

# Pope and Ayatollah walk together in footsteps of Abraham

Pope Francis' historic meeting with Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani marks a new step in Christian-Muslim relations. This is a moment that ranks alongside St John Paul II's first official papal visits to [a synagogue in 1986](#) and [mosque in 2001](#).

The foundation stone for these groundbreaking moves is the Second Vatican Council's declaration, *Nostra Aetate*, which unequivocally condemned anti-semitism, and opened a dialogue with Islam. It transformed the Catholic Church's relations with other faiths.

That relationship was on display on the morning of 6 March 2021 in the Iraqi city of Najaf. Along the narrow and column-lined Rasool Street, a convoy carrying the Roman Pontiff stopped and the Pope made his way on foot to the modest house rented by al-Sistani, the most revered leader in Shia Islam. The sight of Francis walking to meet the Grand Ayatollah down a narrow alleyway in Najaf is itself a sign. Here was a Pope searching out a fellow leader, and brother. It symbolised the Church's approach since Vatican II of being willing to "cross over the road" and encounter other religions.

The most obvious impact of this meeting is the new dialogue between the Church and Shia Islam that could now be opening up. Najaf is the Shia equivalent of Rome and the site of "founding father" Imam Ali's tomb. Even getting the meeting to take place is a major development in Church-Shia relations, because Al-Sistani is a reclusive figure who rarely meets foreign dignitaries. So far most of Francis' efforts at building bridges with the Muslim world have been with Sunni leaders or Sunni-majority countries.

Al-Sistani is not just a religious leader, but the most influential figure in post-invasion Iraq. He is a peacemaker, who has repeatedly called for calm when the Shi'ite community were being attacked by Sunni extremists. In 2014 he helped boost the numbers of Iraq's security forces to battle Islamic State and two years ago a sermon he gave led to the resignation of then-prime minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi.

The images of Francis with al-Sistani send a powerful message against extremism. Their encounter shows that true religion is in service of peace and is both a refutation of and deterrent to, those who claim religious support for acts of terrorism or violence.

Najaf-Vatican relations might also be helped by the similar styles of the 84-year-old Pope and 90-year-old Grand Ayatollah whose meeting today ran to more than 45 minutes, longer than expected.

"He was and is courteous and respectful of other people's opinions, he leads a simple life in an ordinary house shunning ostentation – not unlike Pope Francis himself," [says Professor Ian Linden, an inter-faith dialogue expert](#). "He also rejects violence, does not approve of the *velayat-e faqih*, the theocratic rule of the jurists in Iran, though he supports state promotion of Shi'a teaching."

The separation of religious authority and state is noteworthy. During his trip to Iraq, the Pope has pushed for a "healthy pluralism" and co-existence between faith communities. We should not forget that it was only until Vatican II that the Church formally enshrined its teaching in favour of religious freedom, something that underpins the Catholic dialogue with other faiths.

All of this is important for the plight of Iraq's embattled Christians. According to al-Sistani's office, he "emphasised the importance of securing a peaceful and secure life for Iraqi Christians and protecting their constitutional rights" during his meeting with Francis. Al-Sistani has been

active in this regard.

These remarks are significant.

Over the years, the Holy See has repeatedly called for Christians to be treated as citizens in Muslim majority countries. It goes further than simply the protection of Christians. "May no one be considered a second-class citizen," Francis said in his first speech in Iraq at the presidential palace.

This issue made its way into the groundbreaking [2019 human fraternity document](#) on Christian-Muslim relations signed by the Pope and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar. It is "crucial," the declaration says, "to establish in our societies the concept of full citizenship" in both the east and the west.

A dialogue between the Vatican and Najaf could help push things along, and build on work that has already taken place. [The 2015 Marrakesh declaration](#), signed by more than 250 Sunni and Shia scholars, calls for scholars to "develop a jurisprudence of the concept of 'citizenship'" and was an initiative that took place in response to the persecution of Christians and Yazidis by Islamic State. The declaration was seen as a breakthrough, and it built on the Charter of Medina, drafted by the Prophet Mohammed in 622 as a constitution for Muslims and different religious believers to live alongside one another.

Any relationship takes time to build. But the early signs are encouraging. Following the Pope and al-Sistani meeting, Iraq's prime minister, [Mustafa Al-Kadhimi](#), declared that from now on the 6 March would be a national day of tolerance and living together.

Straight after the meeting in Najaf, the Pope travelled to the plains of Ur, the birthplace of Abraham, where he took part in an inter-religious gathering.

“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,” he said.

“Let us never tire of looking up to heaven, of looking up to those same stars that, in his day, our father Abraham contemplated.”

The Pope and al-Sistani are two leaders who have decided to look to the stars and embark on a new journey in the footsteps of Abraham, their common father in faith.