

# 5-8 March: Pope Francis in Iraq

From March 5 to 8 Pope Francis made an apostolic visit to the war-torn country of Iraq.

03/06/2021

## ***HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER***

*At Mass in Franso Hariri Stadium in Erbil*

Sunday, 7 March 2021

Saint Paul has told us that “Christ is the power and wisdom of God” (*1 Cor 1:22-25*). Jesus revealed that power

and wisdom above all by offering forgiveness and showing mercy. He chose to do so not by displays of strength or by speaking to us from on high, in lengthy and learned discourses. He did so by giving his life on the cross. He revealed his wisdom and power by showing us, to the very end, the faithfulness of the Father's love; the faithfulness of the God of the covenant, who brought his people forth from slavery and led them on a journey of freedom (cf. *Ex 20:1-2*).

How easy it is to fall into the trap of thinking that we have to show others that we are powerful or wise, into the trap of fashioning false images of God that can give us security (cf. *Ex 20:4-5*). Yet the truth is that all of us need the power and wisdom of God revealed by Jesus on the cross. On Calvary, he offered to the Father the wounds by which alone we are healed (cf. *1 Pet 2:24*). Here in Iraq,

how many of your brothers and sisters, friends and fellow citizens bear the wounds of war and violence, wounds both visible and invisible! The temptation is to react to these and other painful experiences with human power, human wisdom. Instead, Jesus shows us the way of God, the path that he took, the path on which he calls us to follow him.

In the Gospel reading we have just heard (*Jn* 2:13-25), we see how Jesus drove out from the Temple in Jerusalem the moneychangers and all the buyers and sellers. Why did Jesus do something this forceful and provocative? He did it because the Father sent him to cleanse the temple: not only the Temple of stone, but above all the temple of our heart. Jesus could not tolerate his Father's house becoming a marketplace (cf. *Jn* 2:16); neither does he want our hearts to be places of turmoil,

disorder and confusion. Our heart must be cleansed, put in order and purified. Of what? Of the falsehoods that stain it, from hypocritical duplicity. All of us have these. They are diseases that harm the heart, soil our lives and make them insincere. We need to be cleansed of the deceptive securities that would barter our faith in God with passing things, with temporary advantages. We need the baneful temptations of power and money to be swept from our hearts and from the Church. To cleanse our hearts, we need to dirty our hands, to feel accountable and not to simply look on as our brothers and sisters are suffering. How do we purify our hearts? By our own efforts, we cannot; we need Jesus. He has the power to conquer our evils, to heal our diseases, to rebuild the temple of our heart.

To show this, and as a sign of his authority, Jesus goes on to say:

“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (v. 19). Jesus Christ, he alone, can cleanse us of the works of evil. Jesus, who died and rose! Jesus, the Lord! Dear brothers and sisters, God does not let us die in our sins. Even when we turn our backs on him, he never leaves us to our own devices. He seeks us out, runs after us, to call us to repentance and to cleanse us of our sins. “As I live, says the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live” (*Ezek 33:11*). The Lord wants us to be saved and to become living temples of his love, in fraternity, in service, in mercy.

Jesus not only cleanses us of our sins, but gives us a share in his own power and wisdom. He liberates us from the narrow and divisive notions of family, faith and community that divide, oppose and exclude, so that we can build a Church and a society

open to everyone and concerned for our brothers and sisters in greatest need. At the same time, he strengthens us to resist the temptation to seek revenge, which only plunges us into a spiral of endless retaliation. In the power of the Holy Spirit, he sends us forth, not as proselytizers, but as missionary disciples, men and women called to testify to the life-changing power of the Gospel. The risen Lord makes us instruments of God's mercy and peace, patient and courageous artisans of a new social order. In this way, by the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit, the prophetic words of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians are fulfilled: "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's wisdom is stronger than human strength" (*1 Cor 1:25*). Christian communities made up of simple and lowly people become a sign of the coming of his kingdom, a kingdom of love, justice and peace.

“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (*Jn 2:19*). Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body, and about the Church as well. The Lord promises us that, by the power of the resurrection, he can raise us, and our communities, from the ruins left by injustice, division and hatred. That is the promise we celebrate in this Eucharist. With the eyes of faith, we recognize the presence of the crucified and risen Lord in our midst. And we learn to embrace his liberating wisdom, to rest in his wounds, and to find healing and strength to serve the coming of his kingdom in our world. By his wounds, we have been healed (cf. *1 Pet 2:24*). In those wounds, dear brothers and sisters, we find the balm of his merciful love. For he, like the Good Samaritan of humanity, wants to anoint every hurt, to heal every painful memory and to inspire a future of peace and fraternity in this land.

