



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

TO IRAQ

[5-8 March 2021]

PRESS CONFERENCE ON THE RETURN FLIGHT TO ROME

Papal flight

Monday, 8 March 2021

[Multimedia]

Matteo Bruni:

Good day, Your Holiness. Good day to all of you. Thank you for this extraordinary journey that touched the history of this country, many places and also the heart of many Iraqis and so many who were able to follow these days, also thanks to the work of our journalist colleagues. Here we also have Msgr Dieudonné Datonou, who worked to bring about this journey ... “the new sheriff”! We thank him for his work, realizing that he was able to count on the experience of the Secretary of State’s travel office and also on the experience of so many sectors of the Holy See involved in the organization of the journey. And now, if you wish, a word of greeting and then a few questions from the journalists regarding these days.

Pope Francis:

First of all, thank you for your work and your company ... and for your exhaustion!

Today is Women’s Day: my compliments to the women. Women’s day.... We used to say: why is there no celebration of men...? In the meeting with the wife of the President [of the Republic of Iraq], I said: “Because we men are always celebrating!” We need a celebration of women. The President’s wife spoke well of women; she told me beautiful things today: the strength that women have in carrying on life, history, family... so many things.

Then, my congratulations to everyone!

Thirdly, today is the birthday of the COPE journalist, not the other day! Best wishes! We will have to celebrate it.... we will see how.... The floor is now yours.

Matteo Bruni:

The first question, Holy Father, comes precisely from the Arab world, from Imad Atrach, a journalist for Sky News Arabia.

Imad Abdul Karim Atrach (Sky News Arabia):

Your Holiness, two years ago in Abu Dhabi there was the meeting with Imam al-Tayyeb of al-Azhar and the signing of the *Document on Human Fraternity*. Three days ago you met with Al-Sistani: can something similar be considered with the Shiite sect of Islam? Then a second thing: Lebanon. Saint John Paul II said it is more than a country: it is a message. Sadly, as a Lebanese, I can tell you that this message is disappearing. Can we envisage a future, imminent visit to Lebanon? Thank you.

Pope Francis:

The Abu Dhabi document of 4 February [2019] was prepared with the Grand Imam in secrecy, over six months, praying, reflecting, correcting the text. It was, I will say – it is somewhat presumptuous, take it as a presumption – a first step toward what you are asking me. We could say that this [with Al-Sistani] would be the second. And there will be others. The path of fraternity is important. Then, as to the two documents: that of Abu Dhabi left me with a strong sense of the need for fraternity, and [the Encyclical] Fratelli Tutti resulted. Both documents should be studied because they go in the same direction, they seek ... fraternity. Ayatollah Al-Sistani said something that I am trying to remember properly: men are either brothers through religion or equal through creation. Fraternity is equality, but equality is the bottom line. I think that it is also a cultural process. We Christians can think of the Thirty Years War, about the Eve of Saint Bartholomew, for example. We think of this, and how our mentality has changed. Because our faith makes us realize that this is what the revelation of Jesus is, love and charity lead us to this. But how many centuries it took to accomplish it!

This is something important, human fraternity – how as men and women we are all brothers and sisters – and we need to make progress with the other religions. The Second Vatican Council took a major step with this; then the institutions, the Council for Christian Unity and the Council for Interreligious Dialogue; hence Cardinal Ayuso is with us today. You are human; you are a child of God; you are my brother or sister, full stop. This would be the biggest step to take and frequently we have to risk taking it. You know that there are criticisms in this regard: that the Pope is not

courageous; he is reckless, acting against Catholic doctrine, that he is one step from heresy.... There are risks. But these decisions are always made in prayer, in dialogue, asking advice, in reflection. They are not a whim, and they follow in the line of what the Council taught. This is my answer to your first question.

The second: Lebanon is a message. Lebanon is suffering. Lebanon is about more than maintaining an equilibrium. It has the weakness of differences, some of which are still not reconciled. But it has the strength of great reconciled people, like the strength of cedars. Patriarch Raï had asked me to make a stop in Beirut on this journey, but it seemed too little to me. A crumb in the face of a problem, a country that suffers as Lebanon does. I wrote him a letter. I promised to make a journey. But at this time Lebanon is in crisis, but in crisis – here I wish not to offend – in a crisis of life. Lebanon is very generous, in welcoming refugees.... This is a second journey.

