

# 5 touching moments from Pope Francis' pastoral visit to Iraq



During his historic trip to Iraq, Pope Francis kept a packed itinerary, including meetings with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and conversations with Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi and with Iraqi President Barham Salih. He also met with authorities, civil society leaders and members of the diplomatic corps, and participated in an interreligious gathering on the plain of Ur. Additionally, Pope Francis spent a day visiting cities destroyed by war and violence, where he offered prayers for peace, reconciliation and fraternity.

The pope's journey was a whirlwind – he left Rome on Friday and returned on Monday. And it was compounded by safety and public health concerns. Yet Pope Francis was determined to go, telling the media aboard Shepherd One on the way back to Rome that the idea “cooks over time in my conscience” and that, despite his concerns – primarily about the pandemic – he felt like God was calling him to go.

“I prayed a lot about this. And in the end I took the decision freely,” Pope Francis said. “It came from inside. I said, ‘He who makes me decide this way will look after the people.’”

Praise God, he has returned safely. Now that the trip is over, here are a few of my favorite moments that have lingered in my head.

1. During Mass in Erbil on Sunday, **Pope Francis blessed a statue of the Virgin Mary** that had been destroyed by the Islamic State. Mary's head had been decapitated, and both of her hands had been cut off. The statue, according to

Catholic News Agency, belonged to St. Adday Church in Karemlash. It had been partially restored for the pope's visit, and it was to go back to St. Adday upon the Holy Father's departure.

2. At the end of that same Mass, **Pope Francis met with Abdullah Kurdi**, the father of Alan Kurdi, the 3-year-old boy washed up on a beach in Turkey in 2015 (his mother and brother also died). A heartbreaking photograph taken of Alan went viral, focusing the world's attention – albeit briefly – on the dangers faced by Syrian refugees fleeing their war-torn country. “The pope ... was able to listen to the pain of a father for the loss of his family,” the Vatican said in a statement following the encounter.

3. On the night of his arrival in Baghdad, Pope Francis met with Catholic bishops, priests, religious men and women, seminarians and catechists in the Syriac Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of Deliverance. There, **he offered his fellow Catholics encouragement** and thanked especially his “brother bishops and priests” for remaining close to the people through challenging years. He encouraged them to continue in this good work so that “Iraq's Catholic community, though small like a mustard seed, continues to enrich the life of society as a whole.”

4. While visiting the Christian town of Qaraqosh, **Pope Francis prayed the Angelus in the Great Al-Tahira Immaculate Conception Cathedral**, which had been burned by the Islamic State in 2014. The terrorist group used the interior of the house of worship as a shooting range from 2014-16. In 2019, the interior of the church was completely restored by Aid to the Church in Need.

5. At the interreligious gathering at the birthplace of Abraham, **Pope Francis led a beautiful prayer worthy of lengthy reflection**. It concluded, “Guide our hands in the work of rebuilding this country, and grant us the strength

needed to help those forced to leave behind their homes and lands, enabling them to return in security and dignity, and to embark upon a new, serene and prosperous life. Amen.”

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