Pope in Iraq- promoting peace, tolerance and equality

By Cindy Wooden

To consolidate peace and ensure progress, the government and people of Iraq must never treat anyone as a second-class citizen and must work each day to promote harmony, Pope Francis said. “Fraternal coexistence calls for patient and honest dialogue, protected by justice and by respect for law,” he said March 5, addressing Iraqi President Barham Salih, other government leaders and diplomats serving in Iraq.

Pope Francis and Iraqi President Barham Salih arrive for a meeting with authorities, civil society leaders and members of the diplomatic corps in the hall of the presidential palace in Baghdad March 5, 2021.

The appointment with civic and cultural leaders at the presidential palace in Baghdad came shortly after the pope landed in Iraq for his first foreign trip in 15 months because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although he, his entire entourage and the journalists traveling with him had all been vaccinated against the coronavirus, they all wore masks during the four-hour flight from Rome.

Lowering his mask briefly to address reporters, he said he felt a “duty” to visit the Middle Eastern country, which had experienced so much death and turmoil since the 2003 invasion by a U.S.-led coalition. He put his mask back on to make his way around the plane and personally greet each member of the media.

The pope held a brief meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi in a lounge at the Baghdad airport before heading into the city under tight security. Outside the airport, in five or six large groups along the highway, hundreds of Iraqis waved Vatican or Iraqi flags as the pope passed. Forced to use a bullet-proof car, the pope rode to the presidential palace in a black BMW 750i; the sedan was flanked most of the way by security officials on motorcycles, but as the motorcade neared the palace, it was accompanied by officers on horseback.

The president welcomed Pope Francis as a “great and dear guest,” expressing his gratitude that the pope made the trip “despite recommendations to postpone the visit because of the exceptional circumstances the world is going through because of the pandemic and despite the difficult conditions that our wounded nation is going through” with sporadic waves of violence. Facing those dangers and visiting anyway “in reality doubles the value of your visit in the eyes of Iraqis,” the president told the pope.

His first speech of the trip, the pope outlined the themes expected to resonate throughout the March 5-8 visit: paying homage to the Christians martyred by Islamic militants over the past 20 years; insisting belief in one God, the father of all, means all people are brothers and sisters; encouraging a continued commitment to rebuilding the physical and social fabric of the country, including with international aid; and condemning all recourse to violence. Repeating a phrase he used in a video message to the Iraqi people on the eve of his visit, Pope Francis told the civic authorities, “I come as a penitent, asking forgiveness of heaven and my brothers and sisters for so much destruction and cruelty. I come as a pilgrim of peace in the name of Christ, the prince of peace.” “May the clash of arms be silenced! May their spread be curbed, here and everywhere,” the pope said. “May the voice of builders and peacemakers find a hearing! The voice of the humble, the poor, the ordinary men and women who want to live, work and pray in peace.” “May there be an end to acts of violence and extremism, factions and intolerance,” Pope Francis urged. “May room be made for all those citizens who seek to cooperate in building up this country through dialogue and through frank, sincere and constructive discussion — citizens committed to reconciliation and prepared, for the common good, to set aside their own interests.”

Pope Francis acknowledges how Iraqis have dedicated themselves to the difficult task of building a democracy. For further progress toward that goal, he said, “it is essential to ensure the participation of all political, social and religious groups and to guarantee the fundamental rights of all citizens.” In fact, the country’s dwindling Christian minority is not the only group that repeatedly has been denied its basic rights; Kurds, Yazidis and Mandaeans all have faced discrimination and even persecution. Under Saddam Hussein, even the Shiite Muslim majority was marginalized in many ways. Even though he was speaking to secular leaders, Pope Francis could not fail to mention the special suffering of the Christian community, advocate for their rights and promise that they, too, would use their talents and skills to build up the nation. Condemning violence “grounded in a fundamentalism incapable of accepting the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic and religious groups,” the pope urged Iraqis to strive to be a model of dialogue and harmony for the rest of the region.

Salih told the pope that, too often in the modern world, “opposition and polarization” are the order of the day, and people, “especially in the East, are losing the habit of pluralism, diversity and accepting the opinion of the other.” Such an attitude, he said, “increases terrorism and the incitement to violence, hatred and committing atrocities with pretexts that have nothing to do with the tolerant spirit of the divine message. This threatens our entire future.”

Pope Francis agreed. “Only if we learn to look beyond our differences and see each other as members of the same human family will we be able to begin an effective process of rebuilding and leave to future generations a better, more just and more humane world,” he said. Religion, he insisted, “must be at the service of peace and fraternity.” https://www.catholicnews.com/pope-arrives-in-iraq-promoting-peace-tolerance-equality/

Muslim Council of Elders on Pope Francis’ visit to Iraq - Vatican News (CNUA) The Muslim Council of Elders issues a statement regarding Pope Francis’ landmark visit to Iraq saying it is a message of solidarity with victims of violence in the region and around the world. The statement reads, “Pope Francis’ visit to Iraq serves as a great opportunity to promote peace and is a message of solidarity with victims of violence in the region and around the world. After years of destruction and war, we believe that the historic visit will help heal the wounds of the Iraqi people, while offering hope for a brighter future for Iraq and the region, one which will be filled with tolerance and coexistence.”

