



GRAND MAGISTERIUM – VATICAN
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At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

Cardinal Fernando Filoni will accompany the Pope to Iraq from 5 to 8 March



In recent days, numerous journalists (La Croix, National Catholic Register, Argentine Telam Agency, Wall Street Journal, Vatican News, La Stampa, Le Figaro, EWTN, ACI Press Agency, Rome Reports Agency, France Inter, etc.) have sought interviews with Cardinal Filoni, to gain a better understanding of the situation of the Church in Iraq. (Photo courtesy: EWTN)

Former Nuncio to Iraq (2001-2006), he travelled to the country in 2014 on behalf of the Holy Father in a sign of support for the local population tried by war. Here we publish a translation of the Grand Master's interview with Paula Rivas, from the agency of the Pontifical Mission Societies in Spain, summarizing Cardinal Filoni's conversations with media on the eve of this historic journey.

You were a Nuncio in Iraq for 5 years and decided to stay there during the Second Gulf War. What can you tell us about that experience?

On March 19, 2001, on the liturgical feast of Saint Joseph, Pope John Paul II consecrated me bishop in Saint Peter's and entrusted me to represent him in Iraq; in the homily that he gave on that day he asked me to support the Christian communities in those lands, adding: "I am sure that you will be a messenger of peace and hope for them".

I have always carried these words in my heart. When, two years later to the day on March 19, 2003, the so-called second Gulf War broke out, I thought that peace had been mortally wounded, but hope was alive; thus, by staying in Iraq with its people and sharing in their anxieties, I could still be a messenger of hope.

There was sorrow at so many deaths and so much destruction and it was impossible to hide behind the shadow of the so-called "preventive war", much less the so-called "collateralism" with regard to non-military victims. When you are beneath the bombs and you hear the missiles explode, what do those expressions mean? The consequences of that war were immense; one of them is the marked exodus of many Christian families and a very precarious coexistence. Let us not forget, together with the destruction, the countless dead and wounded both Iraqis and of those countries that entered the war, including the USA, Great Britain, etc.

But I would like to return to the question of the so-called "preventive" war against which John Paul II raised his voice and his finger in the Angelus on the preceding Sunday. At that time the media in Iraq and other anti-war Muslim countries used to speak of "Western Crusaders". Two aberrant terminologies that were abused in the media that opposed the war. The law does not envisage "preventive" warfare as a measure. We had a clear perception of its illegitimacy and, personally, choosing to stay in Iraq despite the impending war was a response and a form of protest against such claims. Furthermore, the UN had already imposed harsh economic and military preventive measures on the Iraqi population. As for the term "crusaders", it was intended to awaken hatred in the Islamic world for complex and controversial historical past events. Pope Francis' visit represents a step further, both with regard to the "political" justification of the war, and to the "religious" theorization of the past. The dimension chosen in Abu Dhabi today finds fertile territory in Iraq, namely that of dialogue, fraternity and legality because it touches peace - all the more so in a country tormented by wars and insurgencies and in a region plagued by conflicts - and coexistence is a common ground based on dignity, duties and rights that are equal for all human beings: elements that must however be assimilated culturally and put into practice, both in the Catholic-Christian, Islamic and political sphere.

You were again sent to Iraq by Pope Francis in 2014 and 2015 on his behalf as a sign of the Pope's solidarity. What did you find there? How had the lives of Christians changed? What did your presence there mean to them?

The summer of 2014 was dramatic for the Iraqi peoples of the north. The proclamation of the caliphate in Mosul by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi resulted in the expulsion of all Christians from the city of Mosul and the Nineveh Plain; thousands of people were forced to flee with nothing but the clothes on their backs; there was no regard for the elderly, children, women or the sick. It was a true biblical exodus. It was even worse for the Yazidi community of the Sinjar mountains; those who did not flee were killed and the women sold as slaves. On August 10, Pope Francis sent me as his personal representative to Iraq (he was leaving for a pastoral trip to Korea on which I was to have accompanied him): the mission consisted in meeting, speaking, seeing, embracing, praying and showing solidarity for the unspeakable suffering inflicted by the Islamic fanaticism of Isis. I have shocking memories and visions. But also memories of an extraordinarily dignified people, who in the face of something entirely unprecedented were capable of reorganising themselves to meet essential needs and keep their trust in God alive. I was wholly edified by their faith, forged through so many trials down through the centuries to safeguard their spiritual patrimony. As a Nuncio, what struck me most as I visited their villages was that I had never found such love and faith in the West. My return to Iraq in Holy Week and for Easter 2015, was a way of saying to our faithful that we had not forgotten them and I brought them six thousand Easter cakes (colombe – a traditional Italian Easter cake in the form of a dove), a gift from many faithful in Rome.

What prompted you to write your book "The Church in Iraq. History, development and mission, from the beginnings to the present day," Vatican publishing house, 2015?

First of all, it gladdens me that my book is now also available in Spanish, “La Iglesia en Iraq,” published by BAC in the Historia series.

With this book I wanted, at the same time, to give witness to «these communities [which] have survived centuries of punitive taxation; of inducements and prohibitions; of hate, intolerance, and envy; and finally, of persecution»(1), and make known their history, little known, but rich in faith, values, culture, heir of martyrs and confessors of the faith. Only when you live among these communities can you grasp their beauty, and I am very happy to have had the opportunity. We should never forget the Eastern Churches, although small in number, they are great in the spiritual gifts of which they are custodians.

Do you have an ongoing relationship with Christians in Iraq? What can this visit by the Pope bring to the community of faithful there?

Yes, I have many Christian friends; but I have also met many Muslim friends who have shown me respect and consideration. Having shared a dark page of their history with them continues to generate memories and esteem that will never be erased. At the same time, I remember both the telephone calls during the war by John Paul II to express his closeness, and the meetings with Islamic leaders and simple people. Some of these, at the end of my mission in Iraq (2006), wanted to give me a ring and an episcopal cross made by them as a souvenir. They also came to see me in subsequent years.

I wanted to write a history of the Church in Iraq from its beginnings to today wanted, for my part, to express all my affection and admiration. It is no coincidence that the Chaldean Church wanted to translate my book into Arabic, which is a concrete way to offer information that would otherwise not be known to a large non-Christian audience. The volume has been appreciated by the civil authorities and I believe that it contributes to nourishing the brotherhood of all the civil and religious components that have always lived together in the country.

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(1) The Church in Iraq by Cardinal Fernando Filoni, (CUA - The Catholic University of America Press, 2017), p. 9-10.