



Meeting with the clergy in the Eparchy of Detroit

Wednesday 19 June 2019 A.D.

Dear Brothers in the Priesthood,

I thank you for your warm welcome and the opportunity to share with you this time of prayer and mutual listening.

1. Little more than a week ago, during the annual meeting of ROACO, the assembly of agencies that help our Eastern Churches, the Holy Father Francis announced his desire to visit Iraq next year. As we thank him for this sign of paternal attention, let us already start praying for him and his ministry, particularly this intention, so that he can truly carry out his pilgrimage of peace, reconciliation, and confidence in your land so loved by God. Iraq, all too often, especially in recent decades, has been devastated by violence and sectarian hatred, torn apart by opposed interests of international and regional powers. It is always the simple people who pay the price, especially the Christian and Yazidi minorities, but also many Muslim brothers and sisters. The presence of the large Chaldean population, here as in San Diego, derives from the multiple moments of instability that have induced many families to seek a new future of hope for themselves and their children by emigrating like Abraham from the land of Ur of the Chaldeans.
2. This allows me to enter more specifically into dialog with you, who are taken from the people and made sharers in the very priesthood of Jesus Christ, to offer your life and lead the people entrusted to you in fidelity to the covenant that the Lord has sealed in His Paschal Mystery. The priest is taken from the people and therefore inevitably a child of his times and the traditions of the place of his origin. Being human he too feels the fear of his brothers when dense shadows darken the sky: the unleashing of war and violence, the precariousness of one's life projects, and even real persecution. Doubts and questions take hold of the human heart, as attested for example by the prayers of the Psalmist: "Can God have forgotten us? Can God have closed His heart in anger?" When these experiences befall us as individuals, as a family or as an entire people, they bring us even to the point of saying, again with the words of the Psalms, "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" Some of you are Chaldean faithful who were born and raised in this land, others have arrived here through various paths, some having "fled" from a situation that seemed too great to bear. But the Lord takes our sins, our fears and our flights, and redeems them from within by giving rise to your Eparchy, which has grown to become a historical reference point for the Chaldean Church outside of Iraq. The first stage of our reflection today is therefore to remember the story of your people, your Church, and each one of you personally.
3. As priests, however, we must remember who we are and who we have become, how the Lord with His grace has transformed us interiorly. We are Peter who denied him, we are the disciples who fled, those who did not understand the way in which God was saving us... but all of us, like the disciples of Emmaus, have been encountered on the road that leads away from Jerusalem by the same Lord to whose crucifixion our sins have contributed. He

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draws alongside us in our lives, inviting us to listen to His Word, to recognize the signs of His presence even in the darkest pages of His Passion. He has saved and redeemed us, and made us His priests. We have received this mercy, and therefore we can announce it to others. We, bishops and priests, are not set over the people to dominate and use them for our pleasure, but we are constituted FOR the people, to serve and lead them to eternal life. Our condition, which reaches the deepest fibers of our being, imprints on us an indelible character thanks to the seal and anointing of the Holy Spirit. It does not set us on a pedestal but entrusts us the basin to wash each other's feet and those of all our brothers and sisters, through mutual forgiveness, fraternal charity, and patiently waiting for those steps of conversion that God asks of each of His children.

4. Before us stands a great host of holy martyrs and confessors of the faith, from the ancient East Syriac Fathers of the Church to the martyrs of our day, such as Archbishop Raho and Father Ragheed Ghanni, among others. They are the ones who ask us how we are making our lives a total gift without holding anything back, what aspects of our hearts and of our traditions are obstacles to transparently and tangibly showing the face of the Divine Pastor. If we look to Him, and only to Him, how can we think that divisions still exist between who comes from one village rather than another: are not all Christians, all Chaldeans? How can we accept that the celebration of the divine mysteries, the liturgy, instead of being an occasion of sanctification and access to the mystery, becomes a source of disputes and opposition between brothers? How can we permit ourselves to administer according to personal criteria the belongings of the ecclesial community or those goods that some of the faithful might entrust to us? Or how can we even imagine that assistance to emigrants and refugees might become a source of business and self-enrichment, offering moreover a sad spectacle to the society which welcomes us?
5. Let us ask for the grace to remain in Christ, to feel ourselves and truly to be only one Church, to live concrete solidarity towards our brothers and sisters in Iraq, to work to ensure that this blessed land returns once again to being a blessing for all, so that no one either from outside or within the community may extinguish the gentle glow of the presence of Christians who for two millennia have inhabited that land and continue to keep alive its hope. Thank you for your presence, thank you for service. Remember and be proud to belong the Christ first, to be part of the Catholic Church, to be Chaldean.