



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE 90th PLENARY ASSEMBLY OF THE
REUNION OF AID AGENCIES FOR THE ORIENTAL CHURCHES (R.O.A.C.O.)**

*Clementine Hall
Thursday, 22 June 2017*

[Multimedia]

Dear Friends,

I cordially welcome you and I thank Cardinal Sandri for his greeting on behalf of all of you gathered in Rome for the 90th Plenary Session of roaco. I renew my appreciation for the work and the constant effort of charity and solidarity that you have guaranteed since 1968 to the Oriental and Latin Churches, of the territories entrusted to the competence of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches: you support its activities in pastoral care, education and assistance, and you come to meet their urgent needs, thanks also to the work of the Pontifical Representatives, whom I also have the pleasure of greeting. Through the Father Custodian, I greet and bless the Franciscan Friars of the Custody, who have begun celebrating the eighth centenary of their presence in the Holy Land.

The Congregation for the Oriental Churches, on the other hand, is celebrating its centenary, a long period during which it has assisted the Supreme Pontiffs — who were its Prefects up until 1967 — in their solicitude for all the Churches. These decades have witnessed a succession of dramatic events: the Oriental Churches have often been struck by terrible waves of persecution and anguish, both in Eastern Europe and in the Middle East. Heavy emigration has weakened their presence in territories where they had flourished for centuries. Now, thanks be to God, some of them have returned to freedom after the painful period of totalitarian regimes, but others, especially in Syria, Iraq and Egypt, see their children suffering due to the ongoing war and senseless violence perpetrated by fundamentalist terrorism.

All these events have made us undergo the experience of the Cross of Jesus: it is a cause of turmoil and suffering, but at the same time is the source of salvation. As I had the occasion to say the day after my election as Bishop of Rome: “When we journey without the Cross, when we build without the Cross, when we profess Christ without the Cross, we are not disciples of the Lord”, we are worldly: we may be bishops, priests, cardinals, popes, but not disciples of the Lord” (Homily during Mass with the Cardinal Electors, 14 March 2013, l’ore, 20 March 2013).

For this reason I am pleased that you have been able to reflect, together with several representatives of the Churches, on the importance of the initial formation of seminarians and the permanent formation of priests. Indeed, we are cognizant of the radicalness expressed by many of them and of the heroic nature of their dedicated witness alongside their often sorely tried communities. But we are also aware of the temptations they may encounter, such as the pursuit of a social status attributed to the consecrated in certain geographical areas, or a way to exercise a leadership role according to criteria of human affirmation or according to the trends of culture and of the environment.

The effort that the Congregation and the Agencies must continue to fulfil is that of supporting the projects and initiatives that build up the Church in an authentic way. It is essential to always nurture the Gospel way of closeness: in the Bishops, so they may live it in relation to their presbyters, so that the latter may make the Lord’s caress felt by the faithful entrusted to them. But all safeguarding the grace of being disciples of the Lord, starting from the first who learn to make themselves least among the least. The seminarian and young priest will thus feel the joy of cooperating in the salvation offered by the Lord, who stoops like the Good Samaritan to pour onto the wounds of hearts and of human histories the oil of consolation and the wine of Gospel hope.

May we always feel as living stones secured to Christ, who is the cornerstone! The Oriental Churches preserve so many venerated memories, churches, monasteries, places of saints: they must be safeguarded and preserved, thanks also to your help, thus favouring pilgrimage to the roots of the faith. But when it is not possible to repair or maintain the structures, we must continue to be the living temple of the Lord, recalling that the “clay” of our existence as believers was shaped by the hands of the “potter”, the Lord, who infused into it his life-giving Spirit. And let us not forget that in the East, even in our day, Christians — no matter whether Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant — shed their blood as the seal of their witness. May the Eastern faithful, if forced to emigrate, be welcomed in the places they reach, and may they continue to live according to their own ecclesial tradition.

In this way, your work, dear representatives of the Agencies, will be a bridge between West and East, both in the countries of origin and in those that you yourselves come from.

I entrust you to the intercession of the All Holy Mother of God, and I assure you that my prayers accompany you. I wholeheartedly bless you, your communities and your service. And I ask you to

please pray for me.

Thank you!