

Dear Sisters,

When I was asked to talk about our community in Iraq, I was pleased. As I would take this as the best opportunity to express my wholehearted appreciation for everything you have done for us. Thank you for being with us from the very first day we started our journey, Journey of "Sorrow and Hope". It was your support and prayers that helped us carve our way when our exodus started in August 2014. I can say, humbly and deeply, I am proud to be part of such a blessed family.

Some of you learned about what we have been doing during the last two years with and for the Internally Displaced People (IDPs). Let me assure to you that, all the projects we have been involved in, started with the support you demonstrated at the very beginning of our exile. The Lord has been merciful with us in that He put you on our way as a candle to enlighten our darkness.

In what follows I am going to share with you some of what we have experienced these two years of violence. We have lived fear, terror and frustration. But we also experienced God's love and care for his people. His angels were always ahead leading us in our darkness. These angels are people of good will (including you) who were breathing the spirit in us.

As most of you know, the so-called Islamic State attacked Mosul in June 2014, and then almost all the towns in the Plain of Nineveh. That triggered a massive exodus from the Plain of Nineveh where most Christians of Iraq inhabited. In a few days more than 500,000 people (including our sisters) had to face the reality that they were exiled, and had to deal with fact that they lost everything they have worked for all their lives. Of course the Kurdistan government welcomed the displaced people, but so many people found themselves homeless, and there was great need at all levels.

The mess and disorder that ISIS created was so overwhelming that people started to doubt everything, and first of all their relationship with God. They asked why would God allow this to happen; where is the church? Where is the government? It was a state of confusion that made everybody think that there was no one to be trusted.

As for us, Dominican Sisters, sharing with our people the same experience of humiliation and loss, we could not stand the injustice that hurt everybody. So we got organized and went to the camps, two by two, to be with people, trying to respond to the urgent needs in that chaotic environment. Naturally, at the beginning, it was a crisis--an emergency. People left their home with only what they could carry, so when they arrived in Kurdistan they needed to be sheltered, fed and treated.

Of course, it was impossible to answer people's questions. From the beginning, we realized that the whole thing was beyond our capacity. The main difficulty was not providing food or water, but rather dealing with people who were full of anger and frustration. So, our main task was to absorb people's anger, listening to them and being with them.

Needless to say that the most vulnerable individuals were children. So, we started providing milk and diapers. That started with a small donation made by a benefactor. The Lord blessed that gift, as other individuals and organizations started to send financial aid to help us provide the displaced people with some food and non-food items. Thanks to many people of good will (including you), we were able to provide milk and diapers for children, clothes, mattresses, blankets, soap and shampoo, cleaning products, refrigerators, air coolers, water coolers, water. Of course, we could not distribute all these items. "Bearers of Fragrance," an organization (a small organization founded in 1983 to take care of poor people) helped us with that. Additionally, some of our sisters worked at the dispensary which CNEWA created for health care. That dispensary turned into a clinic to treat people.

Working at the camps, sisters realized that people did not only need food for the body but also for the soul. So sisters started organizing outdoor Mass for people and some other spiritual activity (sharing gospel, group prayer, talks about different topics). In summer of 2015 sisters taught more 500 children in ten groups, preparing them for First Communion. Our congregation took the responsibility of preparing everything for the celebration day that they provided clothes, shoes, and gifts.

To tell you the truth, it is true that we were so very occupied in responding to the crisis of emergency, but we never forgot that educational work is always basic.

That's why, in 2015 sisters opened two preschools, one in Ankawa (with 160 children) and one in Kaznazan (with 120 children). And, because of the need, the one in Ankawa was enlarged, and another preschool was opened in Akra (with 47 children). At the beginning of school year 2015-2016 we were able to open a primary school for the children of the IDPs. The school belongs to the Chaldean Bishop of Erbil, Bishop Warda, who kindly granted us the school to run it. The main goal of the school is to give the IDPs children opportunity to study and get proper education. Conditions at public schools are really miserable. Children go to school only three days a week. Also, there are some schools in which there are three shifts, each shift with a different group, not to mention that the number of children is more than the desks times three. Because of that, we decided to open the school after getting the license from the central government and the Kurdish government. Our schools are free of charge.

We are planning to open another primary school in the city of Duhok. We, too, hope to open a secondary school to continue with our children who end the primary school.

Some people ask us about our vision for the future. Honestly, we do not have a clear vision. Things are so mixed up and everything is related to everything. Our mission depends on the presence of Christians in Iraq; the presence of Christians in Iraq is very much threatened by the political unrest, and the direct persecution. We are staying in Iraq as long as Christians stay. Of course our congregation was founded to serve people regardless of their religious identity. But the question remains, how can we serve in a place where we are rejected and persecuted? For the time being, we are remaining with the poor and the vulnerable who have no ability to travel and place to go. We cannot think of long term plans. Our projects are always threatened by the unknown and by the uncertainty.

The political unrest in the Middle East is something beyond our imagination. And the violence and suffering it causes is just overwhelming so that most of the time we cannot think of how to help or how to express what we need.

What we experience as Dominican Sisters:

- Being with and for people enables us to identify the immediate needs of people;

- Sometimes, our mission is decided by the needs of people. None of us ever worked at refugee or displaced people camps, yet, we had to deal with that.
- As individuals and as a community, many times we need to forget about our own plans or dreams, and listen to others needs;
- No matter how huge our loss is, we still have each other and we have you, and on that we count. The most difficult thing for our sisters was to see their parents and families leave Iraq. Yet, it was great that the Sisters stayed and decided to remain in Iraq;
- Uncertainty and the unknown should not hinder us from working; there is one thing that we trust: God is faithful, and He will not abandon us;
- When the Lord was facing death, he washed the feet of disciples to show his love. Following his example, we try to show love where there is hate;
- To be non-violent means to be always ready to start again and again from zero.

At the end, and before I move to the PowerPoint presentation, I would like to let you know that I am greatly proud of being a Dominican Sister. We have not felt isolated or left alone. Your prayers and loving care supported us with every step we made. I am deeply thankful to all who risked their lives and visited us in Iraq. May we all have and keep that charism of our Father Dominic to be able to serve our world and turn it into a peaceful world.