

Our brothers and sisters in Iraq

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At the invitation of fr. Amir Jaje OP, the Vicar of the Arabic Vicariate of the Province of France, we made a visit to Iraq, from January 8th to 16th. We are very aware of how superficial is our understanding of this complex and beautiful country and its suffering, but even so we would like to share what we have heard and seen, the hope that our brethren and sisters keep alive, and what we can do to support them. Please forgive any inaccuracies.

Our brothers and sisters belong to one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, dating almost from the time of Christ. They are our elders and so we must be with them in this terrible time. Also the suffering of Iraq is symptomatic of the crisis of our whole world. ISIS, or Da'esh as it is more usually called in Iraq, is a child of our times. Its violence derives, at least in part from the violence of Western culture, with its love of guns. The jihadists love to watch our films with all their endless killing. We are complicit with what is happening here. Our invasions triggered the crisis that the Iraqi people now endure.

We started in Baghdad. A travel website advised us not to go at all, but if we did, to remain within the fortified Green Zone, where nearly all foreigners are sheltered. If one travels outside that fortress, the advised means of transport are either helicopter or armoured car. Neither the brethren nor the sisters had either of these! As we drove around Baghdad with our brother, Amir, at no time did we experience any tension or feel any threat. Everywhere we were welcomed with a generosity which is astonishing, given how our countries have played a part in the explosion that is ripping apart this country.

Of course it is not entirely safe: there were suicide bombers and kidnappings even while we were there. But the most potent weapon of terrorism is terror. If we let terror prevent us from visiting this city, or if it keeps us imprisoned behind the high walls of an impregnable fortress, the terrorists have won. Iraqis feel forgotten and betrayed, but if one visits our brothers and sisters in Iraq, the welcome is beyond words. After Baghdad, we flew to Erbil where we joined a delegation of three Dominican sisters, Dusty Farnan, Marcelline Koch, and Arlene Flaherty, who were visiting the refugee camps in Kurdistan. We enjoyed the unforgettable hospitality of Sister Maria Hanna, Prioress General, and her community of marvellous and beautiful sisters.

What we saw

The numbers and statistics are numbing. 500,000 Christians and Yazidis, together with a number of moderate Muslims, fled the ancient city of Mosul as Da'esh (ISIS) swept through the Nineveh Plain in early August 2014. A few days later the predominantly Christian villages of Qaraqosh and Bartola were emptied of Christians in a matter of hours, as the ISIS forces marched towards these two predominantly Christian communities. With no time to

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prepare for their tragic exodus, the local people left taking with them only what they could gather in their arms, as they fled in cars or by foot towards the Kurdish region of Iraq.

We met a couple in one of the refugee camps whose baby daughter was snatched from the mother's arms by an ISIS militant as they were leaving Qaraqosh on a bus. There is no word of the baby's whereabouts. A Catholic pastor, who now directs one of the refugee camps in Ankawa (the 'camp' being nothing but the dark, damp concrete shell of an unfinished shopping mall) told us that of the four churches that he served in Mosul, one has been turned into a weapons' warehouse, while the other three are being used as prisons and places of torture.

We heard heart-breaking stories of betrayal by long time Muslim neighbours and friends as ISIS swept through these predominantly Christian towns and neighbourhoods. Some of the Muslim neighbours have even phoned their former Christian neighbours, taunting them, saying, "We have your homes now and are selling the merchandise that you left behind in your shops." Though we met many people who still hold onto the hope of returning, others have said that the betrayal by former friends and neighbours has created a wound that can never be healed.

One of the bishops in Kurdistan told us that due to the violence and the absence of any substantial help from the Iraqi government, approximately 1800 Christians are leaving Iraq each month. Some are resettling, at least temporarily, in surrounding countries (Lebanon and Jordan principally), while the others go to Europe, Australia or North America. It is often the more educated who flee. For many, this is the beginning of a life in exile, resigned to the possibility that they may never see their homeland again. Some Christians say that they must leave for the sake of their children. Those who stay are the poorest, although some Christians and moderate Muslims who have the means to leave have chosen to remain, committed to the difficult task of helping to build a new Iraq. Our Dominican sisters' and brothers' courage in staying to build the future with their people is a powerful witness of their faith in God's steadfast love and mercy.

