



MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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September 2017

Vol. 54 No. 9

Veritas in Iraq



Dear Mission Friends:

Truth be told, please! In today's world where we are bombarded by information everywhere we turn, 24 hours a day, how do we choose which news to read or hear or watch? How do we discern which "facts" are facts and which are slanted, distorted, or glossed over, understated, overstated, omitted, or—as in the now all-too-familiar phrase, *alternative facts*—fabricated?

My attempt to gather quick information about the most recent events in Mosul, Iraq, for example, left me feeling confused, frustrated, and manipulated.

We know that in August of 2014, ISIS stormed the Nineveh Plain and captured the city of Mosul. Hundreds of thousands of Christians, Yazidis, and other religious and ethnic minorities, targeted for extermination by the extremist group, were abruptly driven from their homes and the lives they knew. Their fates varied according to their usefulness: some were killed on the spot, some sold as sex slaves, some horrifically tortured for the world to watch and take note.



More than 150,000 others fled north in desperate haste, eventually taking shelter in makeshift camps in the Kurdistan Region, where most remain today.

This past July, almost three years later, Mosul was officially taken back by the government of Iraq, as announced to the world by the commander-in-chief of all armed forces, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, calling "**the liberated Mosul**" a "**great victory**" over ISIS and declaring, "**Mission Accomplished!**"

But while one site showed the coalition leaders congratulating each other, clicking on another result revealed a woman arriving at the top of a mountain after escaping Mosul with her family just before the city had been retaken. Bent over and covered in dust and sweat, she said, "This is the best moment

A glimpse of a future in newly 'freed' Mosul: Against an endless backdrop of colorless rock and brittle bones, torched cars and violated homes, is the soft blush of new life, knowing eyes conveying stubbornness as well as anger, courage as well as fear. One day the dust will clear.

of my life. We were so hungry in Mosul. There was no money, no food. It's alright if we die here hungry. At least we're safe." They were among the hundreds of thousands still living in the area, caught in the crossfire between the intense thrust of the Iraqi forces determined to quickly retake the city, and the dogged ISIS efforts to destroy as many people and as much of the city as it could before their inevitable defeat.

Another click. Abadi declares 'total victory' over ISIL in Mosul and the return of normal life for its citizens. Click. A week after Iraqi officials declared victory in Mosul, all that remains in the Old City is rubble and unknown hundreds of bodies. Click. ISIS purged from Mosul. Click. Hunt for Isis fighters goes on despite declaration of victory in Mosul.



Far left, a decapitated statue of the Blessed Mother still standing in the Chaldean church of St. Addai; left, a soldier from the Christian militia lights a candle in the rubble of Immaculate Mary in Qaraqosh, the parish church of many of the Iraqi Dominican sisters.

Allowing that the Nineveh Plain is one of the most complex of the world's current hot spots, I narrowed my search, focusing on when or if displaced Christians would be returning to their homes. But once again I was "tossed to and fro (Eph. 4:14)" in a sea of contradictory headlines:

Christians Wish To Return To Mosul As City Is Liberated
As Mosul Battle Nears End, Iraqi Christians Wary Of Return After Mosul Victory,
Christians Eager To Return
ISIS Is Almost Defeated In Iraq,
But Thousands Of Christians Refuse To Return
Iraqi Christians Return To Qaraqosh Amid Fears For Their Safety
Christians May Not Return To Mosul For Years, If At All
Christians Need Time To Rebuild Trust Before Return To Mosul Region
Even If IS Ousted, Christians' Return To Mosul Unlikely
Christian Families Eager To Return To Mosul
Christians May NEVER Be Able To Return
Christians No Longer Want To Return To Mosul

Where does the truth lie? St. Thomas Aquinas, that great Dominican discerner of the truth, believed that at least a spark of truth could be gleaned from an opposing argument if one is listening thoughtfully and openly. But who has that kind of time?

