



MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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“...a long,
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Civilians coming and going: some fleeing Mosul after being trapped inside with diminishing food and water while Iraqi and ISIS forces fought in their streets; others heading back to see the condition of their homes after being displaced for 2 1/2 years.

Dear Mission Friends:

The title quote is how one woman, held prisoner by brutal ISIS militants for the last two and a half years, characterizes her life in captivity. Her son was not able to move his partially paralyzed mother fast enough to flee from Mosul with the other 150,000 Christians who were expelled from their homes when the city was captured in 2014. Recently freed by Iraqi forces in their drive to reclaim the area, the mother and her son recounted being regularly beaten, pricked with pins, and forced to look at the militants' gruesome photo gallery as well as to watch live executions carried out by 13 year old boys.

The lives of well over three million Mosulis were all but obliterated on that hot, dry summer night in 2014. Some

who were detained and imprisoned were executed immediately for being too threatening, too young, too old, or just useless in general to the militants.

Those who could be of some use were spared and made to spend days, weeks, and even months in detention after having been separated and grouped according to their usefulness. Babies were snatched from mothers' arms to be held for ransom, girls and young women were taken by busloads to be auctioned off as sex slaves, and boys and young men were taken away to be trained to kill or carry suicide bombs.

Others who somehow survived, even for just a short time, had only moments to 'choose' from among various options:

Some were allowed to remain in their homes, at least at first, by paying an exorbitant fine. Others agreed to convert and feigned sympathy with ISIS by betraying their neighbors, pointing out houses of Christians and/or the wealthy, whose bank accounts, valuables, businesses, and homes were among the first to be confiscated by ISIS.

Hoping to find some refuge elsewhere, most of the survivors hurriedly fled out the gates of the city with nowhere to go and nothing but the clothes on their backs. Many of them were also made to endure strip-searches before they could pass through the gate. One elderly woman's finger was cut off because her arthritis prevented the ISIS guard from removing her wedding ring.



*Everyone
wants
the
nightmare
to end.*

Regardless of which path these survivors took in their desperate attempt to save themselves and their families, all of them would, I'm sure, consider the woman's description of her experience under ISIS' iron fist to aptly characterize their own as well. Even for those few allowed to remain in their homes, it has been, and continues to be, "...a long, long nightmare with no color..."

Thousands of the Christians who were able to flee landed in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan, where they remain today, living in crowded makeshift pods and barely subsisting on spotty humanitarian aid. As you know, these include our Iraqi Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena who have been living among and ministering to the displaced, of all faiths, in Erbil.

In her November 2016 update, Prioress Sr. Marie Hanna, O.P., wrote, *"It has been two years and four months since we left Nineveh Plain. It has been a long time of displacement, of humiliation, of need, of exile..."* One need not have much of an imagination to hear the uncharacteristic defeat in her voice as she has begun to realize that

the nightmare will not be over any time soon, if ever.

Ironically, Mosul is Arabic for *connection point*, so named by the ancient Assyrians because the Tigris River, upon which Mosul was built, connected—and was shared by—the east and the west. And if Mosul was the geographic connection between the two worlds, Christianity was the religious and cultural connection.



Sr. Marie Hanna, O.P.

The Nineveh Plain on which Mosul stands was one of the most ancient settlements of Christianity, established in the first decades after Jesus died. By the second century, Christianity was flourishing as the Church of the East. Most of Iraq remained Christian until the seventh century which saw the advance of Islam and its gradual replacement of Christianity as the religion of the majority. Christianity and other ancient minority religions survived, though, coexisting alongside each other and Islam. Indeed, the co-mingling among believers of various faiths has long been a part of Iraqi identity.

Even as recent as 1987, according to the country's census, there were 1.5 million Christians in Iraq, inhabiting dozens of thriving villages in the Nineveh Plain. Mosul itself was known as Iraq's most diverse, tolerant, and culturally rich city, home to Sunnis, Christians, Yazidis, Arabs, and Kurds. In a recent interview, a Christian man from Mosul recalled a time, unlike today, when, "in the factories, on the farms, in the offices, nobody asked, 'What are you?'"

But in just the last few decades, the Christian population in Iraq has experienced a huge decline. After the fall of Saddam Hussein, Christians began to be targeted by angry al-Qaeda extremists. A mass exodus then, coupled with the current genocide being perpetrated by ISIS, brought the population to fewer than 300,000 today.

In a January article in *CRUX*, Fr. Benham Benoka, president of the Humanitarian Nineveh Relief Organization, estimated that in two years, “if the situation continues as it is now...the cradle of humanity will disappear.”

In making a plea to the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee to stop ISIS, Iraqi Dominican Sister Diana Momeka, O.P. asserted that, “Christians have for centuries been the bridge that connects Eastern and Western cultures. [Allowing this bridge to be destroyed] will leave an isolated, incultured conflict zone emptied of cultural and religious diversity.”

Addressing the UN this past April, Dr. Thomas F. Farr, Director of the Religious Freedom Project at Georgetown University, takes this one step further, warning that the plan of ISIS to rid the area of Christians and other religious minorities would mean “the destruction of religious pluralism, and with it any opportunity for stability, stable self-governance, and economic development.”

