

**Address of Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches at the Plenary of the Australian Episcopal Conference
Wednesday, 10 May 2017, Sydney**

I am happy to meet you and be able to share with you some reflections on the situation of Christians in the Middle East with a particular accent on Iraq and Syria, and also with regard to the presence of Eastern Catholics in Australia. Thanks also for the beautiful book "Eastern Catholic Churches in Australia", that you have published: I hope it will be an example also for other Episcopal Conference.

Two different stories which have in common the drama of the suffering of whole peoples, upon whom one cannot fix the blame for the predicaments in which their countries have been immersed for years. My first word to you, therefore, is one of gratitude for all that the Australian people have done and are doing, through the action of both the Government and the Churches, to receive the refugees created by the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. The figures speak of 21,483 people welcomed between July 1st, 2015 and March 31st of this year. We know the place this issue holds in the heart of the Holy Father Francis. Gratitude for what has already been done becomes a renewed commitment for tomorrow. The goal is that, within the limits of the possible, no one should be forgotten, and that those, who cannot physically be accepted into the country, will still be offered a solution that is respectful of their human dignity.

As I visited the federal capital of Canberra on Monday, I was impressed by the fact that one of the etymologies of its name derives from the Ngunnawal language: "*Kambera*," which means "meeting place." The very history of this country is a story of constant encounters with new arrivals; it is not so much a tale of conquests, even if the infliction of wounds has not been lacking - for example, in the case of native populations. Still, the passing of time has made everyone aware of the errors of the

past and has allowed for a proper foundation of peaceful and civic coexistence. Of course, international terrorism has unfortunately also had its victims in this Country, and one of the questions debated publicly has been precisely how to limit the spread of extremist radicalism. Nevertheless, here as elsewhere, the problem cannot simply be resolved by constructing barriers.

2. As a Catholic community, you invoke the intercession of Our Lady, Help of Christians, to whom the beautiful cathedral of this city is dedicated. In addition, you turn towards Saint Mary MacKillop, whom St. John Paul II beatified on his visit in 1995 and who was subsequently canonized by Benedict XVI in 2010. I was struck by the words of Pope Wojtyla upon arriving at the airport on January 18th, 1995: "Mary MacKillop embodied all that is best in your nation and in its people: genuine openness to others, hospitality to strangers, generosity to the needy, justice to those unfairly treated, perseverance in the face of adversity, kindness and support to the suffering. I pray that her example will inspire many Australians to take new pride in their Christian heritage and to work for a better society for all. This they will do by acting with courage and commitment wherever there is poverty or injustice, wherever innocent life is threatened or human dignity degraded... She was a woman of courage who placed the spiritual and material well-being of others ahead of any personal ambition or convenience. The honour, which the Church will give to Mother Mary MacKillop by declaring her among the Blessed, is in a sense an honour given to Australia and its people. It is also an invitation, an invitation to the whole of society to show genuine love and concern for all who are weighed down by life's burdens. I dare to say that your response will greatly determine the kind of society you will pass on to future generations in this land of great promise."

3. I believe that these words can serve to help make an examination of conscience; they call us to recognize the gifts that this Australian Church has been able to receive and make fruitful, while at the same time seeking forgiveness for the defects that have sometimes shown themselves, and they indicate a path forward in progress

and renewal. The purification of memory and of the wounds of the past, together with the legitimate demands of truth, and a sublime yet concrete charity for all, will point out the effective way leading to the long desired Resurrection that always is near at hand.

4. When I went to Aleppo, Syria, in January 2011, to preside at the rite of dedication of the new Cathedral of the Latin Apostolic Vicariate and when, in December of 2012, I went to Iraq for the re-consecration of the Syro-Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, which had been profaned and bathed in the blood of martyrs on October 31, 2010, I never would have imagined that we would find ourselves in the present situation. The explosion and subsequent evolution of the Syrian conflict as well as the more recent drama unfolding in Iraq have burdened our hearts with an enormous suffering. Great is the wound inflicted to the dignity of the human person, but especially and above all to our Christian brothers and sisters, both Catholic and not. Still in the 21st century, as if history has taught nothing, we must witness barbarities and atrocities, which strike above all the weakest: the elderly, women and children. Along with my preoccupations for the thousands of refugees, chased from their houses on the plane of Nineveh, I have ever in mind the bishops and priests still in the hands of kidnappers in Syria.

5. On one hand, the action of the Holy Spirit continues to make the Church fertile in every part of the world, manifesting its characteristic maternity (cfr. LG 64). Yet, on the other hand, it must be recognized that the Churches, which gave rise in great part to the diffusion of the Gospel in the Apostolic era, are now shaken at their foundations and threatened in their very existence. We know the difficulties of the Church in Jerusalem, and we are always more convinced that a durable peace in the Holy Land would contribute significantly to the stability of the whole Middle East. We see the drama of the Church in Antioch (geographically located in modern day Turkey, although

the Catholic and Orthodox Patriarchs of that See reside in Syria and Lebanon). As for the Church of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, now called the Church of Babylon of the Chaldeans, the fruit of evangelization of the Church of Antioch, which once played a key role in the East, we fear now for its loss of active presence. If these churches, the historic mothers of the evangelizing mission, are struck at their foundations, we, as their children, cannot be silent.

