

**SPEECH OF HIS EXCELLENCY
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Today I will speak to you on the future of religious pluralism in Iraq. As a Christian, I will of course speak mainly from the viewpoint which I know best. But the challenges which face the Christians are the same as those that face all religious minorities in Iraq, be they Yezidi, Kakai, or even Muslims themselves. And this challenge is clear: how does our land overcome the endless cycles of persecution and violence that repeat themselves with regular horror to us all. The harsh truth to this question is that without an end to this persecution and violence, there is no future for religious pluralism in Iraq, or anywhere else in the Mideast for that matter. The brutal logic of this is that there does eventually reach an end point where there are no minorities left to kill, and no minorities left to persecute. Absent any changes in behavior and intention from those who rule over us, such is the bleak future of religious pluralism in Iraq today.

As for Christianity in Iraq, we are now in what is for us, a moment of truth in which we must honestly acknowledge our situation. Specifically, I will address three main points:

1. Can Christianity and non-Muslim religious minorities survive in Iraq and the greater Islamic world?
2. If so, what is the proper role for Christians?
3. In performing this role, what forms of support can the West provide?

Following more than 1900 years of existence in Mesopotamia, we Christians of Iraq now find ourselves on the very edge of extinction. From a land where our martyrs' blood nourished the earliest flowering of our faith, our church contributed to carrying the Good News as far away as India and China. Our Christian ancestors shared with Muslim Arabs a deep tradition of thought and philosophy and engaged with them in dialogue respectfully since the 8th century AD. The Arabic Golden Age, historian Philip Jenkins has noted, was built on Chaldean and Syriac scholarship. Now we face the end in Iraq, the same end faced by the Iraqi Jews before us, and the same end now being faced by the Yezidis, with whom we have suffered so much pain, alongside us.

We Christians, a people who have endured persecution in patience and faith for 1,400 years, now confront an existential struggle. It is possibly the last struggle we will confront in Iraq. The most immediate cause is the ISIS attacks that led to the displacement of more than 125,000 Christians from our historical homelands and rendered us, in a single night, without shelter and refuge, without work or properties, without churches and monasteries, without the ability to participate in any of the things which give one a life of dignity: family visits, celebration of weddings and births, the sharing of sorrows. Our tormentors confiscated our present while also seeking to wipe out our history and destroy our future.

And yet we are still there. Scourged, battered, and wounded. Yet still there. And having survived thus far, to this point of near finality, we have been granted a position of clarity and courage that we have perhaps lacked, or avoided, up until this day. We can no longer ignore the fundamental cause of what has been a relentless persecution of our people for a nearly a millennium and half. Having faced for 1400 years a slow motion genocide that began long before the ongoing ISIS genocide today, the time for excusing this inhuman behavior and its causes is long since past.

When a people have nothing left to lose, in some sense it is very liberating, and from this position of clarity and new-found courage, I must

speak to you honestly on behalf of my people and speak to you the truth. The truth is that there is a fundamental crisis within Islam *itself* and if this crisis is not acknowledged, addressed, and fixed then there can be no future for Christians or any other form of religious plurality in the Middle East. Indeed, there is little reason to see a future for anyone in the Middle East, including within the Muslim world itself, other than in the context of continued violence, revenge, and hatred. And as we have seen too many times, this violence seeks to overtake us all, and destroy vulnerable innocent lives wherever it can find them.

As a frequent visitor to the USA and Europe, I understand and appreciate the difficulty of this subject. But for we Iraqi Christians this is not an abstract matter, not a theoretical, political, or academic question. And as an Iraqi Christian I stand before you to witness the love of God for us and confirm our faith in Jesus Christ, stressing that as a people, following the persecution by ISIS, we are far, very far, stronger as Christians than we used to be. The words of St. Paul in Romans chapter 8 are now words which have been burned into our very being:

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be

slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
(Rom. 8: 35- 39).

But we were not always this way. Prior to the ISIS horror of 2014, we Iraqi Christians had historically endeavored to maintain a dialogue of life with Muslims. In this dialogue we refrained from speaking honestly and truthfully to our oppressors in order to simply survive and live quietly. We would not openly face the long history of violence and murder inflicted upon us. We did not push back against the constantly recurring periods of extremism that inflicted such pain and violence against the innocents, both Muslim and Christian alike. But following the horror of ISIS there is nothing left for us now but to speak plainly and unreservedly: there is a crisis of violence in Islam and for the sake of humanity, including the followers of Islam themselves, it must be addressed openly and honestly.

