

“There is no peace without justice, and no justice without forgiveness.”
Saint John Paul II

Watching the news of what has been happening in Iraq since June 10, 2014 stirred up a lot of emotions, reopened old wounds and brought to the surface many of the buried memories of experiencing four wars in the land of my birth, Iraq. This home of my childhood and years of upbringing is well beloved by many for its historical significance. It is a land known as a spiritual home of many faith traditions and ethnic groups. Many consider that region of the world as a place where civilization started. It is a tragedy that such a rich history that goes way beyond Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc. has become known in the last few decades only by the many wars that destroyed its lands and devastated the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

Growing up as a child and spending over thirty years of my life on Iraqi soil, Mesopotamia, the land of Abraham, my faith was nurtured by breathing the spirit of many holy men and women of faith, many prophets and martyrs. My soul was refreshed by the water of Tigris and Euphrates... My heart was lifted up by the devotion of the pilgrims praying at many Christian monasteries and shrines, some as old as the 4th century, and the call for prayer in the Islamic tradition rising from the mosques and houses of prayer. My understanding of human relationships and love outside the family was formed by watching Christians and Muslims growing together, celebrating each others' religion and tradition, not only with respect, but most of all, with joy.

Hearing about the bloody conflicts that have been caused in the name of religion in my homeland since 2003 has made me wonder: is this only a nightmare or was the love and respect among different Islamic traditions and Christian denominations where I lived for over thirty years in Iraq a dream? It is hard for me to accept that my experience was a dream because what I have encountered in those years doesn't belong to me but to many men and women of that holy ground who taught me the power of love and that religion is a positive source of bringing people together, a sacred part of our life from where we draw our values and strength for living as people of one nation.

It is very sad to see how the world has turned to the love of power, which has turned religion into a device for developing political agendas to gain political power and control. It is this love of power that has caused a division among the people of one nation and planted the seed of revenge, which has produced many fruits of hatred, violence, and death in the name of religion and government, the two higher powers that are supposed to serve humanity by love, peace, and protecting human life. Watching the news and international views and perspectives on how to resolve the conflicts in the Middle East, in general, and in Iraq and Syria, in particular, brought to mind what Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta said, *“If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.”*

It saddened me to hear that some people believe that the power of weapons is the only solution for this conflict. It's disheartening to know that even though we live in a time and culture where everything is about advanced communication, still very few are willing to embrace the power of dialogue and make an effort to pursue the language of a shared common vision instead of weapons and armed forces. We have become blind because of revenge. As Gandhi said, *“An eye for an eye makes the world blind.”* What separates humanity from other creatures is our sense of reason. It takes courage to stop and look at the history and take a lesson that fighting and conflict

has never helped with settling differences between people and nations. The war between nations has claimed many precious lives. A Chinese proverb echoes this truth, *"The man who opts for revenge should dig two graves,"* and the words of wisdom from Saint John Paul II prove that the dark shadow that covers every nation who experiences such a tragedy: *"War is always a defeat for humanity."*

What is happening in today's world and in the lands and nations that are torn by war, hatred, and violence is a wakeup call to the whole world to choose the true path of courage and strength... a path that will have everlasting fruit, enough to shelter every family and embrace every human heart... a path that will bring a new life instead of claiming lives... a path that will manifest that we are a human family created by one God to love and to share. The umbilical cord that has its mark permanently on the belly of every human person is a physical reminder that we came to this world through another person, and we are called to live in this world with other persons. The child survives in the womb through the life of the mother, and each one of us can experience the fullness of life in the womb of this world through the life of people around us.

It is time to hear the cry of the poor, the suffering humanity, because of the constant attack on what makes us human despite our spiritual differences or nationality backgrounds. It is time to wake up from the sleep of indifference and the fear of looking on the wounds of division that have injured our human family. We each are called to make a difference and to help bring a remedy of reconciliation by seeking and promoting the path of forgiveness. Some of us may be called to take bigger roles than others in this path. However, regardless of the measurement of each person's part, we all have to try because even the light of a little candle can dispel the darkness in a small room.

It is my hope that as we hear and watch the news about Iraq, the Middle East, and other parts of the world that are suffering, we will stop and search for that one little candle and not to be afraid to light it and keep it lit even if it was as an offering of a simple prayer for the healing of our wounded humanity. Most of us have seen how a little stone thrown in a still lake can make ripples. If we each carry one little stone of prayer for forgiveness, healing, love, and peace to this "dead lake" of violence and revenge, we will create many ripples, and when they all mingle we will change the still surface of this "lake."

It is my prayer that the hearts of all the political and religious leaders in Iraq and beyond will be open to the love that can heal and reconcile. Love is the road that leads to forgiveness, and forgiveness is the key that opens the door of peace. Martin Luther King, Jr. said: *"Love is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the damning choice of death and evil. Therefore the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word."*

In his general audience on November 25, 2013, Pope Francis invited the audience to pray with him this prayer: *"Lord, grant that we be more and more united, never to be instruments of division. Enable us to commit ourselves, as the beautiful Franciscan prayer says, to sowing love where there is hatred; where there is injury, pardon; and union where there is discord."*

Mother Olga of the Sacred Heart,
June 26, 2014