

**Homily for Mass with the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land
The Exaltation of the Holy Cross
Ritz Carlton Hotel
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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The back window on the north wall of our cathedral in Springfield depicts John Sobieski III, King of Poland, kneeling on the battlefield giving thanks to God for his victory over the Turks after the siege of Vienna. By the late 17th century the Turkish army was penetrating deep into Europe. In the summer of 1683, 140,000 Turkish troops surrounded Vienna. Sobieski, leading an army of about 75,000, defeated the Turks at Kahlenburg, effectively ending Turkish military expansion into Europe.

In our times, the Christian people of Iraq are not so fortunate. After our troops were summarily withdrawn from Iraq in 2011, a jihadist group known as the Islamic State or ISIS has moved into the void. Violence there has escalated as the Islamic State has taken control of large sections of Iraq, destroying, burning and looting churches, homes and businesses. The Islamist terrorists are ruthlessly slaughtering Christians and others who

chose not to convert to Islam. Tens of thousands have fled their homes since the extremist militant group Islamic State overran large swathes of northern Iraq in June and gave Christian residents an ultimatum to convert to Islam, pay a special tax, or be killed. Faced with such a dire situation, most Christians have fled for their lives. The Chaldean Archbishop of Kirkuk, said that the latest advance has nearly purged northwestern Iraq of its Christian population. "There is not a Christian town left standing," the Archbishop said.

We should not dismiss the situation in Iraq as a far-away matter of no concern to us. U.S. intelligence officials said last month that the gains made in recent months by the Islamic State have bolstered its long-term ambitions in the West, including the United States. Indeed, in a chilling video message aired last month, an ISIS soldier proclaims that their goal is to "raise the flag of Allah in the White House."

In light of this situation, our Holy Father, Pope Francis, has called for all people to pray for peace in Iraq and on August 9th he asked "the international community to protect all those suffering violence in Iraq." Writing to the Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, the Holy Father decried how "Christians and other religious minorities have

been forced to flee from their homes and witness the destruction of their places of worship and religious patrimony." Pope Francis placed before the Secretary General "the tears, the suffering and the heartfelt cries of despair of Christians and other religious minorities of the beloved land of Iraq." The Catholic community and people of the United States share these tears, sufferings and heartfelt cries.

Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, sent a letter this past month to President Barack Obama, saying, "More must be done." Noting that Pope Francis had called upon "the international community, particularly through the norms and mechanisms of international law, to do all that it can to stop and to prevent further systematic violence against ethnic and religious minorities," Archbishop Kurtz pleaded with President Obama for "the United States to answer this call in concert with the international community."

In light of this crisis and other violent conflicts around the world, we should note that tomorrow marks one hundredth anniversary of the the beginning of the trench warfare that characterized the First World War. The surrounding landscape offered no protection to either side in the battle. Unequipped to dig trenches, both the Allied forces and the Germans

sent soldiers to neighboring farms to requisition spades, shovels, pickaxes and any other implements that might help construct what became a four-year nightmare for hundreds of thousands of soldiers. Neither side would give way to the other. The conflict seemed to increase in violence and bloodshed with each passing day. Two years later, almost to the very day, the first tanks supplemented the weapons – and so the death toll rose, so that, by the end of the war, there were more than thirty-seven million military and civilian casualties.

The unsung heroes and heroines of the First World War gave themselves unstintingly as they tried to protect and defend those around them. That is why, in spite of the horrors of war, we remember them with honor and pride. None of us can escape the experience of suffering. It is part and parcel of our human lives. We do not need to be overwhelmed by our circumstances. Looking towards the crucified Jesus, we can see for ourselves someone who knew rejection and pain from personal experience. The cross is the symbol of the resurrection. Death prepares for eternal life. With Jesus in our sights, we can face anything.

Today's feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross recalls the day when in 326 AD, Saint Helena, mother of the Roman emperor Constantine,

discovered the True Cross and subsequently built the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The cross, however, is more than a holy relic; it has a meaning that underpins the whole of Christianity. It proclaims that Jesus faced suffering and death in a supreme act of self-sacrifice. It declares that there is no Easter Sunday unless it is preceded by Good Friday.

As we commemorate today the exaltation of the Holy Cross, we are very aware of how much we need to continue to implore the maternal aid of our Blessed Mother, particularly with regard to the situation which continues to deteriorate in the Middle East. One may be tempted to believe that there is little to no hope in these circumstances, but we continue to remain steadfast in trusting that peace is possible, for, as the angel Gabriel told the Blessed Virgin Mary at the Annunciation, “nothing will be impossible for God” (Luke 1:37).

We are invited to be not so overwhelmed with all of the bad news we hear, but to place our hope in the Good News of the Gospel that Christ has risen victorious and has defeated death. No war, tragedy, or suffering could ever nullify that victory.

It is this hope that should guide us as we offer our prayers without ceasing for a peaceful resolution to the problems in the Holy Land and in

the Middle East. It is also this hope which motivates us not to give up in doing whatever is necessary to aid in bringing about that peace.

In his address to the participants in the Pilgrimage of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem in Rome last year, the Holy Father highlighted this point when he said the following:

To believe in the redemptive power of the Cross and the Resurrection is to offer hope and peace. In a special way, the Land of Jesus needs it very much! The faith does not distance us from the responsibilities that we are all called to assume, but, on the contrary, it urges and impels us to concrete undertakings for a better society.¹

The work that you undertake on behalf of the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land is an important part of the larger struggle for peace throughout the Middle East. Though your efforts may seem insignificant in comparison to the complex issues that surround the present conflicts, we are reminded by St. Paul that “all things work for good for those who love God” (Romans 8:28). We are confident in faith that what we offer will be multiplied by the Lord to accomplish His will.

Like so many who have turned to Mary in times of great distress in our world, let us humbly beg her not only to intercede on our behalf for

peace in the world, but that she might come to our aid to give us the strength that we need to persevere in keeping our eyes fixed on Christ and His victory. By doing so, we will continue to move forward in faith, hope, and love, cooperating with His plan of salvation, never doubting that God can and will manifest His glory by conquering all evil, bringing about lasting peace and unity for eternity in the life that awaits us in Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the Pilgrimage of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, 13 September 2013.