

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



USCCB Fact Sheet

Pope Francis' Solidarity with Beleaguered Christians in Iraq

Pope Francis' visit to Iraq March 5 – 8, 2021 represented a historic milestone for Christians and the Middle East. He was the first pope ever to visit Iraq, despite that country being part of the "cradle of Christianity," where followers of Christ have lived for 2,000 years. But the Christian presence in Iraq has dwindled from an estimated high of 1.4 million, according to a 1987 census, to less than 300,000. The Holy Father's presence was a much needed affirmation of his love for this beleaguered people and a call for interfaith harmony.

During his stay, Pope Francis held an inter-religious meeting in Ur, at the ziggurat, a pyramid reconstructed on the ruins of what, according to scripture, is known as the birthplace of Abraham. Given that the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religions all revere Abraham, it was an apt setting for a meeting of leaders of different faiths. In addition, the Holy Father met privately with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, leader of Iraq's Shiite Muslim population, to build bridges of fraternal dialogue and interreligious understanding.

But most of this visit was to express solidarity with Christians. In Baghdad, the Holy Father celebrated Mass in the Syro-Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of Salvation, the site of a horrific attack by extremists in 2010 who killed two priests and took 150 faithful hostages. A bloody battle between security forces and the extremists ensued that left dozens of worshippers and police dead and even more wounded and maimed. This attack was a harbinger for the brutality that swept through northern Iraq when ISIS took control in the 2014-2017 period.

ISIS targeted religious minorities, attacking churches, kidnapping priests and bishops for ransom, seizing women and girls to forcibly convert them or sell them into slavery, and destroying property. In Mosul, ISIS left Iraq's second largest city in ruins as 100,000 Christians fled when faced with the choice of "convert or die." ISIS' onslaught led to a mass emigration of about 3.4 million from Iraq since 2014. Many Christians fled to the Kurdistan area of Iraq. Today, although ISIS was defeated, the threat from extremists remains as Christians who return to Mosul and the Nineveh Plains are often still subject to harassment, intimidation, and extortion; the task of rebuilding is daunting.

Various international Catholic organizations including Knights of Columbus, Catholic Relief Services, Aid to the Church in Need, Catholic Near East Welfare Association and Caritas Internationalis, are all providing humanitarian assistance to the millions who have been affected and displaced by these conflicts in Iraq.

Nonetheless the scars of conflict made all the more poignant Pope Francis' prayer for the victims of war in Mosul and his meetings with Catholics in Qaraqosh in a cathedral that had been used as an indoor shooting range by ISIS. In Erbil, the Holy Father celebrated Mass in a stadium filled with as many of the faithful as possible during the pandemic. He sought to reassure them of his care and love as they struggle to survive and indeed reclaim their place in Iraq.



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