

INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN MONUMENT.

It's a pleasure and an honour to share in the opening of this Monument erected, in the words of the Inscription "In honour and memory of all deceased Australians and members of Australian Aid Organizations who have served in International Humanitarian Aid work".

There is an added pleasure in revisiting this special site of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture and see that it continues to develop from its initial wonderful vision and humble beginnings. It is a privilege to be associated with a memorial to honour those who have lost their lives in International Humanitarian work. The monument will also serve as a reminder and challenge to others to continue that magnificent tradition of service.

The opening of the monument calls us to reflect on the value of humanitarian aid but is also a stark reminder of how difficult and even dangerous it can be. So often the aid is most needed in places where conditions of extreme poverty, hunger, homelessness and sickness easily breed conflict and violence, sometimes exacerbated by greed and power struggles. The assistance given is often life-saving or at least it ameliorates the harshness of living conditions that afflict so many of our sisters and brothers in the human family. The motivation of those offering humanitarian aid may vary greatly but essentially it is a concern for fellow human beings who are in need of the basic necessities of life or of the conditions that make life a little more human by enhancing their quality of life.

This work is an expression of one of the finest instincts and noblest aspirations of the human heart – to recognize the needs of others and respond in practical ways with generosity and compassion. That instinct and aspiration lie deeply in the heart of the humanity we all share.

Sadly it can be hidden, lost in the chilly mist of apathy. During his recent visit to the island of Lampedusa to show solidarity with the thousands of migrants and asylum seekers drowning in the Mediterranean, Pope Francis used the phrase the "globalization of indifference". The altruistic instinct can also be smothered by selfishness or even violently repressed by greed and power driven cruelty.

But I doubt that it is ever completely extinguished and in many cases it inspires great acts of generosity, heroic deeds of compassion and even the self-sacrifice of death. Because this monument honours those who have acted in this way of generosity, compassion and self-sacrifice which demonstrate the best of the human spirit, it could be placed quite appropriately anywhere in Australia. I believe, however that it is singularly appropriate that it finds its home here in this Centre, this Christian Centre.

As the expression of its Christian inspiration the Centre seeks to provide a universal hospitality. It is called the Australian Centre. Its vision is to provide a spiritual centre for the nation, a sacred place to nourish its soul. Situated amidst the national monuments dedicated to Democratic Government, the Rule of Law, to History,

Learning, Science and Culture, the vision of this Centre is to provide a spiritual space where the soul of the nation can find expression and nourishment.

The Centre wishes to be a place of hospitality and unity. It speaks of Christianity and Culture to indicate its desire to engage with the whole gamut of society and human experience. The fireplace and the mural wall adorned with Hector Jandany's Aboriginal Representation of the Holy Spirit embody one of the foundational principles of the Centre, the inclusion of and engagement with the spirituality and culture of the Indigenous peoples of Australia. It is dedicated to the quest of Christian Unity, to be a place where Christians of all traditions may meet to speak the truth in love and so respond to their Founder's prayer: "That they may all be one". The Centre seeks to initiate a respectful conversation with the other World Religions so that people of faith will contribute, not to disunity and violence but to harmony and peace and so serve as a sign of hope to a divided and troubled world. This Centre is committed to engagement with Australian Culture in its multiform expressions. It offers respect and openness to the aspirations of the human spirit and the hungers of the human heart. Nor is the wider environment neglected – witness the prime place given to native grasses, the Bible Garden and the general care of the landscape.

Surely all these aims and aspirations of the Centre correspond very harmoniously with the dynamic wholesomeness contained in the word 'humanitarian' and its individual and corporate manifestations. Doesn't it also correspond to the human needs addressed by humanitarian workers as they seek to meet the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual needs of their sisters and brothers in the human family scattered throughout the world? In years to come may many come here to pay honour to their humanitarian efforts and emulate their spirit of generosity and self sacrifice, just as we do today with the opening of this monument?