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OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE



BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 170622c

Thursday 22.06.2017

Audience with the participants in the Assembly of the “Reunion of Aid Agencies for the Oriental Churches” (ROACO)

At 11.45 this morning, in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the Assembly of the “Reunion of Aid Agencies for the Oriental Churches” (ROACO) held in Rome on the occasion of the 90th Plenary Session.

The following is the Pope’s address to those present:

Holy Father’s Address

Dear friends,

I cordially welcome you and thank Cardinal Sandri for his greeting on behalf of you all, gathered in Rome for the 90th Plenary Session of ROACO. I renew my gratitude for the work and the constant effort of charity and solidarity guaranteed since 1968 to the Churches, Eastern and Latin, of the territories entrusted to the competence of the Congregation for Oriental Churches: you support the pastoral, educational and welfare activities and help meet their urgent needs, also thanks to the work of the Pontifical Representatives, whom I also have the pleasure of greeting. Through the Custos I greet and bless the Franciscan Friars of the Custody who have started to celebrate the eighth centenary of their presence in the Holy Land.

The Congregation for the Oriental Churches is celebrating its centenary, a long period during which it has assisted the Supreme Pontiffs – who had been Prefects until 1967 – in their solicitude for all the Churches. There have been decades of dramatic events: Eastern Churches have often been overwhelmed by terrible waves of persecution and suffering, both in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Major migrations have weakened its presence in the territories where they had flourished for centuries. Now, thanks to God, some of them have returned to freedom after the painful period of the totalitarian regimes, but others, especially in Syria, Iraq and Egypt, see their children suffer as a result of the ongoing war and the senseless violence perpetrated by fundamentalist terrorism.

All these events have led us to go through the experience of the Cross of Jesus: it is the cause of disturbance and suffering, but at the same time it is a source of salvation. As I was able 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 at Mass celebrated with the Cardinal electors: *Teachings I*, 1 [2013], 3).

Therefore I am glad that you were able to reflect, along with some representatives of the Churches, on the important issue of the initial formation of seminarians and the ongoing formation of priests. We are aware of the radical nature of the choice expressed by many of them, and the heroism of their testimony of dedication alongside their often sorely tried communities. But we are also aware of the temptations that one may encounter, such as the search for a social status attributed to the consecrated in some geographical areas, or a way of exercising the role of guide following criteria of human affirmation or according to patterns of culture and the environment.

The effort that Congregation and the Agencies have to continue to make is that of supporting the projects and initiatives that build up the Church in an authentic way. It is essential always to nurture the style of evangelical closeness: in the bishops, so that they live this in relation to priests, so that these latter enable the faithful entrusted to them to feel the caress of the Lord. But this is to be done while conserving all the grace of being disciples of the Lord, starting with the first who learn how to be the last with the last. The seminarian and the young priest will thus feel the joy of being collaborators in the salvation offered by the Lord, Who stoops like the Good Samaritan to pour the oil of consolation and the wine of evangelical hope on the wounds of human hearts and histories.

Let us always feel that we are living stones close to Christ, Who is the cornerstone! The Eastern Churches preserve many venerable memories, churches, monasteries, places of saints and saints: they should be kept and preserved, also with your help, thus encouraging 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 Lord's living temple, remembering that the “clay” of our existence in belief was shaped by the hands of the “potter”, the Lord, who infused into it his vivifying spirit. And let us not forget that even today in the East, Christians – be they Catholics, Orthodox, or Protestants – shed their blood as a seal of their witness. May oriental believers, if forced to emigrate, be welcomed in the places where they arrive, and continue to live according to their own ecclesial tradition. In this way your work, dear representatives of the Agencies, will be a bridge between the West and the East, both in the countries of origin and in those you yourselves come from.

I entrust you to the intercession of the All Holy Mother of God, and I assure you that I accompany you with my prayer. I bless you, your communities, and your service. And please continue to pray for me. Thank you!
