



Archbishop Warda: The Pope's visit should open minds to foster reconciliation

Archbishop Bashar M. Warda of Erbil talks about the first-ever papal visit to Iraq from 5th to 8th March 2021 and its significance for the country's ancient Christian community, which has been dwindling under marginalisation and security concerns in Iraq.

Interview and Editing Anne Bauer

The following interview with the Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Erbil Bashar M. Warda gives insights into the local Christian community's perceptions and hopes regarding Pope Francis visit. Archbishop Warda is well known for his wide-ranging support for the Christian refugees in Iraq, and for promoting interreligious dialog and environmental protection in Iraq. Ordained a priest in 1993, he joined the Redemptorist order of Flanders in Belgium two years later. After receiving his MA at the Catholic University of Louvain in 1999 he returned to Iraq. In 2009 the Synod of Bishops of the Chaldean Catholic Church elected him for service as a bishop, and Bishop Warda was consecrated in July 2010.

As part of his efforts to support the continuing Christian presence in Iraq, the Archbishop founded the Catholic University of Erbil (CUE). The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Syria/Iraq Office cultivates close relationships and awarded eight Yazidi students with scholarships to complete their studies at the latter.

What is the significance of the Pope's visit to Iraq for Iraqi Christians? What is the significance of the Pope's visit to Erbil in particular?

The historic magnitude of this visit to the Christians of Iraq is enormous. It is a highly significant lift of hope for an ancient people who have been marginalised and pushed to the very edge of their own existence. Pope Francis has always been in solidarity with the marginalized, constantly giving them a voice of support. His Holiness' visit will refocus the world's media attention on us and other ancient minorities like the Yazidis who have suffered greatly, and shed light on our plight to survive into the future.

His Holiness' visit should open minds to foster peaceful coexistence, interreligious dialogue, harmony, and reconciliation. Those who suffer are looking to his visit for hope to live dignified lives in their country of birth.

Erbil is now probably the biggest enclave for Christians in the Middle East and that makes his visit here that more compelling. He will give many good signs of recognition, hope, motivation, confidence, support and care, not only to the Christians but to others who suffer. He will hear our voices at the mass, at the sacrifice, and this is truly important for Christians.

The Pope's first-ever visit to Iraq comes after Pope John Paul II had to cancel his visit in 2000 over discrepancies with the Saddam regime. What is the Christian community's relation with the current political leaders as compared to 20 years ago?

Under Saddam we were a politically quiet community. Therefore, all was calm and security was good for us. We knew we were being watched but that was the extent of it. The current government respects the Christians and speaks well of us, acknowledging our 2000 years of history here. The security situation has deteriorated in the last years, due to the so-called Islamic State (IS) and related groups. When it comes to business then we were and are marginalised and have no real rights of citizenship or a voice that will be heard. There should be respect for all religions and cultures but this is going to take some time.

What are the main hardships Iraqi Christians face at the moment and what needs to happen to put a halt on their emigration from the region?

The so-called IS destroyed communities and livelihoods. People want to have a clear future and they cannot see this without jobs. There have been no livelihoods programmes of any significance since the right to return on May 2017. Since the attacks by the terrorist organization in August 2014 most people have been living off their savings; there remains over 70 per cent unemployment, especially on the Nineveh Plain. This has a domino effect on the communities and their ability to survive and to lead dignified lives. They turn to the Church for help and the Church turns to the Christian and humanitarian agencies. Without solving the ability for people to work, then it is only providing an Elastoplast and is not a real remedy to get us back onto our feet sooner rather than later. We will definitely get back on our feet but we need help now rather than later as people will leave when they cannot work.

The pandemic has further exacerbated the job situation. With such high unemployment money is not circulating; it then becomes an ever-increasing vicious circle of how to survive for all the Christian communities and minorities. Then the dinar was devalued by 20 per cent in January. Iraq is a rentier economy and many people depend on government jobs. The government is now paying people late by as up to five months and with discounted salaries; this extends to the retired people. We are providing the communities with as much support as we can, for example, free education for the poor with our four schools and a university (I thank KAS for their financial support when we gave Yazidis free education at the Catholic University in Erbil). People need to work to live dignified lives. How can they live and survive without jobs? We need international support for livelihood programmes to help families to remain in Iraq to live dignified lives in being able to house, clothe, educate and feed their families.

What concrete actions can the international community take in support of Iraqi Christians as well as to ensure their continued existence in the region?

The plight of the marginalised in Iraq has tragically not been resolved and we have looked to the international community for help. Security and equal rights are what every human being should have. Security remains a source of instability and fear leading to lack of international investment and to people leaving. We are all Iraqis wanting to share a common feeling of nationhood. All people need to be treated with dignity as equal citizens of Iraq, regardless of faith. His Holiness will stress on the fact that we are all children of God, loved equally by Him. I sincerely hope that the international community will use the Papal visit and follow through with great vigour and with a will to solve the many issues my country faces; we cannot do this without their help. His Holiness will open many doors with those in power to sow the seeds of peace and reconciliation: the international community has the power and strength to nurture and grow these seeds. It is in justice and security that people can feel valued and safe. It has to be a holistic approach. The aforementioned are issues that need to be addressed with determination, commitment and passion in order to resolve it for the betterment for all.

Anne Bauer is an intern at Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation's Syria/Iraq Office.

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