Matteo Bruni:

Thank you, Your Holiness. The second question comes from Johannes Neudecker, from the German news agency, DPA:

Johannes Claus Neudecker (German news agency, DPA):

Thank you, Holy Father. My question is also on the meeting with Al-Sistani. To what extent was the meeting with Al-Sistani also a message to Iran's religious leaders?

Pope Francis:

I think it was a universal message. I felt the duty, on this pilgrimage of faith and penance, to go to find a great and wise man, a man of God. And we see this just by listening to him. As for messages, I would say: the message is for everyone; it is a message for everyone. He is a person who has that wisdom... and also prudence. He said to me: "For ten years" – I think he said it this way – "I have not received people who come to visit me with other aims, political and cultural, no. Only religious". And he was very respectful, very respectful in the meeting, and I felt honored. Even in his greeting: he never stands up, and he stood up, to greet me, twice. He is a humble and wise man. This meeting did me good. It is a light. These wise men are everywhere, because the wisdom of God has been spread throughout the world. The same thing is true with the saints, not only those who are canonized, but the everyday saints, those whom I call "the saints next door", saints – both men and women – who live their faith, whatever it may be, with consistency, who live human values with consistency, fraternity with consistency. I think we have to discover these people, to make them known, because there are so many of them... When there are scandals, also in the Church, so many of them and this does not help.... Then let us make known all those people who are seeking the path of fraternity, the saints next door; we will find members of our family, certainly: some grandfathers, some grandmothers.... Certainly!

Matteo Bruni:

The third question comes precisely from Eva Maria Fernández Huescar, from COPE, to whom we offer our best wishes again.

Eva Maria Fernández Huescar (Cadena Cope 31H):

Holy Father, how wonderful to resume press conferences! It is so beautiful!

These days, your journey in Iraq has had enormous repercussions throughout the world. Do you think this might be *the* journey of your Pontificate? It has also been said that it was the riskiest. Were you afraid, at some point of the journey? And now that we have resumed the journeys and you are about to complete the eighth year of your Pontificate, are you still thinking that it will be short? And then, the big longstanding question, Holy Father, the big question: will you ever return to Argentina? And while we are on the topic, because I am Spanish: will there ever come a day in which the Pope will go to Spain? Thank you, Holy Father!

Pope Francis:

Thank you, Eva. I made you celebrate your birthday twice: one in advance, and another late!

I will start with the last one, which is an understandable question... because that book written by my journalist friend, Nelson Castro, a physician. He had written a book on the illnesses of presidents and I once told him [when I was] already in Rome: you should write one about the illnesses of Popes, because it would be interesting to know about the illness of Popes, at least some of recent times. He began to do it; he interviewed me; the book has been published. They tell me it is good; I have not seen it. He asked me a question: “If you resign – if I die or if I resign – if you resign, will you return to Argentina or will you stay here?” – “I will not return to Argentina” – I said – “but will remain here, in my diocese”. But about the question of whether I will go to Argentina or why I don’t go there – I always answer a bit ironically: I spent 76 years in Argentina, that’s enough, isn’t it?

But there is another thing that, for a reason I don’t understand, is never said: a trip to Argentina had been planned in November of 2017. The preparations had begun: [plans were being made for] Chile, Argentina and Uruguay. But at that time – it would have been for the end of November – Chile was in the midst of election campaigns; in those days, in December, Michelle Bachelet’s successor was elected, and I would have had to go before the government changed; I could not go afterwards. But to go to Chile in January and then in January to Argentina and Uruguay was not possible, because January is like our August, July—August, for those two countries. Thinking the matter over, the suggestion was made: why not go to Peru? Because Peru had been passed over in my [journey to Ecuador, Bolivia and Paraguay](#); it had not been included. Hence the idea of

a January trip to Chile and Peru. I want to say this, to put a stop to the fantasies of “patriaphobia”. When the opportunity arises, we will have to do so, because there is Argentina, Uruguay and the south of Brazil, which is a great cultural mix.

Moreover, about the journeys: to make a decision about the journeys, I listen; there are many invitations. I listen to the recommendations of my advisors, but also of the people. Sometimes someone will come and I ask, What do you think, should I go to that place? It is good for me to listen, this helps me make decisions later on. I listen to advisors and in the end I pray, I pray, I reflect a lot; I reflected a great deal on some journeys. And then the decision comes from within: do it! Almost spontaneously, but like a fruit that has ripened. It is a long process. Some journeys are more difficult, others are easier.

