

# Cracked but still Standing

**An invitation to study & contemplative response to our Iraqi Dominican Sisters  
on the fourth anniversary of their exodus from ISIS, August 6, 2014**



Sister Nazik Matty, OP, (St. Catherine of Sienna, Iraq) is a Biblical theologian with a license in scripture from the Biblicum in Rome and a DPhil in Biblical Theology from Oxford. A few short months after her return to minister in Iraq, the sisters and their Christian and Yezidi neighbors were violently uprooted from their homes by ISIS. They lived for three years as displaced persons in the Kurdistan region in northern Iraq.

The context for the accompanying paper *I Peter 3: 8-13 Call for Harmony* is Sister Nazik's reflection on the sisters' return to the Plains of Nineveh with some thousands of families. She recently presented this paper, which she still considers a work in progress, to a meeting of the Central Committee of German Catholics, an association of Catholic laity headquartered in Bonn. Sister Nazik's text reveals how all are struggling to fill the gap between their tragic past experiences and the future, as she acknowledges their woundedness and their need to restore and strengthen relationships with one another and with God. We ask you, our Dominican Family, to enter personally into this context as you study her work, and reflect upon "the broken altar, the broken community," and engage with your hearts and minds in solidarity.

Read *I Peter 3:8-18: Call for Harmony*,  
by Sister Nazik Matty, OP.

Consider a discussion of the paper within a circle  
of your friends and sisters.

If so moved, make a brief response to the Iraqi  
Dominican Family. **Forward it to Sister Kathy  
Nolan, OP, by August 30.**

[knolan@adriandominicans.org](mailto:knolan@adriandominicans.org)

Responses will be translated into Arabic and  
carried to Iraq by the *I Have Family in Iraq*  
*Delegation* in September.

Stay tuned for news about an opportunity for a  
national Dominican Family conversation about the  
delegation upon the delegates' return to the U.S.

## Reflection Starter

- In her paper, Sister Nazik quotes Nehemia Polen, author of *Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto*. Polen, in his reflection on the words of Rabbi Shapira, writes "In times of national calamity and persecution the primary concern should be to place the events in a comprehensible theological and ethical framework, and to provide models of spiritual resistance." (p. 5). The sisters' desire to reconstruct the altar at al-Tahira convent is such a model of spiritual resistance. How does restoration of the altar enable the sisters to be Christ in the wounded community?

As you respond, please focus on the experience of  
the Iraqi Dominican Sisters' return to their villages  
and the rebuilding efforts that are now underway.

## *1 Peter 3: 8-18 Call for Harmony*

Sister Nazik Matty, OP

Presented at the Central Committee of German Catholics

Bonn, Germany, 2018

If we believe that there is a call for harmony in 1 Peter 3: 8-18, we might wonder what that means. Usually, harmony is defined as “the sounding of two or more musical notes at the same time in a way that is desired.” And if we think of harmony within a society, we would immediately imagine the accord, consensus, and unity that harmony implies. But knowing about the variety of sounds and opposing parties that the text presents, one would imagine that harmony in such a context could only be accomplished by a miracle. And, this is the miracle for which the Christian community in my country prays every day. Harmony is like peace; in both cases the integrity and wholeness of the country are required. In this sense, the author of 1 Peter is challenging the world, offering a way of possible harmony and peace in a context where chaos and hatred seem to be triumphing. What makes the words of the author still valid and inspiring after 2000 years is the fact that there are still some Christian communities that experience the suffering and yet try to live the hopes and peace about which the author speaks. For this reason, the next few pages present a reflection on 1 Peter 3: 8-18, keeping in mind the Anatolian readers of the first century to whom the letter was sent, and the Christian community in Iraq that still reads the text.

