

Pope Francis in Iraq. Card. Sako (Baghdad): “A gift to the Country and to all the Middle East. He comes as the new Ezekiel”

The Director of the Press Office of the Holy See Matteo Bruni announced in a statement: “Pope Francis, accepting the invitation of the Republic of Iraq and of the local Catholic Church, will make an Apostolic Journey to the aforementioned Country on 5-8 March 2021. He will visit Baghdad, the plain of Ur, linked to the memory of Abraham, the city of Erbil, as well as Mosul and Qaraqosh in the plain of Nineveh.” The Press Office pointed out that “the programme of the Journey will be made known in due course, and will take into consideration the evolution of the worldwide health emergency.” The news was welcomed with joy in Iraq. The website of the Chaldean Patriarchate features a large photograph of the Pope smiling and a welcome sign in neo-Aramaic: "Bshina Bshina O Baba D Maritha" (Oh Father of the Church, we welcome you!).



commented on the "unexpected" news. "I can't describe how much joy this news brings", he told SIR. "I have been receiving numerous phone calls of joy and congratulations. We share this joy with our Muslim brothers and sisters. The Pope's visit is a blessing for everyone. It is a courageous gesture." "The Pope will visit almost all of Iraq - he added - from Ur to the south travelling all the way to Mosul, Qaraqosh, in the Nineveh Plains up to Erbil." These are symbolic places of Iraq's recent history, shattered by the violence of the Islamic State, by the persecution of Christians, by the mass exodus of many Iraqis seeking safety. "Those are also the sites of Mesopotamia, the cradle of ancient civilizations," the Patriarch pointed out. And from there we shall try to build a new Iraq based on solidarity, on respect for the rule of law, stability and safety. This message extends to the entire Middle East. Fraternity and harmonious coexistence". **The Cardinal reiterates the word fraternity,** emphasizing that the Apostolic journey is a thriving fruit of the Document on Human Fraternity, the joint statement signed by Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, and of the Pope's encyclical, "*Fratelli tutti*", on human fraternity and social friendship, signed in Assisi. "I think it is extremely important to help people regard their fellow other as a brother and not as an enemy, an adversary," His Eminence said. "We live together, we work together and we are close to each other, we must not be afraid. We must change mentality and culture."



Therefore, it is no coincidence that one of the symbolic destinations of the journey is Ur of the Chaldeans, birthplace of the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This is where an interreligious gathering should take place: "We are planning a prayer with Christians, Muslims and other religious denominations, with the reading of passages related to Abraham from the Bible and the Koran" said the Chaldean Patriarch. "A message from Ur will be sent out to the whole world for persecuted Christians, for Muslims victims of tensions and divisions, for the whole of humanity now suffering from the pandemic", the Patriarch said. "We are all children of Abraham in

the faith. Abraham is a man who believed in the Lord. There are symbols that can touch the hearts of every person, including fundamentalists.” **“New Ezekiel”**. “Through his prophetic charisma the Pope is like a new Ezekiel who is coming to announce a Resurrection, that there will be a rebirth. Ezekiel, the prophet who lived among the Jewish exiles in Babylon, like us today: outside their homelands, as refugees, discouraged.” The strength of the prophecy of the dried bones in Iraq and the Middle East: “Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD.” (Ch. 37).” “I hope in the rebirth of Iraq and the Iraqis, I pray for a new life. The Pope, the new Ezekiel, can pave the way for a future of peace.” **The joy of diaspora communities.** The news of the Pope's visit to Iraq was welcomed with joy also by the Chaldean Catholic communities outside Iraq. Contacted by SIR in Germany, where he serves as parish priest, Father Rebwar Basa, former Chaldean Procurator to the Holy See, described the “overwhelming joy of the faithful. The Pope, like a good Shepherd, comes to reunite the small Iraqi flock. The Pope's visit is for us a special grace, especially at this time of political, economic, social and health challenges. His presence will help us get back on our two feet and resume our journey.” The joy of the Chaldean diaspora communities is such that “many are already considering returning to Iraq in March to take part in this historic event,” the priest said. “We shall see if the pandemic enables us to do so.”

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