Pope Francis addresses local authorities at the Presidential Palace in Baghdad. Credit: Vatican Media

More than ten years on from that horrific event, Pope Francis came to this place of worship on Friday, the first day of his Apostolic Visit to Iraq. There he met with bishops, clergy, religious, seminarians, catechists and lay leaders, noting that they were “gathered in this Cathedral of Our Lady of Salvation, hallowed by the blood of our brothers and sisters who here paid the ultimate price of their fidelity to the Lord and His Church.”

Virus of discouragement - Addressing those present, the Pope told them never to lock down their apostolic zeal in the face of daily challenges, especially during this time of pandemic. “We know how easy it is to be infected by the virus of discouragement that at times seems to spread all around us,” he said. “Yet the Lord has given us an effective vaccine against that nasty virus. It is the hope born of persevering prayer and daily fidelity to our apostolates.” Pope Francis went on to say that with this vaccine, “we can go forth with renewed strength, to share the joy of the Gospel as missionary disciples and living signs of the presence of God’s kingdom of holiness, justice and peace.”

Perseverance amid hardship - The Pope highlighted the hardships that so many Iraqi faithful have faced in recent decades. He spoke of the effects of war and persecution, the fragility of basic infrastructures and the ongoing struggle for economic and personal security that has frequently led to internal displacements and the migration of many people, including Christians, to other parts of the world. Pope Francis also thanked his “brother bishops and priests,” for remaining close to their people; and he encouraged them to persevere in these efforts, “in order to ensure that Iraq’s Catholic community, though small like a mustard seed, continues to enrich the life of society as a whole.”

Fraternal union - “The love of Christ,” said the Pope, “summons us to set aside every kind of self-centeredness or competition; it impels us to universal communion and challenges us to form a community of brothers and sisters who accept and care for one another.” “How important is this witness of fraternal union in a world all too often fragmented and torn by division,” he said. “Every effort made to build bridges between ecclesial, parish and diocesan communities and institutions will serve as a prophetic gesture on the part of the Church in Iraq and a fruitful response to Jesus’ prayer that all may be one.”

Untying knots - During his address, Pope Francis pointed out that at times “misunderstandings can arise and we can experience certain tensions; these are the knots that hinder the weaving of fraternity.” The Pope went on to say, “They are knots we carry within ourselves; after all, we are all sinners. Yet these knots can be untied by grace, by a greater love; they can be loosened by the medicine of forgiveness and by fraternal dialogue, by patiently bearing one another’s burdens and strengthening each other in moments of trial and difficulty.”

Be true fathers - In a special word to his brother bishops, the Pope urged them to be particularly close to their priests. “Let them not see you as only an administrator or manager, but as true fathers, concerned for their welfare, ready to offer them support and encouragement with an open heart,” he said.

Tend to your flock - Pope Francis also invited the priests, religious, catechists, and seminarians present to go out among the flock and pay particular attention to those who risk being left behind, such as the young, the elderly, the sick and the poor. “Be pastors, servants of the people, not civil servants,” he said.

Victims of violence - Turning his thoughts again to those brothers and sisters who died in the terrorist attack in this Cathedral some ten years ago, and whose cause for canonization is underway, the Pope stressed that “their deaths are a powerful reminder that inciting war, hateful attitudes, violence or the shedding of blood are incompatible with authentic religious teachings.” He also remembered all the victims of violence and persecution, regardless of the religious group to which they belong.

Blessed are the peacemakers - In this vast Cathedral, Pope Francis thanked all those gathered for their efforts to be peacemakers, within their communities and with believers of other religious traditions, “sowing seeds of reconciliation and fraternal coexistence that can lead to a rebirth of hope for everyone.” He also mentioned all young people who, he said, were a “sign of promise and hope, but particularly in this country.”

Witnesses to God’s promises - Concluding his address, the Pope told these “brothers and sisters” they were part of a long history that faithfully bears witness “to God’s never-failing promises as they strive to build a new future." "May your witness," he said, “matured through adversity and strengthened by the blood of martyrs, be a shining light in Iraq and beyond, in order to proclaim the greatness of the Lord and to make the spirit of this people rejoice in God our Saviour." Before leaving the Cathedral, Pope Francis signed the guest book with the words: "As a penitent and a pilgrim of faith and of peace in Iraq, I ask God to grant this people, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, the strength to rebuild the country in fraternity." https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-03/pope-francis-violence-and-hate-are-incompatible-with-religion.html

‘The name of God cannot be used to justify acts of murder’ By Courtney Mares (CNA via CNUA) In his first speech in Iraq, Pope Francis called for an end to violence and extremism so that ordinary Iraqis can live, work, and pray in peace. Speaking to Iraqi government authorities from the hall of the Presidential Palace in Baghdad, the pope said that “religion, by its very nature, must be at the service of peace and fraternity.” “The name of God cannot be used to justify acts of murder, exile, terrorism and oppression,” Pope Francis said in Baghdad on March 5. “On the contrary, God, who created human beings equal in dignity and rights, calls us to spread the values of love, goodwill and concord.”

