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by OSV News

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Christians in northern Iraq have marked a powerful milestone of faith and survival. From Sept. 9-13, believers from the Chaldean, Assyrian, Syriac Catholic and Syriac Orthodox churches joined together in Erbil for the Festival of the Cross. The multi-day celebration included candlelight processions, prayers, concerts, sports and cultural events to mark an extended celebration of the Sept. 14 feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

Chaldean Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil, who has been working with leaders from other churches to plan the events, told pontifical charity Aid to the Church in Need — which helped support the celebrations — that the festival was a sign that the Islamic State group, or Daesh, that invaded the region a decade ago did not succeed in harming the faith of Christians.

"The timing of the festival is deeply symbolic. A decade ago, Daesh sought to erase Christianity from this land. Today, the very same communities will raise the cross high in public squares, in churches, and in joyful processions," he said. "What once was meant to be silenced has become a proclamation — faith has survived, and hope is stronger than death."

The Islamist extremist group controlled parts of the Nineveh Plains in northern Iraq from 2014 until 2017. More than 120,000 Christians sought refuge in Erbil in Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdistan region after fleeing their homes in August 2014.

ACN supported Christian refugees who fled in 2014, and following the defeat of Islamic State group helped rebuild Christian towns and villages, allowing communities to return to their homes.

The festival began Sept. 9 with a 1.3 mile candlelight procession in the Erbil suburb of Ankawa from the Chaldean Shrine of St. Elijah to the Assyrian Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, where a meal followed prayers and a homily by Mar Awa III — the Assyrian Church of the East's Patriarch.

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A packed program included prayers, music, cultural events, sporting activities and competitions in the lead up to the vigil of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross on Sept. 13.

The five-day festival is now set to be an annual event in the churches' calendars, following ecumenical celebrations in 2024. The 2025 festival builds upon previous year's activities "aiming not only to repeat its success, but also to expand its scope, deepen its content, and involve more youth and families from across the different churches," Warda told ACN.

The prelate also paid tribute to the Joint Youth Committee, composed of 20 volunteers from all four churches, who have played a lead role in organizing the event. He said: "Young people from all churches planned the festival together — organising prayers, sports, marathons, concerts, children's games and cultural events."

He said that "their collaboration became a visible sign of a new future. Older generations watched with admiration as the youth discovered that what unites them — their faith in Christ — is far greater than what divides them. In their hands, the dream of Christian unity in Iraq is already becoming a lived reality."

The festival is seen as vital to the future of Christianity in the country. According to Saddam Hussein's last census, there were 1.4 million believers, but numbers have fallen to well below a quarter of a million. Hussein served as the fifth president of Iraq from 1979 until he was overthrown in 2003 during the U.S. invasion of Iraq and executed in 2006. The death of the dictator brought a power vacuum that led to a devastating insurgency and sectarian civil war, widespread violence and insecurity, and the rise of extremist groups like the Islamic State group.

Warda said the Festival of the Cross is "more than a local celebration" — it's a "message to the global church.

"From the land of Abraham, where Christians suffered exile and persecution, comes a word of hope — we are still here," he said. "We are one in Christ. The cross has not been silenced, and in Iraq, a small and wounded church has shown the world the power of unity, the courage of faith, and the joy of resurrection life."