

Pope Visits Iraq as Assyrian Christians Request Fervent Prayer

During a first-ever visit of the pope to the first nation to accept Christ, Assyria, now known as Iraq, many are praying. This comes despite the fact that the current pope is not held in high regard by Christians worldwide due to his socialist leanings. Still, many pray the visit will help secure the Assyrian Administrative Area, a secure area for the indigenous Assyrian Christians of Iraq, who are guaranteed a self-governing area of their own under the same legal framework as the Kurds in Kurdistan are in their homeland.

The visit begins on March 5 in Baghdad, moves to Najaf and then to Assyria in the north, where the pope will have meetings in Irbil in the Assyrian homeland.

"The people of Iraq are waiting for us," Pope Francis said of his planned visit. "They were waiting for Pope John Paul, who was not allowed to go. The people cannot be let down for a second time. Let us pray that this trip can be carried out well."

Seen in the Middle East as the representative of Christendom, the pope (and his visit) is a net positive, as this trip represents an opportunity to bring the position of Christians in the Middle East to the fore. Nevertheless, Christian leaders have concerns about the visit, including Mar Awa Royel, bishop of the Assyrian Church of the East. Commenting on the theme of the visit, "We Are All Brothers," Awa said, "We are seeing no meetings by the pope with other major Christian groups, including the Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East Mar Gewargis, as well as no roundtable meetings with leaders of the various Christian denominations in Iraq." These are described in the book *Liberating Iraq: The Story of the Assyrian Christians of Iraq*.

Awa added, "The giant elephant in the room is the reality of the indigenous people of Iraq—we strongly oppose the use of the term 'minority' to refer to our people for the simple reason that we are the indigenous, original people of Iraq and were here long before the Arabs came. We are the first Christian nation in the world."

The Assyrian Christians—who most people do not realize still speak the language of Jesus, Aramaic—were the first Christian nation to accept the gospel when it was brought by the apostle Addai. They were the greatest missionary-sending nation in history, bringing the gospel to China, India, Japan, most of Asia, Europe and much of the known world at that time. Most people in the world owe their very salvation to the great Assyrian missionary force. Now, that same people—the Assyrian Christians—need the help of the world to survive in our own homeland."

Currently the greatest need for indigenous Assyrian Christians, who have seen their numbers go from about 2.5 million, approximately 10% of the population, just before the liberation of Iraq in 2003, to 500,000 today, according to the Iraqi government.

Experts point out that the Assyrian Christian refugees, numbering nearly 500,000, will not return to their villages destroyed by ISIS unless they have their own self-government, security and a way to make a living.

It was the foreign minister of Iraq who told the great Assyrian Senator John Nimrod, "It is better to own your own small apartment than to rent a big mansion—nobody will ever give you 'rights.' The only way you can ensure your culture, your history and your freedom is to have your own area that you control and provide security for," strongly urging the Assyrian Christians to accomplish the goal of formalizing the Assyrian Administrative Area.

It was then-Sen. Joe Biden who, at the height of the Iraq war, proposed the "Biden Plan," which proposed the decentralization of Iraq into its main four parts: the southern area, which is predominantly Shia; the middle part, which is predominantly Sunni; the northeast, Kurdish; and the Assyrian homeland. The Biden Plan follows the pattern of U.S. states, which have maximum local administration, as the only way for the whole of Iraq to survive, a concept many are hoping can be revived with the current Biden regime.

The population of Assyrian Christians is nearly 20 million with the inclusion of the Uighurs, the descendants of the Assyrian Christians who were separated from the homeland due to the closing of the Silk Road following the rise of Mohammedanism, which resulted in their forcible conversion to this religion. Much prayer is requested in this regard for them to return to the faith of their fathers.

In his book, *God, Trump and the 2020 Election*, bestselling author Stephen Strang quotes David Curry, president of Open Doors USA, as saying, "Nearly 1 in every 12 Christians in the world today lives in an area or in a culture in which Christianity is illegal, forbidden or punished."

With the dramatic changes that have happened, America may very well begin to share with the persecuted Assyrian Christians of Iraq, Paul's charge to the young Timothy: "Yes, and all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12).

"We call upon the international community and Christians in particular during this time to contact their representatives worldwide to demand that the Assyrian Administrative Area be provided for immediately so the nearly 500,000 Assyrian Christian refugees can return to their homeland and enjoy the self-rule, security and economic resurgence they are entitled to as the indigenous people of Iraq," said one Assyrian Christian. "They will never go back to live under Mohammedan

domination in their very homeland and as the only solution to the refugee crisis.”

Those wishing to support the urgent crisis facing the Assyrian Christians of Iraq can visit this link. {eoa}

Amir George is an author and speaker who directs The World Helpline, .

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