Vice-Chancellor’s Welcome to Australian Catholic University

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MARONITE08
The First Maronite International Youth Forum
at Australian Catholic University
July 2008

Your Eminence, Cardinal Patriarch Sfeir, your Excellencies, reverend Fathers and Sisters, special guests and friends, and the youth of the Maronite Church:

I welcome you to Australian Catholic University which is very pleased to be collaborating with the Maronite Catholic Eparchy in Australia in convening this historic event. You are gathered here from all corners of the world to celebrate and reflect on the questions facing the Maronite Church today, tomorrow, and beyond.

The Maronite08 theme ‘New Horizons for New Times’ is of immense significance because it provides direction for youth in their leadership in the Church both for today and in the future.

I found it particularly insightful that the theme of this gathering is encapsulated so poignantly by the Maronite08 logo. The letter “M” in Syriac, which stands for “Maroun”, your founder, is found at the heart of the Cross, which symbolizes the resurrected Christ and his victory over death. Today, in the same way, your Forum theme captures the hope for renewal in the Maronite Church. Furthermore, all points in the cross come towards the centre, which is Maronite 08 in Sydney. This symbolises your presence throughout the world and your convergence to this defining moment in your Church’s history.

After this Forum, you will join the universal Church for the twenty-third World Youth Day, which reminds us of the mission of the wider Church. This mission invites us to be witnesses to Christ’s call to be a light in the world, to transform and be transformed. In this mission you are called to be both truly Maronite and truly Catholic.

As Maronites, you have inherited a tradition rooted in monasticism. Traditionally, you have been able to practice this reflective monasticism nestled detachedly among the mountains of Lebanon while at the same time remaining faithfully in communion with Rome. Throughout your history, in the midst of your Church’s repeated persecution, isolation and dispersion, you have identified with the suffering Christ. This has been
evident very recently with the beatification of Fr Yaaqoob Haddad, the late Capuchin priest, in Beirut on June 22.

In this third millennium, you are faced with the challenge of building upon this heritage in your Church, which has expanded across many continents. At the same time, you engage a diversity of communities and contexts by globalisation and increasing secularisation, individualism, and consumerism which will undoubtedly be shared, discussed, and scrutinised in the next three days. A fruit of this Forum will be the personal and collective contemplation of the youth which will inform their actions in the Church and the world.

It is worth noting that this momentous event is symbolic because it demonstrates the link between the Maronites and Australian Catholic University. For the Maronites, it is significant because you are of the Eastern tradition, and although you have your own unique charism, you also integrate with the wider Church. Similarly, Australian Catholic University is an academic institution which is also Catholic. Thus, we strive to excel in scholarship and at the same time be an integral part of the Church through our mission and ethos. In a way, therefore, we are part of each other’s story. We are both “diversified, dispersed bodies”.

The Maronites’ spiritual centre remains Lebanon. From there, they were dispersed to various countries and continents of the world. However, they face the challenge of relating to their various contexts while retaining their distinct Maroniteness. Australian Catholic University, too, was created from diverse institutions. The University was opened following the amalgamation of four Catholic tertiary institutions across eastern Australia.

As the Maronite Church is dispersed through various countries and faces the challenge of dealing with diverse contexts, Australian Catholic University also has six campuses dispersed through various Australian states and territories, and faces the challenge of remaining true to its mission in its differing contexts.

This gathering is particularly significant because it highlights the relationship of the Eastern and Western rites of the Church, which allows engagement with the Church worldwide to “breathe with two lungs”. This relationship is well shown through Australian Catholic University being co-host with the Maronite Eparchy of Australia for the Maronite 08 Forum. The symbolism linking us reflects the richness within the Church’s diversity. We are different, yet there is immense beauty in our unity as Church.

I sincerely hope and pray that the fruits of this gathering will become a sign of the renewal of the Maronite Church, with the youth playing a key role in creating a Church of “New Horizons for New Times”. I also hope that the partnership between the Maronite Church and the Australian Catholic University, which has developed through the preparation of this Forum, can continue and flourish through collaborative work in the follow up of the Forum.