

Pope in Iraq. Patton (Custos): “A courageous and prophetic journey.” The “perfect joy” of Iraqis

"A courageous and prophetic journey. From the very first day, we followed and accompanied the Pope with our prayers, offering Holy Mass and fasting. The Pope's gestures and words reached us all even outside Iraq". Father **Francesco Patton**, Custos of the Holy Land, comments from Jerusalem on the Pope Francis' historic visit to Iraq, the first by a Pontiff in the land of Abraham.



The convents and friars of the Custody are present in all Middle Eastern countries, except Iraq. Yet there are members of the clergy of Iraqi origin, such as Fr Father Haitham and Father Nour, both natives of Qaraqosh, whom the Custos himself sent to greet Pope Francis in their hometown. A small presence of the Custody in Iraq with the hope of eventually establishing a monastery in the Land of Abraham, perhaps in the near future. **The courage of the faith.** "I was deeply impressed by the 'courage of the faith' expressed by Pope Francis throughout his visit," said the Custos. " From Jerusalem, we also saw and experienced

a faith that extends beyond the boundaries of human trust,

'*spes contra spem*', hoping against all hope, quoting from the words of St Paul." For Father Patton, the Holy Father's faith "is the faith of one who is not afraid to challenge himself and to put his own life on the line at a time when the world seems frozen in fear.



The Pope is not intimidated by the pandemic, nor by wars, or by logistical difficulties. This faith of his bolsters and offers consolation to all Iraq and the Middle East. His message," he emphasised, "is not to proclaim in slumbers, one cannot bear Christian witness in slumber."



"Pope Francis travelled to a land that experienced tremendous bloodshed and destruction", recalls Father Patton. "On the first day, he visited the Syriac Catholic Cathedral in Baghdad, where 48 Christians died as martyrs. I was touched by the warm reception given to the Pope by numerous Christians looking forward to meeting him. It was another way to offer strong hope in a very trying situation". The joy of the Iraqis is like "*Franciscans' perfect joy, not the joy of someone whose circumstances are ideal, but the joy of one who feels at one with Christ even in the most desperate situations.*" **Simple gestures.** "The visit was enriched by simple gestures, harbingers of dialogue from the start, genuine challenges for all of us living in the Holy Land and the Middle East, as well as

in Western societies.” One of these was the courtesy visit to the Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani. "No joint documents were released but we saw

the gesture of a simple meeting between two elderly religious leaders capable of providing guidance to the world

invoking inter-faith dialogue and understanding, and highlighting the importance of friendship between religious communities.”



The visit to Ur of the

Chaldeans, Mosul and Qaraqosh, with the testimony of people who endured the cruelty of the Islamic State, marked more significant moments. The Custos' thoughts go to a mother in Qaraqosh, Mrs Doha Sabah Abdallah, whose child was killed by a bomb. "The woman shared with the Pope her story of grief and resilience, interpreting her tragic experience through the lenses of the faith, namely, forgiveness for those who killed her son and caused further victims, because, she said, 'our Master Jesus forgave his executioners. By imitating him in our sorrows, we bear witness to the fact that love is stronger than everything'. Listening to these words from a mother who has lost her child”, said Father Patton, “has the disruptive strength of the Gospel incarnate and actualized.” **The powerful fragility of the Cross.** "God's name can never be used to justify violence": the recurring message of the Pope during his visit to Iraq. Including in the Holy Mass in Erbil on Sunday 7 March. "The Pope actualised the Word of God by resonating it among the listening multitudes. In the sports stadium he referred to the fragility of the Cross as the power and wisdom of God, warning against the risk of falling into the trap of fashioning false images of God which lead to the instrumental use of His name resulting in violence." Pope Francis, underlines the Custos of the Holy Land, “leaves behind a powerful message of hope to a Christian community decimated by wars, political instability and insecurity. It is a message for the entire Christian Middle East. Approximately 1.5 million Christians lived in Iraq before the outbreak of wars in the 1990s, compared to an estimated 300,000 today, but they clearly constitute the leaven and light that radiates and the salt that gives taste.” **Syria and Iraq, two mosaics to be reassembled.** "Speaking as Custody of the Holy Land, we pray and hope that the words of Pope Francis will also reach and touch our brothers and sisters living in Syria and other countries affected by tensions and violence." Syria “shares a somewhat comparable situation with Iraq”, remarked Fr Patton. “In fact, as in Iraq, also Syria was once home to a thriving Christian community of over two million faithful, now reduced to only half a million as the Country entered its 10th year of war. Syria was hit by devastation, death and violence perpetrated using the name of God as a pretext.” The Custos' hope is that "like the bleeding woman in the Gospel, the Christians of Syria may touch the hem of Jesus' garment that became manifest in Iraq through Pope Francis, and that they may feel consoled and sustained in hope and charity, the selfless, healing love that reconciles and forgives. I hope the Pope will be able to bring this spirit of consolation also to the Christians in Syria. Syria and Iraq, two specular realities, two mosaics that need to be reassembled.”

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