

Pope Francis meets Grand Ayatollah Sistani on historic Iraq tour

Pontiff, 84, continues visit amid tight security and concerns about rising Covid infection rates



Pope Francis with Iraq's top Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Photograph: Reuters

Harriet Sherwood and agencies in Baghdad, *The Guardian*, 6 March 2021

Pope Francis has had a symbolic meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, one of the most senior clerics in Shia Islam, in Iraq's holy city of Najaf. The historic meeting in Sistani's home was months in the making, with every detail painstakingly discussed and negotiated between the ayatollah's office and the Vatican.

When the time came, the 84-year-old pontiff's convoy, led by a bullet-proof vehicle, pull up along Najaf's narrow and column-lined Rasool Street, which culminates at the golden-domed Imam Ali Shrine, one of the most revered sites in the world for Shia. He then walked the few metres to Sistani's modest home, which the cleric has rented for decades.

A group of Iraqis wearing traditional clothes welcomed him outside. As a masked Francis entered the doorway a few white doves were released in a sign of peace.

The closed-door meeting was to touch on issues plaguing Iraq's Christian minority. Sistani is a deeply revered figure in Shia-majority Iraq and his opinions on religious and other matters are sought by Shia worldwide.

For Iraq's dwindling Christian minority a show of solidarity from Sistani could help secure their place in Iraq after years of displacement — and, they hope, ease intimidation from Shia militiamen against their community.

The visit was carried live on Iraqi television and residents cheered the meeting of two respected faith leaders. "We welcome the pope's visit to Iraq and especially to the holy city of Najaf and his meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani," said Najaf resident Haidar Al-Ilyawi. "It is an historic visit and hope it will be good for Iraq and the Iraqi people."

The pope arrived in Baghdad for the first ever papal visit to Iraq amid tight security and concerns about the impact of his trip on rising Covid infection rates.

His presence was “a duty towards a land that has been martyred for so many years”, Francis said shortly before landing. A Vatican spokesperson said the trip was “an act of love to a country that has suffered terribly over recent decades”.

Despite worries about the risks of his visit amid rising Covid rates in Iraq, a largely unmasked choir sang as Francis was greeted by the Iraqi prime minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi. Both men removed their face masks, shook hands and spoke sitting less than 2 metres apart. The 84-year-old pope, his entourage and 75 media representatives travelling with the Vatican delegation have been vaccinated against Covid, but most Iraqis have not.

Hundreds of people had gathered along the airport road with hopes of catching a glimpse of the pope’s plane touching down. Billboards showing Francis with the slogan “We are all brothers” are on display in central Baghdad, and Iraqi and Vatican flags are lining streets. Security has been increased during the visit, said Tahsin al-Khafaji, the spokesperson for Iraq’s joint operations. “The whole world will be watching,” he said. The high stakes will give Iraqi forces “motivation to achieve this visit with safety and peace”, he added. Instead of his customary open-sided popemobile, Francis is travelling in an armoured car, as well as making longer journeys between regions by plane and helicopter.

The Vatican and Iraqi authorities have played down the threat of Covid and insisted that social distancing, crowd control and other healthcare measures will be enforced.

At a meeting with Iraq’s president, Barham Salih, inside the heavily fortified Green Zone, Francis said Iraqis of all faiths deserved to have the same rights and protections as the Shia Muslim majority. He said: “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.” He added: “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.”

Francis called for an end to “acts of violence and extremism, factions and intolerance” and urged Iraqi officials to “combat the scourge of corruption, misuse of power and disregard for law”. Salih said it was “impossible to imagine the Middle East without Christians” and that their continued migration would have dire consequences.

Later the pope addressed the faithful at the Our Lady of Salvation church in Baghdad’s commercial Karrada district, where attendance was restricted to enable social distancing. In 2010 Islamist militants stormed the church and killed 44 worshippers, two priests and several security force personnel in one of the bloodiest attacks on Iraq’s Christians. Francis thanked his fellow clergy for remaining close to Iraq’s beleaguered Christians, who he said had paid “the ultimate price of their fidelity to the Lord and his church”.

The pope was also due to honour the dead in a Mosul square surrounded by shells of destroyed churches and meet Christians who have returned to the town of Qaraqosh – as well as blessing their church, which was used as a firing range by Isis. Many Christians fled when Isis militants swept through towns across the Nineveh plains in 2014, destroying churches and homes.

The few who have returned have struggled to find work, with many blaming discriminatory practices in the public sector, Iraq’s largest employer. Since 2003 public jobs have been mostly controlled by majority Shia political elites, leaving Christians feeling marginalised.

There were an estimated 1.4 million Christians in Iraq before the US-led invasion in 2003, but now the number is believed to be about 250,000. Fuad Hussein, Iraq's foreign minister, said Iraqis were eager to welcome Francis's "message of peace and tolerance" and described the visit as a historic meeting between the "minaret and the bells".