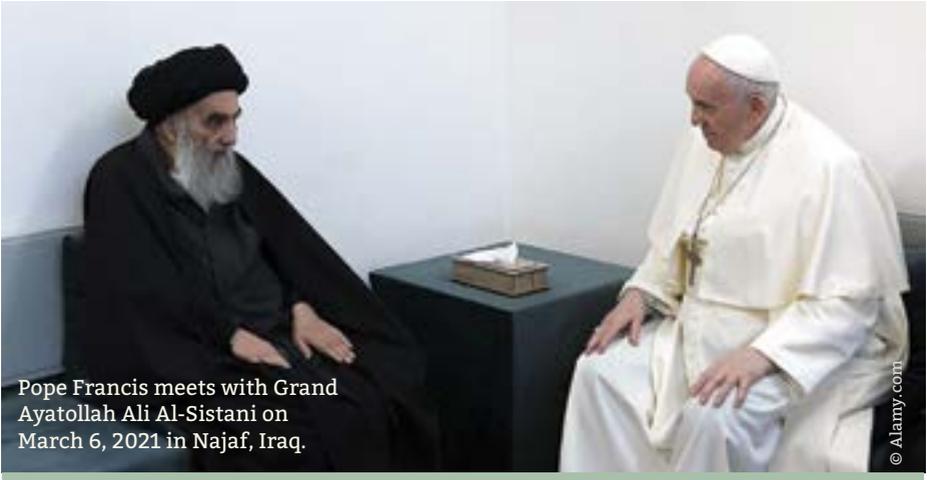


Peace and Hope in Iraq

Pope Francis's visit to Iraq has been described by many as the most important of his pontificate. *Jesuit News* (Rome) looks back on the visit.



Pope Francis meets with Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani on March 6, 2021 in Najaf, Iraq.

Pope Francis's visit to the grand Ayatollah and the holy city of Shiite Islam, was 'a gesture that mirrors St Francis' visit to the Sultan'. This visit was important to heal the many wounds that have been inflicted on Iraq by so many years of mutual suspicion between the various communities. The meaning of this meeting goes in the sense of what the Pope said: "the peace of God is stronger than violence and war".

Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi declared 6 March as the National Day of Tolerance and Coexistence in Iraq in memory of the Pope's visit.

According to Fr Cassar SJ, director of JRS in Iraq, 'This visit was a kairós, a

moment of value, which goes beyond the immediate time in which we live, and which lies entirely in the hands of God. The whole visit had a prophetic dimension, which for its relevance goes beyond the boundaries of what is now a very small Christian community: I believe that Pope Francis sowed seeds of hope and peace in this country, where so much evil has been poured: conflicts, bombings, ISIS. So much evil, so much violence, so many people have suffered.'

Fr Cassar had the opportunity to meet briefly with Pope Francis on Sunday as he prepared to celebrate Mass in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan. 'My two minutes with the Holy Father were

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Pope Francis welcomed by Masrour Barzani prime minister of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

beautiful: he was very tired, almost exhausted, but also very, very happy.' Two years ago Fr Cassar met Francis at the Vatican, 'I had introduced myself as a Jesuit working in Iraq,' he recounts, 'and then he called me back and said, "Pray for me because I want to go there so much". Yesterday I heard that he was very happy to have made that visit'.

The reception given to the Pope, 'both by Christians and believers of other religions, was beautiful, everything worked very well,' said the Jesuit, 'there were people who came from the district of Amadiya, on the border with Turkey, from the monastic community in Syria founded by Paolo Dall'Oglio, who is still missing. Many shared the joy of seeing the Holy Father in Ur, the ancient city of Abraham, or of seeing him enter Mosul, this city of so much bombing.'

'Christianity in Iraq belongs to Iraq, it is not a foreign body. Christians have been in these lands since before Iraq was established as a modern

state', Fr Cassar stressed, adding, 'It is a great pity that this country has emptied itself of the Christian population. Those who stayed either consciously chose to stay or were stranded because they did not have the means to leave. I think that of all who are in the limbo of exile, in Jordan or Turkey or Lebanon, these in Iraq are not to be forgotten.'

In Qaraqosh, a predominantly Christian city devastated by ISIS, joy was mixed with astonishment: 'The local head of JRS, Fadi Yabbo, told me that he never imagined that the Pope would visit this small town. "Abuna, Father," he told me, "you have no idea what this has meant for me and all the people, more than Hoshana," the greatest celebration of the Syriac Catholic rite.'

For Fr Cassar, the first challenges to be faced are those related to the dire situation of the refugees. 'During the Mass, the Pope said "there are so many people who still suffer, physically and psychologically, after being displaced, kidnapped: or having seen relatives killed before their eyes".'

Hence the hope that the seeds sown by the Pope will flourish. 'I hope that there will be a greater openness to one another, I hope that we can undertake common initiatives among religions to respond to the needs of those who are most in need. I hope that the Pope's message that we are all brothers and sisters permeates the hearts of people of good will.' ❤️

*By courtesy of SJ Roman News.
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