

Pope Francis leads Sunday prayers in the ruins of the former ISIS stronghold of Mosul

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Pope Francis led Sunday prayers in the battle-scarred rubble of the former ISIS stronghold of Mosul.

He prayed for the "victims of war" in the shadow of a ruined Iraqi church where jihadis once ravaged one of the world's oldest Christian communities.

Pope Francis releases a dove during a prayer for war victims in Mosul's Old City

The Pontiff held the special service in front of the ruins of a historic church

With collapsed walls behind him, The Pontiff made a plea for Christians in Iraq and the Middle East to stay in their homelands.

Tens of thousands of Christians were forced to flee the area during the ISIS occupation, where they were faced with conversion, death, or paying a special tax for non-Muslims.

"How cruel it is that this country, the cradle of civilization, should have been afflicted by so barbarous a blow, with ancient places of worship destroyed and many thousands of people - Muslims, Christians, Yazidis and others - forcibly displaced or killed," he told the crowd.

"Today, however, we reaffirm our conviction that fraternity is more durable than fratricide, that hope is more powerful than hatred, that peace more powerful than war."

He added that hope could not be "silenced by the blood spilled by those who pervert the name of God to pursue paths of destruction".

The 84-year-old said the "tragic" exodus of Christians from Iraq and the wider region "does incalculable harm not just to the individuals and communities concerned, but also to the society they leave behind".

Iraq's Christian population has shrunk to fewer than 400,000 from around 1.5 million before the US-led invasion of 2003.

Tens of thousands of Christians were forced to flee the area during the ISIS occupation

Children dressed in costumes wave national flags in the ruins of the Syriac Catholic Church

A nun greets Francis during a prayer for war victims in the destroyed Iraqi city

The faithful gathered on Sunday in the courtyard of the Al-Tahera Church, whose roof collapsed during fighting against ISIS in 2017.

It is one of the oldest of at least 14 churches in Nineveh province that were destroyed by the terror group.

Boutros Chito, a Catholic priest in Mosul, said the Pope's visit could change the way people think about his city.

"Pope Francis will announce to the whole world that we are the people of peace, a civilisation of love," Chito told AFP.

The pontiff also hailed the Al-Nouri mosque and its famed al-Hadba minaret, which were destroyed in the fighting against ISIS, and the Church of Our Lady of the Hour which, he said, "has reminded passersby that life is short and that time is precious".

The heaviest deployment of security forces yet was mobilised to protect Francis on what is perhaps the riskiest day of his historic trip to Iraq, where state forces are still hunting ISIS sleeper cells.

His trip as a "pilgrim of peace" aims to reassure the country's dwindling Christian community and to expand his dialogue with other religions.

On Saturday, the leader of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics met Iraq's top Shiite Muslim cleric, the reclusive Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who agreed that Iraq's Christians should be able to live in "peace".

"We believers cannot be silent when terrorism abuses religion," Francis said at an interfaith service in the ancient site of Ur later.

Pope Francis arrives in a golf cart ahead of prayers

Iraqi troops were out in force during the Pope's high-profile visit

Iraqis gather in the ruins of the Syriac Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception

Watching from afar as ISIS swept across Nineveh in 2014, Francis said at the time he was ready to come and meet the displaced and other victims of war in a show of solidarity.

Seven years later, he is visiting both Mosul and Qaraqosh, one of Iraq's oldest Christian towns whose residents still speak Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic, the language said to have been spoken by Jesus.

It, too, was largely destroyed when ISIS rampaged through the area, but its residents have trickled back since 2017 and slowly worked at rebuilding their hometown.

Earlier today, Francis landed at the airport in the Kurdish regional capital of Arbil, which was targeted just a few weeks ago by a volley of rockets that killed two people, the latest in a series of strikes blamed on pro-Iranian forces.

He held a brief meeting with regional president Nechirvan Barzani and his cousin, the prime minister Masrour Barzani.

Many thousands of troops and police have been deployed as the Pope has criss-crossed Iraq, taking planes, helicopters and armoured convoys to cover more than 870 miles.

The biggest event yet will be later today, when several thousand people will gather at Arbil's Franso Hariri stadium for the Pope's last mass in Iraq.

Arbil has been a relative haven of stability and a place of refuge for many Christians who fled ISIS.

- The Sun