



# The Holy See

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POPE FRANCIS **GENERAL AUDIENCE** *Library of the Apostolic Palace*

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## Catechesis on the [Apostolic Journey to Iraq](#)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

*Good morning!*

In the past few days, the Lord allowed me to [visit Iraq](#), carrying out a project of [Saint John Paul II](#). Never before has a Pope been in the land of Abraham. Providence willed that this should happen now, as a sign of hope, after years of war and terrorism, and during a severe pandemic.

After this Visit, my soul is filled with gratitude — gratitude to God and to all those who made it possible: to the President of the Republic and the Government of Iraq; to the country's Patriarchs and Bishops, together with all the ministers and the faithful of the respective Churches; to the religious Authorities, beginning with the Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani, with whom I had an unforgettable meeting in his residence in Najaf.

I deeply felt the penitential sense of this pilgrimage: I could not draw near to that tortured people, to that martyr-Church, without taking upon myself, in the name of the Catholic Church, the cross they have been carrying for years; an enormous cross, like the one placed at the entrance of Qaraqosh. I felt it particularly seeing the still-open wounds of the destruction, and even more so when meeting and hearing the testimony of those who survived the violence, persecution, exile.... And at the same time, I saw around me the joy of welcoming Christ's messenger; I saw the hope of being open to a horizon of peace and fraternity, summed up in Jesus' words that were the motto of the Visit: "You are all brothers" (Mt 23:8). I found this hope in the discourse of the President of the Republic. I discovered it again in the many greetings and testimonies, in the songs and gestures of the people. I read it on the luminous faces of the young people and in the vivacious eyes of the elderly. People stood waiting for the Pope for 5 hours, even women with children in their arms. They waited and in their eyes there was hope.

The Iraqi people have the right to live in peace; they have the right to rediscover the dignity that belongs to them. Their religious and cultural roots go back thousands of years: Mesopotamia is the cradle of civilization. Historically, Baghdad is a city of primary importance, which for centuries housed the richest library in the world. And what destroyed it? War. War is always that monster that transforms itself with the change of epochs and continues to devour humanity. But the response to war is not another war; the response to weapons is not other weapons. And I asked myself: who was selling the weapons to the terrorists? Who sells weapons today to the terrorists, who are carrying out massacres in other areas, let us think of Africa, for example? It is a question that I would like someone to answer. The response is not war, but the response is fraternity. This is the challenge not only for Iraq: it is the challenge for many regions in conflict and, ultimately, it is the challenge for the entire world: fraternity. Will we be capable of creating fraternity among us, of building a culture of brothers and sisters? Or will we continue with the logic Cain began, war? Brotherhood, fraternity.

For this reason, we met and [we prayed, Christians and Muslims, along with representatives of other religions, in Ur](#), where Abraham received God's call some four thousand years ago. Abraham is our father in faith because he listened to the voice of God who promised him descendants; he left everything and departed. God is faithful to His promises and still today guides our steps toward peace; He guides the steps of those who journey on Earth with their gaze turned toward Heaven. And in Ur, standing together under those luminous heavens — the same heavens in which our father Abraham saw us, his descendants — that phrase seemed to resound once again in our hearts: You are all brothers and sisters.

A message of fraternity came from the [ecclesial encounter in the Syro-Catholic Cathedral of Baghdad](#), where in 2010 forty-eight people were killed, including two priests, during the celebration of Mass. The Church in Iraq is a martyr Church. And in that temple — which bears, inscribed in the stone, the memory of those martyrs — the joy of the encounter resounded: my amazement at being in their midst mingled with their joy at having the Pope among them.

We launched a message of fraternity [from Mosul](#) and [from Qaraqosh](#), along the Tigris River, near the ruins of ancient Nineveh. The ISIS occupation caused thousands and thousands of inhabitants to flee, including many Christians of different confessions and other persecuted minorities, especially the Yazidi. The ancient identity of these cities has been ruined. Now they are trying hard to rebuild; Muslims are inviting Christians to return, and together they are restoring churches and mosques. Fraternity is there. And, please, let us continue to pray for them, our sorely tried brothers and sisters, so they might have the strength to start over. And thinking of the many Iraqis who have emigrated, I would like to say to them: you have left everything, like Abraham; like him, safeguard faith and hope, and be weavers of friendship and of fraternity wherever you are. And, if you can, return.

A message of fraternity came from the two Eucharistic Celebrations: [the one in Baghdad](#), in the

Chaldean Rite, and [the one in Erbil](#), the city in which I was welcomed by the President of the region and its Prime Minister, by the Authorities — whom I thank so much for having come to welcome me — and I was also welcomed by the people. Abraham's hope, and that of his descendants, were realized in the mystery we celebrated, in Jesus, the Son that God the Father did not spare, but gave for everyone's salvation: through His death and resurrection, He opened the way to the promised land, to that new life where tears are dried, wounds healed, brothers and sisters reconciled.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us praise God for this historic Visit and let us continue to pray for that Land and for the Middle East. In Iraq, despite the roar of destruction and weapons, the palm trees, a symbol of the country and of its hope, have continued to grow and bear fruit. So it is for fraternity: like the fruit of the palm trees, it does not make noise, but is fruitful and grows. May God, who is peace, grant a future of fraternity to Iraq, to the Middle East and to the entire world!

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### Special Greetings

I cordially greet the English-speaking faithful. May our Lenten journey bring us to the joy of Easter with hearts purified and renewed by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Upon you and your families I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. God bless you!

Lastly, my thoughts, as always, go to *the elderly*, to *young people*, to *the sick* and to *newlyweds*. I invoke divine grace upon each one, so that whether in youth, in suffering, or in mutual conjugal love, you may receive the joy of Easter, revitalized by the journey of conversion and penance that we are now experiencing. My blessing to all.

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### Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, by God's providence, in these days I was able to make the first visit of a Pope to the land of Abraham. I thank those who made possible my [Apostolic Journey to Iraq](#): the President and Government of the Republic, the Patriarchs, Bishops and faithful of the various Churches, and the country's religious authorities. I am particularly grateful to Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani for our cordial meeting in Najaf. My visit was intended as a penitential pilgrimage, to show my closeness and solidarity with a Church of martyrs in a land that has suffered so greatly from violence, terrorism and war, and witnessed a significant reduction in its Christian presence. At [my meeting with religious leaders in Ur](#), we prayed for the growth of fraternity and cooperation between believers. There, where Abraham received God's call, two young Iraqis – one Christian, one Muslim – gave a moving testimony to a friendship capable of respecting differences while remaining grounded in the love of God and neighbour. [In the Syrian Catholic Cathedral in Baghdad](#), where forty-eight people were murdered in 2010, [in the encounters in Mosul](#) and

Qaraqosh amid ruined churches and mosques, and in the Eucharistic celebrations in both Baghdad and Erbil, we reflected on our call as Christians to be witnesses to the forgiveness, reconciliation and peace taught by Christ. Let us pray that these days will contribute to the continuing journey towards fraternity and peace in Iraq, the Middle East, and the whole world.

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