My decision about this journey came early on: the first invitation came from the previous Iraqi Ambassador, who was a pediatric physician: she was good; she didn't give up. Then the Ambassador to Italy came; she is a fighter. Then the new Ambassador to the to the Vatican came, and he fought [for the journey]. Earlier, the President had come. All these things had remained within. But there was something before too, that I would like to mention. One of you gave me the Spanish edition of *The Last Girl* [by Nadia Mourad]. I read it in Italian. Then she gave it to Elisabetta Piqué to read. Have you read it? More or less.... It is the story of the Yazidi. And in it Nadia Mourad describes something terrifying, terrifying. I recommend you read it. At certain points, since it is biographical, it might seem rather depressing, but for me this was the real reason behind my decision. That book affected me.... And when I heard Nadia, who came here to tell me about things.... Terrible! Then, with the book, all these things together, led to the decision, thinking about all of them, all those problems,... In the end, the decision came and I made it.

Then too, in the eighth year of the Pontificate, I don't know if the journeys will slacken or not; I will only confess that on this trip I was more tired than on the others. Being 84 takes its toll! It has its effects.... But we shall see. Next [in September] I will go to Hungary for the final Mass of the International Eucharistic Congress. It is not a visit to the country, but for that Mass. But Budapest is a two-hour drive from Bratislava: why not pay a visit to the Slovaks? I don't know.... And so things begin....

Aaron Patrick Harlan (The Washington Post):

Thank you, Holy Father! This journey obviously had an extraordinary significance for the people who were able to see you, but it involved events that created conditions for the spread of the virus, in particular with regard to unvaccinated people, crowded together, while they were singing. When you considered the trip and what it would entail, were you also worried about the fact that the people who would come to see you could have become sick or even die? Could you explain to us your reflections and your preparations?

Pope Francis:

As I said recently, the journeys “brew up” over time in my conscience, and this is one of the things that I was very concerned about... I thought a great deal, I prayed a lot about this and in the end I made the decision, freely, it came from within. And I said: Let the One who helps me to decide care for the people. And so I made the decision, that way, but after prayer and with an awareness of the risks. All things considered

Matteo Bruni:

Thank you. The next question comes from Philippine De Saint Pierre, M.C. KTO.

Philippine de Saint Pierre (M.C. KTO):

Your Holiness, we saw the courage, the enthusiasm of Iraqi Christians; we also saw the challenges that they have to face, the threat of Islamist violence, the exodus and the [challenge of bearing]witness to their faith in their surroundings. These are the challenges of Christians in the entire region. We spoke of Lebanon, but also Syria, the Holy Land.... Ten years ago a Synod for the Middle East was held, but its development was interrupted by the attack on the Cathedral in Baghdad. Do you think about doing something for the entire Middle East, a regional synod or some other initiative?

Pope Francis:

I am not considering a Synod. Initiatives, yes, I am open to many. But a Synod did not come to me. You have sown the first seed. Let us see. Let us see what happens.

The life of Christians in Iraq is one of hardship, but not only the life of Christians.... I just spoke of the Yazidi..., and other religions that did not submit to the power of Daesh. And this, I don't know why, but this gave them great strength. There is the problem that you mention, of migration. Yesterday as I returned by car from Qaraqosh to Erbil, [there were] many people, young people, the age is very low. So many young people. Someone asked me: what is the future for these young people? Where will they go? Many will have to leave the country, many. Before departing for the journey, the other day, Friday, 12 Iraqi refugees came to greet me: one had a leg prosthesis because he had fled, under a truck and had had an accident.... So very many have fled. Migration involves a twofold right: the right not to migrate and the right to migrate. These people have neither of the two, because they cannot not migrate; they do not know how to do so. And they cannot migrate because the world has not yet realized that migration is a human right.