The Church in Iraq, by God's grace, is already doing much to proclaim this wonderful wisdom of the cross by spreading Christ's mercy and forgiveness, particularly towards those in greatest need. Even amid great poverty and difficulty, many of you have generously offered concrete help and solidarity to the poor and suffering. That is one of the reasons that led me to come as a pilgrim in your midst, to thank you and to confirm you in your faith and witness. 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.

Dear brothers and sisters, I commend you, your families and your communities, to the maternal protection of the Virgin Mary, who was united to her Son in his passion and death, and who shared in the joy of his resurrection. May she

intercede for us and lead us to *Christ, the power and wisdom of God.*

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## ***HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER***

*At Mass in Saint Joseph's Chaldean Cathedral in Baghdad*

Saturday, 6 March 2021

Today the word of God speaks to us of *wisdom, witness and promises.*

*Wisdom* in these lands has been cultivated since ancient times. Indeed the search for wisdom has always attracted men and women. Often, however, those with more means can acquire more knowledge and have greater opportunities, while those who have less are sidelined. Such inequality – which has increased in our time – is unacceptable. The Book of Wisdom

surprises us by reversing this perspective. It tells us that “the lowliest may be pardoned in mercy, but the mighty will be mightily tested” (*Wis 6:6*). In the eyes of the world, those with less are discarded, while those with more are privileged. Not so for God: the more powerful are subjected to rigorous scrutiny, while the least are God’s privileged ones.

Jesus, who is Wisdom in person, completes this reversal in the Gospel, and he does so with his very first sermon, with the Beatitudes. The reversal is total: the poor, those who mourn, the persecuted are all called blessed. How is this possible? For the world, it is the rich, the powerful and the famous who are blessed! It is those with wealth and means who count! But not for God: It is no longer the rich that are great, but the poor in spirit; not those who can impose their will on others, but those who

are gentle with all. Not those acclaimed by the crowds, but those who show mercy to their brother and sisters. At this point, we may wonder: if I live as Jesus asks, what do I gain? Don't I risk letting others lord it over me? Is Jesus' invitation worthwhile, or a lost cause? That invitation is not worthless, but wise.

Jesus' invitation is wise because love, which is the heart of the Beatitudes, even if it seems weak in the world's eyes, in fact always triumphs. On the cross, it proved stronger than sin, in the tomb, it vanquished death. That same love made the martyrs victorious in their trials – and how many martyrs have there been in the last century, more even than in the past! Love is our strength, the source of strength for those of our brothers and sisters who here too have suffered prejudice and indignities, mistreatment and persecutions for the name of Jesus. Yet while the

power, the glory and the vanity of the world pass away, love remains. As the Apostle Paul told us: “Love never ends” (*1 Cor 13:8*). To live a life shaped by the Beatitudes, then, is to make passing things eternal, to bring heaven to earth.

But how do we practice the Beatitudes? They do not ask us to do extraordinary things, feats beyond our abilities. They ask for daily *witness*. The blessed are those who live meekly, who show mercy wherever they happen to be, who are pure of heart wherever they live. To be blessed, we do not need to become occasional heroes, but *to become witnesses* day after day. Witness is the way to embody the wisdom of Jesus. That is how the world is changed: not by power and might, but by the Beatitudes. For that is what Jesus did: he lived to the end what he said from the beginning. Everything depends on bearing

witness to the love of Jesus, that same charity which Saint Paul magnificently describes in today's second reading. Let us see how he presents it.

First, Paul says that "love is patient" (v. 4). We were not expecting this adjective. Love seems synonymous with goodness, generosity and good works, yet Paul says that charity is above all *patient*. The Bible speaks first and foremost of God's patience. Throughout history, men and women proved constantly unfaithful to the covenant with God, falling into the same old sins. Yet instead of growing weary and walking away, the Lord always remained faithful, forgave and began anew. This patience to begin anew each time is the first quality of love, because love is not irritable, but always starts over again. Love does not grow weary and despondent, but always presses ahead. It does not get

discouraged, but stays creative. Faced with evil, it does not give up or surrender. Those who love do not close in on themselves when things go wrong, but respond to evil with good, mindful of the triumphant wisdom of the cross. God's witnesses are like that: not passive or fatalistic, at the mercy of happenings, feelings or immediate events. Instead, they are constantly hopeful, because grounded in the love that "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (v. 7).