We were told that the local Kurdish authorities have now begun to close the borders to new waves of refugees, leaving them with no place to seek asylum and safety. There are approximately 120,000 refugees in Ankawa (a Christian suburb of Erbil, in Iraqi Kurdistan) who are now living in one-room cubicles (called caravans) about the size of a camper-trailer. In many shelters two caravans are joined by a common bathroom, while in other shelters there are only public bathrooms and showers. Many people are sick with colds and other ailments, due to the unusually cold winter this year and the precarious living situations. Some family trailers house 8-12 family members, and in one we were told that 26 people from a single extended family are living in a single caravan, an almost unbearable situation.

The largest camp – the Ankawa Mall – is home to 400 families, approximately 1700 persons. Creatively they have set aside a space that serves as a kind of coffee house where people can rest and enjoy a game of dominoes. Both of us were soundly beaten! The Dominican sisters of St. Catherine are working with two priests and a brother of another congregation in a new

neighbourhood on the outskirts of Erbil where 200 newly built houses are being rented to accommodate refugee families.

Unfortunately they are not completely free from the danger of violence in their new environment. A suicide bomber, a fundamentalist Kurdish Muslim, blew himself up inside Erbil some weeks ago, stoking the fear that even within the boundaries of their 'new home' as refugees, they cannot be totally safe. It is estimated that about 18% of Kurdish Muslims are members of a fundamentalist sect.

The psychological and mental toll on these refugees is worrisome, given that the future is so uncertain. In one camp we watched as thirty to forty desperate refugees protested before one of the priests working in the camps, begging for answers and relief. The priest stood before them patiently, gently listening to their desperate cries for help, with few answers to give to their anguished demands. The harshest pain is the stripping of their human dignity. Their needs are simply overwhelming. The heroism of aid workers, volunteer doctors, nurses and pharmacists, priests and sisters, many of whom are refugees themselves, is incredibly moving in such circumstances.

The Yazidi refugees, many of whom are being cared for by Church aid agencies, suffer an added burden, of being considered by many of their neighbours as devil-worshippers. The Church has called on Muslim leaders to be more forthright in denouncing the use of religion as a pretext for violence. While some claim that Islam is a religion of peace, others say that it is a religion born in violence and that it will not stop until all 'unbelievers' are converted or destroyed. Moderate Muslims, however, have bravely stood alongside their Christian and Yazidi neighbours, sharing in their struggles and offering aid to the refugees.

Few Iraqis trust the Western nations, demanding that they must assume their responsibility for this crisis, even as the war games for control of the region's vast oil reserves continue. Muslim fundamentalism, backed by money from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, uses the greed and economic voraciousness of the West as a pretext for their own self-serving and violent aims.

We happened to be in Iraq at the time of the brutal massacre at the Charlie Hebdo studio in Paris. The "I am Charlie" campaign has reverberated throughout Iraq and surrounding countries. This will only lead to more violence. One Iraqi Dominican sister commented to us: 'As they march in Paris for freedom of expression, we are the ones being killed in retaliation for the cartoons.' The Dominican friars in Ankawa held a two hour prayer vigil in solidarity with the victims of the Paris massacre, while echoing Pope Francis' plea for prudent restraint. Freedom of expression is not a 'right' disconnected from social justice, non-violence and ethical responsibility. Meeting offense with more offense will lead to more violence. We Christians must show that non-violence has the power to change the world and issue in a new era of peace.

Many talked of Westerners who are joining ISIS and other international *jihadist* groups. Though we cannot always stop the radicalised young from setting off to the Middle East, it does not seem constructive to punish or arrest those who return to the West, disillusioned by the violent and extremist expressions of Islam. We must welcome the young home and help

them to be healed of the wounds of war. Only education and the pursuit of justice will defeat fundamentalism. In the end, those who return home disillusioned by the violence of ISIS may be the best preachers to other young who are tempted to join these violent groups.

Access to schools and universities is seen as one of the important and urgent steps needed in order to stem the rise of violent fundamentalism. One bishop in Iraqi Kurdistan said that thirty to forty universities and a number of hospitals are desperately needed if they are to stem the flight of all persecuted Iraqis to other countries.

What Hope?

The question that constantly haunted us during this visit was: How can our brothers and sisters in Iraq keep hope alive? We were often told that in Arabic there are two words for hope. 'Amal' is the everyday optimism that things will go well. 'Raja' is a deeper hope, based on our trust in someone, above all God. Most of these Christians have lost all 'amal.' They see no future at all except sad exile in foreign lands. A bishop told us that even the babies in the womb were longing to go.

