

On historic Iraqi trip, Pope Francis courts criticism, inspires hope

by [Claire Giangravé](#) in the [April 7, 2021](#) issue



Pope Francis listens to Syriac Catholic Patriarch Ignatius Joseph III Yonan (far right) during a meeting with the Qaraqosh community at the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Qaraqosh, Iraq on March 7. (AP Photo / Andrew Medichini)

Pope Francis became the first Roman pontiff to visit Iraq when he embarked on his March 5–8 apostolic visit. There, he visited its diminishing Christian community and spoke with political and religious representatives from different faith groups and denominations, including prominent Muslims.

The book *The Last Girl*, by Nobel Peace Prize-winner Nadia Murad, which describes the suffering of the ethnic Yazidi people following the 2014 occupation of northern Iraq by the so-called Islamic State, “provided the background for the decision,” he said.

Aboard the return flight, Francis addressed criticism of those who have accused him of being “one step away from heresy” in his commitment to promoting human fraternity among the world’s faiths.

Francis said that his decision to speak with Muslim religious leaders and promote interreligious dialogue is “always made in prayer, in dialogue, asking for advice.” He said that his efforts to mend Christian-Muslim relations, far from being “capricious,” are in keeping with the doctrine laid out by the Second Vatican Council.

On March 6, the pope met with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq’s most prominent Shi’ite leader, in Najaf, a holy city to Shi’a Muslims. The historic meeting, which lasted roughly 45 minutes, was the first official meeting between a pope and a prominent Shi’ite representative.

Shi’ites are one of the two main branches of Islam. While worldwide they are far less numerous than Sunnis, in Iraq they are the majority.

Francis’s visit drew criticism for its apparent disregard for health concerns tied to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pope and Vatican citizens have already received the vaccine, Francis has been repeatedly called out for not wearing a mask. He told journalists that he “truly felt in prison” during the lockdown.

“This [trip] for me is like coming back to life, because it means to touch the church, to touch the holy people of God, all the peoples,” he said, defending his decision to travel to Iraq as coming “from inside” and “knowing the risks.”

On the second day of his trip, Francis viewed the ruins of mosques and churches in Mosul, which the Islamic State claimed as its capital during the occupation. He said he “had no words” after seeing the scale of destruction. “Human cruelty, our cruelty, is impossible to believe,” he added.

The pope also criticized those nations selling weapons, though he didn’t single out any particular country.

During the trip, Francis addressed the suffering of immigrants, which has been a main focus of his pontificate. Francis met with the father of a three-year-old boy who died attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. The photo of Alan Kurdi’s body became a symbol of the plight of immigrants and refugees in Europe and beyond.

“Urgent measures are needed so that people can have jobs in their countries so that they don’t need to migrate,” the pope said. The mass exodus of Iraqi Christians, who left behind ghost cities in search of better opportunities, was among the main reasons the pope made the trip.

Before the occupation, the Christian community in Iraq numbered about 1.4 million people, but after years of occupation, war, and financial instability, only 300,000 remain. Francis devoted his last day in the country to encouraging the Christian community to hold fast and be an important voice in the country and in the Middle East.

At the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Qaraqosh, a Christian town in the Nineveh Plains, Francis was greeted by Ignatius Ephrem Joseph III Yonan, the Syriac Catholic Patriarch of Antioch and all the East of the Syrians. Children lined the aisles in excitement for the pope’s visit.

“Our gathering here today shows that terrorism and death never have the last word. The last word belongs to God and to his Son, the conqueror of sin and death,” Francis said. “Even amid the ravages of terrorism and war, we can see, with the eyes of faith, the triumph of life over death.”

Francis told those assembled that forgiveness “is a key word” for the broken Christian community in Iraq. “What is needed is the ability to forgive, but also the courage not to give up,” he said.

During a March 7 mass at the Franso Hariri Stadium in Erbil, which was only filled to roughly one-third capacity, or about 10,000 people, to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the pope called on Christians to become “instruments of God’s mercy and peace, patient, and courageous artisans of a new social order.”

“Today, I can see at first hand that the Church in Iraq is alive, that Christ is alive and at work in this, his holy and faithful people.” —Religion News Service