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## **Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Francis in Iraq (5 to 8 March 2021) - Visit to the Community of Qaraqosh in the Church of the Immaculate Conception**

### **Visit to the Community of Qaraqosh in the Church of the Immaculate Conception**

Upon arrival in Qaraqosh, the Holy Father Francis was received by Archbishop Yohanna Petros Moshe of Mosul of the Syrians, Archbishop Jean Benjamin Sleiman, O.C.D., of Baghdad of the Latins, and various civil and religious leaders. The Pope then transferred by car to the Church of the Immaculate Conception where, at 12.30 local time (10.30 in Rome), he met with the Community of Qaraqosh.

At the entrance to the Church, Pope Francis was received by His Beatitude Ignace Youssif III Younan, Patriarch of Antioch of the Syrians, the Archbishop, and the parish priest, who gave him the crucifix and holy water. Before they proceeded together along the central nave accompanied by a hymn, two children offered the Pope a floral tribute. Then, introduced by a greeting from the Syro-Catholic Patriarch and after testimonies from a laywoman and a priest, the Holy Father pronounced his address and led the Angelus prayer.

At the end of the gathering, after signing the Book of Honour, the Pope greeted various people, then left via the central nave of the Church and, after taking leave of the Patriarch and the Archbishop, transferred by car to the Patriarchal Seminary of Saint Peter of Erbil, where he lunched privately.

The following is the Pope's address during the meeting with the Community of Qaraqosh:

### **Address of the Holy Father**

Dear Brothers and Sisters, good morning!

I am grateful to the Lord for the opportunity to be among you this morning. I have looked forward to this time together. I thank His Beatitude Patriarch Ignace Youssif Younan for his words of welcome, and Mrs Doha Sabah

Abdallah and Father Ammar Yako for their testimonies. As I look out at you, I can see the cultural and religious diversity of the people of Qaraqosh, and this shows something of the beauty that this entire region holds out to the future. Your presence here is a reminder that beauty is not monochrome, but shines forth in variety and difference.

At the same time, with great sadness, we look around and see other signs, signs of the destructive power of violence, hatred and war. How much has been torn down! How much needs to be rebuilt! 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. Even amid the ravages of terrorism and war, we can see, with the eyes of faith, the triumph of life over death. You have before you the example of your fathers and mothers in faith, who worshipped and praised God in this place. They persevered with unwavering hope along their earthly journey, trusting in God who never disappoints and who constantly sustains us by his grace. The great spiritual legacy they left behind continues to live in you. Embrace this legacy! It is your strength! Now is the time to rebuild and to start afresh, relying on the grace of God, who guides the destinies of all individuals and peoples. You are not alone! The entire Church is close to you, with prayers and concrete charity. And in this region, so many people opened their doors to you in time of need.

Dear friends, this is the time to restore not just buildings but also the bonds of community that unite communities and families, the young and the old together. The prophet Joel says, "Your sons and your daughters shall prophecy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions" (cf. *Joel* 3:1). When the old and the young come together, what happens? The old dream dreams, they dream of a future for the young. And the young can take those dreams and prophecy, make them reality. When old and young come together, we preserve and pass on the gifts that God gives. We look upon our children, knowing that they will inherit not only a land, a culture and a tradition, but also the living fruits of faith that are God's blessings upon this land. So I encourage you: do not forget who you are and where you come from! Do not forget the bonds that hold you together! Do not forget to preserve your roots!

Surely, there will be moments when faith can waver, when it seems that God does not see or act. This was true for you in the darkest days of the war, and it is true too in these days of global health crisis and great insecurity. At times like these, remember that Jesus is by your side. Do not stop dreaming! Do not give up! Do not lose hope! From heaven the saints are watching over us. Let us pray to them and never tire of begging their intercession. There are also the saints next-door, "who, living in our midst, reflect God's presence" (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 7). This land has many of them, because it is a land of many holy men and women. Let them accompany you to a better future, a future of hope.

One thing that Doha said moved me deeply. She said that forgiveness is needed on the part of those who survived the terrorist attacks. *Forgiveness*; that is a key word. Forgiveness is necessary to remain in love, to remain Christian. The road to a full recovery may still be long, but I ask you, please, not to grow discouraged. What is needed is the ability to forgive, but also the courage not to give up. I know that this is very difficult. But we believe that God can bring peace to this land. We trust in him and, together with all people of good will, we say "no" to terrorism and the manipulation of religion.

Father Ammar, in recalling all that happened during the terrorist attacks and the war, you thanked the Lord who has always filled you with joy, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. Gratitude is born and grows when we remember God's gifts and promises. Memory of the past shapes the present and leads us forward to the future.

At all times, let us offer thanks to God for his gracious gifts and ask him to grant his peace, forgiveness and fraternity to this land and its people. Let us pray tirelessly for the conversion of hearts and for the triumph of a culture of life, reconciliation and fraternal love between all men and women, with respect for differences and diverse religious traditions, in the effort to build a future of unity and cooperation between all people of good will. A fraternal love that recognizes "the fundamental values of our common humanity, values in the name of which we can and must cooperate, build and dialogue, pardon and grow" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 283).

As I arrived on the helicopter, I saw the statue of Mary on this Church of Immaculate Conception. To her I entrusted the rebirth of this city. Our Lady does not only protect us from on high, but comes down to us with a Mother's love. Her image here has met with mistreatment and disrespect, yet the face of the Mother of God continues to look upon us with love. For that is what mothers do: they console, they comfort and they give life. I would like to say a heartfelt thank-you to all the mothers and women of this country, women of courage who continue to give life, in spite of wrongs and hurts. May women be respect and protected! May they be shown respect and provided with opportunities!

And now, let us pray together to our Mother, invoking her intercession for your needs and future plans. I place all of you under her intercession. And I ask you, please, not to forget to pray for me.

*Angelus Domini...*

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