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2,000 gather in Sydney to see the Father

The Prelate of Opus Dei was relaxed and happy as he gathered with Aussies on Sunday 20 August.

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There were almost 2,000 people in the room, but somehow the Sydney gathering with the Father really felt like a joyful family get-together. The hosts for the event, Caitlin and Greg, had everyone practising the

distinctive national chant of “Aussie, Aussie, Aussie! Oi! Oi! Oi!” before Msgr Ocariz arrived at 11:30am to a roar of clapping and cheers.

The stage was beautifully decorated with custom-made artworks for the backdrop, featuring the iconic Sydney Opera House as well as beaches, flora and fauna. According to Felicia Chaplin, who helped to design the stage, the art was chosen for its fun and whimsical qualities – fresh and youthful to reflect a young nation. Charming native florals adorned the stage, such as waratahs, king proteas and billy buttons. The sofas and armchairs for those sitting on the stage had been chosen to create a homey and cosy feel, to reflect that this really was a gathering of family and friends.

Host Greg started off by telling the Father that everyone in the room wanted to give him a big hug, to

which Msgr Ocariz responded by jumping up and giving Greg a big hug. He then proceeded to give some opening remarks, based on the Gospel of the day – the story of the Canaanite woman who persevered even when it seemed that Jesus wasn't going to heal her daughter, and how he applauded her on her faith.

The Father said that this was a lesson in perseverance in prayer – even when it feels that Our Lord doesn't hear us, it is certain that he is paying attention and that prayers are always valuable. Even when we don't see the results we want, nothing is lost even though it can seem that way humanly. He encouraged everyone to ask for more faith, and that this would lead to a joy that is founded firmly on the assurance of God's love for each of us.

Mirka, an audiologist and young mother, spoke about how being around strong and united families while growing up had played a part in her faith journey. She asked the Father how to make a home Christ-like and inviting. He responded that they could do so by letting others participate in the joy of their family. He said that fostering true friendships was the key – which is a consequence of loving people and seeking their good.

Joe's question was about maintaining a pioneering spirit in retirement and the later stages of life. Msgr Ocariz answered that our spirit doesn't depend on age – if we love God, it will keep our souls young. He said that it is possible to increase this youthfulness by staying close to Jesus Christ. When we feel tiredness and fatigue, we need to renew ourselves and go back to “being young” – because love is always young.

Amelia and Charlie, with five kids under age six and one son with Down Syndrome, spoke about how life can be chaotic. They asked how to help others to be open to life when most people seek a very comfortable existence. The Father's answer was simple but very moving – to show others that they are happy. When people see their joy, it is the best proof that they are people of faith, and that it is worth being open to the plan of God. He also said that suffering could make them more united as a family; and give them a straight path to Jesus.

Mary-Louise told the Father about the challenges of living in regional NSW, and how she has to travel 200 kilometres to make it to the closest monthly recollection. Msgr Ocariz encouraged her by reminding her that Opus Dei is not just buildings and centres – but that the people are Opus Dei, and that we can do the

work of God wherever we are, using our difficulties as a means of praying for the apostolate of the future.

When Michael talked about the decreasing number of Christians in society, the Father said that while some laws and public opinion may be contrary to human life, we can't be pessimistic. We need to reject wrong ideas but never people – there are always good people even when the context might be difficult. Msgr Ocariz said not to get discouraged, and that God is counting on us even more than before.

Spread throughout the get-together were musical performances including “We Are Australian” and “My Island Home.” One of the hosts, Caitlin, asked the Father to pray for her podcast, *Crash Course Catholicism*, which has provided many opportunities to reach the peripheries.

Before he left, the Father said that he was so appreciative to everyone for being there, and that it gave him so much joy. He finished by asking everyone to pray for the Pope, before greeting couples and families on his way out.

Photos by PLA and Michael Wong

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