We can ask ourselves: how do we react to situations that are not right? In the face of adversity, there are always two temptations. The first is flight: we can run away, turn our backs, trying to keep aloof from it all. The second is to react with anger, with a show of force. Such was the case of the disciples in Gethsemane: in their bewilderment, many fled and Peter took up the sword. Yet

neither flight nor the sword achieved anything. Jesus, on the other hand, changed history. How? With the humble power of love, with his patient witness. This is what we are called to do; and this is how God fulfils his promises.

*Promises.* The wisdom of Jesus, embodied in the Beatitudes, calls for witness and offers the reward contained in the divine promises. For each Beatitude is immediately followed by a promise: those who practise them will possess the kingdom of heaven, they will be comforted, they will be satisfied, they will see God... (cf. *Mt 5: 3-12*). God's promises guarantee unrivalled joy and never disappoint. But how are they fulfilled? *Through our weaknesses.* God makes blessed those who travel the path of their inner poverty to the very end.

This is the way; there is no other. Let us look to the patriarch Abraham. God promised him a great offspring, but he and Sarah are now elderly and childless. Yet it is precisely in their patient and faithful old age that God works wonders and gives them a son. Let us also look to Moses: God promises that he will free the people from slavery, and to do so he asks Moses to speak to Pharaoh. Even though Moses says he is not good with words, it is through his words that God will fulfil his promise. Let us look to Our Lady, who under the Law could not have a child, yet was called to become a mother. And let us look to Peter: he denies the Lord, yet he is the very one that Jesus calls to strengthen his brethren. Dear brothers and sisters, at times we may feel helpless and useless. We should never give in to this, because God wants to work wonders precisely through our weaknesses.

God loves to do that, and tonight, eight times, he has spoken to us the word *tūb’ā* [blessed], in order to make us realize that, with him, we truly are “blessed”. Of course, we experience trials, and we frequently fall, but let us not forget that, with Jesus, we are blessed. Whatever the world takes from us is nothing compared to the tender and patient love with which the Lord fulfils his promises. Dear sister, dear brother, perhaps when you look at your hands they seem empty, perhaps you feel disheartened and unsatisfied by life. If so, do not be afraid: the Beatitudes are for you. For you who are afflicted, who hunger and thirst for justice, who are persecuted. The Lord promises you that your name is written on his heart, written in heaven!

Today I thank God with you and for you, because here, where *wisdom* arose in ancient times, so many

witnesses have arisen in our own time, often overlooked by the news, yet precious in God's eyes. Witnesses who, by living the Beatitudes, are helping God to fulfil his *promises* of peace.

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## **INTERRELIGIOUS MEETING**

*Plain of Ur*

Saturday, 6 March 2021

*Dear brothers and sisters,*

This blessed place brings us back to our origins, to the sources of God's work, to the birth of our religions. Here, where Abraham our father lived, we seem to have returned home. It was here that Abraham heard God's call; it was from here that he set out on a journey that would change history. We are the

fruits of that call and that journey. God asked Abraham to raise his eyes to heaven and to count its stars (cf. *Gen 15:5*). In those stars, he saw the promise of his descendants; he saw us. Today we, Jews, Christians and Muslims, together with our brothers and sisters of other religions, honour our father Abraham by doing as he did: *we look up to heaven and we journey on earth.*

*We look up to heaven.* Thousands of years later, as we look up to the same sky, those same stars appear. They illumine the darkest nights because they shine *together*. Heaven thus imparts a message of unity: the Almighty above invites us never to separate ourselves from our neighbours. The *otherness* of God points us towards *others*, towards our brothers and sisters. Yet if we want to preserve fraternity, we must not lose sight of heaven. May we – the descendants of Abraham and the

representatives of different religions – sense that, above all, we have this role: to help our brothers and sisters to raise their eyes and prayers to heaven. We all need this because we are not self-sufficient. Man is not omnipotent; we cannot make it on our own. If we exclude God, we end up worshiping the things of this earth. Worldly goods, which lead so many people to be unconcerned with God and others, are not the reason why we journey on earth. We raise our eyes to heaven in order to raise ourselves from the depths of our vanity; we serve God in order to be set free from enslavement to our egos, because God urges us to love. This is true religiosity: to worship God and to love our neighbour. In today's world, which often forgets or presents distorted images of the Most High, believers are called to bear witness to his goodness, to show his paternity through our fraternity.

