Vatican
News



Women wave Vatican flags as they wait for Pope Francis to celebrate Mass at Franso Hariri Stadium in Irbil, Iraq, March 7. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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Irbil, Iraq — March 7, 2021

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Having witnessed or even experienced persecution for their faith, the Christians of Iraq must be careful not to harbor thoughts of revenge, Pope Francis told them.

After a full morning paying tribute to the victims of Islamic State violence, Pope Francis reached the last major event of his trip to Iraq: Mass March 7 with some 10,000 people at Irbil's Franso Hariri Stadium. Many ignored the social distancing measures put in place, and few wore the masks they were required to have because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Irbil, capital of the Kurdistan autonomous region in northern Iraq, hosts Syrian refugees and hundreds of thousands of displaced people, particularly Christians, from Mosul, Qaraqosh and other towns that had been under the thumb of Islamic State militants in 2014-17.

After blessing the altar with incense, Francis blessed a partially restored statue of Mary from a parish in Karmless. The Islamic State militants decapitated the statue and cut off its hands. The restoration reattached the head, but left the hands dangling.

"Here in Iraq, how many of your brothers and sisters, friends and fellow citizens bear the wounds of war and violence, wounds both visible and invisible," the pope told the crowd. "The temptation is to react to these and other painful experiences with human power, human wisdom," but the path of Jesus was to serve, to heal, to love and to offer his life for others.

Referring to St. John's Gospel account of Jesus cleansing the temple, Francis said Jesus did not want his Father's house to be a marketplace, and "neither does he want our hearts to be places of turmoil, disorder and confusion."

"Our heart must be cleansed, put in order and purified," the pope said.

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Anything that leads a person away from God or causes them to ignore the suffering of others must be cleansed, he said. "We need the baneful temptations of power and money to be swept from our hearts and from the church."

But, the pope told them, "to cleanse our hearts, we need to dirty our hands, to feel accountable and not to simply look on as our brothers and sisters are suffering."

Through his own suffering, death and resurrection, Jesus "liberates us from the narrow and divisive notions of family, faith and community that divide, oppose and exclude, so that we can build a church and a society open to everyone and concerned for our brothers and sisters in greatest need. "

"At the same time," the pope said, "he strengthens us to resist the temptation to seek revenge, which only plunges us into a spiral of endless retaliation."

With faith in Jesus and the experiences of the past decade, Francis told them, the Holy Spirit sends them forth "as missionary disciples, men and women called to testify to the life-changing power of the Gospel."

This story appears in the **Pope Francis in Iraq** feature series. View the full series.
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