At the root of all of this we must be straightforward about the reality of the teachings of *Jihad*, which are the justification for all these acts of violence. Apologists for the history of the last 1,400 years of oppression against Christians will point to the various periods of Muslim tolerance regarding Christians, as the possible and desired alternative to the other periods of violence and persecution. One cannot deny that such periods of relative tolerance have existed. And yet all such periods of tolerance have been a one way experience, in which the Islamic rulers decide, according to their own judgment, whether the Christians and other non-Muslims are to be tolerated in their beliefs or not. It is never, and has never, ever, been a question of equality. Fundamentally, in the eyes of Islam, we Christians and all other non-Muslims are not equal, and are not to be treated as equal, only to be tolerated or not, depending upon the intensity of the spirit of *Jihad* that prevails at the time.

Such is the cycle of history that has recurred in the Middle East over the past 1,400 years, and with each successive cycle the number of Christians and other non-Muslims has decreased until we have reached the point which exists in Iraq today - the point of extinction. Argue as you will, but this coming extinction will likely soon be fact, and what then will anyone be able to say? That we were made extinct by natural disaster, or

gentle migration? That the ISIS attacks were unprecedented? Or in our disappearance will the truth emerge: that we were persistently and steadily eliminated over the course of 1,400 years by a belief system which allowed for regular and recurring cycles of violence against us.

In these past years I have been blessed to spend a great deal of time in this country. I have spent time learning to understand your brave and never-ending commitment to equal rights for all citizens, and the power with which you utilize your freedom of speech. And I will tell you that were you to stand, truly stand, in the shoes of the Christians of Iraq, and those of many other countries of the Middle East, you would not accept for one day, one hour, one second, the status under which we live today – and under which we have lived for centuries. By our country's very Constitution, we are citizens of a lesser nature, deserving of tolerance from our self-appointed superiors, but at their discretion only and not in our own inherent right as equal children under a loving God.

So where, we ask, is there hope for the future in any of this? Should an ancient, peaceful people, be allowed to simply perish without comment, without objection? It seems an almost absurd question to ask in these modern times, does it not? Well then, we object. We object that one faith should have the right to kill another. We object. And we say that if there is

to be any future for the Christians – and other religious minorities – of Iraq and the Middle East, there must be a change and a correction within Islam.

When asking whether ISIS is truly an "Islamic State" or an aberration and warping of Islamic theology, consider the following words, recently quoted in *Time Magazine*:

"Western politicians should stop pretending that extremism and terrorism have nothing to do with Islam. There is a clear relationship between fundamentalism, terrorism, and the basic assumptions of Islamic orthodoxy. So long as we lack consensus regarding this matter, we cannot gain victory over fundamentalist violence within Islam."

and:

"The relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, the relationship of Muslims with the state, and Muslims' relationship to the prevailing legal system wherever they live ... Within the classical tradition, the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is assumed to be one of segregation and enmity. Perhaps there were reasons for this during the Middle Ages, when the tenets of Islamic orthodoxy were established, but in today's world such a

doctrine is unreasonable. To the extent that Muslims adhere to this view of Islam, it renders them incapable of living harmoniously and peacefully within the multi-cultural, multi-religious societies of the 21st century."

Those words come not from some right wing political figure in the West, but from the leader of the largest Muslim organization in the world - Indonesian Islamic leader Yahya Cholil Staquf.

At present these sentiments may be more fully developed among Muslims in Asia than in the Middle East, but post-ISIS, we now hear similar things from Muslims in Iraq. Clearly, ISIS has shocked the conscience of the world, and has shocked the conscience of the Islamic majority world as well. The question now is whether or not Islam will continue on a political trajectory, in which Shari'a is the basis for civil law, and nearly every aspect of life is circumscribed by religion, or whether a more secular, tolerant movement will develop.