6. In addition to being part of a single Apostolic College with our brother bishops in that region, we are duty bound to our own faithful to speak out: the ongoing presence of these churches in their place of origin touches the source of our common Christian faith. God chose that part of the world as “the cradle of a universal plan of salvation in love”. This adds a specific value to every effort we undertake to respond to this dramatic page in human and Christian history. For nearly two thousand years these Christians have kept alive the flame of the first Pentecost in those lands. It is vital to appreciate this two millennia of existence, now so direly tried. I give heartfelt thanks for the constant calls you have issued to the Australian faithful asking for solidarity with their elder brethren in the faith. As Pope Francis said when he received the Members of the Oriental Congregation at the end of our Plenary Session in November 2013: *“Every Catholic therefore owes a debt of thanks to the Churches that live in that region. From these Churches we may learn, among other things, the effort of the daily exercise of the spirit of ecumenism and of interreligious dialogue. The geographical, historical and cultural context in which they have lived for centuries has indeed made them natural interlocutors with numerous other Christian confessions and with other religions”* (21 November 2013).

7. The Churches of the East have been wounded by external events, but they are also burdened by difficulties from within. For our daily work of accompaniment of these Churches, the Congregation is guided by the insight made by Pope Francis last June as he received representatives of the funding agencies of ROACO. He said: *"I have been told that in the course of restoration work in Bethlehem, on one of the walls of the nave a seventh angel in mosaic has come to light, forming with the other six a sort of procession towards the place commemorating the mystery of the birth of the Word made flesh. This can lead us to reflect on how the face of our ecclesial communities can also be covered by "incrustations" as a result of various problems and sins. Yet your work must unfailingly be guided by the certainty that, beneath material and moral incrustations, and the tears and bloodshed caused by war, violence and persecution, beneath this apparently impenetrable cover, there is a radiant face like that of the angel in the mosaic. All of you, with your projects and your activities, are part of a "restoration" that will enable the face of the Church to reflect visibly the light of Christ the Word Incarnate."*

8. At the end of the 18th century, the early British explorers arrived, and, gradually from those first settlements, the modern face of Australia developed. Now, in a similar way, the sons and daughters of Eastern Catholic Churches have entered into the history of this great nation. Having become an integral part of society, they seek to make their contribution to the growth of the common good. As in the United States and Canada, so now in Australia, five brother bishops of Eastern Churches sit among you as members of this Conference in all respects. These bishops lead the eparchies that the Supreme Pontiffs have decided over the years to erect in order to ensure adequate Pastoral care of the Eastern communities. First, there is the Ukrainian one, which was an Exarchate since 1958, but was elevated to Eparchy in 1982. The other four Eparchies are: Maronite, erected in 1973, Melkite in 1987, Chaldean in 2006 and, finally, in 2013, Syro-Malabar. Also present, however, and kept in mind by this Congregation are parishes or centers of worship for Armenians, Syro-Catholics, Syro-

Malankars, and Russian Byzantines. I hope the inclusion of these Bishops is both effective and collaborative. Our Dicastery, through the Pontifical Representative and through Archbishop Hart, who is a member of the Congregation, remains at your disposal to clarify any eventual difficulties or requests for clarification that may emerge. In this regard, allow me to clarify two points:

A) The situation of priests: to the Eastern and Latin bishops I say: Let us try to accompany the clergy as fathers and shepherds. As some Latin bishops of Canada have recently pointed out, it can happen that following the constitution of their own eparchy, some Eastern priests, perhaps even a few hundred or thousands of miles from the closest confrere of their own eparchy, isolate themselves and have no contact with others. I sincerely hope that, while maintaining the legitimate care for ritual diversity and safeguarding the various jurisdictions, a climate of genuine priestly fraternity will grow and develop. It could take place, for example, during occasions of permanent formation or spiritual retreat, which could also benefit from the presence of Eastern spirituality for a healthy exchange of gifts between the various "lungs", with which the one Catholic Church breathes also here in Australia.

B) The knowledge of the Christian East on the part of Latins: I have just mentioned the famous expression of St. John Paul II on the life-breath – coming from both East and West - of the Catholic Church. In these days the centenary of the founding of the Congregation for Oriental Churches and of the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Urbe is being celebrated. During this century, at least three popes - Benedict XV, one hundred years ago, his immediate successor, Pius XI, and also Saint John Paul II in *Orientalis Lumen* of 1995 – expressed the desire that Latin priests should also be educated to know the treasures of the patrimony of spirituality, liturgy, and discipline of the Eastern Catholic Churches. This is important both for their own profit and ministry, but also for its fundamental role in the ecumenical journey. Therefore, it would be excellent if there should

be at least one or two among the Latin priests of Australia who would come to Rome to pursue academic degrees in Oriental ecclesiastical sciences and Oriental canon law. They could then be of service, at the level of the Australian episcopal conference, for the necessary and fundamental relationship between the Latin Church and the various Oriental traditions, which have been present in this land for years.

9. It only remains for me to reiterate my thanks for your attention this morning and for the dialogue, which might follow from it. May the Blessed Virgin help all of you, dear bishops of Australia, in the service you render to the holy people of God in this not easy but equally exciting period of history, which is still a part of the history of salvation. Thank you.