



EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY



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Pope visits war-ravaged north

Mosul ... and Mass



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Pope Francis, center, leaves Mar Youssef Church in Baghdad, Iraq, on March 6, 2021. Pope Francis and Iraq's top Shiite cleric delivered a powerful message of peaceful coexistence Saturday, urging Muslims in the war-weary Arab nation to embrace Iraq's long-beleaguered Christian minority during a historic meeting in the holy city of Najaf. (AP)

Pope Francis arrived in northern Iraq on Sunday, where he planned to pray in the ruins of churches damaged or destroyed by Islamic State extremists and celebrate an open-air Mass on the last day of the first-ever papal visit to the country.

The Vatican hopes that the landmark visit will rally the country's Christian communities and encourage them to stay despite decades of war and instability. Francis has also delivered a message of interreligious tolerance and fraternity to Muslim leaders, including in an historic meeting Saturday with Iraq's top Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

Francis headed to the northern city of Mosul, which was heavily damaged in the war against IS, to pray for Iraq's war victims. In a scene unimaginable just four years ago, he mounted a stage in a city square surrounded by the remnants of four damaged churches belonging to some of Iraq's myriad Christian rites and denominations. A jubilant crowd welcomed him.

IS overran Mosul in June 2014 and declared a caliphate stretching from territory in northern Syria deep into Iraq's north and west. It was from Mosul's al-Nuri mosque that the group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, made his only public appearance when he gave a Friday sermon calling on all Muslims to follow him as "caliph."

Mosul held deep symbolic importance for IS and became the bureaucratic and financial backbone of the group. It was finally liberated in July 2017 after a ferocious nine-month battle. Between 9,000 and 11,000 civilians were killed, according to an AP investigation at the time. Al-Baghdadi was killed in a U.S. raid in Syria in 2019.

Francis will later travel by helicopter across the Nineveh plains to the small Christian community of Qaraqosh, where only a fraction of families have returned after fleeing the IS onslaught in 2014. He will hear testimonies from residents and pray in the Church of the Immaculate Conception, which was torched by IS and restored in recent years.

He wraps up the day with a Mass in the stadium in Irbil, in the semi-autonomous northern Kurdish region, that is expected to draw as many as 10,000 people. He arrived in Irbil early Sunday, where he was greeted by children in traditional dress and one outfitted as a pope.

Iraq declared victory over IS in 2017, and while the extremist group no longer controls any territory it still carries out sporadic attacks, especially in the north. The country has also seen a series of recent rocket attacks by Iran-backed militias against U.S. targets, violence linked to tensions between Washington and Tehran.

The IS group's brutal three-year rule of much of northern and western Iraq, and the grueling campaign against it, left a vast swathe of destruction. Reconstruction efforts have stalled amid a years-long financial crisis, and entire neighborhoods remain in ruins. Many Iraqis have had to rebuild their homes at their own expense.

Iraq's Christian minority was hit especially hard. The militants forced them to choose among conversion, death or the payment of a special tax for non-Muslims. Thousands fled, leaving behind homes and churches that were destroyed or commandeered by the extremists.

Iraq's Christian population, which traces its history back to the earliest days of the faith, had already rapidly dwindled, from around 1.5 million before the 2003 US-led invasion that plunged the country into chaos to just a few hundred thousand today.

Francis hopes to deliver a message of hope, one underscored by the historic nature of the visit and the fact that it is his first international trip since the start of the coronavirus pandemic. (AP)

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