



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

TO IRAQ

[5-8 March 2021]

MEETING WITH AUTHORITIES, CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS

Hall of the Presidential Palace in Baghdad

Friday, 5 March 2021

[Multimedia]

*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!