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Audience with the participants in the Plenary of the Congregation for the Eastern Churches

This morning the Holy Father Francis received in audience, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the participants in the Plenary of the Congregation for the Eastern Churches. Before the Pope's address, His Eminence Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, prefect of the Congregation, spoke some words of greeting to the Holy Father, in which he expressed his concern for the Ukrainian people.

The following is the Pope's address to those in attendance:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

I thank Cardinal Sandri for his kind greeting and introduction, and I thank each of you, especially those who have arrived from a great distance, for your presence here.

This morning you prayed before the Tomb of the Apostle Peter, renewing together his profession of faith: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God". We did the same thing before the Mass for the inauguration of the pontificate, in order to manifest, as Pope Benedict XV declared, that "in the Church of Jesus Christ, which is neither Latin, nor Greek, nor Slav, but Catholic, no discrimination exists between her children; all, Latins, Greeks, Slavs and other nationalities have the same importance" (*Motu Proprio Dei Providentis*, 1 May 1917). In this year that marks the centenary of his death, our grateful remembrance goes to Benedict XV, who established the Congregation for the Eastern Churches and the Pontifical Oriental Institute. He condemned the brutality of war as a "useless slaughter". His warning went unheard by the heads of the nations engaged in the First World War. As did the plea of Saint John Paul II to avoid the conflict in Iraq.

In this moment, there are numerous wars going on everywhere but like in the past, the warnings of both Popes and men and women of good will are unheard. It seems that the highest award for peace should be given to the wars: it is such a contradiction. We have an attachment to war and this is tragic. Humanity is proud of its

advancement in science and thought, in many beautiful things, but it is going backward in bringing about peace. It is the champion in making war. This should make us all feel shameful. We need to pray and ask pardon for this attitude.

We had hoped that there would have been no need to repeat such statements in the third millennium, yet humanity seems still to be groping in the darkness. We have witnessed the slaughter resulting from conflicts in the Middle East, in Syria and Iraq, and those in the Ethiopian region of the Tigray. Threatening winds continue to blow in the steppes of Eastern Europe, lighting fuses and firing weapons, and turning to ice the hearts of the poor and the innocent, they do not matter. Meanwhile, the tragedy of Lebanon continues, leaving so many people without their daily bread; young people and adults have lost hope and are leaving those lands. Yet those lands are the motherland of the Eastern Catholic Churches: there they developed, preserving age-old traditions, and many of you, the members of the Dicastery, are their children and heirs.

Your daily existence is thus like a blend of the precious gold dust of your past and the witness of heroic faith of many in the present, together with the mire of the misery for which we too are responsible and the pain visited upon you by external forces. Again, you are seeds on the stalks and the branches of age-old plants, transported by the wind to unimaginably distant places. Eastern Catholics have lived for decades now on distant continents, having sailed oceans and seas, and crossed vast plains. Eparchies have already been established in Canada and the United States, in Latin America, in Europe and Oceania, while many others are entrusted, at least for the time being, to Latin bishops who coordinate their pastoral activity through priests sent in accordance with the correct procedures by their respective Heads of Churches, Patriarchs, Major Archbishops or *sui iuris* Metropolitanans.

For this reason, your sessions have dealt with evangelization, which constitutes the identity of the Church everywhere and, indeed, the vocation of each baptized person. For the sake of mission, we must pay close heed to the richness of the different traditions. I think, for example, of the process of the adult catechumenate, which provides for the celebration of the sacraments of Christian initiation in a unitary form; a custom that the Eastern Churches have preserved in practice also for children. In both processes, we can easily see the importance of a skilled mystagogical catechesis, capable of accompanying the baptized of all ages to a mature and joyful membership in the Christian community. Mystagogical catechesis is lacking in the Latin Church. Precious in this are the different forms of ministry in the Church, as well as the harmonious relationships with the men and women religious who operate in accordance with their proper charism also in your own contexts. In these days you have been dealing with these aspects.

There is one experience in which the “clay” of our humanity lets itself be molded, not by changing opinions or the sociological analyses, however necessary, but by the word of God and the Spirit of the Risen Lord. That experience is the liturgy. It makes us think of the synodal way, or rather, of the synodal process. The synodal process is not a parliament or about offering different opinions and then proceeding to a synthesis or a vote, no. The synodal process is walking together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and you, who have Synods and ancient synodal traditions in your Churches, are witnesses to this reality. The Spirit is present in synodality and when the Spirit is not present, there is only a parliament or an opinion poll. This experience, as I was saying, is heaven on earth, and it is given to us in the liturgy, as the Eastern tradition loves to repeat. Yet the beauty of the Eastern rites is much more than simply an oasis of escape or of conservation. The liturgical assembly recognizes itself as such, not because it was called together of its own accord, but because it hears the voice of Another, is constantly turned towards him, and, precisely for this reason, feels the urgent need to go forth towards our brothers and sisters, and to bring them the message of Christ. Even those traditions that preserve the use of the iconostasis, with the royal door, or the veil that conceals the sanctuary at some moments in the rite, teach us that these are architectural or ritual elements that speak not of distance from God, but rather heighten the mystery of the “condescension” – of the *synkatabasis* - by which the Word came and continues to come to the world.

The Liturgical Congress marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Instruction on the application of the liturgical prescriptions of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches is an opportunity to know one another within the liturgical commissions of the different *sui iuris* Churches. It is an invitation to journey together with the Dicastery and its consultors, following the path indicated by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. On that path, it is

most helpful that each part of the one and “symphonic” Catholic Church always listen attentively to the other traditions, their itineraries of research and of reform, while preserving its own uniqueness. Fidelity to uniqueness is what creates the “symphonic” richness of the Eastern Churches. One can discuss, for example, the possibility of introducing editions of the liturgy in the languages of the countries where their faithful are found, but where the form of the celebration is concerned, it is necessary that unity be experienced in accordance with what has been laid down by the Synods and approved by the Apostolic See, avoiding liturgical particularisms that in reality manifest divisions of another kind within the respective Churches. Furthermore, let us not forget that our brothers and sisters of the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches are watching us: even if we cannot sit at the same Eucharistic table, nonetheless we almost always celebrate and pray the same liturgical texts. Let us be attentive therefore to forms of experimentation that can harm the journey towards visible unity of all Christ’s disciples. The world needs the witness of our communion. If we give scandal by our liturgical disputes, and unfortunately there have been some recently, we play the game of the master of division.

Dear brothers and sisters, I thank you for your work these days. I am constantly close to you in my prayers. Bring to your faithful my encouragement and my blessing. And please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.
