My dear Friends and Visitors from Melbourne

Firstly, I welcome you north of the border, to NSW and to Sydney and I thank Professor Jude Butcher for inviting me to speak to you. He has asked me to speak on “Called to exercise a Leadership Informed by Faith”. Today I will reflect with you on three dimensions of the topic:

1. Leaders, informed by faith, function within a social context;
2. Leaders, informed by faith, have to challenge that context;
3. Leaders, informed by faith, have to move beyond their social context.

Before proceeding let me just tell you where I stand as a Christian leader vis à vis yourselves. I believe that we are all God’s creatures, made in His image and likeness, and for that reason you are my brothers and sisters because we are all created by God and are God’s children. I have a great respect for you as created by God, and sustained in life by God.

I was greatly encouraged last year in September when 138 Islamic leaders approached the Holy See, the Pope, seeking a dialogue between Christians and Muslims on two things we have in common, i.e., the One God, and love of neighbour. These two give us a great grounding for further dialogue.
Secondly, I want to say just a little bit about faith. What do I understand by faith? I believe it is trusting in God’s Word, accepting God’s Word because He is all powerful, all wise, and all truth. The famous English writer, Chesterton, summed up faith this way: “Faith is a step in the dark.”

**Leaders, informed by faith, function within a social context;**

In considering that Leaders, informed by faith, function within a social context, I will refer to the historical and contemporary realities. Some Muslim leaders in Sydney have said to me that they find Catholics sympathetic to their experience of living in Australia as Muslims. To the extent that that is true, and I would hope that it is, I think it is because we, Catholics, have experienced being the underdog in Australia.

When Catholic, mainly Irish people, came here either as convicts or as free settlers in early Australia, no provision was made for them to practice their faith until almost 1820, with the exception of a brief period in 1803. Religion and politics continued to be very firmly connected in early Australia; the workers were Irish and Catholic; the bosses were ‘English’ and Protestant. Into the 1950s, it was not usual to find job advertisements in windows which read: “POSITION VACANT, CATHOLICS NEED NOT APPLY”.

How did we improve the situation, when there was no anti-discrimination legislation to help us? The chief means were education and participation in public life: education largely through the non-government school system, funding for which was finally engineered by the Catholic Church in the late 1960s and 1970s.

It is not always easy for the Catholic Church to run its own schools, there is always opposition, probably somewhat similar to what is taking place in the Camden area, nowadays, where Muslim leaders are endeavouring to establish a Muslim school. I have made overtures, having recognised the experience of
Catholics and the injustice which is inherent in the refusal, and I have gone into bat for the Muslim leaders.

Participation in public life brings me to the second and contemporary aspect of the social context. By public life I mean something wider than elected political office. We could say being interested in, and from time to time, active in community affairs. We live in a democracy, and we respect the institutions of the State. The separation of Church and State can be a difficult concept for Catholics, as for Muslims, because for us there is no part of life which is not under God. In a democracy, we cannot impose our views on others but we can always seek to influence public policy by peaceful means. We can speak out, separately and together, on issues on which we have a common position: euthanasia is an example that comes to mind and other life issues.

Leaders, informed by faith, have to challenge that social context

We do have an obligation as leaders, informed by faith, to challenge the world in which we live in order to make it the kind of world God wants it to be. I believe that Muslims, Catholics, all Christians, Jews, in short, all believers in a monotheistic God have an opportunity, and a responsibility, locally and globally, to say to the world: ‘God is here’. It is a tremendous witness, and to the extent that we can do that together, or at least support one another, it will be a more powerful witness in the areas of social justice, drug-taking, pornography.

In order for that to happen, we have to know more about one another, to know one another, and trust one another. Research shows how little many Catholics know about Islamic beliefs and practices, and how little many Muslims know about Catholic beliefs and practices. That’s understandable to some extent and it is not too difficult to remedy it.
What is more difficult and dangerous are the half-truths and mis-representations that pass for truth, and the fact that some people, from both groups, act on those half-truths and misrepresentations.

As leaders, we must encourage Muslims and Christians to become better friends and neighbours, and we must make some effort to establish knowledge of the main beliefs of Catholicism and Islam through dialogue.

3 Leaders, informed by faith, have to move beyond their social context.

Heaven/Paradise is our ultimate destiny but we have a few things to do before we get there!

