



A royal VISIT

Fr Dominic Robinson SJ and the King walk through the historic Farm Street Church. All photos: Marcin Mazur / ACN

Fr Dominic Robinson SJ spoke with **Maria Fernanda Lopez** about the themes of unity and hope that emerged from the King's recent visit to Farm Street Church, a remarkable occasion that resonated beyond its walls.

On the morning of 17 December 2024, the interior of Farm Street Church was filled with expectation. The 175-year-old Jesuit parish was hosting a service that felt profoundly significant, not just because of the historic visit of King Charles III, though his presence certainly added a momentous air. Nor was it only the gathering of Christians from across denominations, people of all faiths and none, to reflect on the ten years since the invasion of Mosul and the Nineveh Plains by Daesh (ISIS). It was the way these elements came together – history, unity and hope – to create an Advent service unlike any other.

In the heart of central London, a diverse congregation had gathered, their voices rising in prayer and song, both in English and Aramaic.

For parish priest Fr Dominic Robinson SJ, this was a moment that spoke directly to what churches can do today. 'We live in an age when Christians need to come together to build the kingdom in the midst of a secular society in a way which includes everyone.' That unity was palpable in the service, co-hosted by the Catholic charity, Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), and inspired by the resilience of Iraqi Christians.

When asked why moments of unity like this are so important for the Christian community today, Fr Dominic's response was heartfelt. 'I think they're vital for two reasons. Firstly, Christian churches are diminishing almost across the board – not quite the case with some of the independent or Pentecostal churches

– but that diminishment means we must work together.' He paused, then added: 'But the main reason is that we really do share a desire to sow seeds of hope, to make a difference in the world, to promote the kingdom through proclaiming justice, peace, reconciliation and love.' For him, collaboration cannot be optional: 'It is absolutely vital that the churches work together. There is no future in our remaining in silos. The only future is in building Christian unity.'

The service was a celebration of hope, as rebuilding and reconciliation happens. 'In 2014, thousands of Christians had to flee and made their way to the Kurdish capital, Erbil, where they were welcomed in by three churches, but principally the Chaldean Catholic Church.'

ACN has been instrumental in the reconstruction phase, supporting the rebuilding of churches and homes in the Christian town of Qaraqosh and other settlements in the Nineveh Plains, enabling thousands of families

to return. They also helped establish the Catholic University in Erbil, where most Christian families sought refuge after the invasion.

‘We were marking a message of hope that, ten years on, through the work of ACN, those people are able to go back; their schools, churches and hospitals are reopening, and reconciliation centres are springing up.’ The Iraqi community’s participation in the service highlighted this message, and was a reminder of what faith and unity can achieve even in the face of devastation.

The presence of King Charles III added another layer of meaning. It was a historic moment for Farm Street Church at the end of its 175-year jubilee, but also for the Catholic community in Britain. As Fr Dominic ponders: ‘Who would have thought that this was possible even fifty years ago?’ While the times of Jesuits being held in the Tower of London are very distant now, the sight of a monarch in a Jesuit church, standing alongside a diverse congregation, was a powerful symbol of unity and mutual respect.

‘I was thinking of the last time that a monarch could have visited a Jesuit church and I’m not sure that has ever happened in England. The Jesuits were under suspicion for so much of the seventeenth century, after the Gunpowder Plot. So, these resonances are very real for me, and it says to us that we’ve come a long way and that we have very similar visions of what the Christian Church can be about.

I think that has to be good for the parish and for the whole Church.’

Fr Dominic walked alongside the King after the service as he met with some of the most vulnerable members of society: those persecuted and forcibly displaced in Iraq, and homeless parishioners. I asked him what was going through his mind during those encounters. ‘I couldn’t help but be moved by the desire of so many to meet the King and I was grateful for his support. It highlighted for me that those at the bottom of society need to be brought into the centre.’

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This service was an occasion for the parish to come together in its diversity, Fr Dominic tells me, and to embrace ‘what a Jesuit church in the centre of the city is all about’. And what is that, exactly? ‘The focus on going to the margins, to bring in and really help those most in need, who are abjectly poor in the middle of a city of such great contradictions, and where there’s such a gap between rich and poor. And doing it in collaboration with others, as part of the Church and part of the Christian community, at the heart of the secular city’, he explains. ‘It struck me, throughout all the planning, that this is what the Jesuits have always done

in our city centre missions and what we’re called to do more and more.’

Iraq’s journey of recovery, with schools and churches reopening, is seen by Fr Dominic as an example of what can be achieved elsewhere, a testament to the enduring strength of communities when supported by faith and solidarity. For him, this service was a message of real hope. ‘Of course, the situation still isn’t perfect in northern Iraq, but as when Pope Francis recently visited Mosul and Qaraqosh, we were marking hope in the midst of what was a really dark tragedy ten years ago. And if this can be done, then for Christians who are persecuted for their faith where there is conflict in the name of religion, extremism and terrorism, there’s hope as well. And of course, as it was Christmas, we were thinking especially of the land of Jesus’s birth.’

As the congregation filed out into the crisp Advent air, their hearts and minds were full. This was not just a service; it was a call to action, a moment to reflect on how unity and hope can transform lives. ‘An occasion like this invites a discernment of what’s most important in a life of Christian discipleship’, Fr Dominic shares. ‘Reaching out to those most in need who are part of that one family of the Church is something that I think will continue to resonate’.

In a world often marked by division and despair, this service was a reminder of the light that can shine when faith, history and hope come together. ●



The King meets with attendees after the special Advent service



Fr Dominic Robinson SJ with Cardinal Vincent Nichols to his right, followed by Archbishop Miguel Maury Buendía and Archbishop Athanasius Toma