



Nancy Keating, Finance Manager

March 2025

Vol. 62 No. 3

I know it's complicated. We can't simply drop money into impoverished areas. Many are so trapped in poverty that their misery seems almost inescapable. So limited are their opportunities that their persistent and oppressive poverty has become structurally entrenched. Their lives are severely diminished by the denial of the basics of human dignity. Good missionaries like ours, therefore, facilitate practical learning and skills to improve their quality of life and that of their community, thus helping to restore to them their human dignity, the cornerstone of Catholic social teaching.



But there can never be enough of those doing or supporting such work. Moreover, we tend to forget those hot spots of misery when they're no longer in the headlines. I myself was made to recall the mission we support in Iraq when I came across an article, almost a footnote, ironically entitled, *"Iraq Today: A Nightmare That Americans Largely Sleep Through."*

**The long-suffering Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena in Iraq are a shining testament to the positive effect of treating everyone they've met on their paths with human dignity,** even as they encountered huge jagged rocks at every turn. The congregation, which was founded in Mosul in northern Iraq in 1877, started running preschools and schools for girls in 1880. After the schools they ran were nationalized in 1974, the sisters remained as teachers. When their pay was cut to less than \$3.00 a month during our 1991-2003 economic embargo against Iraq, many employees left, but the sisters stayed on, even though, as one sister told then-Master General of the Order Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, *"We feel as if even God has forgotten us."* The sisters continued their apostolate against all odds, while experiencing the same daily suffering and catastrophes as the people and country of Iraq.

Then in 2014, Mosul was captured by ISIS and an estimated half million people, including more than 120,000 Christians, were forced to choose between joining them and their extremist beliefs or being horrifically murdered. Many thousands were fast enough to flee, including the Sisters who headed toward Erbil while *"They were shooting over our heads. It was really scary,"* one Sister remembers. In the refugee camps, the Sisters separated again, going wherever they were needed to minister to their fellow refugees, eventually setting up makeshift schools and clinics and providing spiritual support and presence. **In the midst of their own fear and displacement, the Sisters were helping others to know they were not forgotten.**



After the Iraqi army regained control of Mosul in July 2017, the world's attention waned. **But thousands of courageous and/or desperate returned from their years of exile to find nearly everything had been destroyed.** The Sisters were also hit with the facts that not only had most of their family members moved away to other countries, they had also lost many of their fellow Christians who had returned and then left again, having found their homes looted, often by neighbors, and severely damaged or burned to the ground.

But the Sisters have always pledged to minister there as long as there are Christians to minister to. And so, barely skipping a beat—thousands of bodies were still being cleared from the ruins—they set up schools wherever they could, including at their own convent in Qaraqosh because, they said, the need for a school there was more pressing than having a convent. **Keeping schools going gave hope to families and helped to persuade them to remain in Iraq.** They gave accommodation in any habitable convents to many who had been orphaned by the fighting and subsidized tuition for the poor.



*Top, settling in to the refugee camps; above left, Sisters returning to their motherhouse in Mosul; right, children heading back to school, following the leader to avoid hidden bombs left behind.*





*The charism of the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena: planting and nurturing human dignity.*



Their schools have always welcomed both Muslim and Christian children, giving extra attention these days to teaching how to relate with one another as friends. A Sister visiting from the U.S. remarked that the Iraqi Sisters are highly regarded as top educators in the country, so parents of all religions are eager to send their children to their schools. **Indeed, as with those serving in all our mission areas, children's well being is always the highest priority.**

The government after ISIS was still unsettled, however, facing an uncertain future and providing limited security. The sisters said they would go to sleep, always fitfully, not knowing what was going to happen the next day. Even years later much of the Old City is in ruins—rubble is still being cleared and falling buildings with exposed rebar are being ignored.

**Government officials and residents both say there is a long way to go before Mosul sheds the sadistic legacy of ISIS,** who not only destroyed buildings and infrastructure and countless irreplaceable antiquities but also deeply injured the spirit of the surviving Iraqi people.

Standing in the center of four demolished places of worship on a visit in 2021, four years after ISIS was defeated, Pope Francis lamented how so many Christians had been forced to flee: *“Indeed such a richly diverse cultural and religious fabric as this is weakened by the loss of any of its members, however small. As in one of your intricately designed carpets, one small thread torn away can damage the rest.”*

**Despite years of exile, economic hardship, and horrific violence, however, the Dominican Sisters continue working to heal that spirit and restore human dignity.** Besides teaching, the Sisters administer many outreach projects, creating places for people of different religions, classes, and ethnic groups to come together, meet, heal and reconcile. Iraqis, especially Muslims, trust and appreciate their services as not being aligned with a certain side or narrow special interests.

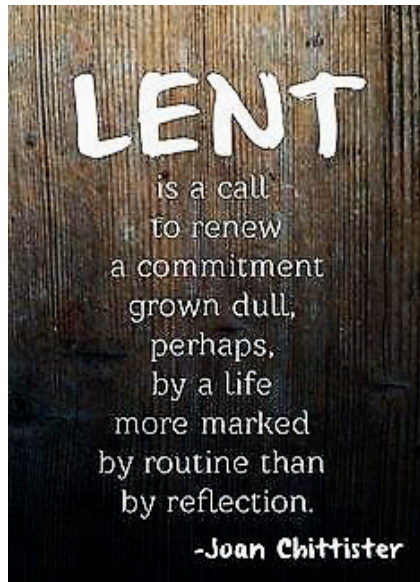
Following the Sisters' example, over 5,000 educators and parents have been trained in peace education. They have learned how to re-establish dialogue with young people out of school, identify those suffering from psychological distress, and answer sensitive questions about the inhumane events that took place so that healing can begin.

And residents have begun to realize that to prevent the return of violent extremism, they must call for and facilitate the reconstruction of homes, roads, schools, hospitals, churches, electricity and the water supply, all of which will have the added benefit of creating long-term jobs and in turn motivating the thousands still in refugee camps to reclaim their home and their rightful heritage in the cradle of civilization. That's a lot, and it doesn't just happen. But as the good Sisters exemplify, doing what really matters—the right thing in the right amount at the right time and for the right reason—will help that life-affirming cycle to begin turning.

It's so much easier to stay off Instagram for 40 days (except Sundays) than to meditate on, pray for, or in some way confront the current awful realities of victims of war zones, hurricanes, fire, abuse, or addiction. It takes a heart of courage and conviction to try to make sense of a world turned upside down, to look into the center of suffering and remain present. Let us recall the words of Desmond Tutu, another long-suffering, holy advocate of peace and human dignity: *“Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.”*

In gratitude for you,  
*Lesley Warnshuis*





*Amid the destruction and agony, there appears a cart full of fresh, healthy, brightly-colored gifts from the earth—a sign, perhaps, of the resurrection to come.*