

Pope Francis' visit to the land of Abraham's birth expressed a message of hope and reconciliation that is the defining motif of his papacy / By CHRISTOPHER LAMB

Pilgrim of peace

IT WAS THE riskiest trip of his pontificate, but the gamble more than paid off. Pope Francis' whirlwind three-day tour of Iraq made history, and will be remembered for years to come. He is the first Roman Pontiff to set foot in the land of Abraham, where he held an unprecedented meeting with the most revered figure in Shia Islam and offered a message of hope to one of the world's oldest and most persecuted Christian communities.

Francis today marks the eighth anniversary since his election as Pope. Looking back over that time, it is possible to see the visit to Iraq as encapsulating the heart of his papacy. He has urged the Church to leave its comfort zone and to go to the ends of the earth to heal the wounds of a suffering humanity. This historic pilgrimage symbolised his missionary, risk-taking approach.

Four years ago, as Islamic State (IS) swept through northern Iraq, destroying churches and ordering Christians to convert, a visit by the Pope to the country would have been unthinkable. In the middle of a global pandemic, which has restricted international travel, and with recent terrorist attacks in Baghdad causing security concerns, officials in the Vatican were advising Francis to postpone the visit.

But the Jesuit Pope, who has confessed to feeling "caged" during the pandemic, was determined to get back on the road after spending 15 months grounded inside the Vatican. Speaking on the flight back to Rome from Baghdad, he told journalists he felt as though he had "come back to life again" during the visit.

THE COVID CRISIS has also heightened the sense of urgency that has been one of the marks of this papacy. Francis sees the pandemic as having brought humanity to a crossroads: things will either get better, or they will get worse.

During lockdown he worked on setting out a vision of a post-Covid world and in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, and his book *Let Us Dream*, he sketches out an audacious new kind of politics which crosses religious and political divides, rooted in the idea of a shared humanity that runs deeper than the things that separate us. Now was the time to start to make the dream a reality.

The unforgettable images seen by Iraqis



PHOTO: CNS/VATICAN MEDIA

Pope Francis, in Erbil, swings a censer before a part-restored statue of Mary that had been vandalised by IS militants

of every ethnic group and every faith alone made his visit worthwhile. One of them came amid the rubble of Mosul, a city once ruled by IS. Here, in the wounded heart of the country, Francis talked about hope triumphing over hate. "Fraternity is more durable than fratricide," he said. Another was the sight of the 84-year-old Pope, who suffers from painful sciatica and was limping more than usual, making his way down a narrow alleyway in Najaf to meet 90-year-old Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's most prominent Shia *marja*, or religious authority, in his spartan residence. Here was a Pope searching out a fellow leader, and brother.

The images point to the priorities for the Church in the Francis era, while illustrating the two core elements of his pilgrimage. The first is dialogue. Since taking up office eight years ago, the Pope has been building bridges with the Muslim world, visiting several Muslim-majority countries and establishing friendships and productive working relationships with religious and civil leaders. Dialogue is not just about discussions

or well-meaning, yet ineffectual, summits and joint statements. In the cauldron of the Middle East, where beleaguered Christian minorities sometimes face extinction, restoring a relationship of mutual respect with Islam is a matter of life and death.

The meeting that Francis held with Ayatollah al-Sistani was so important because Sistani is the most influential figure in post-invasion Iraq. Having forged a reputation as a fearless peace-broker between Iraq's many faiths, sects and tribes, his interventions have changed the course of the country's recent history. Sistani's appeal for able-bodied males to join the Iraqi security forces swelled their ranks and helped defeat IS, while a speech in 2019 led to the resignation of an Iraqi Prime Minister. He is a crucial ally in preserving the presence of Christians in Iraq, whose numbers have fallen to less than 400,000 from 1.5 million before the 2003 Iraq war. During his meeting with the Pope, it was significant that Sistani stressed that Christians should "live like all Iraqis, in peace and security, preserving their full constitutional rights".

Professor Ian Linden, an inter-religious dialogue expert at St Mary's University, London, told me that the Ayatollah's remarks about the rights of Iraqi Christians are "of very great importance" and will have "a knock-on effect in Iran". ASistani, he added, does not approve of Iran's *velayat-e faqih*, or theocratic rule. "This was a very important meeting for the Pope and the security of Christian communities," Linden explained. "On the other hand, it is a boost for Sistani. Boosting Sistani only serves to contrast his approach with that of the ayatollahs in Iran."

ON THE FLIGHT back to Rome, Francis told reporters that his efforts in inter-religious dialogue are rooted in the Second Vatican Council, which in the declaration *Nostra Aetate* condemned anti-Semitism and transformed the Church's relations with other faiths. Pursuing inter-faith harmony, he added, means taking risks, and being willing to face criticism. Securing the meeting with Sistani took intense diplomatic efforts, and

ranks alongside John Paul II's first papal visit to a synagogue in 1986 and a mosque in 2001. After meeting Sistani, the Pope then headed to Ur, the birthplace of Abraham, where he joined fellow religious leaders to say that the "greatest blasphemy" is violence carried out in the name of God. These events flow from the Council, and show a Church willing to

"cross over the road" to encounter other faiths.

