

*"Let the holiness of God shine forth" (cf. Mt 5, 16)*

item 417

## Oh, Lord, make me an instrument of your peace

Dear sisters, dear brothers,

This prayer of St Francis of Assisi we should make ours too: "Oh, Lord, make me an instrument of your peace." It is very important to pray for peace and make ourselves an instrument of peace, particularly with a thought directed towards persecuted Christians throughout the world but especially in the Middle East, the cradle of civilization and of the Abrahamic religions. It is also where our Lord Jesus was born, the true prince of peace of the world.

Dear friends, unfortunately we constantly receive news of wars, persecutions and aggression throughout the world, above all in the Middle East. Being an Iraqi priest of the Catholic confession and of the Chaldean Rite, I am able to speak of the tragedies of Iraq's minorities, and especially those of Christians and of Yazidis [an ethnically Kurdish religious community] who have been driven away from their city of Mosul and from their villages in the Nineveh plain and from elsewhere. But I would add that what I say about the current situation in Iraq is not dissimilar to the one in Syria, indeed in some respects there it is more dramatic. ISIS wants a single Islamic state encompassing both Iraq and Syria.



In both countries our brothers and sisters, Christians and other religious minorities, are victims of today's wars which are even more dirty than previous ones. They have lost everything. In Iraq and Syria a peaceful people, well educated, very loyal to their homeland, but at the same time the weakest and most vulnerable of people, have been devastated by militias, the most dangerous of all time. These militias – who are themselves often victims of the ideologies of hatred and violence – are against humanity, against civilization,



against life, against freedom in all its forms. They are really the darkness of our times. These militias of the twenty-first century bury people alive and crucify them. They steal and destroy the archaeological and cultural heritage of ancient Mesopotamia, Syria and humanity. These militias force people to become like them offering, as the only alternative, death. These militias tear away wives from

their husbands, mothers from their children and young girls from their parents to rape them and then sell them in the streets and markets as slaves. These militias make people die from hunger and thirst just because they are different.

Right from the last war in Iraq in 2003 until today, almost all Iraqi churches have been attacked by different armed groups. A bishop has been kidnapped and killed, another bishop kidnapped and then released back on payment of a ransom. Five priests have been killed. Others were abducted like many other Christians who were kidnapped, ransomed or killed, and sometimes even redeemed, but killed all the same. Three-quarters of Iraqi Christians have left their homeland and sought refuge in different countries around Iraq and in the West. A quarter of the Christians – around 300,000 – who opted to stay in their homeland are victims of persecution, discrimination and genocide. The Patriarch of the Chaldean Church, Rafael Sako, describes the situation of Christians persecuted in Iraq by the so-called Islamic State as a real genocide. Pope Francis commented recently on the situation of Christians and persecuted Yazidi: "In these cases, where there is unjust aggression, I can only say that it is permissible to stop the unfair aggressor."

For about a year and nine months now, throughout the city of Mosul and in almost all the villages of the Nineveh plain, we have not been able to recognise the millennial presence of Christians. Houses, churches and everything belonging to Christians has been taken by the Islamic State militia. The crosses of churches and monasteries have been replaced with the black flag of the black Caliphate. However Christians did not want to let down Jesus Christ and convert to Islam, rather they preferred to leave everything to be close to the Lord, for he is the true master and the real saviour of body and soul. Persecuted Iraqi Christians continue to follow the example and teachings of our Lord as did the former bishop of Mosul, Mgr Paulos Faraj Rahho, who was kidnapped and killed, adhering to what he said in a homily in a church in Mosul just before being attacked by terrorists: "We have no enemy, but if some consider us as their enemies, we love them all the same and we pray for them, for our Lord Jesus taught us to love our enemies and pray for them."

The book of Ecclesiastes says: "A time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace." But I wonder when will this time of hatred and war end and the time of peace and love commence? Ever since I was born, up to today, my country has been in a continuous state of war: war between the Ba'th regime and the Kurds;



war between Iraq and Iran; between Iraq and Kuwait; the first Gulf War then the embargo. And, since 2003, the second Gulf War and its tragic consequences.

Because of all these wars Iraq has been destroyed, together with thousands of victims. Men and women, through no fault of their own, are dead, wounded, made prisoners, kidnapped, beheaded, burned or buried alive, faced attacks and suicide bombers, raped and abused in prison. They have been massacred with different types of weapons – knives, swords, guns, missiles of all types, right up to chemical attacks such as the one against Halabja. As a consequence of the last war – to speak only of 2003 – there were 4,000,000 displaced Iraqis. In Syria most of the population is displaced and emigrating, about 13 million people. And the war is still going on, with at least ten deaths a day in Iraq and the majority of its citizens suffering extreme poverty in a country that is among the richest in oil production. Many Iraqi cities are completely destroyed, producing thousands of widows, orphans, and disabled. We have suffered the loss of an archaeological heritage and culture unique in the world – the current Iraq was the ancient Mesopotamia, the land of the Sumerians, Chaldeans and Assyrians. Ask yourself where is Ur of the Chaldeans, the birth city of Abraham, the patriarch of Judaism, Christianity and Islam? Where is the land where Ezekiel prophesied? Where is Nineveh, the city where the prophet Jonah preached? And Iraq is one of the places where St Thomas the Apostle evangelized.

Besides the general situation and the terrible events that I have seen and lived through, being Iraqi I have lost so many loved ones such as relatives, friends, teachers, priests who taught me, priests colleagues with whom I studied, killed in various wars, terrorist or other attacks. The Monastery of St George, the place where I lived for 9 years and where I was ordained a priest in 2004, was taken by ISIS in June 2014. They desecrated it, removed all Christian symbols and have even destroyed the tombs!

We wonder: why all these wars? No one has a clear answer! Why are there all these victims? No one gives a right answer! Why are we unable to establish peace and justice? We do not know!

Best to seek not the answers! We just want to end this hatred, and stop these absurd wars. We want justice, hope for peace, we want love, we want mercy for the victims. We pray to the Lord that he may help us to love and forgive.



If we really follow the example of our Lord Jesus, we will still have peace in our hearts and at least we will have no fear of the darkness that surrounds us. This darkness cannot separate us from the true light of the world, Jesus, as St Paul says: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Perhaps tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: *For your sake we die all day long, we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.*" "Like sheep for the slaughter" – we have seen many people who were slaughtered in this way.

Dear brothers and sisters, even Jesus himself was neither born nor lived in a time of peace. Indeed he was born and lived in a time of injustice and wars. Jesus was not born rich, rather he was born poor to enrich the poor. Jesus was not born into the light, indeed he was born in darkness to be the light of the world.

Before concluding I would like, with all my heart, to thank all those who do not forget the persecuted Christians. A big thanks and infinite gratitude to all benefactors who pray and help persecuted Christians.

Dear brothers and sisters, we ask God our merciful Father, through the intercession of Mary, our merciful Mother and all the saints, the gift of peace in our hearts, in our homes and in the world, as we pray to the Lord Jesus, the true light of the world. Even today the words of the prophet Isaiah are valid: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwell in the land of gloom a light has shone."

"Lord, we are the people of the East, of a world that walks more today than ever in the darkness of war. Please enlighten our hearts, our families, our society and the whole world with your divine light and give us peace.

"Lord, help us also to be 'instruments of peace', as St Francis taught us. Lord help us not to curse the darkness but to light a candle, as recommended by Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

"Lord Jesus, light of the world, enlighten us, and help us to be at least a candle in the darkness of wars.

Amen."

**Rebwar Audish Basa oaoc – Rome – ITALY**  
**10.05.16**  
**oaocpg@gmail.com**

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