



Have you forgiven them?

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1. HAVE YOU FORGIVEN THEM?

That was the final question that a journalist from Reunion asked me in an interview in February 2017, referring to my kidnapping by terrorists in Mosul in 2005. I answered him spontaneously: "Yes, straight away." - "How?" - "First of all, because we are disciples of Jesus, then because we do not solve the problem by not forgiving, and I would become complicit in it and full of hatred all my life."

This is a lesson I learned from my kidnapping, one afternoon in January 2005, when two gunmen pushed me into the trunk of their car for an unknown destination. I spent the night in a cold room, lying on the floor, hands and feet bound, blindfolded. Before closing my mouth with a bandage, my jailer asked me how much money I had in my wallet, which he had confiscated earlier. I told him that there were some \$300 for the poor. "What poor", he said to me, "you, you will be slaughtered!" I answered him quietly: "Then, you will distribute it in my place"! I spent the night praying, remembering the psalm that we recite at the offertory of the Syriac Mass: "Like a lamb led to the slaughter ...", and repeating the prayer of abandonment of Father Charles de Foucauld¹.

The next day, transferring me to another place, the kidnappers tried to intimidate me, but for me it was truly an execution walk, when the one who was

¹ Father,
I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you:
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul;
I offer it to you
with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord,
and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands,
without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.



keeping an eye on me put the knife under my neck, invoking "the name of God" to slaughter me, and saying to me, "Speak, if you have anything to say to your parents before the execution". I took his word as verdict, and said distinctly: "I offer my life for peace in Iraq, that her children, Christians and Muslims, may join hands in building this country." - "That's not what I want ...do you want to say a word to them?" he said to me. - "I have nothing else to say," I replied ... Then he withdrew his knife, exclaiming suddenly: "By Allah, these are good words," and the conversation took another tone. This confident abandonment, this invitation to solidarity between Muslims and Christians, was another lesson of my kidnapping. It gave me inner peace and the strength to *sustain me in the vital dialogue with Muslims*. A discussion ensued on traditional doctrinal disputes between Islam and Christianity (the divinity of Christ, the divine sonship of Jesus, the marriage of priests, the sense of gift ...). The visit of one they call their "Emir Prince" put an end to my captivity, and after a little discussion, he ordered my release against a heavy ransom. I was the first cleric to be kidnapped. The worst could have happened, as was the case for my brother Bishop Faraj Rahho, a Chaldean Catholic Bishop of Mosul, kidnapped and murdered in 2008.

An elderly lady, who came to congratulate me the day after my release to the bishop's residence, said to me: "Monsignor, may God cut their necks". I replied: "No Madam, it would increase the number of disabled in the world, nothing more. Let's ask instead that God "bend" their hearts!"

2. THE HISTORY OF THE PRODIGAL CHILD

You see, the great value of the story of the prodigal child as told in the Gospel of Luke (15: 11-32) is the movement in the young son from the depth of despair to hope, and in the father from offended paternity to love. This is "heart bending", I might say. The forgiveness sought by the child, overcoming his fear or his selfishness, becomes the occasion of new life. The forgiveness granted by the father becomes the creative energy of new life, the superabundance of kindness and the love of a father's heart, which is always ready to give both light and nourishment and to stimulate confidence. This is the great difference between the younger and the older brother, between Peter and Judas, between the Publican and the Pharisee in prayer, between the adulteress and the older people in the scene, between the woman who was a sinner and Simon, between mercy and justice, between forgiveness and hatred. Forgiveness is the experience of reintegration into life, while hatred is the placing of oneself beyond solutions.



Is forgiveness not then a distinctly family value! The life of two people, then three or four or more, two characters, two personalities, born of different fathers and mothers, with different sensibilities, building a commitment to life, day by day, with a sense of mutual understanding, patience, self-forgetfulness, sometimes exercising their faculties of hearing, sometimes forgetfulness, but always with love and attention. Otherwise we reach the sterility of two perpendicular lines that never meet. I will not preach to converts! Your presence here in the “Teams of Our Lady” is a most eloquent sign, a sign to be constantly converted into lived witness.

3. THE EXODUS OF MY PEOPLE

But, you say, Monsignor, we know all this from our infancy as a couple, as the young man in Luke's gospel said. Tell us about your people, your Church, your experience!

