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Visit of the Cardinal Secretary of State to Iraq: Holy Mass in the Chaldean Cathedral of Saint Joseph in Ankawa

The following is the text of the homily pronounced by Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin yesterday afternoon during the celebration of Holy Mass in the Chaldean Cathedral of Saint Joseph in Ankawa, during his visit to Iraq for the Christmas celebrations (24-28 December):

Homily of the Cardinal Secretary of State

Your Grace Archbishop Bashar Warda
Your Excellency Bishop Basilio Yaldo,
Your Excellencies,
Dear Priests,
Dear Consecrated Men and Women,
Distinguished Authorities and Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I greet all of you here present with great affection, also in the name of the Holy Father Pope Francis, who has asked me to bring you his Apostolic Blessing, together with the assurance of his closeness and his daily remembrance in prayer.

Upon my arrival in the city of Erbil, and in particular here in Ankawa, I thought immediately of your great generosity in welcoming, especially in these last years, your brothers and sisters who come in great numbers from Mosul and from the Plain of Nineveh, and from other places as well.

With disbelief and heartbreak, we recall the tragic scenes of the summer of 2014, when so many people, forced to flee from their homes, knocked on your doors and were greeted with admirable hospitality. We remember the words of our Lord Jesus Christ: "Whatsoever you did to one of these, the least of my brothers and sisters, you did to me" (*Mt 25:40*).

Hatred and intolerance were countered by solidarity and closeness on the part of all those who, both here and in the universal Church, sought to support suffering Christians and other Iraqis by prayer, by concrete assistance and even by the sending of volunteers. For all this, we give thanks to the Lord!

The recollection of these events points to the biblical passage about Saul on his way to Damascus: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" These were the words heard by the man who was to become the Apostle of the Gentiles. And when Saul responds by asking, "Who are you, Lord?" he is told, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting!" (*Acts 9:5*).

Whenever we speak of persecution, we are speaking of the profound identification of Jesus with his disciples. Whoever injures the body of Christ which is the Church, injures Jesus himself. This is the extent to which the Lord wished to be one with us!

At Christmas, we celebrate this mystery of God's love, which led him even to become one of us in the desire to make us one with himself. This is the Good News that in these days resounds throughout the Church. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (*Jn 1:14*). The true light that overcomes the darkness has come into our world and it enlightens every man and woman. And all those who receive him become children of God.

In the words of Pope Saint Paul VI, "The coming of Christ into our world is the source of great and true joy, happiness, fullness of life, sure truth, revelation of goodness and love, a hope that does not disappoint. In a word, the salvation to which all men aspire is at last granted us and is within our reach. And it has a name, one name alone: Christ Jesus. He is our peace, for he, he alone, is the way, and the truth and the life" (*Urbi et Orbi Message*, 25 December 1967).

How mysterious is this condescension and tenderness of God in our regard! Jesus, the Son of God, God himself, came to share all things with us, except sin; he wanted to embrace even our limitations and our suffering. Hence, we can feel his closeness. He has not eliminated pain, but transformed it, by the power of a greater love, and made it a path to the fullness of life and happiness.

Today, in this celebration of Mass, we commemorate the Holy Innocents killed by Herod in Bethlehem. They were sacrificed for the name of Jesus without even knowing that name. They offered their blood for Christ even before they were capable of speech. In the words of one of the Fathers of the Church: "How great a gift of grace is here! To what merits of their own do children owe his kind of victory? They cannot not speak, yet they bear witness to Christ. They cannot use their limbs to engage in battle, yet already they bear off the palm of victory" (Saint Quodvultdeus, *Serm. 2 de symbolo*).

Faced with the mystery of innocent suffering and pain, we are left without words. Yet in this mystery is hidden the Good News of the victory of Christ, of the love that triumphs over every evil. Contemplating the Son of God, a helpless child laid in a manger, we can find an answer to our deepest questions about the existence of evil and of death.

Dear brothers and sisters, evil does not have the last word in history or in our lives. The last word is that of God's triumphant love. Throughout history, numerous martyrs have given their lives for Jesus. They are the multitude spoken of in the Book of Revelation: a multitude from every nation and tribe, every people and tongue. They stand before the throne of God and hold in their hands the palm branch, the symbol of martyrdom, and they sing of God's salvation.

The Lord united them to his cross, but he also united them to his victory and eternal life. They will no longer hunger or thirst... for the Lamb in their midst shall be their shepherd and will guide them to springs of living water.

You are a Church of martyrs. The blood of your martyrs and the witness of faith given by so many of your brothers and sisters represent a treasure for the Church and a seed of new vitality.

In light of their example, I encourage you to keep living your faith with joy and gratitude. I urge you, as Pope Francis would say, not to let yourselves be robbed of hope. I ask you to continue showing love and forgiveness to all, spreading the good fragrance of Christ among the people of your nation (cf. *2 Cor 2:14*). Be builders of communion, avoiding like the plague divisions, disagreements and rivalries within your communities, and competing with one another in showing mutual esteem and bearing each other's burdens. In this way, you will become a force of reconciliation and peace in a broken world, a reminder that the Church is, as it were, in Christ, a sacrament, a sign and means of intimate union with God and the unity of all humanity (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 1). In this way, together with your fellow citizens, you will make a fundamental contribution to the building up of society and of the nation.

I am happy that many families have already returned to their villages, which are happily in the process of being rebuilt. I hope that many others will follow soon. It is the responsibility of all to support this return, ensuring suitable conditions for the resumption of a normal and tranquil life.

The true message of Christmas is that of peace and goodness for all, a message of love for our neighbour.

In this blessed season, I wish for you, and for all of Iraq, the gifts of unity, reconciliation and concord. May the birth of Christ the Saviour renew hearts, awaken the desire to build a more fraternal and united future, and bring joy and hope to all. May Mary our Mother, the Mother of the Church, accompany you with her tender love and sustain you in hope. Amen.
