



Chaldean Archdiocese of Erbil

Newsletter From Archbishop Bashar WARDA Papal Visit to Iraq 5-8 March

The presence of the Christians since the second century is an essential yet very marginalised and ignored part of Iraqi culture. Our history has been continually eroded by it not being taught in the classrooms, by persecution, emigration and lack of rights. My country has been torn apart for decades and it now sits as a puppet for other countries to fight their wars on our soil. This attrition leads to fear, disunity, sectarianism and economic woes. Yet for three days in March my country came together for the first time in many many decades due to the historic



Papal Visit. Only the Pope could unite and mobilise such a people as the Iraqis together, despite their bitter tribal differences and array of problems. The Pope came as a “*pilgrim of peace in the name of Christ, the Prince of Peace*”. His presence and messages of peace, fraternal coexistence and interreligious dialogue were magnificent, penetrating and highly consequential. No one has seen a united Iraq for decades, especially after the 2003 invasion and then ISIS. The media is still talking about building on the momentum of his visit, for the chance for dialogue between all and a new beginning to seek fraternal coexistence and a much healthier Iraq in togetherness.

The meeting of the *Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani* and *His Holiness* was also miraculous and highly significant; it sent a message of unity that has been received very positively by the people and the media throughout Iraq. The Pope is setting a model of going to where the other is and is speaking to him as he has done in his other Middle East visits. This is what God wants us to do. For the *Grand Ayatollah* to mention





Christian citizen rights rather than Iraqi rights is hugely significant, as Christians and Yazidis do not have citizen rights. I know that this meeting has really helped us and the other minorities.

Christian history is not taught at school and that makes it very hard for Muslims to understand and accept Christians. This visit showed to all that the Christians have been there since the second century and are very much part of the rich historic culture of this nation.

I watched with joy at the meetings and in the positivity within which they were held in *Baghdad* , *Najaf* , *Ur* , *Mosul* and *Qaraqosh* , knowing that my community would have the immense honour and privilege to celebrate the *Holy Mass* for the world to see, and to see us in a different light.





To organise it was beyond an honour, but at the same time a massive responsibility to do it perfectly with limited resources. It took much communication, planning, organisation and many late night rehearsals to achieve it, despite the challenges within Covid 19. *The Catholic University in Erbil (CUE)* was the centre of the planning and operations to make the *Papal Mass* an incredible moving and spiritual experience that was a huge worldwide success. The university's structures played a major role as it was used as the place for training volunteers, registering people for the Holy Papal Mass, organizing their data and preparing transport for 10,000 people. Part of the volunteers worked at the university for the registration process, whilst others worked at the stadium helping the church and government experts. As the registration process was held at the university, the university set up 50 computers to be used for gathering and organizing data. The university's IT managers voluntarily created special software with high-security standards for organizing the enormous people's data. The Pope's team said "mama mia" as to what we achieved so professionally with so little means. A big thanks to God and my people for this, especially those 300 young volunteers who generously gave their time and dedication to give us a spectacular *Holy Mass*. The young people showed their capabilities and they are the future for Christianity in Iraq.

I thank *Knights of Columbus for supporting the mass* and those who restored the desecrated statue of Virgin Mary from Karamles, blessed by the Pope during the mass.

I also thank the Kurdistan Government and Archbishop Nathaniel and his community.

In summary, I found the Papal Visit to be miraculous and incredibly uplifting. The Pope sowed great seeds of forgiveness, hope and peace for the future. The spirit of all of his messages are for all in Iraq, the International Community, aid agencies and ourselves to very actively work on for the future of the country.

We now need help with the international NGOs for significant livelihood programmes to happen in order to remove the very high level of unemployment in the villages that remains at over 80 per cent; this is the same problem for the Yazidis. Jobs and education give dignity and hope; if the parents stay then their children will stay.



I thank *The Aid to the Church in Need (ACN)* for becoming first foundational core donor for the scholarship programme *the CUE*; they will support 150 new students for the duration of their degrees from 2021/22 until 2024/25. We need to find more core donors to achieve 1000 students by 2025 (200-250 per year for the next five years). Without a doubt, *the CUE* is a beacon of light and a symbol of hope for the young people of Iraq. The provision of scholarships will be an immense support; this international aid will not only benefit young people, who are hoping for a better future, but at the same time gives a clear future “ through education” for the Christians, all the other minorities and the disadvantaged.

In increasing the student population will help local businesses as students/ increased staff will spend money and so will the university. It will have a multiplier effect on the community in circulating money and jobs : that in itself helps bond the community and the sharing of prosperity.

The *Papal Visit* brought international eyes back to our country and the continued plight of the Christians and the minorities like the Yazidis. This gives people hope and why we have to build on this very successful visit. Please help us to build on this momentum set by Pope Francis for his people; his courage and fortitude were immense and his words have built bridges that we will most certainly act upon. The Pope brought a nation together for three days; it shows that we can coexist together and we need to work on this with the help of the *International Community*.



I know that the richness and spirit of his messages are for all in Iraq ,and for the *International Community*, NGOs, aid/humanitarian agencies, to work relentlessly for the future of Christianity, the minorities and my country.

As we pray for you, do please continue to pray for us.

Thank you.

Archbishop Bashar Warda

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