There is only one source which I know with certainty to be reliable and trustworthy, which is not bound by an ulterior motive, whose spokespersons not only "bear witness to the truth (John 18:37)" but also grasp Aquinas's notion that there is some truth

everywhere: The Iraqi Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena, who, according to their prioress Sr. Clara, affirm that,

...Mosul has been liberated, but the amount of destruction is overwhelming...It will take years to be fixed...it is not easy to decide whether to go back to Mosul or not. Some people still try to understand what the will of God is. If ISIS is defeated that does not mean that the Plain of Nineveh is entirely cleansed from that mentality. However, we as community decided to [eventually] return with our people, and pray and hope all people will have the courage to go back to their hometowns and be able to start from the beginning again.

This community was among the last to flee the area on that dreadful night in 2014. Squeezed into their cars, they crept along the dark crowded road, covering only 30 miles after 10 hours. Sr. Luma still vividly remembers: "Our superior...wouldn't let the sisters cry so that I could focus on driving." Sr. Clara recalls, "On August 6, 2014, we entered a tunnel and we did not know when we would get out of it...During these years, we cried, screamed, wondered, questioned God and our faith..." These sisters could have left the country, would have been welcomed by countless congregations, but they promised,

"We will not leave our people. Wherever they go, we will go with them." And from the moment they arrived in Erbil, Kurdistan till today, they have never stopped ministering to the needs of their fellow refugees. They started with "diapers and milk...[which] soon became blankets and tarps and food."

In an interview with *Catholic News Service*, Michel Constantin, regional director for the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, reported that "the nuns became the *de facto* managers of aid for much of the displaced community. Priests weren't trained to deal with this crisis. When we asked about the needs of the displaced, no one could answer with any authority except the Dominican sisters...[They] were everywhere...[They] were not the only religious order around, but they were unique."

In addition to acquiring and distributing supplies, the sisters cooked, provided emergency medical care, and eventually built clinics. And since Kurdish was the language of the local schools, they rushed to set up crude classrooms where they could teach the refugees in their native Arabic and Aramaic, starting with kindergarten and adding grades as time and space and finances allowed.



Far left, Christina's mother and two of her siblings, her "missing person" photo in the inset. Left, 3 years older, she sits with one of the Dominican sisters who prayed with the family all that time and now joins them in welcoming her back home.

Instinctively, the sisters were aware of another, unspoken, need: Dividing into pairs, they visited every camp regularly to "just sit and listen to the people...talk about what they were facing every day." Besides being displaced, most all of the families in the camps had been affected by ISIS in one horrible way or another. UNICEF reports that, in the chaos of fleeing the violence that began with the ISIS capture of the region and continued through the Iraqi recapture, roughly 800,000 children have lost one or both parents, and over 4,600 children have been separated from their families.

Our April 2015 newsletter described one such tragedy: a child being "snatched from her mother's arms as the family was fleeing Qaraqosh, and the parents have had no word on her whereabouts or condition since." The year before, when so many were scrambling to flee their homes, this girl's family had stayed behind, foolishly hoping that her father's blindness would elicit mercy from the terrorists. As they were being crowded onto a bus with other remaining families, a jihadist grabbed the 3-year-old from the arms of her mother who was then forced at gunpoint to continue to board.



I'm overjoyed to report that, in my most recent search, I discovered a follow-up to this story from June 10 of this year: "**After almost three years in captivity,**" the little girl, Christina, "has been reunited with her parents." This story's details were also inconsistent, depending upon the day or the site or the browser: Either Christina was an infant or a 3-year-old when she was snatched. Either she was held for "almost three years in captivity" by ISIS; or she was quickly abandoned by them and found near a mosque, alone and crying, by a Mosul family who cared for her for three years; or she was held by ISIS for one year and cared for by the Mosul family for two years. Either her older brother was called to let him know where they left her, or she was found and brought to her family by Iraqi Special Forces. Either she "appeared to be in shock" and would not respond to questions or she smiled brightly and repeated, "I'm with mum and dad." **But cause for rejoicing is indisputable. Christina's back home!**

During the three years she was missing, her family took great comfort from the sisters' routine visits to their camp. And the family can now count on the sisters' loving teaching to help guide Christina as she adjusts and heals.