Good! I come from Iraq, a country that has been much talked about in recent times. In the summer of 2014 it was invaded by Daech, the Islamic State, IS or ISIS, the acronyms used in the West. My region, known as the "Plain of Nineveh", was the historical land of the Christians of Iraq. Its very name goes back to the time of Ninevah of ancient Assyria, to the biblical Jonah, anti-prophet of divine mercy, to ancient Mesopotamia of the Akkadians, of Sumer, of the Babylonians, of Assur, to a glorious time in history! On June 10, 2014, the Islamic jihadists, already masters of the city of Mosul, the metropolis of northern Iraq, issued an ultimatum to the 30,000 Christians who remained there, either to convert to Islam, or to pay the Jizia, a tax imposed on the People of the Book by the Koran, or else to be killed if they stayed in the city – where their ancestors were already living before the Muslim invasion in 630. They preferred to leave everything rather than deny their faith, and they went to the Christian cities of this "Plain", leaving their 30 empty and silent churches and monasteries as the only witnesses of their millennial presence in a city that was considered the cultural capital of the Christians of Iraq. On August 6, 2014, under gunfire from Daech, the whole population of the 11 Christian cities of the "Nineveh Plain", with the Christian refugees of Mosul, about 120,000 Christians, had to flee in haste, leaving their houses, their goods, their fields, their churches, their schools ... with nothing but the clothes they wore, and to rush, in disorder and despair, to the cities of neighbouring Kurdistan. On the morning of Transfiguration Day, Daech shelling killed three children, two boys, and a little 12-year-old girl, who were playing in front of their homes in Qaraqosh, my home town, the largest Catholic centre in Iraq with 50,000 inhabitants. This event, along with what had already happened



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Fátima 2018

16-21 Juillet – July 16th-21th – 16-21 de Julio – 16-21 Julho – 16-21 Luglio

to the Yezidi women of Sinjar, caused the Christians to panic and, fearing the same fate, they fled in disorder. A people destitute of everything, uprooted, abandoned, in disarray, thrown literally on the pavement, in need of everything: food, shelter, medicine, diapers, as well as schools, places of prayer, and especially hope in the future.

The Church, in the person of the bishops, priests, nuns and their lay collaborators, led the way in the organization of services - not always without tensions! External Christian and ecclesial organizations supported us effectively. May they be sincerely thanked for it.

This hard and bitter exile lasted more than three years, destabilizing many things, dangerously upsetting the fabric of relationships, especially in the family, destroying childhood, disrupting the future of our youth. It caused loss of confidence in the political powers, growing mistrust of neighbours whom we had previously welcomed into our homes, but who had now become our aggressors in the name of a negativist and destructive Islam. The hierarchy of the Church, overwhelmed by the magnitude of the tragedy and with no prospects for the future, were forced to deal with just immediate needs. The return after the military evacuation by the Daech felt more and more like suicide. More than 50% of Christians had already left Iraq, with emigration becoming a "reasonable" rescue option. "Our country no longer wants us, we no longer want it", chanted recent Iraqi Christian protesters seeking asylum in front of the UN offices in Beirut.

In fact, a year after the military release that took place in October 2016, only 25% of Christian families were able to return to their homes; in truth these were families who were devastated by emigration, traumatized by fear and uncertainty. What did they find? Houses burned, streets destroyed, shops ransacked, churches damaged or blackened by fire, crosses and bell towers destroyed, desecrated cemeteries, monasteries blasted by dynamite or changed into firing camps by the Daech ... If life is stronger than death, hope stronger than fear, attachment to ancestral land, no matter how nostalgic, needs to be supported by more than symbolic reconstruction projects, in order to seriously motivate confidence and the will to return. It's already a year after Daech ...