Many people find fault with Islam and Christianity! But what they fail to realise is that the problem is not with Islam and Christianity but with the human beings who are Muslims and Christians. If we all lived according to the Revelation we have been given, then the world would be a place of peace and harmony. We human beings are frail and have our faults and we trust God will forgive us.

But there are others, and in some cases, extreme religious régimes, who use religion for some political, economic or personal end, and it is vital that leaders speak against such misappropriation of religion.

Casting an eye over history, I unreservedly admit that Christians were guilty of unjust and violent acts in the Crusades, but this is 1000 years later, and I cannot understand the killing of Muslims by other Muslims. This is a problem which moderate Muslims have to try to explain to generations of people in Australia who watch the news every night.

There are many unjust situations in the world, and without justice, there can be no peace. But justice is not about bombs, shooting and so-called 'non-violent' means such as trade agreements which force developing counties out of world
markets. Justice and peace can never come from vengeance, only from forgiveness.

It is depth of forgiveness for which we need God’s help. And I pray today that you, as leaders, will be preachers of, and witnesses to, forgiveness.

To further clarify what I have said, and to help with our discussion afterwards, there are just a few things that I would like to say, things that I have learned as a leader, a leadership informed by faith.

**The Heart**

I have learned that the most important thing in Christian-Muslim dialogue is a loving heart. In the Acts of the Apostles, it is written that the believer must believe with his heart, and very closely allied is understanding with the heart. A heart which truly encounters another when meeting, in the spirit of our being created by God.

At the funeral of Cardinal Koening, the retired archbishop of Vienna, Muslims, Jews and Christians mourned and prayed; not for the passing of an ecclesiastical dignitary, but for the loss of a good friend. For him every meeting with an individual was an authentic human encounter. When his successor was asked which was more important in Christian–Muslim dialogue: theological scholarship or the building up of personal relationship at a simple human level, he replied “friendship is the key”.

If friendship is the key, what is holding us back? One of the great paradoxes of modern life is that, in a world in which communication was never technically easier, we have fewer and fewer true encounters with our fellow human beings. Obviously, we can never know people if we do not talk to them.

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Acknowledging Difference

I learned the importance of openly and gently acknowledging that we have differences: our beliefs are not the same: the very obvious differences in doctrine are the Incarnation and the Trinity. Note that I said the differences, not that which divides us, because there is no rational basis to the idea that the acknowledgment of differences is necessarily divisive. On the contrary, it would be lacking in love and respect to write our differences out of the dialogue.

Willingness to talk about our differences grounds the dialogue in reality; challenges us to explain the differences in language and concepts which are meaningful for the dialogue partner. The dialogue partners reciprocate by being open to extending their habitual frameworks of meaning.

I believe it is good to consider differences for at least three reasons:

First, and this point was made by several contributors in our dialogues in Western Sydney, it helps us to clarify our thinking about our own faith, and to appreciate what is unique, and to grow in respect for the convictions of others; in talking about our faith with others, we clarify things for ourselves. But it is helpful to state it more positively: for Muslims to engage in inter-religious dialogue, strengthens rather than diminishes their Muslim faith; for Christians to engage in inter-religious dialogue, strengthens rather than diminishes their Christian faith.

Secondly, each group frees the other to be authentically who they are because we come to understand why they act the way they do. If we feel ourselves to be free, then there are no constraints on our honesty, no fear that our honest efforts will be repudiated. Instead we can be confident that misunderstandings will be resolved in a spirit of good will.
Thirdly, with an understanding and listening heart, we can develop ways of talking about our differences so that the end result is greater mutual understanding of our identity as Muslim or Christian

**Cultural Variations**

I have learned to appreciate the importance of culture and the misunderstandings which can spring from conflating culture and religious expression.

I have been at meetings when Christians have been quite hostile to what they incorrectly believe is the Islamic practice of female circumcision. This practice is not a requirement of Islam; it is a practice in some countries, carried out by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

**A final word about my hopes for the Future**

So far, the Christian-Islamic dialogue has worked well on a social level. It would be good to move from talking together to working together: there is much to be said for collaborative projects on pro-life and on social justice issues.

**Resistance**

But there are pockets of people in our communities who have not yet been touched. I receive letters warning me about the dangers of Islam from time to time. Among some of our people, there is uncertainty about it all and there is much to do for both groups to encourage and to reassure our own congregations.

Yes, there are difficulties but a sense of perspective, a sense of history, and a sense of humour will help us to worship the One God in peace and harmony.