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## Audience with Representatives of the Churches in Iraq on the anniversary of the Apostolic Journey in Iraq

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the representatives of the Churches in Iraq, on the anniversary of his Apostolic Journey in Iraq.

The following is the Pope's address to those present:

### Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers in Christ,

It is with emotion and joy that I meet you again here in Rome, representatives of the different Christian Churches in Iraq, one year after my unforgettable visit to your country. Through you, I wish to extend my cordial greetings to all the pastors and faithful of your communities, borrowing the words of the Apostle Paul: "Grace to you and peace from God" (*Rm 1:7*).

Your lands are *lands of beginnings*: beginnings of the ancient civilizations of the Middle East, beginnings of the history of salvation, beginnings of the history of Abraham's vocation. They are also lands of Christian beginnings: of the first missions, thanks to the preaching of the Apostle Thomas, of Addai and Mari and their disciples, not only in Mesopotamia, but as far as the Far East. But they are also *lands of exiles*: think of the exile of the Jews at Nineveh, and that of Babylon, of which we are told by the prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, who sustained the hope of the people uprooted from their land. But many Christians in your region have also been forced into exile: the persecutions and wars that have followed one another up to the present day have forced many of them to emigrate, bringing to the West the light of the Christian East.

Dear Brothers, if I recall these episodes from the biblical and Christian history of your country, it is because they are not foreign to the present situation. Your communities belong to the most ancient history of Iraq and they have known truly tragic moments, but they have offered courageous witnesses of fidelity to the Gospel. For this I

thank God and I express my gratitude to you. I bow before the suffering and martyrdom of those who have preserved the faith, even at the cost of their lives. Just as the blood of Christ, shed out of love, brought reconciliation and made the Church flourish, may the blood of these many martyrs of our time, belonging to different traditions but united in the same sacrifice, be a seed of unity among Christians and a sign of a new springtime of faith.

Your Churches, through the fraternal relations which exist between them, have established many links of collaboration in the field of pastoral care, formation and service to the poorest. Today there is a deep-rooted communion among the country's Christians. I would like to encourage you to continue along this path, so that, through concrete initiatives, constant dialogue and, what is most important, fraternal love, progress may be made towards full unity. In the midst of a people which has suffered so much division and discord, Christians will shine as a prophetic sign of unity in diversity.

Dear friends, with you I wish to state once again that it is not possible to imagine Iraq without Christians. This conviction is based not only on religious foundations, but also on social and cultural evidence. Iraq without Christians would no longer be Iraq, because Christians, along with other believers, contribute strongly to the country's specific identity as a place where co-existence, tolerance and mutual acceptance have flourished ever since the first centuries; a place that has the vocation of demonstrating, in the Middle East and throughout the world, peaceful coexistence in diversity. Therefore, no stone should be left unturned in ensuring that Christians continue to feel that Iraq is their home, and that they are citizens in their own right, required to give their contribution to the land where they have always lived (cf. *Common Statement of Pope Francis and the Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Gewargis III*, 9 November 2018, no. 6). For this reason, dear Brothers, Pastors of the People of God, always be devoted and diligent in caring for and comforting your flock. Be close to the faithful entrusted to your care, bearing witness first and foremost by example and with the conduct of evangelical life to the closeness and tenderness of Jesus the Good Shepherd.

You, Christians of Iraq, who from apostolic times have lived side by side with other religions, have, today especially, another indispensable vocation: to make efforts to ensure that religions may be at the service of fraternity. In fact, "the different religions, based on their respect for each human person as a creature called to be a child of God, contribute significantly to building fraternity and defending justice in society" (Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*, 271). You are well aware that interreligious dialogue is not a matter of mere courtesy. No, it goes beyond that. It is not a matter of negotiation or diplomacy. No, it goes beyond that. It is a path of brotherhood towards peace, a path that is often arduous but which, especially in these times, God asks for and blesses. It is a path that takes patience and understanding. But it makes us grow as Christians, because it requires openness of heart and the commitment to be, in a practical sense, peacemakers.

To engage in dialogue is the best antidote to extremism, which is a danger for the followers of any religion and a grave threat to peace. However, it takes work to eradicate the root causes of fundamentalism, of these forms of extremism that take root more easily in contexts of material, cultural and educational poverty, and are fed by situations of injustice and vulnerability, such as those left behind by wars. And how many wars, how many conflicts, how many harmful interferences have afflicted your country! It is in need of autonomous and cohesive development, without being damaged by external interests, as has sadly happened all too often. Your country has its own dignity, its own freedom, and cannot be reduced to a battlefield.

Dear brothers in Christ, know that you are in my heart and in the prayers of very many people. Do not be discouraged: while so many, at various levels, threaten peace, let us not avert our eyes from Jesus, Prince of Peace, and let us not tire of invoking his Spirit, maker of unity. Saint Ephraem, following in the footsteps of Saint Cyprian, compared the unity of the Church to Christ's "incorruptible and undivided tunic" (cf. *Hymns on the Crucifixion*, VI, 6). Although he was brutally stripped of his garments, his tunic remained united. In history too, the Spirit of Jesus preserves the unity of believers, despite our divisions. Let us ask the Holy Trinity, the model of true unity which is not uniformity, to strengthen communion among us and among our Churches. In this way we will be able to respond to the Lord's heartfelt desire that his disciples be "one" (*Jn 17:21*)!

I thank you most sincerely for coming and I now propose that we pray the Lord's Prayer together, each in his

own language.

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