

Address to the Pre-Synod Gathering of Young People

Written by Angela Markas (Australian Delegate)

My name is Angela Markas and I feel very humbled to be representing Australia here in Rome. With all of my heart, I would like to thank Pope Francis for this invitation and everyone who made this happen. This event in itself, stands strong in its message to youth all across the world, and my only hope is to give it all we can.

I would like to begin by sharing with you a little about the region of Oceania. There are several delegates here from our region and I know together we will share the diversity of our lifestyles and the issues we all encounter, but also our common faith.

Australia's population is 23 million people, and 23% are Catholics. New Zealand's population is near 5 million and only 12% are Catholic. Catholicism is the largest religious group across Australia and New Zealand, however both countries are also seeing a large percentage who identify themselves with no religion, about 30% in Australia and 40% in New Zealand. Papua New Guinea has a population of 7 million and the 20 other major Pacific Islands amount to 3 million in total. In Papua New Guinea 95% of residents are Christian, the majority Protestant, combining traditional Indigenous beliefs with Christian practices. The Pacific Islands are consistent with these trends, as Christianity remains the dominant faith. Let me just say that I am one person from Australia, and I can only really talk from my experiences and what I feel is important for young people from where I come from.

In Australia, 20% of the population are aged 16-30 years. I believe this is a similar percentage in New Zealand, but young people make a greater percentage of the population in PNG and the Pacific Islands.

The majority of dioceses across Oceania are defined geographically, however five dioceses in Australia and some spreading to New Zealand are Eastern non geographical dioceses, including the Chaldean Rite which I am part of. The Chaldean Church originates from Iraq, so the majority of our community members are immigrants and refugees. Both of my parents were born in Iraq, and I was born in Australia. Their stories are a big part of who I am, and how I encounter the world.

Let me share a story with you which will help me explore the situation of young people in my region and life.

When I was four years old, at my kindergarten, there were patches of white, yellow and purple daisies planted along the walls outside. Every day I would pick them out to create a floral

arrangement for my teacher and my mum. And although, my poor teacher would kindly ask me to please stop cutting down her flowers, the moment I saw those flowers I just couldn't resist. The simple mind of this four-year-old just could not fathom the beauty of these small living things. I just wanted to capture it, even for a brief moment – just to hold on to this beauty. My mum still remembers how my teacher would ask me to stop because the flowers would die, and then she let me do it anyway. They saw how much joy it brought me, in those moments it didn't matter to them.

I feel like God is the same. Sometimes it feels as though we just want to live in the moment, be captured by the awe and beauty and truth. But that moment is fleeting. And God knows this as He has infinite plains to offer us, and yet, He lets us follow our young hearts and He rejoices in our smallness.

So I ask, how can we encounter God through our smallness? How can the Church empower us through our smallness to see Him? And in discovering Christ, identify 'Who we are?'

It is the stories of my family and faith community that engrained in me the empathy to understand and reach out to other communities in Australia, in particular the Indigenous community. Indigenous culture is foundational to many of the communities across the Oceania region. In Australia 650,000 individuals identify themselves as Indigenous. New Zealand's Maori Indigenous people constitute for about 15% of the total population, whilst Papua New Guinea alone has the highest population of Indigenous cultures with over 700 communities and 5 million people. Since the arrival of Europeans to the region, Indigenous people's lives and stories are stories of adversity and trauma. In Australia, New Zealand and all countries, we need to acknowledge and rectify the deep mistakes of the past and present in order for Indigenous cultures to feel their worth as a "key part of the nation's history, present and future". But not enough is being done. We need to delve deeper.

When I meet young Indigenous students on camp, no matter how different their backgrounds and lifestyles may be, there is one particular theme that seems prevalent in every individual's story – "Who am I?" and "Who am I meant to be?" These are not questions that are alien to youth, the marginalised, or all people, but they are amplified in communities that have experienced a deep sense of loss and pain. As a society and a Church we must ask, how do we empower young people, particularly those who are hurt and marginalised, to discover their identity amongst our shared history?

We are children of hope. Our church is built on our hope. So I feel compelled to ask, how can we be true Christians, if we are not present and work to instil hope and dignity in people's lives?

The question of 'who we are' is revisited continuously throughout our whole lives. We are constantly redefining our identity in an ever-changing world. It is therefore important we reflect on how we accompany young people in their journey to discover their place and value in our society today.