But there are signs of that deeper hope, 'raja', even if it is not clear how it may come to fruition. Staying in Iraq is already a sign of hope. A chemistry teacher said to one of our sisters: 'Why are you still here? France will accept you.' When many of the disciples fled, Jesus said to Peter: 'Will you also go?' (John 6.67). Peter remained. Jesus abides with us, and remaining is a powerful sign of hope when so many are leaving. Who knows what we would do in this situation? If we had children, would we dare to stay and risk their future? It was not for us to urge members of this most ancient Christian community to stay and keep alive their unique tradition. But we hoped that some would.

It is a source of hope that some Muslims say that if the Christians go, the Iraq which they love will be finished. The relationship between believers of different faiths has been the core of Iraqi identity. In a Muslim restaurant in Baghdad, offering 'impregnating chicken', 'sheep full of rice' and 'upside down chicken', there was an image of the Last Supper of Christ with his disciples, and a light burnt before an icon of the Virgin and her child. We gave a public lecture to almost three hundred people in Baghdad, 70% of whom were Muslim. They begged the Christians to stay. One young man said: 'Why do we debate whether the Christians should stay or go? They were here before we Muslims arrived.'

It is hopeful that Christianity is sometimes recognised by Muslims as a religion of peace. When soldiers came searching for weapons in Baghdad they entered a Christian home, but when they saw the Christmas crèche they said: 'You are Jesus. There are no weapons here' and left immediately. It seems to be above all the Christians who welcomed and collaborated with the Yazidis. Christians have something essential to offer if Iraqi society is to find a new unity

We were told that this year many Muslims bought Christmas trees. Of course this may in part be due to the dominance of the Western world in the media and its image of Christmas. But

for many Muslims, especially the Shia, this was an expression of shared devotion: Muslims and Christians standing together before the tree to make a wish, honouring the prophet Jesus.

This hope peeps through in the simple determination to get up each morning and do what must be done today. One of our brethren, Nouran, said: 'Hope means that I live now, whatever may happen tomorrow.'

This hope shines through in the Christian commitment to go on caring for others even when our own future is so uncertain. In a clinic in a squalid camp we met a woman who had owned three pharmacies until the dreadful night when ISIS came. Now she works as a volunteer, dispensing what few medicines they have. She said: 'I have lost everything, but I have learnt gratitude for the little that remains. This is why I come.'

In Baghdad we were bowled over by our visits to two homes. Mother Theresa's sisters run a home for children of all faiths who have been abandoned because of their disabilities. Who could forget the intelligent, gentle face of Nora, born without arms or legs, who feeds the younger children with a spoon held between her teeth? Two consecrated virgins welcome 60 older women of all faiths who have no home, with whom we laughed and prayed. The joy in these places is sacramental of a hope for a new world.

We visited two centres for refugees built by the brethren, called 'the Vine' and 'Hope.' Our brothers Nageeb and Sarmad explained that it is important that every family have a home with a window and a door. One needs to look out but also human dignity requires a space for privacy. Here the refugees themselves are involved in building emergency caravans and homes, an employment which gives them some income but, even more important, dignity.

Memory shores up hope. One can hardly imagine the hope given to the people staying in one of these camps when the phone rang on Christmas Eve, and Pope Francis was there to tell them that they were not forgotten. Let us remember them too and be a sign of our God who never forgets anyone: 'Can a woman forget our suckling child, that she should not have compassion of the child of her womb? Yes, these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have graven you upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are always before me.' (Isaiah 49.15f)

When we visited these and other centres, we were impressed by how our brothers and sisters remembered the names and stories of so many of the refugees. There is a hunger for recognition. So many NGOs treat people as just numbers, units with material needs rather than the dignified children of the People of God, each of whose name is known to God.

Memory of the past can be a sign of hope in the future. Things need not necessarily be as they are today. Our brother, Nageeb, just managed to snatch the Vicariate's centuries' old archives from under the noses of ISIS and carry them into exile, keeping alive the memory of the past. These help us to remember that we have survived crises in the past.

The most intriguing sign of hope was the commitment to education. If ISIS is just defeated militarily, then it will be reborn in another form. The true enemy is the blind fundamentalism that fuels its violence. In 2012, the Dominican Father Yousif Thomas Mirkis, now the

Archbishop of Kirkuk, founded the Baghdad Academy of Human Sciences. It has 500 students, mainly Muslim. They study philosophy, sociology, anthropology, as well as English and French. They earn certificates granted by DOMUNI, our Internet University. Is it crazy to attend lectures on Wittgenstein when ISIS is decapitating people? But in this violent storm, the Church must cling to its belief in reason. The logo of the Academy is the Dominican shield, with a pencil in the centre, supporting a big question mark. Archbishop Mirkis told us: 'We need places where people can breathe the oxygen of debate.' Here they discuss whether it is true that 'Je suis Charlie' rather than just chant a slogan. The Church keeps alive a belief in reason when many others look only to force. Intelligence can break through the walls of prejudice and stupidity.

