

Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God. Church of Our Lady of the Hour, Mosul, Iraq 2024

We gather around the table of the Eucharist in this beautiful Dominican Church of our Lady of the Hour, to give thanks to God for the grace to rebuild this Church, to rebuild the lives of the people whose loved ones were killed in this church. During those dark times, I used the Arabic letter "N" symbolizing "Nasrani" in my social media profile to show my solidarity with the persecuted Christians in Iraq. Today, the Dominican Family in Iraq, the Dominican Family of the Province of France represented by the Prior Provincial fr. Nicolas, the Dominican Family all over the world represented by Alain and me, come home to this beautiful Dominican Church of Our Lady of the Hour. We thank the UNESCO, fr. Olivier Poquillon, the friars here in Iraq, and those who helped rebuild this beautiful church. Of course, we, the people of God, the mystical Body of Christ is the Church not built by human hands, and cannot be destroyed by human hands, because we are secure in the loving hands of God.

When Pope Francis visited Iraq two years ago, he said: *"From this place, where faith was born, from the land of our father Abraham, let us affirm that God is merciful and that the greatest blasphemy is to profane his name by hating our brothers and sisters."* This holy and beautiful Church was profaned and destroyed by the ugliness of hate, masquerading as faith. Hatred spilled innocent blood of victims in this Church. We pray that the blood of Christ poured out for the remission of sins, which we celebrate in this Eucharist, will fill our hearts with love, bring healing to those who lost their loved ones, and eternal rest to those who died here in this sanctuary.

The darkness of sin hovered over this church in the recent past. But today on the last day of the Octave of Christmas, we celebrate Jesus, the light of the world, the *light that shines through the darkness, the light that darkness cannot overcome* (John 1:5). The darkness of hatred invaded this church, but today we celebrate the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God, who gave birth to Jesus, *Lumen gentium*, the Light of all nations. Mary is our *Lady of the Hour* not only because of the prominent clock on the tower of this Church. We recall that in Cana, Jesus said that his "hour" had not yet come, but Mary interceded and prevailed on her beloved Son to perform a miracle. Mary is more than just our "Lady of the Hour" because she is the mother of the One who is the same *yesterday, today and forever* (Hebrews 13:8).

Mary of Nazareth became part of our lives because of three short but important "dialogues". The first is a dialogue with the angel Gabriel: "Do not be afraid, Mary... Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus." And Mary said: "may it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:26-37). **This "dialogue" made Mary the Theotokos, the Mother of God.** The second dialogue took place at the wedding at Cana: "My son, they have no more wine". Jesus seemed to hesitate: "my hour has not yet come"; but eventually granted the request of his mother who told the waiters: "do whatever my Son tells you" (John 2:1-11). **This "dialogue" clearly shows Mary as our intercessor who urges us to obey God, to be His disciples.** The third dialogue is at the foot of the cross: "woman, behold, your son" (John 19:26-27). It seems less of a dialogue but a monologue for there was no audible response from a grieving mother. But in the silence of her anguished heart, Mary must have repeated her response to the angel: "let it be done according to your word". **In this "dialogue" at the foot of the cross, Jesus gave Mary to us, to be "our" Mother.**

Dialogue changes us, opens our horizon of understanding. When old friends who became foes enter into sincere dialogue, they open the possibility for a restored and renewed friendship. When persons with different persuasions and beliefs enter into authentic dialogue, they open the path to understanding each other's point of view. When strangers welcome each other in dialogue, they begin to realize that the *other* is not so different after all.

Mary was "changed" in her loving dialogue with God, she became *Mother of God, Intercessor and Disciple, Our Mother*. When we enter into a dialogue with God, we enter into prayer, a profound conversation with God that leads to a profound change, i.e., conversion. It was this openness to listen to the prophet Jonah that converted and saved the people of Nineveh. When we enter into dialogue with others, a foe could turn into a friend, the *other* and stranger could become *familiar*, i.e., one who is not too different from ourselves; after all, we share the same humanity, we all belong to the family of God, ***we are brothers and sisters!*** This is an important truth that Pope Francis calls our attention to in his 3rd Encyclical Letter "***Fratelli tutti***" ***on Fraternity and Social Friendship***. If humanity recognizes that we have one Father and we are one family, humanity will not only survive but flourish.

I wish you all a Blessed and Holy Year of the Lord 2024!

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