"He [Francis] did not send a message, or invite the Ayatollah to meet him in Baghdad. He went himself, in person. It would seem that this respect for the elderly religious leader has been much appreciated in Iraq," Cardinal Michael Fitzgerald, former president of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, told me.

In the wounded heart of the country, Francis talked about hope triumphing over hate

TWO REFLECTIONS FOR MOTHER'S DAY

The second element of the visit was the Pope standing in solidarity with the Christian community in Iraq. This ancient community of believers, which dates back to the first century and is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles is a martyred church. Francis has always prioritised the small flocks on the margins. For him, the periphery is the centre. As the Pope entered St Joseph's Cathedral, Baghdad to celebrate the first papal Mass in the Chaldean Rite, he was greeted with ululating women and tears of joy. Chaldean is a dialect of Aramaic, giving the liturgy a spine-tingling closeness to early Christianity.

THE FOLLOWING day, when he travelled to the Nineveh plains, children were dressed in folk costumes, and the crowd chanted "Viva il papa!" as they gathered in the old city's ruined Church Square in Mosul. Francis' message was consistent. The world is not changed through worldly logic, or human power, but through the words of Jesus, found in the beatitudes. "For you who are afflicted, who hunger and thirst for justice, who are persecuted", Francis told those gathered in St Joseph's Cathedral, "the Lord promises you that your name is written on his heart." In the Syriac Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception in Qaraqosh, heavily damaged by IS when it swept through the region, he urged the congregation to forgive and persevere. Finally, in Erbil, in front of a 10,000 crowd in the Franso Hariri stadium, he was able to say: "Today, I can see at first hand that the Church in Iraq is alive."

Nevertheless, the future of Iraq's Christians hangs in the balance. A number have returned since the defeat of IS, and the Pope would like more to do the same. But will they? Some of those who left see both the continued dangers that Christians face and a poor economy as making it too difficult. Bassam, 40, who fled Iraq to Jordan with his family, says he will not return. As he looked at the moving scenes of the Pope visiting his home country he said: "My feeling was a mixture of joy and sadness, the joy of his visit to my beloved town. [But] our churches are burned and destroyed, which is what prevents us from returning, and this made me sad."

FRANCIS' TRIP was not only about protecting Iraq's Christian minority. His message was for the entire country, and while in Mosul he also spoke out for the Yazidis, so cruelly persecuted by IS. On his way back to Rome, the Pope said his visit to Iraq had been inspired by reading *The Last Girl* written by Nadia Murad, a Yazidi human rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner.

One papal visit can't solve Iraq's problems. But it can offer some hope, and healing. For Francis, this extraordinary pilgrimage to a land at the crossroads of civilisation was a very personal witness to a message that, if lived out each day with courage and perseverance, he believes has the power to change the world.

I sense a strong and all-prevailing spirit raising in me to replace this mother Church I have lost. I have been touched by the image of God as Mother. This morning I prayed that Mother God will show her face to me. God has planned a future full of hope. God waits for my response – God is my Mother who gives the gift of life freely.

But I must call, I must seek – then God will listen, and I will find her. Much of the action comes from me. God waits, like a mother waiting for her child to be born, while the new life turns in the womb. I am excited. I experience joy because I am being called to give birth. I am called to be creative. I, who have received, must now bring forth new life.

I remember, last week, rescuing a baby chipmunk from the cats. I held the tiny thing in my hand – it was all wet and trembling – its mouth was open in fear and its eyes were wide and beautiful....

I have thought of it often since then. I feel like the chipmunk. Maybe that is how God experiences me as she holds me in the palm of her hand. Her love is far deeper than I could have felt as I held the chipmunk. I am in her hands – longing to allow her to love me – but still kicking and biting.

Edwina Gateley

Raising Children - "*Anyone who wants to be great amongst you must be your servant ...*"

At the Parish meeting without much of a focus, the conversation soon turned to the topic of this world and its sad state. Something should be done. All kind of action programs were thought of. Then a homemaker, a mother of young children, said something that put everything in a new perspective: "*I think that the best contribution to the betterment of the world that I can make is the careful raising of my children.*" While she said that, she put her hand on the head of her cute youngster.

"*Childrearing is almost always an invitation to ascetism,*" wrote Elizabeth Dreyer. "*In our society the raising of children is perhaps the ascetic opportunity par excellence.*"

Parenting isn't something we spontaneously think of when speaking about mortification. Too often we imagine people like Father Damian, the hero of Molokai, Mother Theresa of Calcutta, Dorothy Day, or great saints from the past when using these words.

"*A full night's sleep, time to oneself, the freedom to come and go as one pleases,*" says Dryer, "*all this must be given up in a way that is quite different from a monk who chooses to rise once or twice during the night to recite his prayers ... Huge chunks of life are laid down at the behest of infants.*"

As Jesus' saying goes: "*As you did to the least of my sisters and brothers you did to me.*"

Besides, Jesus himself seems to have lived for thirty years in the circle of his family in the modest conditions of Nazareth, preparing himself, his family, and the people around for the God's reign.

Fr Joseph Donders