Pope Francis told the President of Iraq, Barham Ahmed Salih Qassim, and other local politicians and diplomats, that the Catholic Church in Iraq desires to be “a friend to all and, through interreligious dialogue, to cooperate constructively with other religions in serving the cause of peace.” “I come as a penitent, asking forgiveness of heaven and my brothers and sisters for so much destruction and cruelty,” the pope said. “I come as a pilgrim of peace in the name of Christ, the Prince of Peace. How much we have prayed in these years for peace in Iraq. St. John Paul II spared no initiatives and above all offered his prayers and sufferings for this intention.”

The pope called for an end to “partisan interests” and “those outside interests uninterested in the local population.” “Give a voice to the builders and to the artisans of peace. The voice of the humble, the poor, the ordinary men and women who want to live, work and pray in peace.” “May there be an end to acts of violence and extremism, factions and intolerance,” Pope Francis said.

The pope’s meetings with Iraqi authorities come at a time when the country is also facing severe political and socioeconomic challenges, including a protest movement calling for an end to government corruption, high levels of unemployment, and the sectarian divisions within the political system established after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Pope Francis declared in his speech to Iraqi government leaders that it is “necessary, but not sufficient, to combat the scourge of corruption, misuse of power and disregard for law.” “At the same time, it is necessary to build justice, increase honesty, transparency and strengthen the institutions responsible for this,” the pope said. “In this way, stability within society grows and a healthy politics arises, able to offer to all, especially the young of whom there are so many in this country, sure hope for a better future.”

The pope highlighted the “age-old presence of Christians” in Iraq and said that “their participation in public life, as citizens with full rights, freedoms and responsibilities” will testify to healthy pluralism and “contribute to the nation’s prosperity and harmony.”

Pope Francis also pointed to the suffering endured by the Yazidis, who he said were “innocent victims of senseless and brutal atrocities, persecuted and killed for their religion, and whose very identity and survival was put at risk.” “Only if we learn to look beyond our differences and see each other as members of the same human family, will we be able to begin an effective process of rebuilding and leave to future generations a better, more just and more humane world,” he said. “In this regard, the religious, cultural and ethnic diversity that has been a hallmark of Iraqi society for millennia is a precious resource on which to draw, not an obstacle to be eliminated.”

“

Pope Francis said he understood how the country’s small Christian community, which has been present in the country since the first century, could lose its enthusiasm. “We know how easy it is to be infected by the virus of discouragement that at times seems to spread all around us,” the pope told them. “Yet the Lord has given us an effective vaccine against that nasty virus. It is the hope born of persevering prayer and daily fidelity to our apostolates.” “With this vaccine, we can go forth with renewed strength, to share the joy of the Gospel as missionary disciples and living signs of the presence of God’s kingdom of holiness, justice and peace,” Pope Francis said.

The women in the congregation responded several times to his speech with zagharit, an ululation of praise or honor. With the representatives of the various Catholic communities wearing masks and socially distanced inside the church, the pope also encouraged them to reach out to one another and to other Christians.

Pope Francis said they should think of a prized carpet. “The different churches present in Iraq, each with its age-old historical, liturgical and spiritual patrimony, are like so many individually colored threads that, woven together, make up a single beautiful carpet, one that displays not only our fraternity but points also to its source.” “God himself is the artist who imagined this carpet, patiently wove it and carefully mends it, desiring us ever to remain closely knit as his sons and daughters,” the pope said. But, being human and prone to sin, individuals and groups can create knots that stop the process of weaving, he said. The knots “can be untied by grace, by a greater love; they can be loosened by the medicine of forgiveness and by fraternal dialogue, by patiently bearing one another’s burdens and strengthening each other in moments of trial and difficulty.

Following Pope Francis’ address, the socially distanced congregation recited the “Lord’s Prayer” prayer in Arabic. The pope signed the church’s book of honor, leaving a message for the Syriac Catholic congregants. His visit to Iraq was being watched live on satellite TV by thousands in Iraq and throughout the Middle East. https://www.catholicnews.com/pope%3A-honor-martyrs-by-remaining-faithful-working-for-a-better-iraq/

Pope stresses fraternity in meeting with Iraq's Grand Ayatollah - Vatican News (CNUA) Pope Francis met this Saturday morning in Najaf with Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Al-Husayni Al-Sistani in a visit which stressed the importance of friendship, mutual respect and dialogue between religious communities. According to a statement from the Holy See Press Office, during the courtesy visit, which lasted about forty-five minutes, “the Holy Father stressed the importance of cooperation and friendship between religious communities for contributing – through the cultivation of mutual respect and dialogue – to the good of Iraq, the region and the entire human family.”