

**“Building Bridges and Unity through Interfaith Dialogue and Encounters”**  
**Address by His Eminence Mykola Cardinal Bychok, CSsR**  
**National Harmony Week – Interfaith Network of the City of Greater**  
**Dandenong**  
**18 March 2026**

My dear friends, distinguished leaders of faith and community,

I am grateful for the opportunity to join you during National Harmony Week. I thank the Interfaith Network of the City of Greater Dandenong for your invitation and for the work you do every day to strengthen understanding, respect, and peace in this diverse and vibrant region.

I also want to acknowledge with deep gratitude the contribution of the late Fr Robert Stickland, a priest of the Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy, whose ministry in Dandenong / Noble Park was marked by a genuine commitment to ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. Fr Robert believed that faith is never meant to isolate us from one another, but to draw us into deeper relationship. He understood that when people of faith meet, listen, and walk together, something sacred happens. His legacy continues to shape this community, and I honour him today.

Our theme, “Building Bridges and Unity through Interfaith Dialogue and Encounters,” is not simply a topic for discussion. It is a responsibility that belongs to all of us. In a world marked by fragmentation, polarisation, and fear, the work of building bridges is essential. Faith communities carry a unique moral weight in this task. We are custodians of meaning, of hope, and of the conviction that every human being possesses inherent dignity. When we choose dialogue over suspicion, encounter over avoidance, and cooperation over rivalry, we strengthen the very foundations of social cohesion.

For me, this theme is not just a theory. It is shaped by the painful reality of my homeland. For more than four years, Ukraine has endured a brutal and unjust full scale war. Cities have been destroyed, families separated, children displaced, and millions forced to flee. The suffering is immense, and the wounds—physical, emotional, and spiritual—are deep. Yet in the midst of this tragedy, something extraordinary has taken place: faith communities in Ukraine have come together in ways that were unimaginable before the war. The All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations, which includes Ukrainian Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, and other religious leaders, has become a powerful voice for unity, human dignity, and peace. These leaders pray together, advocate together, and stand together in defence of life and freedom.

His Beatitude Sviatoslav Shevchuk, the Head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, expressed this reality clearly when he said, “In times of war, interfaith cooperation is not optional. It is the only way to preserve our humanity and to protect the dignity of every person.” This is not a theoretical statement. It is lived experience. When missiles fall, when people shelter in basements, when families search for missing loved ones, no one asks whether the

person next to them is Christian, Muslim, Jewish, or of no faith at all. They simply recognise a fellow human being. War strips away illusions and reveals what truly matters: compassion, solidarity, and the sacredness of every life.

This experience has shaped how Ukrainians understand interfaith dialogue. It is not a luxury. It is not a polite gesture. It is a lifeline. It is a way of ensuring that society does not collapse into hatred or despair. It is a way of protecting the vulnerable and upholding the dignity of every person. And it is a way of reminding ourselves that even in the darkest times, humanity is stronger when it stands together.

Last year, I was privileged to witness something profoundly moving at the heart of the universal Church. At the funeral of Pope Francis and the inauguration of Pope Leo XIV, I saw with my own eyes the extraordinary number of ecumenical and interreligious representatives who gathered in Rome. Leaders from Christian traditions, Jewish communities, Muslim communities, and many others stood side by side in prayer, respect, and solidarity. Their presence was not symbolic. It was a living testimony that the Catholic Church is at the forefront of building bridges—bridges of understanding, bridges of fraternity, bridges of peace.

Pope Leo XIV himself reminded us of the deep roots of this mission. He recalled that sixty years ago, the Second Vatican Council, through the declaration *Nostra Aetate*, opened a new horizon for encounter and mutual respect between Catholics and people of different religions. The Council taught that true dialogue and collaboration must be rooted in love—the only foundation for peace, justice, and reconciliation. This dialogue, inspired by divine love, must embrace all people of goodwill, reject prejudice, discrimination, and persecution, and affirm the equal dignity of every human being.

Pope Leo XIV went further, insisting that our common path must be understood in the broadest sense, involving everyone in the spirit of human fraternity. “Now is the time for dialogue and building bridges,” he said. He expressed his gratitude for the presence of representatives of other religious traditions, who share the search for God and His will—a will that is always and only a will of love and life for all people and for all creation.

