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Visit of the Cardinal Secretary of State to Iraq: Holy Mass in the Syro-Catholic Cathedral of Altahera in Qaraqosh

The following is the text of the homily pronounced by Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin this morning during the Holy Mass celebrated in the Syro-Catholic Cathedral of Altahera in Qaraqosh with His Beatitude Ignace Yousif III Younan, Patriarch of the Syro-Catholics, and H.E. Msgr. Yohanna Petros Mouche, Syro-Catholic archbishop of Mosul, during his visit to Iraq for the Christmas celebrations (24 to 28 December):

Homily of the Cardinal Secretary of State

Your Beatitude Ignace Yousif III Younan, Patriarch of Antioch of the Syrians

Your Grace Archbishop Yohanna Petros Mouche

Your Grace Archbishop Ephrem Yousif Abba

Dear Priests, Religious Brothers and Sisters,

Distinguished Authorities,

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I am very pleased to come to this historic city of Qaraqosh, of which we have heard so much in recent years because of the tragic news that reaches us regularly from this battlefield. The Holy Father asked me to bring you his greetings and his Apostolic Blessing, and to assure you that you are daily in his thoughts and prayers.

It is a reason for great joy that we gather for the celebration of the Eucharist around this altar. It has become a symbol of your suffering, that, when joined to the sacrifice of Christ, becomes a source of peace and salvation

for the world.

From ancient times, the Christian community in this city has been marked by vibrant faith, even amid all kinds of hardship and persecution. You yourselves have experienced trials, injustice, betrayal, and the destruction of all that you held most sacred, like this cathedral. The Church and the whole world witnessed with disbelief and horror the events of the summer of 2014, when from one day to the next, you were forced to leave everything behind and flee from your homes. In an inspiring witness, you did not deny your faith. Like the Holy Family of Nazareth, you chose the path of exile in order to protect the lives of your children, the hope of the future.

In God's saving plan, your sacrifices will be no less fruitful than the witness of the many martyrs who, from the first centuries of Christianity, bathed this land with their blood and lived their faith heroically to the end. They have surely been an encouragement and an example for you, particularly Saint Behnam, whom you greatly love and venerate not only in the liturgy, but also in daily life. He, together with his sister Saint Sara and their companions, testify to the fact that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ (cf. *Rom* 8:35).

Each year, the contemplation of this merciful love of God, who took flesh for our sake, invites us to respond fittingly by following in the footsteps of these disciples of Christ. Now, as then, the darkness that rejects life descends, yet the light of love, that triumphs over hatred and ushers in a new world, shines even more brightly (cf. Pope Francis, *Angelus* of 26 December 2015).

Our response as Christians to the gift of our becoming God's sons and daughters is seen in forgiveness. The word of God that we just heard shows the importance of forgiveness, and the hope born from faith, for the building of a new world.

We may ask ourselves: Why should I forgive? Why should I cancel debts? The answer is very simple: because that is what God does. Practising forgiveness draws us closer to God. Through forgiveness, let us overcome evil with good, transform hatred into love, and thus render the world more pure. You are experts in forgiveness. It is moving to know that many people have forgiven those who have wronged them.

Growth in faith implies, first and foremost, accepting God's forgiveness. Indeed, whenever we are forgiven, our heart is reborn, regenerated. Once forgiven ourselves, we can forgive and love others in turn. By his forgiveness, God heals the wounds of our heart and renews us in love.

Nonetheless, as Pope Francis reminds us, forgiving is not easy; indeed, it is quite difficult. He asks us: "How can we imitate Jesus? From what point do we begin to pardon the small and great wrongs that we suffer each day? First of all, beginning with prayer, as Saint Stephen did. We begin with our own heart: with prayer we are able to face the resentment we feel, by entrusting to God's mercy those who have wronged us: 'Lord, I ask you for him, I ask you for her'. Then we discover that this inner struggle to forgive cleanses us of evil, and that prayer and love free us from the interior chains of bitterness" (Pope Francis, *Angelus* of 26 December 2015).

Dear brothers and sisters,

May the pain and violence you have endured never turn into bitterness, and may the heavy yoke of hatred never fall on your shoulders.

Forgiveness is the basis of reconciliation. "Jesus asks us to believe that forgiveness is the door which leads to reconciliation... he also gives us the grace to do it" (Pope Francis, *Homily at Holy Mass in Seoul*, 18 August 2014). Forgiveness and reconciliation play a very important role in society. You are called to make a valuable contribution not only to the Church but to society as a whole, by becoming artisans of reconciliation and peace, witnesses of love and forgiveness, a wellspring of goodness and a blessing for all.

Asking and offering forgiveness, beginning in our own homes and families, our rectories and parishes, must be the tangible sign of our being Christians. Together with unity and harmony within our communities, it can

become a living witness for our world, torn by division and violence. Yet none of this, dear brothers and sisters, can happen without the strength provided by a faith lived fully under the banner of love.

Your fidelity to Christ during these years of harsh trial is known throughout the Church, and your example has helped reawaken the faith of many Christians who had unwittingly yielded to a worldly culture that leaves very little room for God. Please know that the Church has constantly supported you with prayer and charity. Here I would like to express deep gratitude to the many charitable organizations that have worked daily to meet the needs of your people and to alleviate the sufferings of those in greatest need, not only with material help, but also by the presence of so many volunteers, some of whom are here with us. Thank you so much, dear friends.

Dear brothers and sisters,

After its time of trial, the Holy Family returned to Nazareth. The return from exile is also beginning for you. Happily, in your city of Qaraqosh, and in other villages of the Plain of Nineveh, houses are being rebuilt and many of you have already come home. This is a source of joy and hope for the universal Church and for your country. Even so, the most difficult task is not material reconstruction, but the rebuilding of trust, the reassembling of a social fabric torn by betrayal, bitterness and hatred. Here is your vocation and your mission: what is at stake is your fidelity to your own roots and to the building of a better future for your children.

For this reason, I affirm once again the importance of the Christian presence in the Middle East. You are the presence of Jesus. Yours is a unique and extremely important mission. I urge you, then, to keep practising your faith and pursuing your mission with fidelity and gratitude, with trust and hope, in this land where the history of salvation began and continues today, thanks to you. Take courage, do not be afraid, stand up, take your place and begin your lives anew, for evil will not have the last word when it comes to your destiny and your future in this historic land of your fathers.

In this holy season of Christmas, may the tender strength of the Child Jesus teach us how to pursue the path of love and humility. Dear brothers and sisters, I pray that all of you will be blessed with the gifts of unity, reconciliation and peace. May the Holy Family of Nazareth confirm you in faith, sustain you in hope, make you grow in charity, and accompany and protect you always. Amen.
