. And the only one who saves us from the leprosy of greed, of pride, is the holy people of God, like what God spoke about with David, "I have taken you out of the flock, do not forget the flock." That of which Paul spoke to Timothy: "Remember your mother and grandmother who nursed you in the faith." Do not lose your belonging to the people of God to become a privileged caste of consecrated, clerics, anything.

This is why contact with the people saves us, helps us. We give the Eucharist, preaching, our function to the people of God, but they give us belonging. Let us not forget this belonging to the people of God. Then begin again like this.

I met in Iraq, in Qaraqosh... I did not imagine the ruins of Mosul, I did not imagine. Really. Yes, I may have seen things, I may have read the book, but this touches, it is touching.

What touched me the most was the testimony of a mother in Qaraqosh. A priest who truly knows poverty, service, penance; and a woman who lost her son in the first bombings

by ISIS gave her testimony. She said one word: forgiveness. I was moved. A mother who says: I forgive, I ask forgiveness for them.

I was reminded of my trip to Colombia, of that meeting in Villavicencio where so many people, women above all, mothers and brides, spoke about their experience of the murder of their children and husbands. They said, “I forgive, I forgive.” But this word we have lost. We know how to insult big time. We know how to condemn in a big way. Me first, we know it well. But to forgive, to forgive one’s enemies. This is the pure Gospel. This is what touched me the most in Qaraqosh.

Matteo Bruni: There are other questions if you want. Otherwise we can...

Pope Francis: How long has it been?

Bruni: Almost an hour.

Pope Francis: We have been talking for almost an hour. I don’t know, I would continue, [joking] but the car... [is waiting for me.] Let’s do, how do you say, the last one before celebrating the birthday.

Matteo Bruni: The last is by Catherine Marciano from the French press, from the Agence France Presse.

Catherine Marciano (AFP): Your Holiness, I wanted to know what you felt in the helicopter seeing the destroyed city of Mosul and praying on the ruins of a church. Since it is Women's Day, I would like to ask a little question about women... You have supported the women in Qaraqosh with very nice words, but what do you think about the fact that a Muslim woman in love cannot marry a Christian without being discarded by her family or even worse. But the first question was about Mosul. Thank you, Your Holiness.

Pope Francis: I said what I felt in Mosul a little bit en passant. When I stopped in front of the destroyed church, I had no words, I had no words... beyond belief, beyond belief. Not just the church, even the other destroyed churches. Even a destroyed mosque, you can

see that [the perpetrators] did not agree with the people. Not to believe our human cruelty, no. At this moment I do not want to say the word, “it begins again,” but let’s look at Africa. With our experience of Mosul, and these people who destroy everything, enmity is created and the so-called Islamic State begins to act. This is a bad thing, very bad, and before moving on to the other question -- A question that came to my mind in the church was this: “But who sells weapons to these destroyers? Because they do not make weapons at home. Yes, they will make some bombs, but who sells the weapons, who is responsible. I would at least ask that those who sell the weapons have the sincerity to say: we sell weapons. They don’t say it. It’s ugly.

Women... women are braver than men. But even today women are humiliated. Let’s go to the extreme: one of you showed me the list of prices for women. [Ed. prepared by ISIS for selling Christian and Yazidi women.] I couldn’t believe it: if the woman is like this, she costs this much... to sell her... Women are sold, women are enslaved. Even in the center of Rome the work against trafficking is an everyday job.

During the Jubilee I went to visit one of the many houses the Opera Don Benzi: Ransomed girls, one with her ear cut off because she had not brought the right money that day, and the other brought from Bratislava in the trunk of a car, a slave, kidnapped. This happens among us, the educated. Human trafficking. In these countries, some, especially in parts of Africa, there is mutilation as a ritual that must be done. Women are still slaves, and we have to fight, struggle, for the dignity of women. They are the ones who carry history forward. This is not an exaggeration: Women carry history forward and it’s not a compliment because today is Women's Day. Even slavery is like this, the rejection of women... Just think there are places where there is the debate regarding whether repudiation of a wife should be given in writing or only orally. Not even the right to have the act of repudiation! This is happening today, but to keep us from straying, think of what happens in the center of Rome, of the girls who are kidnapped and are exploited. I think I have said everything about this. I wish you a good end to your trip and I ask you to pray for me, I need it. Thank you.