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Audience with participants in the Assembly of the Reunion of Aid Agencies for the Oriental Churches (R.O.A.C.O.)

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the 94th Assembly of the Reunion of Aid Agencies for the Oriental Churches (*Riunione delle Opere per l' Aiuto alle Chiese Orientali*, R.O.A.C.O.), taking place in Rome at the Casa Bonus Pastor from 21 to 24 June.

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

Address of the Holy Father

Dear Friends,

I am happy to meet you at the conclusion of the work of your Plenary Session. I greet Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, Cardinal Zenari, Msgr. Pizzaballa, the other Superiors of the Dicastery – who have changed in the meantime – the Officials and the members of the Agencies that make up your Assembly.

The fact that we are able to meet in person instils confidence and proves helpful for your work, since last year it was possible only to reflect together at a distance. We know that it was not the same. For we need to encounter one another, to share ideas in fruitful dialogue and to hear the questions and the cries for help coming to us from so many parts of the world, particularly from the Churches in the countries where you carry out your work. I can testify personally to this, for it was precisely in this setting that, in 2019, I announced my intention to visit Iraq. A few months ago, thank God, I was able realize this desire. I was happy to include one of your representatives in the entourage, as a sign of gratitude for what you have done and continue to do.

Despite the pandemic, you have had additional meetings over the past year to face the situation of Eritrea, but also to follow that of Lebanon following the terrible Beirut port explosion of 4 August last. In this regard, I thank you for your efforts to support Lebanon in this grave crisis, and I ask you to pray, and invite others to pray, for our meeting on 1 July with the Heads of the Christian Churches in Lebanon, that the Holy Spirit will enlighten

and guide us.

I would also like, through you, to extend my gratitude to all those who support and make possible your projects: ordinary members of the faithful, families, parishes and volunteers who understand what it means to be “brothers and sisters all” and who devote a portion of their time and resources to assisting you in the services you provide. I have been told that the income from the 2020 collection for the Holy Land was only about half of that received in previous years. Certainly, this was due in part to the long months when attendance at church services was reduced, but also to the economic crisis generated by the pandemic. While the crisis may have encouraged us to focus on what is essential, we cannot remain indifferent when we think of the deserted streets of Jerusalem and the loss of those pilgrims who go there to strengthen their faith, but also to express concrete solidarity with the local Churches and their people. Once again, I ask everyone to appreciate the significance of this form of charity, which Saint Paul refers to in his letters, and Saint Paul VI restructured in his 1974 Apostolic Exhortation *Nobis in Animo*, whose continued timeliness and validity I reaffirm.

In your Meeting, you have discussed a variety of geographical and ecclesial situations. In the first place, the Holy Land itself, with Israel and Palestine, peoples who we hope and pray will see the bow of peace that God showed to Noah as a sign of the covenant between heaven and earth, and of peace among peoples. For all too often, even lately, those skies have been darkened by missiles bringing destruction, death and fear!

The pleas for help rising from Syria are never far from God’s heart, yet do not seem to have touched the hearts of leaders in a position to affect the destiny of peoples. We think of the continuing scandal of ten years of conflict, millions of internally and externally displaced persons, the victims and the need for reconstruction, all held hostage to partisan thinking and the lack of courageous decisions for the good of that war-torn nation.

The presence of Cardinal Zenari, Apostolic Nuncio in Syria, and that of the Papal Representatives in Lebanon, Iraq, Ethiopia, Armenia and Georgia, whom I greet and heartily thank, has enabled you to consider the situation of the Church in those countries. Your own way of life is important, for it helps pastors and faithful to concentrate on what is essential and helpful for the proclamation of the Gospel, as together you show the face of a Church that is a Mother, with particular concern for the poor and the vulnerable. If at times it is necessary to reconstruct buildings and cathedrals, including those destroyed by war, we need to be concerned above all for the living stones who have been wounded and dispersed.

I am following with apprehension the situation arising from the conflict in the Tigray region in Ethiopia, knowing that it is also affecting nearby Eritrea. Beyond religious and confessional differences, we come to see the essential importance of the message of *Fratelli Tutti*, whenever differences between ethnic groups and the resulting struggles for power become systemic.

At the conclusion of my Apostolic Journey in Armenia in 2016, Catholicos Karekin II and I released doves into the sky as a sign of hope for peace in the entire Caucasus region. Sadly, in recent months that hope has once more been disappointed. For this reason, I am grateful for the concern you have shown for the situation in Georgia and Armenia, in order to enable the Catholic community to continue to be a sign and leaven of evangelical life.

Dear friends, thank you for your presence, thank you for your attention and the projects and activities you carry out. I bless each of you and your work. And I ask you please, to continue to pray for me. Thank you!