Such an opportunity may not exist, however, even if a good number of Christians remain as they had planned. Talk of Iraqi forces’ offensive to reclaim Mosul from ISIS provided a glimmer of hope for those who wanted to stay in their ancestral homeland, and when the battle started in mid-October, forces were able to quickly take outlying areas that had been mostly empty of civilians.



Iraqi Dominican Sister Elene, O.P. with one of her preschool students.

But after two months, the fight for Mosul is proving to be tougher than expected, and, in spite of a year-end Pentagon report that the battle is “progressing...and the Iraqis are advancing every day,” huge numbers of Iraqi forces have been killed and the front lines have barely budged in weeks. A million people are trapped inside the city, many forced out of their homes in nearby villages when ISIS got word of Iraqi forces approaching. They have no electricity, are running low on food and safe drinking water, and are living in constant fear of the increasing cruelty of ISIS members, who, according to a recent *New York Times* article, “have become like mad dogs, and every member has the power of immediate execution.”

Hundreds of civilians have already been killed by ISIS snipers and suicide bombers. “We are amid hell,” said one civilian. “We don’t know when we will be bombed or if ISIS will return to kill us.”

Mosulis are beginning to think they will never wake up from their horrific nightmare. In November, Patriarch Ignace Joseph III Younan visited the Nineveh Plain and described unrecognizable, Mad Max-type scenes. In an email to *Catholic News Service*, he wrote, “We discovered that the terrorists, out of hatred to the Christian faith, set fire to most of the buildings, including churches, schools, kindergartens and hospitals,” noting that only Christian properties were targeted. Indeed, according to an AP article on Christmas Eve, “Returning home for good appears a distant prospect.”

In her November letter, Sr. Marie Hanna affirms: “*People are following the news of the army advancing in Nineveh Plain every single minute...many Christian militants among the army...have been sending us photos...showing our churches, homes, schools, and convents, hospitals...etc. burned and destroyed after they had been looted. We were shocked that even our cemeteries were dug—is it possible that even the dead did not survive their cruelty?*

Obviously, we are following the news with mixed feelings. On the one hand, we are grateful that our towns are eventually being recaptured. On the other hand, it is heart-breaking to see the damage that ISIS had caused. We knew that when we left, our towns will not be the same when we return. But, we were hoping to be comforted by seeing our houses standing, at least, which

would encourage us to return. The reality is that ISIS has used our houses to hide tunnel entrances and store weapons. Additionally, they planted bombs...ready to explode as soon as the door opens, and [land] mines are everywhere... we fear that our houses might be a trap for us...It will not be possible to return to any of the liberated towns until the government announces it is safe...People are wondering how to go back as there are no basic physical...structures and facilities (e.g., buildings, roads, and power supplies) in the damaged towns. In country where there is no insurance, people wonder who is going to help them."

Sr. Diana told the UN, "There are many who say, 'Why don't the Christians just leave Iraq and move to another country and be done with it?' To this question we would respond, 'Why should we leave our country? What have we done?'" Sr. Marie Hanna writes, "As sisters, we are worried about the legacy of our land. We do not want our heritage to be wiped up when process of cleaning the place happens. We hope someone will help us to document history."

Carl Anderson of the Knights of Columbus believes that people should be allowed to decide their own future, and so, for those who still want to stay after viewing their devastated houses, there must be a strategy to not only repair or rebuild the infrastructures and community facilities and help the citizens to

resettle, but also to lay the foundation for re-creating a safe, stable, and pluralistic—yet united—society. And Chaldean Patriarch Louis Sako preaches that the Iraqi Christians "are in need of an efficient, true, and permanent protection that reassures them that there is no limit to their existence."

Recommendations for meeting these goals are quite ambitious: put pressure on those factions who directly or indirectly aid ISIS through financial support, weapons deals, or military training; invite local and foreign investors to provide capital to local entrepreneurs hoping to start businesses; and, because education can help rid societies of fundamentalism, hatred, and persecution, build thirty to forty universities in the country.

Just as ambitious, a more immediate recommendation in a December article in *Catholic News Service* calls for making "a concerted multilateral effort to establish a safe haven for [Christians] while rebuilding their devastated homelands." And Dr. Farr told the UN that he would like to see a safe haven that is "autonomous, multi-religious, [and] multi-ethnic," enjoying robust "economic revitalization, just and effective governance, treatment for trauma and psychological distress, plans for reconciliation," and guarded by international peacekeeping forces. He admits that "a lot would have to be accomplished for this to be a viable plan."

Indeed, the concerned people behind all of these idealistic plans and recommendations must be dreaming, but maybe the good dreams can help make the nightmares go away.

In the meantime, wherever they happen to be—in Mosul, on the outskirts of Mosul, or in refugee camps—Iraqi Christians are still in dire need of humanitarian aid. As Pope Francis said in an address last May, problems won't be solved "by discussion alone, but by concrete signs of solidarity with those most in need." But you, who so generously support our missionaries' work, already knew that.

In Christ's peace,
Lesley Warnshuis

Prayer for Peace

Lord, the plight of our country is deep and the suffering of Christians is severe and frightening. Therefore, we ask you Lord, to spare our lives, and to grant us patience and courage to continue our witness of Christian values with trust and hope. Lord, peace is the foundation of life; Grant us the peace and stability that will enable us to live with each other without fear and anxiety, and with dignity and joy. Glory be to you forever. Amen

~Louis Raphael Sako
Patriarch of Babylon and the Chaldeans