4. WHAT IS THE DAECH?

The Daech, or the "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria", as an Islamic organization of conquest, appeared in politico-media vocabulary around the years 2010, and actually invaded Mosul in June 2014, then large areas of Iraq and Syria. If we



were to summarize in two words the ideology of Daech, we could say it is a conquering, extremist, exclusivist and violent Islam, ready to resort to the use of terror. Is this not the image and these not the facts, which have been exposed for 4 years on the screens of the world, images and facts that have challenged people on the streets of the West itself, which they believed were safe? A challenge above all for Eastern Christians, who are destined to be exterminated by the sword or by imposed conversion, or to undergo massive eradication and forced abandonment of their own historic lands. Lands confiscated, plot by plot, over the centuries, to make it a "Land of Islam" where only Muslims of strict observance should live. This is an ideology that legitimizes the very slaughtering of Christians and Yazidis, simply because they are "kafir, infidels". Some say: "It is not just Christians and Yazidis who suffer from this extreme ideology, but even Muslims who oppose it". Certainly, but the weakest sector, the age-old victims since the advent of Islam are, once again, the Christians of the East, under multiple pretexts! At one time because of their dogma and morality, at another time accused of being "crusaders", or alleged allies of the Americans. Calumny, false accusations, jealousy, ignorance ... everything goes!

As a mere force of violent occupation, Daech is not an invincible force! The proof is when the international coalition and the Iraqi army committed themselves effectively. But, presenting itself as a political ideology, using religion to legitimize its evil action, it needs to be tackled at its ideological roots. Daech is not a spontaneous growth, but comes from a culture based on religious and legal texts that were never contested. It is the culmination of a dogmatic-political line of thought developed in Wahhabi-inspired schools (in Saudi Arabia), and by the Muslim Brotherhood (in Egypt), inspired by Ibn Taymyya, the most rigorous theoreticians of political Islam from the beginning of the 14th century. All subsequent Islamist militant factions, whether armed or unarmed, in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, are only ramifications of a fanatical ideology of political Islam, whose ultimate goal is to conquer the world. An illusion? No, a real project! This is the whole content of the discourse of contemporary political Islam. Restoring the Caliphate to Iraq and Syria was just the prelude. IS is in fact a resumption of the Islamic conquests of year 1 of the Hegira, and a return to the religious, social and political rules of life of 1439 years ago.

Political regimes and religious ideologies have manipulated these militarized movements, or supported them by giving them money and weapons. For political and economic reasons, local or more widespread, some of these manipulators are powers that boast of their "statues of freedom" or refer to their "charters of human rights" and peoples. It is to all these "suppliers" that the action should be directed. Have you ever wondered why Daech is present in



Sunni majority areas, be it in Iraq, Syria or elsewhere? Regions rich in oil and gas deposits... Simple coincidence!

5. CONDITIONS OF A NORMAL AND HONORABLE "LIFE WITH"

La Croix, on November 19, 2017, carried the headline: "In Iraq, Daech is (almost) finished". It is this "almost" in parenthesis, which intrigues us. Military action alone is not enough to defeat Daech. Military liberation alone is not enough to convince people to return home. There needs to be another more extensive project that seriously concerns itself not only with post-Daech Iraq, but with all countries of the Arab-Muslim world: the struggle to purify religious (Islamic) extremist thought from fanaticism and the negation of the other; the struggle for the separation of the Muslim religion from political power, which would render a great service to Islam as a religion, restoring to it its religious soul and its saving inspiration, and freeing it from the political manipulation that subjugates it.

Christians, like the Yazidis, have suffered too much from the age-old discrimination of the ruling regimes, who follow or are still inspired by Muslim Sharia. These barely know or tolerate their existence, to the point that they have always felt like second-class citizens. This second-class status has resulted, many times in history, in attacks or provocations on the part of their neighbours. The most deadly example was the 1915-1918 genocide by the Ottomans. Is the project of the Islamic State, Daech different? The proof is the Sinjar² of Yazidis and the Christians' Plain of Nineveh.

What the Christians in Iraq yearn for is to be able to return peacefully to their towns and villages, and live without fear of their neighbours. This would imply a vast programme involving the healing of wounded memories and the restoration of mutual trust by appropriate committees of wise people from different communities. At the same time, extensive compensation and reconstruction programmes are needed for restoring essential infrastructure and public services. However, these programmes can only be effective in the long term if they are supported by just laws that guarantee the rights, freedoms and respect of all, including cultures and religions, without favouritism. These guarantees must necessarily engage the central government of Baghdad and Kurdistan.

² A massacre which occurred in and around the city of Sinjar, which has become synonymous with 'massacre'.



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Likewise, they should normally be supported by international organizations, indeed the great powers involved from near and far.