From this place, where faith was born, from the land of our father Abraham, let us affirm that *God is merciful* and that the greatest blasphemy is to profane his name by hating our brothers and sisters. Hostility, extremism and violence are not born of a religious heart: they are betrayals of religion. We believers cannot be silent when terrorism abuses religion; indeed, we are called unambiguously to dispel all misunderstandings. Let us not allow the light of heaven to be overshadowed by the clouds of hatred! Dark clouds of terrorism, war and violence have gathered over this country. All its ethnic and religious communities have suffered. In particular, I would like to mention the Yazidi community, which has mourned the deaths of many men and witnessed thousands of women, girls and children kidnapped, sold as slaves, subjected to physical violence and forced conversions. Today, let us

pray for those who have endured these sufferings, for those who are still dispersed and abducted, that they may soon return home. And let us pray that freedom of conscience and freedom of religion will everywhere be recognized and respected; these are fundamental rights, because they make us free to contemplate the heaven for which we were created.

When terrorism invaded the north of this beloved country, it wantonly destroyed part of its magnificent religious heritage, including the churches, monasteries and places of worship of various communities. Yet, even at that dark time, some stars kept shining. I think of the young Muslim volunteers of Mosul, who helped to repair churches and monasteries, building fraternal friendships on the rubble of hatred, and those Christians and Muslims who today are restoring mosques

and churches together. Professor Ali Thajeel spoke too of the return of pilgrims to this city. It is important to make pilgrimages to holy places, for it is the most beautiful sign on earth of our yearning for heaven. To love and protect holy places, therefore, is an existential necessity, in memory of our father Abraham, who in various places raised to heaven altars of the Lord (cf. *Gen* 12:7.8; 13:18; 22:9). May the great Patriarch help us to make our respective sacred places oases of peace and encounter for all! By his fidelity to God, Abraham became a blessing for all peoples (cf. *Gen* 12:3); may our presence here today, in his footsteps, be a sign of blessing and hope for Iraq, for the Middle East and for the whole world. Heaven has not grown weary of the earth: God loves every people, every one of his daughters and sons! Let us never tire of *looking up to heaven*, of looking up to those

same stars that, in his day, our father Abraham contemplated.

*We journey on earth.* For Abraham, looking up to heaven, rather than being a distraction, was an incentive to journey on earth, to set out on a path that, through his descendants, would lead to every time and place. It all started from here, with the Lord who brought him forth from Ur (cf. *Gen 15:7*). His was a *journey outwards*, one that involved sacrifices. Abraham had to leave his land, home and family. Yet by giving up his own family, he became the father of a family of peoples. Something similar also happens to us: on our own journey, we are called to leave behind those ties and attachments that, by keeping us enclosed in our own groups, prevent us from welcoming God's boundless love and from seeing others as our brothers and sisters. We need to move beyond ourselves, because *we*

*need one another.* The pandemic has made us realize that “no one is saved alone” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 54). Still, the temptation to withdraw from others is never-ending, yet at the same time we know that “the notion of ‘every man for himself’ will rapidly degenerate into a free-for-all that would prove worse than any pandemic” (*ibid.*, 36). Amid the tempests we are currently experiencing, such isolation will not save us. Nor will an arms race or the erection of walls that will only make us all the more distant and aggressive. Nor the idolatry of money, for it closes us in on ourselves and creates chasms of inequality that engulf humanity. Nor can we be saved by consumerism, which numbs the mind and deadens the heart.

The way that heaven points out for our journey is another: *the way of peace*. It demands, especially amid

the tempest, that we row together on the same side. It is shameful that, while all of us have suffered from the crisis of the pandemic, especially here, where conflicts have caused so much suffering, anyone should be concerned simply for his own affairs. There will be no peace without sharing and acceptance, without a justice that ensures equity and advancement for all, beginning with those most vulnerable. There will be no peace unless peoples extend a hand to other peoples. There will be no peace as long as we see others as *them* and not *us*. There will be no peace as long as our alliances are *against* others, for alliances of some against others only increase divisions. Peace does not demand winners or losers, but rather brothers and sisters who, for all the misunderstandings and hurts of the past, are journeying from conflict to unity. Let us ask for this in praying for the whole Middle East. Here I

think especially of neighbouring war-torn Syria.

The Patriarch Abraham, who today brings us together in unity, was a prophet of the Most High. An ancient prophecy says that the peoples “shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks” (*Is 2:4*). This prophecy has not been fulfilled; on the contrary, swords and spears have turned into missiles and bombs. From where, then, can the journey of peace begin? From the decision not to have enemies. Anyone with the courage to look at the stars, anyone who believes in God, has no enemies to fight. He or she has only one enemy to face, an enemy that stands at the door of the heart and knocks to enter. That enemy is *hated*. While some try to have enemies more than to be friends, while many seek their own profit at the expense of others, those who look at the stars of the

promise, those who follow the ways of God, cannot be *against* someone, but *for* everyone. They cannot justify any form of imposition, oppression and abuse of power; they cannot adopt an attitude of belligerence.