He also paid tribute to the remarkable efforts of Pope Francis, who opened new avenues of encounter and tirelessly promoted what he called “the culture of dialogue as the path; mutual collaboration as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard.”

These words are not abstract ideals. They are a mandate for all of us. They remind us that interfaith dialogue is not an optional extra for peaceful times. It is a moral and spiritual duty, especially in moments of global tension. It is a way of safeguarding the dignity of every person and ensuring that our societies do not fracture under the weight of fear or misunderstanding.

I speak about these matters not only as an observer, but as someone entrusted with this mission within the Church here in Australia. I serve as a member of the Bishops Commission for Christian Unity and Interreligious Dialogue of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference—

a responsibility that I greatly treasure. It is a privilege to work alongside fellow bishops who are deeply committed to strengthening relationships across Christian traditions and with people of all faiths. I also have the honour of chairing the Subcommittee for Ecumenical Relations, where our task is to foster genuine friendship, mutual understanding, and practical cooperation among the Christian communities of this nation. This work is close to my heart, because unity is not merely an ideal; it is a witness to the world that faith can heal divisions and illuminate a path toward peace.

Here in Australia, we are blessed with peace, but we are not immune to division. We see rising anxiety, social fragmentation, and the temptation to retreat into our own communities. Global conflicts—including the war in Ukraine and what we are also experiencing in the Middle East—have emotional and social consequences even here. They can strain relationships, create fear, and deepen misunderstandings. This is why the work of the Interfaith Network of Greater Dandenong is so important.

You model what it means to live together with respect. You show that diversity is not a threat but a gift. You demonstrate that dialogue is not weakness but strength. And you remind us that harmony does not happen automatically. It requires intentional relationships, honest conversations, shared commitments, and the courage to listen deeply.

Every faith tradition represented here today carries a profound teaching about the dignity of the human person. We may express it differently, but the core is the same: every person is created for relationship, for community, for peace. Dialogue is not about erasing differences. It is about meeting one another with integrity, recognising the truth in the other, and discovering that our shared humanity is stronger than anything that divides us. In the Christian tradition, we speak of Christ as the One who breaks down the dividing wall between peoples. But this insight is not ours alone. Many of you could quote your own sacred texts that call for compassion, justice, and peace. When we enter into dialogue, we are not abandoning our faith. We are living it more fully.

We live in a time when fear spreads quickly, misinformation travels faster than truth, and social media amplifies anger more easily than understanding. In such a climate, it is easy for communities to turn inward, to become suspicious, or to feel threatened. But this is precisely the moment when we must choose another path. We must choose to build bridges. We must choose to protect social cohesion. We must choose to model a different way of being human. If we do not, the forces of division will fill the vacuum.

The Ukrainian experience offers several lessons for all of us. Unity is strongest when it is built before a crisis; relationships formed in peace become lifelines in times of conflict. Interfaith cooperation protects society; when religious leaders speak together, they can calm tensions and guide communities toward peace. Shared suffering can deepen solidarity; when communities support one another, trust grows. And hope is a moral duty; even in the darkest times, faith communities must be guardians of hope. These lessons are not only for Ukraine. They are for every multicultural society, including Australia.

To strengthen social cohesion in our current climate, we can commit to practical steps. Regular interfaith encounters, not only during crises or special events. Joint service projects that address local needs—poverty, loneliness, youth support, environmental care. Shared advocacy for human dignity, refugees, and those who suffer discrimination. Educational initiatives that help young people understand and respect different faiths. And spaces for honest conversation, where difficult topics can be discussed with respect and without fear. These actions do not eliminate differences. They honour them while building trust.

My friends, building bridges is not the task of one group or one leader. It is the shared responsibility of all of us—religious leaders, community members, educators, families, and young people. In a world marked by conflict, fear, and uncertainty, our task is clear: to be instruments of peace, guardians of dignity, and builders of unity. This is the work of National Harmony Week. This is the work of the Interfaith Network. And this is the work of every person who believes that humanity is one family.

Thank you for your commitment, your leadership, and your witness. May our encounters today strengthen the bonds of friendship and deepen our shared resolve to build a society where every person is respected, protected, and welcomed. May peace be upon all of you.