An Italian sociologist told me, with reference to Italy's demographic winter: “Within 40 years we will have to ‘import’ foreigners to work and pay the taxes for our retirement benefits”. You French

people have been more clever; you have gone ahead by 10 years with the law in support of the family; your growth level is very large. But migration is seen as an invasion. Yesterday I wanted – because he requested it – to receive, after the Mass, the father of Alan Kurdi, that little boy.... He is a symbol; Alan Kurdi is a symbol. This is why I donated the sculpture to FAO. He is a symbol that speaks of more than simply a child who died in migration: he is a symbol of dead civilizations, of dying civilizations, that cannot survive, a symbol of humanity. Urgent measures are needed to enable people to find work in their own country and not have to migrate. And measures to safeguard the right of migration. It is true that every country should carefully examine its capacity to receive them. Because it is not just about receiving them and then leaving them on the beach; it is about accepting them, supporting them, helping them to advance and integrating them. The integration of migrants is key.

Two anecdotes: in Zaventem, Belgium, the terrorists were Belgian, born in Belgium but Islamic immigrants, ghettoized, not integrated. The other example, [when I went to Sweden](#), the Minister bid me farewell: she was very young and had a distinctive appearance, not typical of Swedes. She was the daughter of a migrant father and a Swedish mother: so well integrated that she became minister! Let us look at these two things; they will make us think. Integration. As for migration, which I believe is the tragedy of the region, I would also like to thank the countries that have been generous, the countries that welcome migrants: Lebanon, Lebanon has been generous to migrants, two million Syrians there, I believe... [a million and a half Syrians, plus 400,000 Palestinians]; Jordan – unfortunately we will not be flying over Jordan – the King is so kind, King Abdulla, he wanted to pay us tribute with airplanes as we passed, I thank him now; Jordan is extremely generous: more than a million and a half migrants. And so many other countries, to mention only two. Thanks to these generous countries! Thank you, thank you so much!

Matteo Bruni:

Thank you, Your Holiness. The next question is in Italian, from journalist Stefania Falasca, of *Avvenire*.

Stefania Falasca (Avvenire):

In just three days in this country, which is a key country of the Middle East, you have done what world leaders have been talking about for thirty years. You already explained the interesting way your travels have come about, how decisions are made for your journeys, but now, as things stand, and thinking also of the Middle East, could you also consider a journey to Syria? What might be, over the next year, some other places in which your presence is requested?

Pope Francis:

Regarding the Middle East, the only hypothesis, and also the promise, is Lebanon. I have not

thought about a journey to Syria; I have not thought about it because the inspiration has not come to me. But I am very close to Syria, war-torn and beloved, as I call it. I remember at the beginning of my Pontificate the afternoon of prayer we celebrated in Saint Peter's Square, there was the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and we prayed the Rosary... But there were also many Muslims, many Muslims with their rugs, who prayed with us for peace in Syria, to stop the bombing, when there was talk of imminent heaving bombing. I carry Syria in my heart. But as far as a journey is concerned, it has not come to my mind at this time. Thank you.

Matteo Bruni:

The next question comes from Sylwia Wysocka, PAP – Polish Press Agency.

Sylwia Wysocka (PAP - Polska Agencja Prasowa):

Your Holiness, over these twelve very difficult months your own activity has been very limited. Yesterday you had the first direct and very close contact with people in Qaraqosh. How did it feel? My first question. Now, the second. In your opinion, now, given the overall health situation, can the General Audiences resume with people, the faithful, present as they were before?

Pope Francis:

I do feel different when I am away from people in the audiences. I would like to resume the General Audiences as soon as possible. Let us hope that the [right] conditions will permit it; I follow the rules of the authorities on this matter. They are in charge and they have God's grace to help us with this. Those in charge provide the rules. Whether we like it or not, they are in charge and they have to do so. I have now resumed the Angelus in the Square; with distancing it can be done. There is a proposal for small General Audiences, but I have not decided until it become clear how the situation will develop. But after these months of 'imprisonment', because I really felt somewhat imprisoned, for me, this is to live again. To live again because it means touching the Church; touching the holy People of God; touching all peoples. A priest becomes a priest to serve, to be at the service of the People of God, not for careerism, not for money. This morning at Mass there was the [reading of the] healing of Naaman the Syrian, and it said that Naaman wanted to offer gifts after being healed, but the Prophet Elisha refused. The Bible goes on to say: and the servant of the Prophet Elisha, then, when they had left, accommodated the Prophet and ran after Naaman and asked him for the gifts. And God said: "the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you" (cf. 2 Kings 5:1—27).

