

Sister Nazek Matty about her return in Iraq:

Sometimes we find it difficult to share our unusual experiences, simply because we have no words to describe them. In these few lines, I will try to share the most unusual experience I have ever lived in my life. In so doing I am taking this opportunity to extend my thanks to those kind people who helped me grow in many ways.

I finished my doctorate programme in February 2014. The title of my thesis was: **Historical Reconstruction of Sennacherib's Campaign against Judah and Jerusalem in 701**. I returned to my country, Iraq, in March 2014. I was so grateful to the Lord that he put on my path extremely kind and generous people who helped me study and achieve my ambition to be a biblical researcher. When I arrived in Iraq, I was really happy to be reunited with my Dominican Sisters and my family. The conditions were not settled, yet I was hoping, like other Iraqi Christians, that they would improve. In few weeks I was asked to teach *Introduction to the New Testament* at a Catholic Centre in Qaraqosh/Nineveh (about 30 km from Mosul); also, I was offered to teach as a lecturer at Babel College (a Catholic college based in Ankawa/Erbil) for the academic year 2014-2015. I was glad that things were going as I had hoped.

But summer came in Iraq with wicked winds that disturbed everything and made us all reconsider what we had planned. The ISIS entered Mosul and captured it on the 9th of June, and then we had to face a new reality realizing that our presence in Iraq as Christians was openly and rigorously threatened. Yet, we remained in our towns in the Plain of Nineveh, with the rest of our Christian people hoping that we would be safe, especially after the Kurdish government promised us that they would protect us and would not let the ISIS enter our Christian towns. We believed them. On the 22nd of June I gave my sisters a retreat for six days in Ankawa/Erbil. On the 20th of July I started another retreat in Qaraqosh for another group of my sisters which lasted six days as well. Having finished the retreat, I started preparing my course which I was going to offer at Babel College. Unfortunately, that was prevented as the ISIS entered Qaraqosh on the 6th of August. We were told to leave the town immediately taking with us as little as we could, for there was not enough space in the cars; we left the convent at 11:30 pm. It was a real exodus! The town was empty over night!

We arrived in Ankawa/Erbil next day –the road was very crowded that it took us 9 hours to get to Erbil (it usually takes 1 hour). Everybody was shocked trying to understand what was happening ... but it was too much. In three days, the Dominican Sisters were distributed on refugee camps helping people. I went with another sister to work at a school where 70 families were placed. Suddenly, I found myself responsible for providing food, bedding, and clothing for people whose demands were increasing day after day. I was thinking all the time how Jesus could provide food for thousands of people in the wilderness. I realized that our Christian community was really living biblical times. People were hungry, scattered, weak and humiliated - we badly needed the Saviour! I worked at the school for two months (August and September).

On the 7th of October, I started teaching at Babel College. I was offering two courses: *Introduction to the Bible*, and *Introduction to Historical Books*. Also, I was asked to teach *Introduction to the New Testament* at the institute affiliated with the college. It was not easy at all to switch from working at the refugee camp to lecturing at the college. I felt that I was

being cut in two. On the one hand, I had to teach at a level of people who are hungry to know about the word of God. So I had to search and prepare my classes as if I were not a refugee myself. What made it worse was the fact that I left all my books, as I could not carry them with me the night of our exodus. So, I sent some emails asking some scholars to send me the pdf of their books if possible. Some were so generous and kind that they responded and sent me some precious books that I used in writing my syllabus. It was an unusual experience to stand in front of my students talking to them about the Bible and how people wrote their history, while I was asking God everyday: "why have you forsaken us?" On the other hand, personally, I felt it was a time of grace in which we come face to face with God, when we feel completely empty and we pray for Him to help us understand His will.

At this moment, I feel I am between two completely different communities. A displaced community that badly needs to understand the will of God in all that is happening, and a second community that is hungry to know about the Word of God and how to understand it. I pray that the Lord may enable me to be a bridge between these two Christian communities.