### **1. The Broken Altar, the Broken Community**

Before dealing with the text, I would like to share with you an experience that I consider to be a poignant image to show what Christians are living in Iraq. You might have heard about the invasion of ISIS in 2014. That invasion was like a wicked storm that caused immense damage and violent disturbance in the whole area. The hardest thing in the entire experience is the fact that it was motivated only by animosity and hostility, which destroyed houses, uprooted people, and broke down their spirit in many ways. One of the ways ISIS used to express its hatred was by destroying churches and altars, and of course, the chapel of our convent and its altar was no exception. After three years of displacement in Kurdistan, we returned to our towns after the liberation. Like other people, we went to see our homes, and we were shocked to find our convent ruined (Slide one). The view of our altar was extremely painful (Slide two). It was in pieces. When we were exiled and far from our lands, we always hoped that one day we would return and see our convents and pray around our altars. But when we saw the damaged altar, we realized that ISIS' hatred for us was far beyond our imagination. It was very clear that their aim was not to frighten a group of people or steal properties—but rather it was the Christian identity that was targeted. The broken altar left an image in our minds that we will never be able to forget.

In a way, this is the image that illustrates the situation of our Christian community in Iraq. What had been established for years was scattered overnight. It was a broken community: stricken people, empty land, abandoned churches, and confused leadership. People who used to believe for ages that their presence was very connected with the presence of churches and shrines, spent three years exiled from their towns with their eyes longing to see their churches. One can tolerate the lack of daily bread despite all shame and humiliation that that implies, but questioning the meaning of our loyalty to our Lord and our disciplines was the hardest moment we have ever lived. It caused self-doubt. Rabi Shapira, a Jewish writer who lived during Second World War says that self-doubt means we ask the Lord, why? Why is God doing things that could distance us from him? Has God rejected us? Does he still exist?

To add insult to injury, our neighbours with whom we had spent years of friendship and companionship, were the ones who betrayed and stole from us when we were forced to leave, and had asked them to guard our houses and properties. The scattered pieces of the altar made us question about all those years of trusting and hoping. Now, we are so many in the same body of Iraq, but we are not united, despite the fact that there are some things we share in common: history, land, and belief in one God.

## **2. Restoring the Altar and Trying to Reunite the Community**

Having returned with our people to our lands, we decided to rebuild our convent and restore the altar. We gathered the pieces one by one and put them back together. While doing that we had many thoughts going through our minds: shall we be as before? Shall we trust our neighbours who betrayed us? Missing many families who travelled, will the towns be vibrant and safe as before? Above all, was our decision to return the right decision to have made? Despite all these worries, the altar was rebuilt, and part of the community returned. The altar is not as it was before, it does not have the same beauty (Slide three). But, it is our new altar around which we are going to celebrate and pray. Again, it is a place where Jesus gives his life to us. It has cracks, but it is still a place where the will of humans and God meet for the good of humanity. That humbly reminds us that the community that has returned is not a perfect one; it is wounded, it has doubts, and it needs reconciliation. Now, more than ever before we feel ourselves as living in a similar context as the one lived by the Anatolian Christian community in the first century. Being rejected by our people and targeted by the enemy made us doubt the meaning of being in and staying in this land. This is what causes us to pause at the words of 1 Peter 3: 8-18.

## **3. The Community in Iraq and the Social conflict in which we live**

### *a. Similar context, the same case*

Clearly, the author of 1 Peter 3: 8-18 had experienced persecution and rejection by the people of his own country; that fact encourages us to read the text and find answers for many of our questions. When people experience a traumatic event, such as war or the threat of annihilation, they often turn to history for stories that promise a positive outcome to their suffering to serve a unifying, restorative purpose.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> N. Polen, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto*. (2004).

A close view of the text reveals two realities in which Christians of the first century found themselves. On the one hand, there are Christians who are living certain values and conducting themselves in a particular way because they have a certain case, that is, believing in Jesus the Christ. On the other hand, there are these people that the author calls evil-doers who deliberately oppose the Christians because of their faith and conduct. Naturally, living in a context where you are rejected because of your values leaves you with few options: either to escape and look for another context that respects you and the way you are, or to stay and avoid others by building your own separate world with people you love. However, the author urges the reader to go beyond that, and choose another option that is offered in the text. In addition to practicing certain good qualities: being harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, humble in spirit, not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, the author, however, indicates for followers of Jesus to go beyond being passive members of society. The text does not only contain some pleas or requests, but also gives orders. There are seven verbs in imperative mode. The author commands the audience to

Refrain the tongue from evil and the lips from speaking guile,  
turn away from evil,  
do good,  
seek peace,  
pursue it (peace),  
do not fear,  
sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts

It is natural to keep these commands in times of security and in an atmosphere of harmony. However, it sounds unjust in the midst of the conflict lived by the community, to be commanded to respond in ways that seem to be beyond their capacity. To quote the meaning given by Travis Williams: “amidst temptation to renounce their Christian faith as a result of persecution, the readers are most in need of encouragement concerning their devotion to Christ. In this particular instance, a request for the readers to “honor the Lord Christ as holy” or to “sanctify the Lord Christ” would seem out of place.” What is the message that the text conveys for the readers of that time, and in our time? It might come to our minds that the concept of hope that the author is speaking about is hollow, and, one has to think of solutions that are more pragmatic and realistic. In fact, some people are convinced of that and already try to understand what is happening from a pure worldly perspective. Others are still trying to find an existential meaning for what they live, and so, they align themselves to the writer of 1 Peter 3: 8-18.

#### *b. Meaningful suffering*

Suffering is destructive when meaningless. It is beyond dispute that people suffer for different reasons. But what devastates us is when we know that our suffering is meaningless. To be honest, the most frightening thing is to think that all we experienced in 2014 was just a political economic social event that happened because of some confused individuals. As if we left because they wanted us to leave and returned because that pleased them. With its powerful meaning, the words of the author come to our aid. Readers of the text are suffering because of righteousness. It is not because of something they did to harm others. They suffer because of their faith in Christ. In this we can bring ourselves into line with those readers. Before we left, we were give three choices: to be converted to Islam, or to pay *Jizia* which means to be fully subjected to ISIS and their law, or to leave without anything. Everything we lived those days was very much connected to our faith. They only thing sustaining us was the knowledge that we

were rejected because of our faith, just like the Christians in the early time of the church. So, our suffering is not meaningless. It could have a salvific meaning.

*c. Call to seek peace*

Seeking peace when you are injured demands a great effort to go beyond what is human within you. The hardest command that the author is putting into the text is when he exhorts people to seek peace and pursue it. This of course sounds impossible if we think of it as pure human effort. What kind of peace would that be? Is it just to call for a stop to war? or to leave the place? or to punish the terrorists? or to kill the enemy? From experience, one has to say that in this context peace is something different. Actually, what we seek is not a situation (absence of war), or place (with all possible facilities). In our seeking for peace, we seek a person: The Risen Lord. He is our peace. Derived from this we can speak about peace that is possible.

In the ancient languages, the word “peace” means “becoming intact, whole, return to whole, becoming complete, restore, and finish.” If we think about these words and keep in our minds a situation or condition, or a place, then achieving peace will be not possible. The aim of peace is the person, not a thing. Iraq is one of the richest countries in the world, yet Iraqi citizens have benefited the least from this wealth. This is because in the effort of seeking peace, people do not always think of the integrity of the Iraqi person as a whole. Unfortunately, this is the way people think, inside and outside Iraq. For example, inside Iraq there are people who hate the others because they are different in their beliefs and way of living. And they think of others as strangers who should leave the country only because they are Christian. This is the real danger in Iraq now. From the outside, on the other hand, some peacemakers think that their job in Iraq is done after punishing and pushing ISIS out of Iraq. Others think of Iraq as groups of people or minorities, and they have to protect this group from that group.

Jesus always sought the whole person. When people brought the paralyzed to him (Mark 2), He first forgave his sins and then healed his body and sent him back to the society safe and sound in soul and body. Jesus healed people to bring them back to the society. And through those people whose lives were touched by Him, He could speak about peace in a society worn out by occupation and slavery. In other words, one can say that Jesus touched not only the bodies of those in His society but also their spirits. He preached about a kingdom in which everybody (all society) is invited at the end of the day to have something to eat. Could we think of Iraq as one entity? I wish the world would consider Iraq as one people. Maybe it is time to stop seeing Iraq as a place where you try to see how efficient your technology is. Please, stop testing out your plans and ideologies on this people; we have every right to live in peace. Since 1991 foreign intervention has not been successful and has led from one tragedy to the other.