Our magazine 'Christian Thought', edited by fr. Philippe, is widely bought by Muslims who wish to think and dialogue with us. It is not for spreading Christian ideas, but so that the Christian tradition of reflection can open a space for dialogue. 800 hundred years ago, in ancient Baghdad, Christian, Muslim and Jewish scholars studied together. Fr. Amir's commitment to dialogue with the Shia scholars in the south of Iraq, in Najef, is a witness to hope. One of us attended a summit of Christian and Muslim leaders in Rome in December, where many Shia spoke with affection and respect for his work.

In Ankawa in the north, we visited Babel College, where many of our sisters and brothers teach. Two of our sisters have doctorates in scripture, from Oxford and Notre Dame. What a wonderful and long-sighted expression of hope to form scholars in such terrible circumstances. Three of the professors in this Christian college are Muslim. There are 120 lay people in the lay programme.

Beauty too makes hope visible in the face of the ugliness of violence. We had a very moving afternoon in Baghdad when we visited the Church of Our Lady of Deliverance, where on October 31, 2010 forty-seven lay people and two priests were massacred, along with the five suicide bombers who blew themselves up after entering the church during the celebration of the Eucharist. During our visit to the church we met a woman who was shot during the attack, losing the baby in her womb. The new church, beautifully reconstructed with fine wood work, with the names of the dead carved on the walls, is a sign of the victory of the resurrection, when the dead barren wood of the cross blossoms, as it will in Iraq. We believe that the blood of the martyrs will be fruitful.

Finally, in the camps, there are many children whose playful laughter gave us hope. We visited two hospitals in Baghdad founded and run by the Dominicans sisters of the Presentation and of St Catherine, each of which has a maternity ward. Here the future citizens of Iraq are being born, Muslims and Christians side by side. One sister, a midwife, was described to us as 'the mother of Iraq.'

When we visited the camps in the north children came bounding up to meet these strangers in white habits. They had been dragged out of their homes, fled for their lives, and live in squalor, but they had a confident, trusting spontaneity which is not always evident in Western children. Just before communion in the Chaldean Catholic rite, two children come up to the

altar to receive the sign of peace from the priest which they transmit to the congregation. Perhaps these children are the messengers of hope for the future, even if now we cannot imagine what form this might take.

What can we do?

This is a question which we often put to the brethren and sisters. Frequently the response was: 'Tell people the truth of what is happening here.' This is our motto: *Veritas*.

The truth is that this is a vast humanitarian catastrophe, which is crushing millions of lives.

The truth is that this disaster has largely been triggered by the West's bungling intervention in the region, mainly in pursuit of its own interests.

The truth is that the confrontation with ISIS is symptomatic of a crisis which afflicts the whole of humanity at the beginning of the twenty first century, as traditional cultures confront modernity.

The truth is that the violence of ISIS is in part a sour fruit of the violence of a global economic system which is creating ever greater inequalities between nations and within nations. We should inform our politicians, invite them to visit Iraq and to work for a solution to this catastrophe.

Secondly, the Dominicans of Iraq ask for our prayers. Many of them pray every day: 'How long, O Lord, how long?' (Psalm 15.1) We should besiege the heavens with our prayers, like the importunate widow beating on the door of the judge until he gives her what she wants (Luke 18.2ff). We must pray frequently and insistently for peace in Iraq, and for its Christians, in our communities, our parishes, our various ministries.

Thirdly, it would be wonderful if some of the wider Dominican Family were to visit our brothers and sisters in Iraq, and meet the people whom they serve. The bumper stickers distributed by the Order during the last Iraqi war read: 'We have family in Iraq'. We still do. Come, especially if you have some skill that could help the refugees, if you are a nurse or a doctor or an expert in the care of people with trauma. Maybe small groups of young people could come for a couple of weeks to be with the young in these camps, to share their experience. This would be transformative, both of those who come and those who are visited. Of course it is a little risky, but we should not be governed by fear: 'Perfect love casts out fear' (I John 4.18).

Finally, we can raise money to help these refugees, so that they can live with dignity and hope. Funds to support the work of the brethren and sisters should be sent to:

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