But the big project that all the Arab countries, which are mostly multicultural societies, should undertake, is finally to lay the political, legal and institutional bases of a civil society that would not be contaminated by the exploitation of religion as an instrument of power. A society based on one-tier citizenship, recognizing equal civil rights for all citizens as such, and not based on religious, ethnic, racial or gender affiliation. This is the "pure and simple" citizenship status that my people dream of. To be frank, this calls for a true "cultural revolution" that would purify educational programmes, the media, preaching in mosques and Koranic schools, in order to undertake a real reform of mentalities and institutions, as well as of the pseudo-culture advocated by this rigorous Islamic current, whether before or after Daech. Otherwise, we risk the return of the drama at any time.

A whole programme of the civil reorganization of society would be necessary then, if we really want to stop the extinction of Christianity in the Middle East. For it concerns not only Iraq, but the entire region of the Middle East, the cradle of Christianity, where Christians, since the dawn of our era, were the first and the main promoters of civilization. They themselves initiated the Arabs and Muslims into their culture, whether in the great centres of the Arabian Peninsula, or in Yemen, Mecca, Kufa, then Damascus, the Umayyads in Baghdad of Abbasids. The Arab "Najdha", the cultural and political awakening of the 20th century in Lebanon, Syria and Egypt, had Christians as pioneers. I will not list all the Christians who have marked recent Arab history. I simply recall that the founder of the largest nationalist Arab political party, the Baath, was a Christian of Syria; that the founder of the largest political newspaper in Egypt was a Christian from Lebanon, Bechara Taqla; that the most famous Egyptian comedian, Najib Al-Rihani, was a Christian of Iraqi origin; that the greatest modern promoters of the Arabic language were Lebanese Christians; that the first Arab Secretary of the United Nations was an Egyptian Christian, Petros Ghali.

But ... see how the Christians of Syria, who were still in the majority in the 16th century, number no more than 25% at the beginning of the 20th century and 8% today. How many will remain after Daech and the like? Egypt, totally Christian until the coming of Islam in the 7th century, is today 7 - 9%, just 7 million out of 100 million. In Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula or the Gulf countries, after a flourishing and active presence until Islam, there are only vestiges left, hidden in the history and archeology books of these countries! Let's not talk about Turkey,



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which hosted the first five Ecumenical Councils! Just remember that the famous Hagia Sophia of Istanbul was the Cathedral of the Patriarch of Rome of the East. In Iraq, the flowering of the monasteries, churches, dioceses is recounted by Fr. Jean Fiey, O.P., in his "Christian Assyria". Their existence today is disproportionate to the 300,000 Christians who remain there since Daech. The reason? Several factors, certainly. But the main one is essentially this multi-faceted discrimination perpetrated over the centuries by a subversive and arrogant socio-political ideology.

Today Iraq, barely released from the nightmare of Daech, sinks again into a hostile clash between the central government, held by the Arab-Muslim majority, and Kurdistan, which is claiming independence. The Christian minority, still ignored by the "strategists" and already reduced to a third, is geographically wedged between the two camps. Will it survive this new earthquake?

6. EMIGRATION, A SOLUTION?

Is the solution of emigration to the West, envisaged by a number of Iraqi Christians, the real solution? Categorically speaking, no! It would be infinitely better if they were to become re-rooted at home, to regain hope and to rebuild the future in their own history. As Apostolic Visitor for Syriac Catholics in Europe, and now in Australia, I am perhaps best placed to speak about the clash of civilizations, the displacement, the difficulties of integration, the tragedy of uprooting, the change of educational and ethical values, the splitting of the family where members of the same family are scattered on five continents, the feeling of loss of cultural, national, and ecclesial identity. But that's the reality! Given the uncertainty of the future and the absence of change in criteria, emigration is a life-saving solution for many families, despite its bitter taste. We may well run after our faithful in the diaspora, try to rebuild our Eastern liturgies for our emigrants in the West and continue to revitalize their faith, but we will only succeed in a small part. We are reduced in number, in clergy, in competence. Nevertheless, the centre of gravity of our Eastern Apostolic Churches is moving more and more towards the Diaspora. A real Mission Land! The Church of the West has more than one witness of solidarity to offer to its Sister Churches of the East, whether it is in the land of the East, from which the light of the Gospel came, or in the West where its guests now are.... They could be, once again, the evangelizers!

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