

Companions on the Journey

March 14, 2021

Dear Friends,

I was very touched by this account of Pope Francis recent pilgrimage to Iraq during a very dangerous time. Please read with care.

Quoted from Catholic News Agency for Mar 8, 2021. (Aboard the papal plane)

“Pope Francis said Monday that the sight of the destroyed churches and ruins in Mosul and the Nineveh Plains in northern Iraq left him speechless. “When I stopped in front of the destroyed church, I had no words... beyond belief,” Francis said on March 8. Speaking to journalists during an in-flight press conference, the pope said that he had read about and seen pictures of the destruction in northern Iraq, but what he saw in person in Mosul and Qaraqosh was unimaginable.

The pope’s March 5-8 trip to Iraq brought him from Baghdad to the birthplace of Abraham (Ur of the Chaldees) and finally to the rubble-strewn city of Mosul, where the Islamic State declared its caliphate in 2014. “But then what touched me most was the testimony of a mother in Qaraqosh,” Pope Francis said on his flight back to Rome. “She is a woman who lost her son in the first Islamic State bombings, and she said a word: ‘forgiveness.’ I was moved.” Pope Francis met Doha Sabah Abdallah, the mother who lost her son, in the Syriac Catholic Immaculate Conception Church in Bakhdida, also known as Qaraqosh. The town, 20 miles southeast of Mosul, was occupied by ISIS from 2014 to 2016.

Abdallah shared the story with the pope and those gathered in the church of the bombing of the town in August 2014 that killed her son, his cousin, and a young neighbor. “Our strength undoubtedly comes from our faith in the Resurrection, a source of hope. My faith tells me that my children are in the arms of Jesus Christ our Lord. And we, the survivors, try to forgive the aggressor, because our Master Jesus has forgiven his executioners. By imitating him in our sufferings, we testify that love is stronger than everything,” the Iraqi woman said.

Reflecting on this moment during the in-flight press conference, Pope Francis said: “I forgive. This is a word we have lost. We know how to insult big time. We know how to condemn in a big way ... But to forgive, to forgive one’s enemies. This is the pure Gospel. This hit me in Qaraqosh.” The 84-year-old pope also noted that he had felt more tired during the Iraqi trip than on previous ones. Recalling the final day of his trip, he said: “Yesterday, as we drove from Qaraqosh to Erbil, there were a lot of young people ... many young people. And the question someone asked me was: ‘And these young people, what is their future? Where will they go?’ And many will have to leave the country, many.”

The Christian population in Iraq has been steadily dwindling for decades, from around 1.4 million in 2003 to around 250,000 Christians in the country. Urgent measures are needed to ensure that people have jobs in their place and do not need to emigrate. And also measures to safeguard the right to emigrate,” the pope said.”

My friends, the covid has hit there just as hard as it has hit here. As difficult as things are here, we must hold on to our faith as others all around the world hold on to their Catholic faith. They are a genuine inspiration. Let us find ways to forgive. It is Lent. We journey to Easter pardon.

In the Peace of Christ,

Msgr. McHenry