The West has not seen for some time anything like the totally religion-based theocratic systems in many Islamic majority countries. Why is it that the West finds it unremarkable that an organization exists called the

Organization of Islamic Cooperation, with representation at the UN, etc. but there is no similar Organization of Christian Cooperation, or Organization of Buddhist Cooperation?

And what is it like to live under a system in which the faith upon which every law is based defines you as an infidel, or at best, a second, even third class citizen? Too often, it has been for religious minorities in Iraq like it is with ISIS. And even when it is not, it has been always been a slow squeezing of our community.

In fact, an academic study by my fellow Chaldean Bishop Bawai Soro shows that at no time since Iraq's conquest by Islam has the Christian percentage of the population grown. Some years it decreased slightly, other years more sharply, but the demographic trend for the past 1400 years has always been unmistakably, relentlessly downward.

Secular observers in the West make two major mistakes in considering Islam. Either they consider it religious in the Christian (post-Papal State sense), which is to say somewhat removed from politics, or they view it through the lens of the mid-20th century, when more secular

governments held sway in the Middle East, and in turn held political Islam at bay. But those largely secular governments (including those of Hussein, Qaddafi, Mubarak, etc.) are gone now. Now please do not misinterpret this to mean that these governments were without serious problems and deep injustice in their treatments of the people. But in their place now is something that is clearly worse: chaos and violence for all, and just beneath its surface flows the constant current of political Islam. And so now in the Mideast we have moved from fear, to terror, to horror. Where next?

One common misunderstanding that I wish to address with you in all this is the idea that the defeat of Daesh, or ISIS, means the defeat of this ideology of structured persecution and discrimination against non-Muslims. This is very far from the truth. In fact, while the physical fighting force of Daesh may have been defeated in a military sense, the idea of the re-establishment of the Caliphate has been firmly implanted in many minds throughout the Muslim world. And with this idea of the Caliphate there comes all the formal historical structures of intentional inequality and discrimination against non-Muslims.

I speak here not only of Iraq. We see leaders now in other countries in the Middle East who are clearly acting in a way which is consistent with

the re-establishment of the Caliphate. How will you in the West react to this? My question to you is not rhetorical. The religious minorities of the Middle East want to know the answer. Will you continue to condone this never-ending structured persecution against us? When the next wave of violence begins to hit us, will anyone on your campuses hold demonstrations and carry signs that say, "we are all Christians" or "we are all Yazidis"?

And yes I do say, the "next wave of violence", for this is simply the natural result of a ruling system that preaches inequality, and justifies persecution. The math of this equation is not complicated. One group is taught that they are superior and legally entitled to treat others as inferior human beings on the sole basis of their faith and religious practices. This teaching inevitably leads to violence against any "inferiors" who refuse to change their faith. And there you have it - the history of Christians and religious minorities in the Middle East for the last 1,400 years.

In considering this I hope that the Catholic Church's experience may be of some use to Muslims grappling with these issues. After all, just a century and a half ago, we had Papal States, and a much more politically-oriented Christianity in places. But we developed away from that, getting

back to the roots of the faith, before Constantine, and embracing again Christ's words "My kingdom is not of this world."

2. What is the Proper Role of Christians?

Fundamentally, this change must come about as the conscious work of the Muslim world itself. We see the small beginnings, perhaps, of this recognition in Egypt, in Jordan, in Asia, even in Saudi Arabia. Certainly much remains to be seen as to whether there is actual sincerity in this. But we Christians should not remain passive and simply pray for the best. We too have a critical role to play, a role which brings us back to the beginnings of our faith.

Ours is now a missionary role, to give daily witness to the teachings of Christ, to show the truth of Christ that we might provide a living example to our Muslim neighbors of a path to a world of forgiveness, of humility, of love, of peace. Lest there be any confusion here I am not speaking of conversion. Rather, I am speaking of the fundamental truth of forgiveness which we Christians of Iraq can share, and share from a position of historically unique moral clarity. We forgive those who murdered us, who tortured us, who raped us, who sought to destroy everything about us. We

forgive them. In the name of Christ, we forgive them. We forgive them not only for the last four years, but for the last 1,400 years. And so we say to our Muslim neighbors, learn this from us. Let us help you heal. Your wounds are as deep as ours. We know this. We pray for your healing. Let us heal our wounded and tortured country together.

