



MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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Embraced by the Pope



Dear Mission Friends:

During this month of May in which we honor Our Blessed Mother and all mothers, it is fitting that we also pay tribute to the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena in Iraq, who have always focused especially on the needs of children. Their largest contribution to their communities has always been in education, teaching Christians and Muslims alike, for they know that education is key to helping rid their society of blind fundamentalism, hatred, and persecution.

Theirs was the first congregation of Catholic women religious in modern Iraq, and their commitment to stay has remained impenetrable, in spite of the country's constant state of instability and turbulence.

Just in the past 40 years, they have persevered through almost continuous conflict, including a corrupt and violent dictatorship, the Iran-Iraq war, two gulf wars, years of debilitating economic sanctions, and the horrors of ISIS.



And ever since that hot, dry, summer night in 2014 when ISIS captured Mosul, sparking “one of the single fastest displacements in recorded history [in which] nearly 500,000 people fled Mosul in a single weekend” (*New York Times Magazine*, Nov. 2019), we—you!—have been helping to support the good sisters and those they serve.

After three long years of deliberate, calculated horrors imposed by ISIS upon Christians, Yazidis, and other religious minorities, with the goal of wiping them from the face of the earth, Iraqi forces were finally able to reclaim Mosul, and, while filled with trepidation and insecurity, many, including most of the sisters, have moved back to rebuild their homes and lives.

Pope Francis had long been a source of spiritual support and comfort during the ISIS takeover, imploring from the outset, “May the God of peace arouse in all of us a genuine desire for dialogue and reconciliation...

Violence is not defeated by violence. Mary, Queen of Peace, pray for us!” His distress clearly intensified with each publicized atrocity as he pled with the international community to do all in its power to stop and prevent further systematic violence against ethnic and religious minorities. **“We wonder,” he lamented, “how human hearts can think up and carry out such atrocities.”** He sent personal envoys to meet with Iraqi leaders and, acknowledging that conditions won’t be resolved “by discussion alone, but by concrete signs of solidarity with those most in need,” he provided emergency funding for refugees.

Earlier this year, recognizing—and proclaiming to the world—the devastating and long-term consequences of Iraq’s volatile and tortured recent history, the Pope made the courageous decision to visit the country himself. The sisters were delighted and recounted the landmark event in the following letter.



Dear Friends,

March 5th – 7th was a historical time in Iraq, a unique experience for all Iraqis on every level. His Holiness Pope Francis' visit to our country during which he traveled to several cities and met with many varied communities—Christians, Mandaean, Muslims, Yazidis, and others—served to bring messages of love, peace, and joy to the Iraqis and to the whole world. The fact that His Holiness came as a penitent pilgrim added an even deeper value to the visit. The theme of his visit was very clear: **"We are all brothers."** Not only did it unite all Iraqi people, but the extraordinary event marked perhaps the first time, albeit short, that our country won the hearts and minds of everyone in the world. We and all Iraqi people are no longer being forgotten or neglected but rather we are being embraced by the whole world in the Pope's arms.

As a congregation, many of our Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena here played a big role in organizing vigils and festivals, including carnivals for the youth, during the week preceding his visit. Our hope was to prepare Christians spiritually throughout the country to welcome the Pope with repentance and hope and joy.

To tell the truth, we had mixed feelings before the visit: On the one hand, we were happy about this long-awaited event that was actually coming to fruition; but on the other hand, we were worried about the safety of the Pope due to the volatility of the area and some threats that preceded his coming. However, his presence among us brought calm and peace and joy beyond all our expectations.

To every place in Iraq he visited, the Pope carried a significant message unique to his audience. At the Republican Palace in Baghdad, the Pope mentioned all the failures and resulting wounds of the politicians and the people. But healing the wounds, he said, depends on the willingness and desire of our people to co-exist in peace. He urged them to focus on what unites them, to find the common ground on which they can revive the culture of dialogue in order to open new doors for accepting and respecting others...strengthening a sense of pride and belonging among all...instilling security and economic stability. He called for going beyond rebuilding homes and cities to rebuilding relationships—by forgiveness and reconciliation, by rejecting hostility, corruption, lies, and killing in the name of God...