It is interesting that the command to seek peace is in the context of the exhortation to do good. As a congregation, we trust that education is the best remedy for what has happened, in order to be about healing our spirits. That is why we are involved in educational projects starting with children to help them grow in love. In order to achieve this, we greatly depend upon humanitarian organizations and benefactors who are being so helpful in restoring us to life. Seeking peace through good deeds enables people to see the face of Christ on the wounded faces of our community. It's just like the restoration of the altar enables the community to live the presence of Christ within the wounded community.

#### 4. Called to Go on Despite the Cracks

Now, the words of St Paul about the great treasure that we “carry in a fragile clay jars” resonate more than at any other time. We are very much fragile people, but the power of God is what keeps us alive. Having that in our mind, we continue to go on even if our jars are cracked. We have returned with wounds; so, we need to think of how to deal with these wounds. And to do that, there are some possible ways for us to move ahead:

1. *How to think of what happened since 2014.*

For this the words of a Jewish writer who lived during the Second World War are most helpful. He says that “In times of national calamity and persecution the primary concern should be to place the events in a comprehensible theological and ethical framework, and to provide models of spiritual resistance.”<sup>2</sup>

Yes, we need to read the events through the eyes of the Lord. Nowadays, people speak about ISIS more than they do about God. The street language is about the power of ISIS, the deeds of ISIS, the darkness of ISIS. We need to remind ourselves that God is the protagonist of the whole Bible. He is there from start to end. He is the one who is accompanying his people, and the one who has the last word. Not abandoning our faith in him is what gives us our strength and honor. But, I trust that maintaining our faith is not the only concern that we should have. Maybe it is the best time to learn how to combine history with ideology and reality with thought process. Usually, the most effective written experiences emerge, as Rabi Shapira says, “from a place and time when the voice of God was seemingly not to be heard at all.”<sup>3</sup>

2. *What we do has a meaning because we trust the Lord.*

Sometimes we think that we are wasting our time, our money and our efforts. Maybe we should start afresh somewhere else. Some people blame us for being involved in rebuilding our damaged convents and restoring our community in Iraq. Opening kindergartens and schools sounds crazy for some because they think that another version of ISIS will come and what happened will happen again. This thought might be right. Everything in Iraq says that there is no promising future, and it seems pointless to start any project. The uncertainty is the most dangerous fear that we face. The outcome cannot be controlled. This is affecting our work, as some organizations might notice. Every time we set out a plan for a project, we do not know if we are doing right or wrong. We cannot make huge projects thinking that our staying in the area is temporary. It is not fair to play with people’s expectations and make them feel that we returned and that everything is OK now, because it is simply not OK. But we cannot live just by crossing our arms and doing nothing, waiting for better tomorrows. So, we work with many worries. Sometimes we get lost in our feelings about it. But the time of Jesus was also uncertain and full of the unknown. Yet, Jesus founded a community. He preached justice and love of God. He spoke to the people, the educated and the marginalized. He was with the people and for them.

3. *We need to learn from the past.*

What happened should stay in our memory. We have been through wars and we did not learn from our history. This means there is something missing, or we do not really want to learn because what is

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<sup>2</sup> Polen, Holy Fire, 19.

<sup>3</sup> Polen, Holy Fire, 33.

happening is benefiting us. There is a Lebanese thinker called Antoin Messera who says that trauma makes us feel that we are all at risk; not only in Iraq, or the middle East, but also in Europe. Some people are thinking of how to stop immigration. But not many know that Europe has had a hand in what happened in Iraq. Also, it is important to fill in the gap between the past and the future. It is dangerous to forget everything and start as if nothing has happened. Messera sees that people who do not learn from the past are ignorant. They keep repeating the same mistakes and live worse tragedies.

Finally

The altar is standing again with its cracks (Slide four). That would not have happened without the aid of many organizations and benefactors who extended their helping hands with much generosity and kindness. Every time we pray around this altar you can be sure that you are greatly remembered and thanked. Thank you for helping us restore our buildings, and more importantly, restoring our community. God bless the effort and, may He keep His altars standing all over the world.

## Our al-Tahira (Immaculate Mary) Convent in Qaraqosh after ISIS 2014



Slide 1

## Our altar at al-Tahira (Mary Immaculate) Convent



Slide 2



### Cracked but still standing

