

Pope exhorts Iraqi Church leaders to promote interreligious dialogue

Francis thanks Christian communities of Iraq for their "courageous witnesses of fidelity to the Gospel" amid persecution during events in recent years



Iraqi Christians place a cross on a church in Qaraqosh, Iraq, on February 22, 2021. (Photo by HADI MIZBAN/AP)

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Pope Francis, during his meeting with a delegation of Iraqi Church leaders, called on them to continue to counter extremism by promoting interreligious dialogue, despite the violence against Christians by fundamentalists purporting to act in the name of Islam.

"I bow before the suffering and martyrdom of those who have preserved the faith, even at the cost of their life," Francis told the group who came to the Vatican Feb. 28 to mark the first anniversary of his visit to Iraq March 5-8, 2021.

Members of the Iraqi delegation included, among others, Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Nicodemus Daoud of Mosul and East Assyrian Bishop Abris Youkhanna of Kirkuk and Diana, who both expressed deep gratitude for the pope's historic visit to Iraq.

Pope Francis was the first Bishop of Rome to visit Iraq. His predecessors Benedict XVI and John Paul II had also hoped to make visit but couldn't.

Over the course of three days, Pope Francis traveled across the country as no foreign head of state has done for years. He went to several different towns and cities in full view of all.

"Just as the blood of Christ, shed out of love, brought reconciliation and made the Church flourish, may the blood of these many martyrs of our time, belonging to different traditions but united in the same sacrifice, be a seed of unity among Christians and a sign of a new springtime of faith," the pope said.

During his address to the group of Iraqi Church leaders the pope recalled that Iraq is the cradle of civilization and of Christianity and that it has also been a land of exiles since biblical times.

He expressed his deep gratitude to the Christian communities of Iraq for their "courageous witnesses of fidelity to the Gospel" amid persecution during events in recent years and encouraged them to continue seeking Christian unity and engaging in interreligious dialogue.

"To engage in dialogue is the best antidote to extremism, which is a danger for the followers of any religion and a grave threat to peace," Pope Francis said.

"In the midst of a people which has suffered so much division and discord, Christians will shine as a prophetic sign of unity in diversity," he said.

Francis also thanked the Iraqi Churches for their fraternal relations which have allowed to establish "many links of collaboration in the field of pastoral care, formation and service to the poorest" and encouraged them to "continue along this path, so that, through concrete initiatives, constant dialogue and, fraternal love, progress may be made towards full unity."

A prophetic sign of unity

Pope Francis pointed out that Christians are an essential component of Iraqi society but said he understands that while Iraq is rebuilding, the temptation of many, especially of the young, is to try to immigrate to a country where prospects seem brighter.

"Iraq without Christians", he said, "would no longer be Iraq, because Christians, along with other believers, contribute strongly to the country's specific identity as a place where co-existence, tolerance and mutual acceptance have flourished ever since the first centuries".

This is why, "no stone should be left unturned in ensuring that Christians continue to feel that Iraq is their home, and that they are citizens in their own right", he said adding that fundamentalism can be eradicated only through addressing its root causes, which include "material, cultural and educational poverty and situations of injustice and vulnerability".

Pope Francis also called on Christians not be discouraged and to continue to foster unity.

"Let us ask the Holy Trinity, the model of true unity which is not uniformity, to strengthen communion among us and among our Churches. In this way we will be able to respond to the Lord's heartfelt desire that his disciples be 'one,'" the pope said.

Islamic State that ruled Mosul from 2014 to 2016, making its Iraqi capital, damaged or destroyed every church in the city including the 19th century built "Our Lady of the Hour" Church, popularly called Al Saa'a Church.

The Islamic State also razed the 1,400-year-old St Elijah's Monastery, the oldest in Iraq. St Elijah's Monastery, or Deir Mar Elia, was believed to have been constructed by Assyrian monks in the late 6th Century. It was later claimed by a Chaldean Catholic order.

Islamic State also looted the churches but drove out the terrified local Christians from the area, their homes pillaged and destroyed by the jihadists and their supporters.

The memory of the atrocities committed against Christians is still fresh, including the kidnapping and assassination Chaldean Catholic Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho of Mosul in 2008.

For lack of reliable statistics, it is estimated that there are about 400,000 Christians in this country in the land of ancient Mesopotamia, the historical cradle of Christianity.

Christians are estimated to currently make up only 1% or so of Iraq's 40 million people.

Roughly two-thirds of these are Catholics -- mainly Chaldeans and Syriacs, and to a lesser extent Latins and Armenians.

The remaining one-third are Orthodox Christians.