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***“We are one human family whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. We are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers, wherever they may be.” USCCB on Solidarity***

Sunday, August 17, 2014

Dear Reverend Fathers, Brothers, and Sisters in Religious Communities,

Peace and blessing to you. I pray this message finds you all well in this summer season.

Inspired by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops’ announcement of observing Sunday, August 17, as a Day of Prayer for peace in Iraq, I take this initiative to write to all of you asking for your continued prayers for the Christians and other religious minorities in Iraq. In a special way, I want to ask you to keep all the bishops, priests, and religious communities in Iraq in your daily prayers and remember them in your daily Masses.

The grave situation in which our Christian communities in Iraq are suffering, and the desperate cry of their bishops and priests, led me to write to all of you. The Secretary General of the United Nations in his letter of July 20, 2014, and the follow up letter issued by the President of the Security Council on July 21, 2014, both condemned in categorical and unequivocal terms the atrocities committed against the Christians of Iraq by the militant, fundamentalist and terrorist Islamic group known as ISIS (now IS).

On August 11, Pope Francis tweeted: ***“The news coming from Iraq pains me. Lord, teach us to live in solidarity with all those who suffer [...] I ask the international community to protect all those suffering violence in Iraq [...] Those driven from their homes in Iraq depend on us. I ask all to pray, and for those who are able, to give material assistance.”*** Also on August 13, the Patriarch of the Chaldeans in Iraq, Patriarch Louis Sako, wrote in his appeal, ***“If the situation does not change, the whole world should take the responsibility of a slow genocide of a genuine and entire component of the Iraqi Society and of losing its heritage and age-old culture. ISIS tries to erase all traces.”***

The plight of the ancient Christian communities in Iraq, particularly the Assyrians, the Chaldeans, the Syriac Catholics and Orthodox, and the Armenian communities has caused the displacement of over 100,000 people, elderly, pregnant women, and children among them. They all left their homes and lost everything. Many of them had to walk on foot for days from village to village and from city to city, seeking safety for their lives. On August 15, Pope Francis tweeted, ***“My heart bleeds especially when I think of the children in Iraq. May Mary, Our Mother, protect them.”***

Christianity has been present in Mosul, formerly known as Nineveh, since the preaching of Saint Thomas, one of the Lord’s Apostles in the first century. Today, not one Christian is present and many ancient churches and monasteries have been destroyed. As Patriarch Sako wrote on August 10 in his appeal letter, ***“The churches are destroyed and desecrated; five bishops are out of their bishoprics, the priests and nuns left their missions and institutions leaving everything behind, the families have fled with their children abandoning everything else! The level of disaster is extreme.”*** A report from Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) on August 17, 2014, stated that the Islamic State desecrated about 45 churches in Mosul and converted some of these church buildings into mosques and operation centers for ISIS military.

As priests and religious, you can imagine the pain of the bishops, priests, and religious communities who have been forced to leave their dioceses, parishes, convents, and monasteries. As men and women consecrated to serve those in need, they find themselves today at a loss of how to provide basic necessities for about 130,000 Christian refugees scattered in four cities in northern Iraq. The Patriarch of the Chaldean Church described their experience as walking daily in the Stations of the Cross.

The most challenging task, after the basic necessities of providing water, food, and shelter to thousands of displaced families, is to find a way to provide spiritual consolation and renewed hope when the young and old are in despair. Pope Francis' personal envoy in Iraq, Cardinal Ferdinando Filoni, reported to the Vatican Radio, after visiting the displaced people during his current tour of northern Iraq, that one of the elderly men asked him: ***"What sin have we committed to be slaughtered in this way?"*** It is a true tragedy that about 300 women, between the ages of 15 and 35, have been kidnapped, raped, and are now being sold in a public market in Mosul.

As a religious sister in Iraq, I had the privilege of knowing all the religious communities who have been recently displaced. I served in Mosul and visited all the monasteries and shrines that have now been taken by ISIS and destroyed. On August 17<sup>TH</sup>, a report from the Dominican Sisters of Saint Catherine of Siena in Iraq, stated: ***"As for us, as a community, Sisters are scattered everywhere. We left nineteen places of ours, which include convents, schools and orphanages. Moreover, we have learned that our convent and the orphanage we own in Bartila have been taken by the ISIS. Also, our convents in Mosul and in Tal Kaif were taken (including a school and kindergarten)."***

The disaster is overwhelming, and we are unable to comprehend it all. Given the vastness of such human tragedy, the gravity of the loss of many lives, homes, religious culture and history, as well as the delay of response from the international community towards what has happened, leave many religious communities, priests, and bishops wondering if the Christian presence in Iraq will be saved or erased.

As a daughter of Nineveh, sister in Christ to all the bishops, priests, and religious in Iraq, I write to you, my brothers and sisters in Christ here in the United States of America, asking for your continued prayers with your parishes and religious communities. Our brothers and sisters in Iraq need our help and daily prayers to persevere as they await a new dawn of hope and peace.

Please be assured of my continued prayers for each one of you, your parishes and communities, and your ministries and the people whom you serve.

Yours in the Sacred Hearts of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,

*Mother Olga*

mother Olga of the Sacred Heart (Yaqob)

mother servant of the Daughters of Mary of Nazareth

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