I am afraid that we, men and women of the Church, especially that we priests, do not have this freely given closeness to the People of God, which is what saves us, and we do as Elisha's servant did: help them, yes, but then ask for something.... I am afraid of that leprosy. And the only thing that saves us from the leprosy of greed, of pride is the holy People of God. What God said to

David: “I took you from the flock; do not forget the flock”. What Paul said to Timothy: “Remember your mother and your grandmother who ‘nursed’ your faith”. In other words, do not lose your closeness to the People of God and become a privileged caste of consecrated people, clerics, any such thing. Contact with the people saves us, helps us; we give the people the Eucharist, preaching, that is our role. But they give us closeness. Let us not forget this affinity with the holy People of God.

You began by asking: [what did I encounter in Iraq, in Qaraqosh...](#)? I had not imagined the ruins of Mosul, of Qaraqosh; I had not imagined, truly.... Yes, I had seen pictures, I had read the book, but I was struck, it was striking. And then, what touched me the most is the testimony of a mother in Qaraqosh. The testimony was given by a priest who truly knows poverty, service and penance, and by a woman who lost her son in the first Daesh bombings. She said one word: forgiveness. I was moved. A mother who says: I forgive and I ask forgiveness for them. I was reminded of my [journey to Colombia](#), of that [encounter at Villavicencio](#), where so many people, women especially, mothers and wives, recounted their experience of the murder of their sons and their husbands and said: “I forgive”. But we have forgotten this word; we are experts at insulting; we are great at condemning, myself before anyone; we know this well. But to forgive! To forgive enemies: this is pure Gospel. That is what struck me most in Qaraqosh.

Matteo Bruni:

The last question is from Catherine Laurence Marciano, AFP:

Catherine Laurence Marciano (AFP):

Your Holiness, I wanted to know how you felt in the helicopter when you saw the city of Mosul destroyed and then prayed at the ruins of a church. If I may, seeing it is Women’s Day, I also wanted to ask a small question about women. You supported the women in Qaraqosh with really beautiful words, but what do you think about the fact that a Muslim woman in love cannot marry a Christian man without being repudiated by her family or even worse? The first question was about Mosul. Thank you, Your Holiness.

Pope Francis:

Regarding Mosul I mentioned somewhat *en passant* what I felt when I halted before the ruined church. I was speechless. It is unbelievable, unbelievable.... Not only this church but also the other churches, even a mosque destroyed. Evidently it was not in agreement with the people.... Our human cruelty is unbelievable. In this moment, I do not want to say the word, it is starting over again. Let us look at Africa! And with our experience in Mosul, these destroyed churches and everything, it creates hostility, war, and the so-called Islamic State is starting to act again. This is a terrible thing, really terrible.

Before moving on to the other question. A question that came to mind in the church was this: Who is selling weapons to these agents of destruction? Because they do not make the weapons at home. Yes, they may make some devices.... But who sells the weapons? Who is responsible? I would at least ask those who sell weapons to have the candour to say: We sell weapons. They do not say it. It is terrible.

Women. Women are more courageous than men, this is true; that is how I feel. But today too women are being demeaned. We go to that extreme: One of you, I don't know who, you showed me a price list for women.... I could not believe it: if the woman looks this way, she costs this much, it costs... to sell them. Women are being sold; women are being enslaved. Even in the centre of Rome. The fight against trafficking is a daily job. In the Jubilee [of Mercy] I paid a visit to one of the many houses of the *Opera di Don Benzi*: girls who had been rescued, one with her ear cut because she had not brought in the right [amount of] money, that day; another one, brought from Bratislava in the trunk of a car, a slave, kidnapped. This happens among us, the "civilized", human trafficking. In these countries, especially in part of Africa, there is mutilation; there is mutilation as a rite that has to be performed. But women are still slaves and we have to fight, fight for the dignity of women. They are the ones who carry history forward; this is no exaggeration: women carry history forward. And that is not just a compliment for today, Women's Day; it is true. Slavery is like this, the rejection of women.... Think that in a certain place there was a debate about whether the divorce of a wife must be written or just verbal. Not even the right to the deed of divorce! This happens today. But so as not to distance ourselves, let us think of the centre of Rome, of the girls who have been kidnapped and are being exploited. I think I have said enough about this.

Matteo Bruni:

Thank you, Holy Father.

Pope Francis:

I wish you a good end to the journey and I ask you to pray for me, since I need it! Thank you!