One may ask, how can we Christians, in our diminished state, provide any example at all? So many of our people have fled, and so few of us are left. Some estimates have us now at barely 200,000, some even less. But among those Christians who are left, I can tell you there is a core of the faithful who will not leave. And while it is true that our numbers are now small, the Apostles themselves were far smaller. We take heart then from the first chapter of Acts:

"All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren." Acts 1: v14.

This is now our role. *All of us with one accord to devote ourselves.* Not to exist in the shadows, waiting for the next handout of charity, hoping to be somehow passed by in the next round of violence. No. We will *devote ourselves* as our ancestors did in this same land nearly two thousand years ago when they first accepted the teachings of Christ in a world that was just

as dangerous and uncertain as our present time. We Iraqi Christians are the children of Mesopotamia, and our ancient land is among the first places in the world where the teachings of Christ found good earth in which to grow. We will stay and bear our witness there and pray that we will see the end of all this darkness.

3. In performing this role, what forms of support can the West provide?

As we Christians of Iraq now look to devote ourselves to a clear example of living witnesses to the teachings of Jesus, what forms of meaningful support can be provided to us from the West?

First, there is spiritual and moral support. Spiritually, we ask that you please pray for us and do not forget us. This solidarity with our Christian brothers and sisters around the world has sustained us these past four years, and we are in need of this strength even more in the times ahead. Morally, we ask that you consider our situation truthfully, as it exists for us actually, and not in stretched attempts at historical relativism, which diminishes, or more honestly, insults, the reality of our suffering, and thereby seeks to rob us even of the dignity of our continued faith.

Concerning political support, we ask that you support efforts by your leaders to ensure equal treatment for all minorities in Iraq. In this we pray that your policy makers can find in themselves the humility to recognize that their theories, which over the past decades have become our horrific reality, have been almost universally wrong, based in fundamentally flawed assessments of the Iraqi people and situation. And in these mistaken policies, designed in comfort and safety from afar, argued over in the media as partisan intellectual talking points, hundreds of thousands of innocent people have died. An entire country has been ripped apart and left to the jackals. This horror all began with policy, and we beg those of you who continue to have access in shaping policy for your country, the most powerful on earth, to daily remember that your policy assessments have life or death consequences. Please, walk humbly and make sure that you truly understand the people on whom you are passing sentence.

Finally, the West can provide material support. Here I am not speaking primarily of charitable aid, but of intelligently placed support to help us develop sustainable ways of life and income. Within Iraq the Christian community has historically been trusted providers of education and health care. These two areas can continue to provide us with legitimate, self-sustaining platforms in our fight to hold a meaningful place in Iraqi

society from which we can continue to share Christ's message and display our Christian witness. We welcome and seek long-term partners in these fields. We especially hope that the scholars assembled here, young and old, will think to come and share with us at our new Catholic University in Erbil, which we hope can become a beacon of religious freedom and tolerance in the heart of the Middle East.

4. Closing.

Friends, the non-Muslim religious minorities of Iraq may be facing the end in the land of their ancestors. As Christians, we acknowledge this. In this end that looms like such a dark cloud above us, the entire world faces a moment of truth along with us. Will a peaceful and innocent people be allowed to be persecuted and eliminated because of their faith? And, for the sake of not wanting to speak the truth to the persecutors, will the world be complicit in our elimination?

Friends, I am an Iraqi Christian. I hope and pray that our people can still survive in the ancient land from which we have been born. I pray that those of you in this room will help us to survive in our homeland, and not as lost migrants in some foreign land.

But if we are to become extinct in Iraq, the world should understand this, in our path to extinction we will not go quietly any further. From this point we will speak the truth, and live out the truth, in full embrace of our Christian witness and mission, so that if someday we are gone no one will be able to say: how did this happen?

We Christians are a people of Hope. But facing the end also brings us clarity, and with it the courage to finally speak the truth. Our hope to remain in our ancient homeland now rests on the ability of ourselves, our oppressors, and the world to acknowledge these truths. Violence and discrimination against the innocents must end. Those who teach it must stop. We Christians of Iraq, who have faced 1,400 years of persecution, violence and genocide, are prepared to speak our truth, and to show our witness, to our oppressors and to the world, whatever the consequence. Please pray for us.

Thank you and God bless you all.