Dear friends, is all this possible? Father Abraham, who was able to hope against all hope (cf. *Rom 4:18*), encourages us. Throughout history, we have frequently pursued goals that are overly worldly and journeyed on our own, but with the help of God, we can change for the better. It is up to us, today's humanity, especially those of us, believers of all religions, to turn instruments of hatred into instruments of peace. It is up to us to appeal firmly to the leaders of nations to make the increasing proliferation of arms give way to the distribution of food for all. It is up to us to silence mutual accusations in order to make heard the cry of the

oppressed and discarded in our world: all too many people lack food, medicine, education, rights and dignity! It is up to us to shed light on the shady maneuvers that revolve around money and to demand that money not end up always and only reinforcing the unbridled luxury of a few. It is up to us preserve our common home from our predatory aims. It is up to us to remind the world that human life has value for what it is and not for what it has. That the lives of the unborn, the elderly, migrants and men and women, whatever the colour of their skin or their nationality, are always sacred and count as much as the lives of everyone else! It is up to us to have the courage to *lift up our eyes and look at the stars*, the stars that our father Abraham saw, the stars of the promise.

The journey of Abraham was a blessing of peace. Yet it was not easy:

he had to face struggles and unforeseen events. We too have a rough journey ahead, but like the great Patriarch, we need to take *concrete steps*, to set out and seek the face of others, to share memories, gazes and silences, stories and experiences. I was struck by the testimony of Dawood and Hasan, a Christian and a Muslim who, undaunted by the differences between them, studied and worked together. Together they built the future and realized that they are brothers. In order to move forward, we too need to achieve something good and concrete together. This is the way, especially for young people, who must not see their dreams cut short by the conflicts of the past! It is urgent to teach them fraternity, to teach them to look at the stars. This is a real emergency; it will be the most effective vaccine for a future of peace. For you, dear young people, are our present and our future!

Only with others can the wounds of the past be healed. Rafah told us of the heroic example of Najy, from the Sabean Mandean community, who lost his life in an attempt to save the family of his Muslim neighbour. How many people here, amid the silence and indifference of the world, have embarked upon journeys of fraternity! Rafah also told us of the unspeakable sufferings of the war that forced many to abandon home and country in search of a future for their children. Thank you, Rafah, for having shared with us your firm determination to stay here, in the land of your fathers. May those who were unable to do so, and had to flee, find a kindly welcome, befitting those who are vulnerable and suffering.

It was precisely through hospitality, a distinctive feature of these lands, that Abraham was visited by God and given the gift of a son, when it

seemed that all hope was past (cf. *Gen 18:1-10*). Brothers and sisters of different religions, here we find ourselves at home, and from here, together, we wish to commit ourselves to fulfilling God's dream that the human family may become hospitable and welcoming to all his children; that looking up to the same heaven, it will journey in peace on the same earth.

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### ***PRAYER OF THE CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM***

Almighty God, our Creator, you love our human family and every work of your hands:

As children of Abraham, Jews, Christians and Muslims, together with other believers and all persons of good will, we thank you for having given us Abraham, a distinguished

son of this noble and beloved country, to be our common father in faith.

We thank you for his example as a man of faith, who obeyed you completely, left behind his family, his tribe and his native land, and set out for a land that he knew not.

We thank you too, for the example of courage, resilience, strength of spirit, generosity and hospitality set for us by our common father in faith.

We thank you in a special way for his heroic faith, shown by his readiness even to sacrifice his son in obedience to your command. We know that this was an extreme test, yet one from which he emerged victorious, since he trusted unreservedly in you, who are merciful and always offer the possibility of beginning anew.

We thank you because, in blessing our father Abraham, you made him a blessing for all peoples.

We ask you, the God of our father Abraham and our God, to grant us a strong faith, a faith that abounds in good works, a faith that opens our hearts to you and to all our brothers and sisters; and a boundless hope capable of discerning in every situation your fidelity to your promises.

Make each of us a witness of your loving care for all, particularly refugees and the displaced, widows and orphans, the poor and the infirm.

Open our hearts to mutual forgiveness and in this way make us instruments of reconciliation, builders of a more just and fraternal society.

Welcome into your abode of peace and light all those who have died, particularly the victims of violence and war.

Assist the authorities in the effort to seek and find the victims of kidnapping and in a special way to protect women and children.

Help us to care for the earth, our common home, which in your goodness and generosity you have given to all of us.

Guide our hands in the work of rebuilding this country, and grant us the strength needed to help those forced to leave behind their homes and lands, enabling them to return in security and dignity, and to embark upon a new, serene and prosperous life. Amen.

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