Like all Dominicans, the Iraqi sisters are committed to education, to teaching the truth, to *Veritas*. Theirs is a commitment, however, fraught with uniquely challenging obstacles. Their students have seen more horror than any eyes should ever have to see. Moreover, many of those whose families stayed in Mosul—either because they were forbidden to leave or because they feigned allegiance to ISIS—were made to attend ISIS schools, and as hundreds of them escaped the city during the recent bloody takeover and arrived at the camps, the sisters discovered quickly that they had been learning violence and hatred rather than history and geography. Last year ISIS released a phone app that teaches the Arabic alphabet using drawings of weapons (*below*). Children are also taught the English alphabet in school, with such pictures as a battle for B, a gun for G, and a sniper for S. A typical word problem in math for older students involves calculating the number of "unbelievers" who could be killed by a car bomber. And all math texts are devoid of "plus signs" since they look like crosses!



All of the sisters' young charges—those who stayed and suffered ruthless indoctrination as well as those who fled for their lives in 2014—have been stripped of their rights as children to feel secure, protected, and carefree. The sisters, determined to restore their childhood rights, have recently renewed their promise to stay in Iraq: "For us it is important, very important, to be with our people. We were with our people before displacement, we were serving our people in displacement, and we will be with our people when they return." Their hope is to raise funds to rebuild their convents so that as soon as the area is deemed safe, they will be able to resume their previous ministries, especially teaching, along with the proper materials and supplies.

While Sr. Luma admits, "It is so hard to think of a future in Iraq," she and her colleagues know that that is precisely why their commitment to education is crucial—education presupposes a future and acknowledges potential, and in doing so it inspires courage and hope.

Undoubtedly bolstered by St. Dominic, who was able to convert heretics through preaching and example, and by their patron, St. Catherine of Siena, who wrote, "God grant that I may always be a lover and proclaimer of truth, and that for the sake of truth I may die (*Letters*, 277)," the sisters hope to counteract the effects of what the children have endured by continuing to teach the truth with integrity. But they need reassurance that they are also supported by those of us who still walk the earth.



Book Burning:
Ruins of the library at the University of Mosul, burned down by ISIS. They had shut down every department at the university except medicine and engineering, the only disciplines which could be of use to their cause. A would-be history major was told, "We have a new history. We have the right history."

A recurrent theme in their letters is that their pleas for help have not been heard: "*Is the world deaf and blind?*" Certainly sending financial help is a much needed and appreciated way for those of us who live in freedom to support those who don't. As is praying.

But in order to gain the courage and hope needed to see a future, to *create* a future, the children, their parents, the sisters—all the Iraqis—need to know that the rest of the world is aware of the truth of their daily lives, of the violence, and the fear of violence, that persist long after we've mailed in the check or finished our nighttime prayers. Since the so-called defeat of ISIS in Mosul, for example, the sisters fear "that our struggle will become only our own affairs, and it will not have impact on the world anymore."



Indoctrination starts early in ISIS. Here a child soldier-in-training proudly holds up the knife he used to cut off the head of a teddy bear.

In this era of relentless media overload void of ethical guideposts, let us foster the kind of education that teaches the value of discerning the truth, of then spreading it far and wide, and of remembering it after the headlines have faded.

Let us no longer be infants, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine...in the interests of deceitful scheming. Rather, let us profess the truth in love (Eph. 4:14-15).

Peace to us all,
Lesley Warnshuis

Upcoming Mission Appeals
If you are in the area, please come and say hello to our preacher.

- Sept. 2-3: Our Lady of the Rosary, Union City
Fr. Martin Walsh
- Sept. 9-10: St. James the Greater, Vernal, UT
Fr. James Moore
- Sept. 16-17: St. Helen, Roosevelt, UT
Fr. Martin Walsh
- Sept. 23-24: St. Mary of the Assumption, Park City, UT
Fr. Martin Walsh

In the long run of history, the censor and the inquisitor have always lost. The only sure weapon against bad ideas is better ideas. The source of better ideas is wisdom. The surest path to wisdom is a liberal education.

*—Alfred Whitney Griswold,
*Essays on Education**



Still mightier than the sword.