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## **Pope Francis in Iraq: Msgr Michael (Mosul): "The Pope will instil hope amid the rubble left by ISIS"**

A portrait of smiling Pope Francis is positioned between the Al-Saa (Our Lady of the Hour) church bell tower and the leaning Al-Hadba minaret of the al-Nouri mosque, symbolic sites of Mosul's heritage and history, emblems of cultural diversity and of the peaceful coexistence of its communities. Vatican and Iraqi flags rise above the image of the Pontiff, crowned by the flight of a white dove holding an olive branch in its beak, with the caption "Mosul welcomes you." Iraq's second most important city, capital of the Nineveh Governorate, still bears the unhealed scars and wounds of Islamic State rule, which elected it capital of the Caliphate on Iraqi soil on 29 June 2014. Until its liberation in 2017 by the Iraqi army. **The esplanades of churches destroyed by Daesh.** Here, on March 7, the Pope will make one of the most eagerly awaited visits of his apostolic journey to Iraq - starting March 5 until March 8. The papal programme for that day will see a prayer of suffrage for the victims of the war in Hosh al-Bieaa (Church Square). The Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Mosul, Msgr. **Najeeb Michael**, interviewed by SIR, described the climate of anticipation in Mosul: "Preparations have been in full swing for over two months to welcome Pope Francis in the best possible way. Mosul probably bears the most dramatic legacy of war and violence in Iraq."

**"The dead bodies of Islamic State militiamen are still lying in the rubble of this martyred city".**

Msgr. Michael highlighted the "great efforts of Muslims and Christians, together with the believers of other faiths, to organise this meeting on the esplanade of four ancient Christian churches destroyed by Daesh. "In Mosul", the archbishop recalled, "the Islamic State destroyed over 30 churches. These are open wounds because none of them have been rebuilt," he said. "The same applies to mosques and mausoleums". However, some progress seems to have been made: last year, UNESCO approved projects for the rehabilitation and restoration of the monastery church of Our Lady of the Hour, the Al Tahera Syriac-Catholic Church and the Al Nouri mosque complex, bombed by Daesh, as part of UNESCO's led international initiative "Revive the Spirit of Mosul" with partial funding from the United Arab Emirates. **With the Pope amidst the ruins.** On 7 March, Christians, Muslims, Yazidis and the believers of other faiths will join in the prayer for the victims of the war in Hosh al-Bieaa Square.

**"We will all be gathered around the Pope, surrounded by rubble".**

Msgr. Michael said, providing a glimpse of the contents of the meeting: "a prayer, two testimonies, one by a Sunni faithful and one by a priest, followed by the flight of a dove as a sign of peace.

On a small popemobile, the Holy Father will then make brief visit to the destroyed churches in the square and the surrounding areas." "A message of peace, justice and hope will rise after the death, violence and injustice, in a word, resurrection: this is the most powerful message that will reverberate from this square," said the Archbishop. "We admire the Pope's courage to visit us here, to pray and hear from Christians, Muslims and local people, and to bear witness to the stones, those of destroyed houses and churches. The Pope will be passing through the ruins of this two thousand year-old city together with its Christian community that inhabits it from its origins. The Pope is arriving to remind the living stones of Mosul not to be afraid, to have hope in peace.

**Peace, not fear, is the last word.**

I am therefore certain that a prayer will rise from Mosul not only for the dead, for the victims of war, but also to instil courage and hope in the living. We need it badly - said Msgr Michael -. Only 60 Christian families have returned to Mosul. There were 6000 before the invasion of Daesh. The Pope will help us restore hope and return to rebuild what Daesh has destroyed." After the visit in Mosul, Pope Francis will travel by helicopter to Qaraqosh. Once landed, on the way to Qaraqosh, the pontiff's vehicle will transit through Karamles where the martyred priest of the Iraqi Church, Father Ragheed Ganni, is buried. In compliance with coronavirus restrictions, a large number of people are expected to welcome the Pope at his passage along the streets. Bells will chime for the occasion. People in Karamles are hoping that the Pope will stop briefly to bless the city.

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