



We proclaim a crucified Christ

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To the Clergy and Faithful of the Archdiocese of Melbourne

09 September 2024

Dear friends in Christ,

My warm and prayerful greetings to you.

As I write this letter, Pope Francis has arrived in Timor Leste, having just concluded his visit to Papua New Guinea, Australia's closest neighbour. This is the third leg in his current apostolic visit; to our part of the world – Asia and Oceania. The Pope's visit began in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country in the world, and it was there that I travelled to last week. Why? Because we have a large Indonesian Catholic community in Melbourne, largely comprising of tertiary students and young families. To give expression to the communion of the Church by being with the Holy Father on his mission, I thought it appropriate to do so by representing those of our people from Indonesia. It was a wonderful three days.

Christian faith in Indonesia is old. The first Christian missionaries can be traced back to the 9th Century, with the Franciscans coming to the archipelago in the 14th Century, and yet, the Church I encountered in Jakarta is distinctively young. Perhaps this is a factor of Indonesia's younger age demographic, more generally. Whatever the reason, it was wonderful to be present among a youthful generation of Catholics, and a Church young in spirit and life.

Pope Francis undertook several encounters and gatherings in the short time he was in Jakarta. I was present at three of them: a gathering of clergy, religious, seminarians and catechists in the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption; an interreligious meeting held in front of the Istiqlal Mosque, the largest mosque in South-east Asia; and the final Mass at Gelora Bung Karno Stadium. I thought I would share some brief reflections on these experiences.

While I spotted a few 'grey haired' attendees like me, the vast bulk of those present at the Cathedral gathering would have been under 60, and most of those under 50. It did my heart a lot of good to see groups of young religious women, lay catechists with their families, and a healthy number of seminarians. The Pope spoke of the importance of unity in faith expressed in the diversity of missions and cultures that make up Indonesia. I was taken by the large numbers of lay catechists that offer an essential ministry in the life of the Church in Indonesia, and their crucial and indispensable place in the proclamation of the Gospel in local communities.

The interreligious meeting took place in front of Istiqlal Mosque, which sits directly across the road from the Cathedral. There, the Holy Father and the Grand Imam, Dr Nasaruddin Umar,

met together, spoke together and signed a Declaration together, to defend human dignity and foster religious harmony for the sake of humanity. The Imam spoke of the need for moderation in faith, and the Pope spoke of the building of bridges among people of faith. This gathering was also the opportunity to visit a tunnel (the *Tunnel of Friendship*) between the Cathedral and the Mosque, symbolising the work of harmony and respect that links the two places of worship and their peoples.

Around 100,000 faithful gathered in the Stadium for Mass on the hot and humid evening. Just about everyone came in their parish and community faith groups, distinguished by brightly coloured polo-shirts. And they brought their voices – and can Indonesian Catholics sing! Dignified yet simple, this was a Eucharistic liturgy to remember for its participation and joy. I was struck by the ways in which the varied cultural expressions coming from the different islands and peoples of Indonesia, found a way into the Liturgy without losing the essence of our Roman Ritual. Here was worship expressing unity in diversity, of the inculturation of faith.


Throughout the few days I was in Jakarta, I kept coming back to a particular thought. Our local Church in Melbourne is fast shifting in its makeup. We are taking on a more Asian face of Christ, and a less Anglo-European one. How might this be accounted for in the way in which we live our Christian faith, and grow in our missionary outlook? What does a more Asian way in Christ look and feel like? And how do we embrace it with joy and hope? These are good questions to be facing into. I would certainly like to see how the youthfulness of the Church in Indonesia might find its way among us, as a sign of hope.

A culturally diverse Church. A distinctly young Church. A missionary-led Church with vibrant lay leadership. These are three features of the Church in Indonesia that manifested itself to me in the few days I had in Jakarta. It is not a perfect reality; nowhere is - but it was a sign worth seeing up close, and I am thankful to God for the time spent there.

There were many takeaways from this brief visit, but the Holy Father's call to be 'prophets of communion' that always share the 'joy of encountering Christ' is a deep invitation to us all. May the fruits of this apostolic visit to our neighbourly regions be rich and far-reaching.

With every grace and blessing, I remain,

Yours sincerely in Christ Jesus,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter A. Comensoli'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a small cross symbol at the beginning.

Most Rev Peter A Comensoli
Archbishop of Melbourne