The Pope in Iraq. Fr Attalla (Qaraqosh): "His visit is a great consolation after so much suffering." Youth gathering on February 15

The fire-blackened marble columns are back to their original splendour and whiteness. Polished wooden pews now replace the remains of burnt ones. The sacred vestments used by ISIS activists as triggers for the fires have since been replaced by brand new ones. The church esplanade, where ISIS used the statues of the Virgin Mary as shooting ranges, has returned to be a place of worship for the faithful. There are no more shells or bullets on the ground. The Syrian Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception in Qaraqosh (Bakhdida), in the Nineveh Plains, 30 km from Mosul (northern Iraq), is looking forward to welcoming Pope Francis on Sunday 7 March, one of the most meaningful destinations of the Pope's visit to Iraq.

Immagine non disponibile

As indicated in the official programme of the visit, Pope Francis will arrive by helicopter from Mosul to Qaraqosh, where he will meet the local Christian community in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception and celebrate the Angelus prayer. Numerous faithful are expected to greet him with placards along the way to the cathedral. The Pope will be welcomed by the Syrian Catholic Patriarch, Ignace Youssef III, among others. **"Balm on the wounds inflicted by ISIS."** "This is the land of Abraham, where the mission originated. The faithful eagerly await the Pope's visit", said Fr **Majeed Attalla**, secretary of the Syrian Catholic Archbishop of Mosul, Msgr Youhanna Boutros Moshe. "The Pope's arrival is like a balm on the unhealed wounds inflicted by Islamic State militants who, on 6 August 2014, invaded the Nineveh Plains, traditionally inhabited by Christians, forcing around 120,000 people to flee overnight. Those memories are still vivid, the blackest days of sorrow and grief, years spent in refugee camps, in makeshift shelters, with no possessions except for the few things we managed to carry with us that night."

Many believers find strength and courage in the words of Pope Francis. "Restarting from scratch after having lost everything is no easy task", remarked Fr Majeed. "Approximately 6,000 families have returned to Qaraqosh. There were twice as many before the ISIS invasion. This is further cause of suffering for us".

"Isis has not only destroyed our homes and churches, it has also torn and divided our families."

"Many fled to Canada, Australia, the US, Europe, a diaspora that sees parents separated from their children, grandparents separated from their grandchildren. We used to live all together, we are not used to being divided. I myself don't have anyone left in Iraq, everyone has left - parents, sisters, relatives." **Countdown to the Visit**. In Qaraqosh and in the villages of the Nineveh Plains, "Christians have started the countdown to the Pope's arrival. His presence is a consolation for us after so much suffering - said the Archbishop's Secretary - and it encourages us to trust in God. Pope Francis comes to confirm us in the faith and give us the strength to move forward." It's the response of Christians to ISIS and to its extremist mentality that remains widespread in the country.

Youth gathering. Young people are keen to contribute. "On 15 February, a large youth gathering will take place in Qaraqosh to pray and deepen the motto of the papal visit 'You are all brothers'. Five thousand young people are expected to attend. "No COVID-19 infections have been reported in this area", explained the priest. Testimonies, songs, catechesis will be the guiding thread of the event. "We have been praying for the Pope's visit during Holy Mass on a regular basis", added Fr Majeed, "with time devoted to Adoration every day."

Qaraqosh, the largest Christian-majority city in Iraq, wants to start anew from the words of Pope Francis. The Immaculate Conception Cathedral has returned to its original splendour, also thanks to many benefactors. For a few minutes, during the Angelus prayer on 7 March, it will be the beating heart of Christianity.

Daniele Rocchi