



GRAND MAGISTERIUM – VATICAN
EQUESTRIAN ORDER OF
THE HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

Three days for a resurrection

A brief account of our Grand Master's trip to Iraq



On the occasion of the Pope's trip to Iraq, Grand Master Cardinal Filoni - part of the pontifical delegation - received affectionate messages from many local leaders of the Order around the world. After having read such emotional messages, which were full of spiritual depth, the Grand Master decided to write a few lines to share his impressions with the Dames and Knights of the Order, knowing that they contributed to the success of the event thanks to their prayers.

Iraq is a country that has been in great need of a visit from the Pope.

Even if it was “locked down” due to security and Covid, its people were able to participate by following every moment of the Pontiff’s words and events on TV. I am very grateful to have been invited by the Pope and thus able to participate in this pastoral visit so desired by the Iraqi’s, especially by the Christians and minorities.

After many years of bad news, of violence and human and social traumas, it seemed to me that Iraq – after a lengthy lent – celebrated the day of the “Resurrection”, its Easter. Thus I thought of this historical event, also full of emotion for me personally, as I saw places and people once more with whom I had shared both sufferings and hopes.

Ur remains the strongest symbolic place for dialogue between monotheistic religions that refer to the Patriarch Abraham. Mossul and Qaraqosh have been symbolic places for the people of Mossul, who witnessed this ancient city destroyed and ransacked; and for the Christians of Qaraqosh, who were also driven out of nearby villages in the unfortunate occupation by Isis (2014-2017). The Syriac

Catholic Cathedral of Baghdad has been the symbol-place of many Christians' martyrdom where numerous priests, children, women and men have been slaughtered by terrorist fanaticism.

Yet here I met a young girl, 'Light' (a pseudonym). When I saw her for the first time in 2001 she was only a few months old; she was phocomelic but her face was bright and intelligent. She had not been "eliminated" because she had been taken in by the Sisters of Mother Theresa, who were wanted in Iraq by the then powerful Saddam Hussein. Now she is a young woman, with a sweet and friendly face, who speaks English. We looked at each other with mutual wonder.

For me it was the miracle of charity and life that is stronger than any misfortune.

Cardinal Fernando Filoni

(March 2021)

The Pope's trip to Iraq raises hope for Christians in the Middle East

"A sign of hope" is how Pope Francis described his journey to the land of Abraham, which was also a journey of the whole Church. "Let us praise God for this historic visit and let us continue to pray for this Earth and for the Middle East", he added during the general audience of 10th March thus clearly indicating the importance of this event for the whole region, beyond Iraq. The Holy Father mentioned the symbolism of the palm trees in Iraq, which continue to grow and bear fruit despite wars, stressing that this is the case for fraternity: "it does not make noise, but it is fruitful and makes us grow". In fact, we have seen that the actions taken in Iraq by the Holy Father over these three days, from 5th to 8th March, carry the hope of resurrection for all Christians in the Middle East.

The Pope also chose to announce his plan to travel to Iraq on 10th June 2019, in front of the participants of the ROACO (Reunion of Aid Agencies for the Oriental Churches), to which the Order of the Holy Sepulchre belongs, as if he already wanted to give it a broader meaning and experience it in communion with the Middle Eastern Churches which spread from the Nile to the Euphrates, by way of the Jordan... Indeed, for two millennia there have been Christians in all the lands of the Bible. They must have the same rights as the other inhabitants and be able to live in freedom and harmony in the land of their ancestors.

This is the message that Francis gave in the only photo of his fraternal meeting with the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, in Najaf which continued, now with the Shiite Muslims, the commitment undertaken in the company of the Sunni Muslims at the unforgettable meeting in Abu Dhabi. As Cardinal Louis Raphaël Sako, Chaldean Patriarch, reminded him in Baghdad, the presence of Christians in the East is not a chance occurrence but a divine plan, a mission, and a vocation.

Through their presence, they promote both pluralism and mutual respect, values necessary for a society not locked into a self-referential and domineering egoism which is always a source of injustice, conflict, and suffering.

Those, Christians among them, who have emigrated due to hardship are called to return to their towns and villages, such as in Mosul and Qaraqosh. The Pope's trip to Iraq encourages all Christians in the Middle East to continue to bear witness to the love of Christ amid their Muslim brothers, in the humility of true disciples of Jesus. It is up to us to support these Christians who are a model of courage and evangelical unity for us all.

The universal Church needs them, I would go so far as to say that the universal Church is closer to Christ because of them!

François Vayne