



Aid to the
Church in Need

ACN INTERNATIONAL

„Return to the Roots: Christians in the Nineveh Plains
Lateran University, 28 September 2017

Address by His Eminence Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State to
Participants in the Conference

“Return to the Roots: Christians in the Nineveh Plains”

Organized by the Pontifical Foundation *Aid to the Church in Need*

28 September 2017

Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends,

Allow me, first and foremost, to express my thanks to the Pontifical Foundation “*Aid to the Church in Need*” for organizing this gathering and for extending me an invitation to take part. I cordially greet all present, and in particular His Beatitude Louis Raphael I Sako, Chaldean Catholic Patriarch of Babylon, His Excellency Yohanna Petros Mouche Syrian Catholic Archbishop of Mosul, and His Excellency Mor Nicodemus Daoud Matti Sharaf, Syrian Orthodox Archbishop of Mosul. I am grateful to each of you for your constant and generous commitment to helping the Church in difficult situations, especially the Christians of the Plain of Nineveh, which is the subject of this Conference.

From the outset, the Holy Father has followed with deep concern the tragedy of the thousands of families forced to abandon their own cities and villages due to the invasion of the so-called Islamic State, starting in June 2014. Two months later, in a letter addressed to the then Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr Ban Ki Moon, Pope Francis asked the international community to help Christians and other groups, which had fled the brutal violence of ISIS, to return to the safety of their own homes (*Letter to the Secretary General of the United Nations*, August, 2014). The same concern has also been reflected in the diplomatic activity of the Holy See, which has



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missed no opportunity to speak out on behalf of those Christians, reiterating on numerous occasions the necessity of facilitating their return and ensuring adequate measures of protection and respect for their rights. In the various international forums and high-level meetings, the Holy See has continued to emphasize that the Christian presence is fundamental in the Middle East for peace, stability and pluralism – to which the Christian communities have made their own contribution through the centuries. This presence is in constant decline due to the migration of many families which abandon their historic homelands, in search of security and a better future. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*, Pope Benedict XVI noted that “*a Middle East without Christians, or with only a few Christians, would no longer be the Middle East, since Christians, together with other believers, are part of the distinctive identity of the region*” (N. 31).

We are all aware that the conflicts and tensions of recent years represent a risk, not only for the survival of Christians, but also for the very possibility that the Middle East can be a place of coexistence between peoples belonging to different religious and ethnic groups. The Holy See, therefore, continues to reaffirm: the importance of safeguarding the presence and the rights of Christians by means of adequate juridical instruments; the right to return of displaced persons and refugees, under adequate conditions of security; respect for religious freedom and, above all, the importance of applying the concept of citizenship, which entails equality of rights and obligations. There is likewise a need to address the root causes of the phenomenon of terrorism and to promote interreligious dialogue, mutual understanding and education.

For about a year now, from the time the battle of Mosul began and various territories were liberated from occupation by ISIS, including the villages of the Plain of Nineveh, various efforts have been made to help Christians return. Much has been done, yet much remains to be done.



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On this subject, I would like to express my sincere appreciation for the support which, in the three years since the ISIS invasion, the *“Aid to the Church in Need”* Foundation has offered to the many Christian families that were able to endure this situation with dignity and in security. Your reconstruction project *“Return to the roots”*, the so-called *“Marshall Plan”* for the Plain of Nineveh, is yet another sign of the concern you have shown, with a sense of urgency and with remarkable efficiency and organization.

In addition to expressing the solidarity of the universal Church, demonstrated not only through spiritual closeness and prayerful support, but also at the level of practical charity, your project aims to restore to the Christian communities that environment of a normal life, essential for overcoming fear and despair, and looking to the future with hope.

The reconstruction of houses and villages is the first and fundamental condition for the return of Christians to their own lands. We know, however, that beyond the rebuilding of cities, villages and homes, there is the more burdensome obligation of reconstructing Iraqi society and consolidating a harmonious and peaceful co-existence. Here Christians have a specific mission: to be artisans of peace, reconciliation and development (*cf. Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Christians in the Middle East, 21 December 2014*). This mission is more necessary than ever in the current Iraqi context, and urgently demands for a process of national reconciliation and a shared effort by all parts of society to achieve shared solutions for the good of the whole country.

It is significant that this Project is being undertaken with the involvement of the representatives of the three Churches: Chaldean, Syrian Orthodox and Syrian Catholic. May the cooperation between the different Churches be a tangible sign of unity in charity. I take this opportunity, therefore, to thank the bishops here present for their generous commitment, and to invite them to spare no effort in overcoming any sources of tension



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between the various communities in order to attain renewed unity. Such a witness of Christian unity is made all the more necessary and urgent by the complex situation that the country faces and the real danger of the loss of the Christian presence.

The greatest challenge, then, is to create the social, political and economic conditions to enable a new social cohesion, which favours reconciliation and peace, and gives to Christians and other minorities the possibility of working to rebuild the future of a country where their presence is deeply rooted. As has already been made clear on many occasions, Christians do not want to be a “protected minority” that is benignly tolerated. They want to be citizens whose rights are protected and guaranteed, along with all the other citizens. That said, without the possibility of returning to their villages and cities of origin, very little of the aforementioned would be possible.

The process of reconstruction started by the Foundation, and the return of Christians to a degree of normality in their lives, should be the primary and urgent objective of our efforts. This will allow the Christian community in due course to face up to other challenges that await them, so that they can be fully and generously engaged in working for the common good of the entire nation.

Thank you for your attention.