



**Daughters of Mary
of Nazareth**

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**May truth and freedom come to every nation; may peace abound where strife has raged so long;
that each may seek to love and build together, a world united, righting every wrong;
a world united in its love for freedom, proclaiming peace together in one song.**

Dear Dr. Woo,

Peace and blessing to you. I pray this letter finds you well.

Encouraged by His Eminence, Cardinal Seán Patrick O'Malley, O.F.M. Cap., I take this initiative to write to you about the current tragic situation in Iraq.

First, please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Mother Olga (Yaqob) of the Sacred Heart, a Catholic Religious Sister in the Archdiocese of Boston and mother servant of the Daughters of Mary of Nazareth, a new diocesan community founded in 2011 under the guidance of our Archbishop, Cardinal O'Malley. By blood, I am Assyrian from Nineveh, born and raised in Iraq. By citizenship, an American.

Inspired by the mission and the commitment of the Catholic Relief Services throughout the world, and in Iraq in particular, I take this opportunity to write to you about the urgent needs for help in Iraq after the recent dramatic and incomprehensible developments that have occurred since the ISIS invasion of several of the capital Iraqi cities and some of the Christian territories in particular.

In order to explain to you my desperate cry for help and my effort to be a voice for the voiceless, the Iraqis who have suffered not only from the effect of four wars in the last four decades, but most of all, the persecution, humiliation, deprivation, etc. that has occurred since the ISIS attack in June 2014, I thought to offer you a little bit of background on my experience in the land of my birth and the journey of serving the Iraqis during the four wars.

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 the 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 waters of the Tigris and Euphrates and 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 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.

This past weekend the jihadist insurgents led by ISIS militants, who have seized control of Mosul, have ordered the northern city's large Christian community to convert to Islam, pay a special tax, leave or face execution. Patriarch Louis Raphaël I Sako, head of the Chaldean Catholic Church said, ***"It is shameful that Christians are being rejected, expelled and diminished. It is obvious that this would have disastrous consequences on the coexistence between the majority and the minorities, even among Muslims themselves, in the near and long term. Hence, Iraq is heading to a humanitarian, cultural, and historical disaster."***

Iraq's Christian communities are among the world's oldest. Some speak a form of Aramaic, a language spoken by Jesus Christ. Before 2003, Christians living in Iraq's second largest city of Mosul numbered 60,000 people, but that dropped to 35,000 this year and had shrunk to 25,000 by this past Thursday, according to Chaldean Patriarch Louis Sako. Many fled when ISIS occupied the city in June, 2014 and most of those who still remained abandoned their Mosul homes on Saturday, July 19th, following the jihadist ultimatum, leaving essentially no Christians left in the city. The Patriarch also stated, ***"For the first time in the history of Iraq, Mosul is now empty of Christians."***

For the first time in 1,600 years, Mass is not being said in Mosul: an ancient culture has been wiped out in a matter of weeks. According to the Vatican Radio, this past Sunday, July 20th, Pope Francis expressed his concern for the plight of Christian communities in the Iraqi town of Mosul and in other parts of the Middle East. ***"Today our brothers are persecuted, they are banished from their homes and forced to flee without even being able to take their belongings!"*** Assuring them of his closeness and constant prayer, the Holy Father said, ***"My dear brothers and sisters who are persecuted, I know how much you suffer; I know that you are deprived of all. I am with you in faith in He who conquered evil."***

On July 7th, in an interview by Aid to the Church in Need, Archbishop Yousif Mirkis, Archbishop of the Chaldean Archdiocese of Kirkuk, was asked: Do you fear the end of Christianity in Iraq? He replied: ***"Quite definitely. We are in the process of disappearing, just as the Christians in Turkey, Saudi Arabia and North Africa have disappeared. And even in Lebanon they now constitute only a minority."***

Yesterday, Al Arabiya News reported that ISIS burned a 1,800 years old church. Today, BBC News reported that ISIS took over one of the most ancient monasteries in Iraq and ordered the monks to leave the 4th century Mar Behnam Monastery near the predominantly Christian town of Qaraqosh. This monastery is considered a landmark of the Christian history in Iraq. It contains many relics and historical documents, books, religious articles, etc. The militants rejected a request from the monks to take away religious relics kept at the monastery.

Among the most tragic effects of this horrifying and incomprehensible crisis is the loss of human life and the suffering of thousands who have been displaced and deprived of what they have spent their whole lives building. Thousands of people have become refugees in these hottest months of the year. Without immediate humanitarian aid, many children, elderly and sick will not survive. The majority of them have been physically exhausted from walking miles and miles to get to a safe haven. They have also been mentally and emotionally devastated, not only because of the grief for their great loss, but also from the fear of their unknown future.

I am writing to beg for your assistance in whatever way your organization might be able to help the Christian Church in Iraq. I am not excluding the Iraqi Muslims. However, the majority who has suffered since the ISIS attack have been Christians and the Christian Churches have been places of refuge for all Christians and Muslims alike. Many parishes, schools and Christian centers have been turned into refugee camps for families. Many bishops have continued to organize and provide daily meals in their local Churches for the refugees. Realistically speaking, whatever resources they had to provide such service will soon no longer exist.

By helping save the Christians in Iraq, we are helping to protect the stabilization of the society in that country and region. For centuries Christians have contributed tremendously, like in many other parts of the world, by their schools, hospitals, orphanages and many other organizations that take care of the human person as a whole, body, mind and spirit. This echoes what Archbishop Yousif Mirkis mentioned in the same interview of July 7th to Aid to the Church in Need: ***“Before 2003 Christians made up only 3 percent of the population. And yet nearly 40 percent of the medical specialists were Christians. And the proportion of Christians in engineering occupations was exactly the same. That's quite impressive. In addition we provided a major portion of the intellectuals, writers and journalists. These were educated people with a Western orientation. The Christians have been the engine of Iraq's modernization.”***

It was very moving to read in some of the recent news how some local Iraqi Muslims, who experienced the goodness, generosity and kindness of their Christian neighbors, friends, coworkers, have demonstrated their disappointment for what's happening toward their Christian brothers and sisters. A Muslim university professor, Dr. Faris Nadhmi, writing on the presence and the contribution of the Christians in Iraq, said: ***“We are indebted to you, Christians of our country for our highest values as Iraqis. Whether we were from Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, Arbil... you all instilled in us for many generations the openness of mind, honor for diversity, and the respect of every person by your teaching on forgiveness and sacrifices for others. Do not leave your country and leave us in exile. Iraq will not be Iraq without you. You are the majority by your values, and that is your identity. Please do not leave.”***

Cardinal O'Malley has encouraged me to take this initiative to write to you asking for assistance for the Church of Iraq because of the admirable history of your humanitarian organization. Your charitable work has offered help to many countries and nations who suffered from tragedies and disasters. Trusting in your leadership and the mission of Catholic Relief Services, I am hopeful that whatever your organization may offer will bear tremendous fruit, not only in saving lives and offering aid for the survivors, but also, hopefully, by the grace of God, and the perseverance of the Iraqi people, there will be a better future for the nation who has been living under the shadow of death for decades.

It is my prayer and hope that by finding ways and resources to support the Church in Iraq, we will help the survivors to find hope. It will be a step to help them find a 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 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.

Peace in Christ, *Mother Olga*