

The Contribution of the Christians in the Middle East

Since Christianity emerged and then spread in what we call the “The Middle East”, Christians have tried to live and preach the love of God that was manifested on the Cross. Strengthened by the words of the Lord “*Do not be afraid*” of your small number and your weakness, Christians understood that their mission would always remain far beyond the size of their community. For centuries, Christians extended bridges between the Roman and the Persian empires, between the Greek and the Arab Muslim cultures, between the East and the West. They were convinced that enlightened hearts and minds open to wisdom and knowledge were the best ways to reach the other, and they became known in their countries as peaceful and trustworthy people.

That did not mean that Christians were always esteemed for their truthfulness. Waves of persecution, over the centuries, targeting the identity of Christians and their sense of belonging, made Christians doubt that they would ever live in peace in their own homeland. More recently the violent invasion of the Plain of Nineveh by ISIS and the wave of destruction left behind have deeply wounded the Christian community.

As part of this wounded community, the Dominican Sisters, who were forced to leave their convents, now hope for restoration and healing. With our people, we still believe that our mission is to extend bridges between the past and the future. That is why we returned to the Plain of Nineveh with all the doubts and fears in our hearts. Truthfully the return of Christians, despite everything, is based upon our determination to live our beliefs and traditions in the place where we belong, and where we feel deeply connected to our roots.

Having returned, we realize how threatened our Christian community is by the uncertainty that permeates all aspects of our lives. Now more than ever we need serious initiatives for reconciliation from our government and our Muslim neighbours.

As Dominican Sisters, we believe that the best way to be healed from our wounds is to help people become aware of, and draw on, the inner strength that helped them endure years of displacement and humiliation because of their faith. So, we opened educational projects starting with kindergarten and schools. And, some of our sisters, with degrees in Theology, Scriptures and other sciences, now contribute to the faith formation of adults in higher education. With the help of many people of good will, including Christian and other NGOs, we have been able to restore our institutions. It is here that human values are cultivated and dignity is respected.

Yet, we believe that the restoration of our community greatly depends on our trust in the risen Lord who promised to be with us always.

I would like to end with an appeal for respect for the uniqueness of the Middle Eastern culture, which will definitely help Christianity to thrive and flourish.

Sister Nazek Matty, Dominican Sister of St Catherine of Sienna, Iraq