



## [Pope Francis Makes a Historic Trip to Iraq to Promote a Message of Religious Tolerance and Harmony](#)

During this past week, Pope Francis embarked on a historic four-day trip to Iraq, the papal's first ever visit to the Middle Eastern nation. Iraq is the first country that Pope Francis has traveled to since the global outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. While there, the pope conveyed a message of interfaith tolerance and harmony to Muslim and Christian religious leaders at the symbolic location of Ur – the birthplace of the Prophet Abraham, the revered patriarch of the three monotheistic faiths of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. He stressed the commonalities and interconnectedness of the creeds, and denounced any form of hostility, extremism, or violence as a betrayal of religion. Pope Francis also visited several churches in the Iraqi capital city of Baghdad and met with top Shia cleric Ali al-Sistani, with both respected figures advocating for peaceful coexistence between the country's Muslim and Christian population. Observers have praised the significance of the pope's trip in helping to shed light on and encourage the protection of minority groups, in Iraq and elsewhere.

Pope Francis arrived in Iraq late last week for a trip aimed at promoting greater harmony among people of all religious backgrounds. He lamented the fact that the country, situated within the historic region of Mesopotamia and often referred to as the "cradle of civilization" because of it, has been so negatively impacted by forces of extremism and intolerance in recent years. The pope expressed sadness that thousands of people of varying faiths have been displaced or killed and ancient places of worship destroyed as a result of violence perpetuated by these groups. To that end, Pope Francis spent much of the third day of his visit in Mosul and Qaraqosh in northern Iraq, traveling to sites that had been decimated by ISIS before being newly renovated and restored. The local communities there were hopeful that the pope's presence would help draw attention to the admirable work that had been done in rebuilding the area since ISIS was pushed out.

One of the other main noteworthy stops on Pope Francis' trip was a visit to Ur, an ancient Sumerian city that dates back 6,000 years. According to the Christian, Islamic, and Judaic traditions, Ur is the birthplace of the Prophet Abraham – the common patriarch of the three aforementioned monotheistic faiths. In using that particular location as the site for an interfaith meeting between Christian and Muslim religious leaders, Pope Francis emphasized the concept of the Abrahamic faiths as a single tradition and highlighted the connections between them. He remarked that it was fitting for them to all come together in Ur at the "birthplace of our religions" to pray for peace as children of the Prophet Abraham.

Lastly, Pope Francis took part in a momentous meeting with top Shia cleric and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in the city of Najaf. The two prominent religious figures delivered a message of peaceful coexistence, urging Iraq's Muslim-majority population to embrace the country's longstanding Christian minority. Al-Sistani stated that religious authorities in Iraq have an important role to protect the nation's minority groups including Christians, who deserve the same rights and securities as all other citizens. The Shia cleric has been a strong and consistent voice in calling on Iraqis to protect minority groups there since 2003. The meeting between the two was a milestone moment as it marked the first time that a pope had met with a grand ayatollah.