Let me use Australia as an example to explore this. Australia is ranked the 9th country with the largest number of people born overseas. People in Australia are from over 190 different countries and 300 different ancestries; each with their own value-system, identity and story, all living on one land. Add the presence of technology and global connectivity in our day-to-day lives and you can imagine why it would be so difficult growing up in this culturally loud society to find and understand their identity, voice and place in the world. Personally, I found it very difficult growing up in an Iraqi community. Who was I meant to listen to, the East or West? Which path should I take, given that I can virtually take any, compared to my parents whose paths were blocked along the way? All these questions reduced to one: why am I here?

As youth, we are in need of guidance. Through my interactions with friends, the youth I tutor, and my family, I feel young people are less drawn to seek this guidance from someone associated with the Church. There are many reasons, but a consistent one is that youth feel disconnected from the Church. Whether it is because they feel divided by an older clergy, unwelcomed for their different ideas and beliefs, or that they don't feel listened to or approached with love and empathy. Youth do not always feel they have a place in Church. They need a place where they feel safe, welcomed and loved. They then can look within themselves and reflect on all of these unanswered questions, from a peaceful state of mind in this noisy world. We need to reflect and ask, how can the Church provide for these people, so these people can provide for the rest of humanity?

Mental health, a person's ability to manage their psychological and emotional wellbeing is Australia's biggest battle and is growing around the world. Mental health was ranked 1st in Australia and 2nd in New Zealand as the most significant challenge in the lives of young people in local pre-synod surveys. Let us be clear – affluence does not equal happiness. There is another side to unhappiness; when you have everything but nothing at all. When people begin to feel a real sense of not having value in their life, everything diminishes before them. Can you force someone to be happy when they are not? Can you force someone to see value in their life when they cannot? It is unfortunate that the World Health Organisation reports that suicide is the leading cause of death for people aged between 15 and 44.

We are witnesses to the Resurrection. Our Church needs to be a safe and loving home for all to be called by name. We need to be able to listen to the thoughts and views of youth, and ask how they feel. Who do they think are? And who do they think God calls them to be? We cannot shut our doors when they need us the most. When we find it difficult to extend that compassion and empathy towards young people, we need to stop and ask ourselves – why? For youth experiencing mental health battles in their lives, we need to ask, what can we do as a society and as a Church to show them they are needed, they are valued and that their presence and talents are important for the rest of humanity?

Young people's disconnection with Church is exacerbated by significant cultural changes happening around the world. Young people feel the Church is distant and irrelevant in aspects of our humanity, the spiritual and the physical.

The recent legislation of same-sex marriage in Australia, and in countries all over the world, has spurred so many different reactions. Through all of it, so many young people around me kept asking the question, “Why ‘no’?” Young people are not satisfied with simple answers, or with answers that parents of their parents gave them. Young people are seeking depth. We want and are able to, understand the complexity of it all and be able to have a voice. There is a tendency in the Church to avoid matters that are not-so-easy to talk about. This includes same-sex marriage, our sexuality, and also, the role of women in the Church. As a young woman myself, from a Middle-Eastern culture, I can testify to how easy it is to feel marginalised. I know I am equal to and just as valued as a male counterpart, but I want all young women to know this and feel empowered by it. It was in Mother Mary’s ‘yes’ that Jesus was brought to life. Women empower the Church. We need to feel this sense of empowerment and love. Why can’t the Church meet the youth where they are in all aspects of their humanity?

In my life, I have been lucky to lead and be part of occasions that exude the joy of youth. When youth feel they are part of something, they give the world a part of themselves and their joy is contagious. Young people need to be heard so the Church can always be a place of warmth and love. We can accompany them through their hardships and histories and through vocational discernment, by speaking courageously and with sensitivity on the challenging issues of our time, and by seeing the true value and worth of young people.

We young people have something to offer the Church. Something special and unique in our smallness, that cannot be found anywhere else. It is our spirit to follow the heart courageously; it seeks the light and doesn’t dare look back, is it the spirit and grace to pluck the flowers planted along the walls outside our classrooms, and to cling to beauty, goodness, and truth. This is the spirit of who we are as young people – the spirit of our smallness, our courage, and our desire to give of ourselves abundantly, just as He does for us. This is our identity.

God loves you immensely. God loves you immensely.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today, and thank you for your time.

Speech video: www.facebook.com/synod2018/videos/1712820375466217/