Pope Francis holds historic meeting with Iraq's top Shi'ite cleric

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Pope Francis meets with Iraq's top Shi'ite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, in Najaf, Iraq March 6, 2021. (REUTERS Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani office)

Najaf: Pope Francis held a historic meeting with Iraqâ€™s top Shiâ€™ite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani on Saturday, in a powerful appeal for coexistence in a land torn by sectarianism and violence.

Francisâ€™s meeting in the holy southern city of Najaf, during a whirlwind and risky tour of Iraq, marked the first time a pope has met with such a senior Shiâ€™ite cleric. Children lined a street and waved Iraqi and Vatican flags at the leader of the worldâ€™s Catholics.

The pontiff has visited predominantly Muslim countries including Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, Bangladesh, Azerbaijan, the United Arab Emirates and the Palestinian territories, using those trips to call for inter-religious dialogue.

After his 55-minute meeting with Sistani, Francis headed to the ruins of ancient Ur in southern Iraq, revered as the birthplace of Abraham, father of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

He is scheduled to give a speech at an interreligious meeting. After flying back to Baghdad, he is expected to deliver mass at the Chaldean Cathedral of Saint Joseph. Sistani is one of the most important figures in Shiâ€™ite Islam, both within Iraq and beyond. He wields enormous influence over politics.

His edicts sent Iraqis to free polls for the first time in 2005, rallied hundreds of thousands of men to fight against Islamic State in 2014 and toppled an Iraqi government under pressure from mass demonstrations in 2019.

Sistani, 90, rarely takes meetings, and has refused talks with Iraqâ€™s current and former prime ministers, according to officials close to him. Sistani agreed to meet the pope on condition that no Iraqi officials would be present, said a source in the presidentâ€™s office.

The meeting with Francis took place at Sistaniâ€™s humble home which he has rented for decades, located along a narrow alleyway in Najaf.

An ascetic cleric of almost mythical stature among millions of Shiâ€™ite followers, Sistani intervened at critical junctures as Iraq lurched from one crisis to another. A gaunt figure, the reclusive Sistani worked from his spartan base near the golden-domed Imam Ali shrine in Najaf.

He was rarely seen in public. Pope Francis began his most risky foreign trip on Friday, flying into Iraq amid the tightest security ever seen for a papal visit to appeal to the countryâ€™s leaders and people to end militant violence and

religious strife.

The country has deployed thousands of security personnel to protect him during the visit, which comes after a spate of rocket and suicide bomb attacks and a spike in COVID-19 cases.

Francis said he was making the trip to show solidarity with Iraqâ€™s devastated Christian community of around 300,000, just one fifth of the number before the U.S. invasion in 2003 and the brutal Islamist militant violence that followed.

Pope John Paul II came close to visiting, but had to cancel a planned trip in 2000 after talks with the government of then-leader Saddam Hussein broke down.

The 84-year-old Francis, limping from what appeared to be a fresh flare-up of his painful sciatica, made an impassioned call for Iraqis to finally give peacemakers a chance during a gathering of Iraqi officials and diplomats at the presidential palace.

He later paid tribute to people killed in attacks motivated by religion, visiting a Baghdad church where Islamist gunmen killed about 50 worshippers in 2010. Iraqâ€™s security has improved since the defeat of Islamic State in 2017, but the country continues to be a theatre for global and regional score-settling, especially a bitter U.S.-Iran rivalry that has played out on Iraqi soil.

The U.S. invasion of 2003, after years of international sanctions and a devastating war with Iran instigated by former leader Saddam Hussein in the 1980s, plunged Iraq into sectarian conflict and chronic mismanagement that has plagued it since.

- Reuters, The Sun