At Our Lady of Perpetual Deliverance Church (the church in which 53 people were martyred in 2010), and St. Joseph Church, both in Baghdad, His Holiness addressed the consecrated women and men, reminding us of our role and responsibility as a Christian community in rebuilding and developing our country. He called on us to return to our roots, to our founders who received the charisma and lived it fully, urging us to guard what we have been entrusted by the founders and to hand it down to those who come after us. He prayed that the wisdom of our elders be embraced by the aspirations of the coming generations...

In Najaf, it was marvelous to see our spiritual leader meet in peace and respect with that city's spiritual leader, discussing a mutual concern: justice and dignity of the poor. And in Ur, the land of our father Abraham, His Holiness united religious leaders and representatives of all Iraqi religious traditions whose faith is rooted in the One God that Abraham worshiped. They prayed on behalf of all the children of Abraham, urging religious and political leaders to serve and work for peace, a peace that is especially needed by religious minorities threatened by persecution.

In Mosul, where we suffered for years under ISIS, His Holiness placed his hand on the open wounds of the Iraqis by visiting and praying in the central square, once home to four churches which were destroyed by hatred during the ISIS takeover.

In nearby Qaraqosh, a town deserted for three years because of ISIS, newly-returned townspeople received the Pope with olive branches and palm fronds, an act which he praised as symbolic of their desire to forgive and start again.

Then it was on to Erbil, the town that welcomed and made room for those displaced from the Nineveh Plain by ISIS, including our congregation and many of those we serve. It was very meaningful that the Pope changed from his original plan to fly from Qaraqosh to Erbil; rather, he chose to travel by car and take the same road that we had all taken as we fled ISIS on the night of August 6th, 2014. In Erbil the Pope celebrated Mass with 15,000 people, proclaiming words of hope throughout, and ending it with the blessing of *Salam, Salam, Salam* (peace, peace, peace).

Dear Sisters and Brethren all over the world, we thank you for your love and prayers, support and solidarity during the Pope's historical visit...

Salam to us all,
Dominican Sisters of St Catherine of Siena, Iraq
March 15, 2021



The sisters ended their letter asking us to “Please pray that the visit may have a **permanent effect** on our troubled country,” because now, of course, it’s back to the trenches for them, resuming their battle against the **permanent effects** of ISIS. It is estimated that one in five Iraqis suffers from war-induced psychological disorders, but mental health care is sorely lacking—there is only one psychiatrist for every 275,000 people.

But it is the children who are, as one of the sisters once put it, “the most vulnerable, the ones who will carry the deep trauma of violence and displacement into the future.” The sisters have become all too aware that when there is very little of nutritional value to eat and hunger is constant, it is the children who suffer the most, often acquiring long-term physical and mental deficiencies. Moreover, these children saw bombs falling on their homes and dead bodies in the streets.

Many lost a loved one, often watching them die right in front of them. Ibrahim Khalil, former director of a mental health services department in Iraq, said numerous children told him that they wish ISIS had just killed them.

One sister said, “We need the world to know what ISIS [has] done to us, how we have suffered in these years. For some time, the media focused on Iraq and then, all of a sudden, they forgot us. The Pope's visit will place the world's eyes on us, on our story and our struggle to survive.”

Indeed, Pope Francis got us talking about it again. Let us continue to hold Iraqis in our minds and hearts, sending prayers and support to the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena as they go about their never-ending tasks of nurturing and educating and making a difference in the lives of the children within their circle of love.

Peace,
Lesley Warnshuis



Prayer for Peace

*Lord, the plight of our country is deep
and the suffering of Christians
is severe and frightening.*

*Therefore, we ask you Lord to spare our lives,
and to grant us patience and courage to continue our witness
of Christian values with trust and hope.*

*Lord, peace is the foundation of life;
Grant us the peace and stability that will enable us
to live with each other without fear and anxiety,
and with dignity and joy.
Glory be to you forever. Amen*

~Louis Raphael Sako
Patriarch of Babylon and the Chaldeans

*If you would like to remember our
missionary work
in your will,
our legal title is:*



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