



*We lived an abundant joy*

Dear friends,

March 5<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> was a historical time in Iraq, in which we all lived a unique experience on every level. As Iraqis, we followed His Holiness Pope Francis' visit to different cities meeting different communities: Christians, Mandaeans, Muslims, Yezidis, and others. Indeed, the His visit to Iraq carried several messages to the Iraqis and to the whole world. The fact that His Holiness came as a penitent pilgrim, added a deeper value to the visit. It was a touch of love, peace and joy for all those of good will. Perhaps, this was the first time that Iraq wins the heart and mind of the world for an extraordinary event that united all Iraqi people.

As a congregation, many of our sisters had a great role in preparing vigils and arranging festival carnivals for the youth and all people in Christian towns during the week preceded the Pope's visit. All activities were meant to prepare people spiritually to welcome the Pope with repentance and hope. To say a word of truth, before the visit, we had mixed feelings: on the one hand, we were worried about the safety of the Pope due to some threatens that preceded his coming. On the other hand, we were happy about an event that we had waited for a long time. However, his presence among us made us live joy and peace beyond our expectations. We and all Iraqi people are not neglected but rather embraced by the whole world in the Pope's arms.

And as a Christian community, he reminded us of our role and responsibility in building and developing our country. Additionally, in his message to the consecrated women and men, he called us to return to the roots, to our founders who received the charisma and lived it fully. The Pope prayed that the wisdom of our elders may meet the aspiration of the young ones to guard what they have been entrusted by the founders and to hand it over to those who come after us.

His visit to every place in Iraq had a significant gesture: In Baghdad, in the Republican Palace, he called on the people to focus on what unites them to find the common ground on which they can revive the culture of dialogue in order to open new doors for accepting and respecting the others. Moreover, he called for brotherhood, a message that was very clear in the theme of His visit: "You are all

brothers". Furthermore, His Holiness called for rebuilding the relationships (not only rebuilding homes and cities) by forgiveness and reconciliation, rejecting hostility, corruption lies, and killing in the name of God. To make that possible, His Holiness urged the politicians to serve the interest of people especially the poor, and not to work for their own interest, neither to differentiate between the citizens by making minorities as second-class citizens. It was very powerful to direct the attention to the necessity of strengthening sense of belonging among the Iraqi people. The Pope mentioned all the wounds and failures of the politicians and people. But healing the wounds depends on the willingness and desire of our people to co-exist in peace. Also, there was a call to the world, the NGOs, and all people of good will, to continue showing solidarity to help the Iraqis rebuild their country and provide security and economic stability.

In Baghdad/ Our Lady of Perpetual Deliverance Church (the church in which 53 people were martyred in 2010), His Holiness addressed the consecrated women and men, urging them to continue their witness to the presence of Christ in this hectic world; a message that was emphasized in the homily at St Joseph Church in Baghdad. In Najaf, it was marvellous to see the two spiritual leaders meeting about one concern: justice and dignity of the poor.

In Ur, the land of our father Abraham, His Holiness united all the religious traditions under the tent of our father Abraham. His Holiness prayed with the other religious leaders and representatives of the Iraq religious traditions whose faith is rooted in the One God that Abraham worshiped. The prayer was on behalf of all the children of Abraham urging the religious and political leaders to serve and work for peace. Peace that specially needed by Christians who are threatened by migration.

In Mosul, His Holiness placed His hand on the open wounds of the Iraqis, who suffered under ISIS for years, by visiting and praying in the four-church square – the churches which were destroyed because of hatred. Qaraqosh, a town deserted for three year because of ISIS, received the Pope with olive branches and palm fronds; the Pope valued the people's desire to forgive and start again. It was very meaningful that the Pope chose to travel by car (and not to fly as it was planned) from Qaraqosh to Erbil to take the road that the displaced people from Nineveh Plain took fleeing ISIS in the night of August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2014. In Erbil, the town that welcomed the displaced, the Pope celebrated Mass with 15000 people. It was good opportunity for people to hear words of hope. The last words with which the Pope ended the Mass ...*Salam, Salam, Salam* (peace, peace, peace).

Dear Sisters and Brethren all over the world, thank you for your love, solidarity, support and prayers during the Pope's visit. Please continue to pray that His visit may have an actual effect on our country.

Dominican Sisters of St Catherine of Siena –Iraq  
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