

Rebuilding in a land of faith: Why Pope Francis' visit to Iraq matters

When the Holy Father lands in Iraq later this week, it will be young people like Yunis he'll be speaking to.

In 2014, Yunis was studying economics and administration at Mosul University when the Islamic State invaded, sending him and millions of others fleeing for their lives. As the 25-year-old describes it, "We never thought this would happen to us." Yunis and his family spent the next four years displaced before finally returning home in 2018. By then, ISIS had been defeated.

Yet for Yunis and so many other Iraqi families, the tremendous fallout from the ISIS invasion continues. As the head of Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in Iraq, I've seen how trust between communities has been shattered. How tensions run high. And how the COVID-19 pandemic has made the work of rebuilding harder, with more than a million people still displaced and nearly 5 million people needing some type of support.

It's into this troubled context that Pope Francis arrives with the hope of putting a spotlight on a country that feels all but forgotten. The theme of the Pope's visit, "You are all brothers," from the Gospel of Matthew, connects us to the concept of human fraternity as laid out in the document [he signed in Abu Dhabi in 2019](#) with Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyeb, the most prominent Sunni Muslim religious authority. It's also a main thrust of the Holy Father's latest encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*.

In [Fratelli Tutti](#), the pope writes, "The world exists for everyone, because all of us were born with the same dignity. Differences of color, religion, talent, place of birth or

residence, and so many others, cannot be used to justify the privileges of some over the rights of all. As a community, we have an obligation to ensure that every person lives with dignity and has sufficient opportunities for his or her integral development” (No. 118).

This message of solidarity and dignity is urgently needed in a time of so much upheaval.

Pope Francis’ visit is the realization of the dream of several of his predecessors, starting with St. John Paul II, to travel to [the birthplace of Abraham](#), the spiritual father of Jews, Christians and Muslims. This is a land where Syriac – so close to Jesus’ language – is still the mother tongue of many Christians.

After decades of violence and sectarian strife, it’s easy to overlook the fact that Iraq is the cradle of civilization, one of the richest places on Earth for religious and cultural diversity. Here, people of different faiths and ethnic communities, some found only in Iraq, have coexisted for millennia. In recent decades, unfortunately, the Iraqi people have experienced growing violent sectarian strife, culminating in the rise of ISIS, with its goal of destroying diversity. Today, rebuilding trust and cooperation is arguably even more urgent than rebuilding the country’s infrastructure.

I am inspired by Pope Francis’ choice to hold an interreligious meeting in Ur. The ruins of this ancient town represent the birthplace of Abraham, the place he heard God’s voice calling him to a journey of faith. The fact that the pope wants to meet there with leaders of other religious traditions indicates that he does not want to appropriate this highly symbolic place. His message is that Abraham belongs to all his spiritual children in an equal way; therefore, they have to respect each other as brothers and sisters in humanity.

In Iraq, many organizations – including those led by the Church – are working to bridge divides. CRS partners with the local Church on all its projects, mainly Caritas Iraq and the Chaldean Archdiocese of Erbil. Diversity is an important focus of our work. [CRS](#) teams include Iraqis of many different faith communities. In addition, CRS partners with leaders of other Christian churches, as well as with Muslims, Yezidis, and other faith groups. Perhaps most importantly, CRS helps people regardless of his or her religious affiliation. Since 2014, CRS has helped more than 350,000 conflict-affected Iraqis via various humanitarian and development programming. This includes a project, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which helps diverse communities rebuild trust and foster collaboration in areas of return.

Yunis is among those who have participated in our programming. After taking part in a 13-week entrepreneurship course, Yunis and his brother bought an old bus and spent two months converting it into a cafe. “Despair is never a solution,” Yunis told us of his recent endeavor. When his converted red bus travels down the streets of Bartella, his hometown, it will be the very definition of resilience. And we see stories like his every day.

Surely, the pope’s visit will not solve the myriad problems facing the country. Ultimately, it’s up to all of us, as members of the global community, to play a role in supporting this beautiful and unique nation. The international community must remain engaged in helping the Iraqi people.

The pope’s presence on Iraqi soil will send the message that evil does not have the last word. That human fraternity is the only way forward. Let’s hope the world is listening. The young people in Iraq – those such as Yunis who are doing the painstaking work of rebuilding so much of what was lost – are counting on it.

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