MEDIA RELEASE
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Australian diplomat offers interfaith wisdom from Pope Francis

Australia's former Ambassador to the Holy See has reflected on the late Pope Francis' interfaith legacy at the annual ACU Parliamentary Interfaith Breakfast in Canberra.

Speaking to nearly 250 guests at Australian Parliament House on 26 November, including leaders from Australian faith and religion communities and parliamentarians, Australian diplomat Chiara Porro offered insights into Pope Francis' friendship with other religions, which was central to his papacy.

From his historic first-ever papal visit to the Arabian Peninsula, where he co-signed the Document on Human Fraternity, to being the first pope to celebrate Mass with persecuted Christians and Muslims in Iraq, the late pontiff saw interfaith relations as a sacred act.

"There are few other world leaders that are as recognisable and as influential as the Pope," Ms Porro said.

"Pope Francis in particular – who was the Pope during my time - built a following among Catholics and non-Catholics alike, had the ear of Presidents and Prime Ministers, who often sought his counsel."

During her four-and-a-half years as Australia's Ambassador to the Holy See, Ms Porro said Pope Francis had transformed Rome into a faith hub for all religions.

"Pope Francis' papacy was focused on building bridges, and he transformed Rome into a faith hub – a crossroads – offering a unique insight into the role religion plays globally," she said.

"I met regularly with the Archbishop of Canterbury, members of the World Jewish Congress, and Muslim leaders – who were passing through for interfaith conversations and engagements with the Pope on an almost weekly basis."

Ms Porro said her experience in Rome had revealed the importance of finding faith in diplomacy.

"We know that religious belonging remans a strong driver and mobiliser in many parts of the world," Ms Porro said.

"On many occasions, the most influential communication channels are those that involve religious leaders."

The 2026 ACU Parliamentary Interfaith Breakfast, co-sponsored by Speaker of the House of Representatives the Hon Milton Dick MP, was one of the largest gathering of faith leaders and community members in the event's 12-year history.

Religious leaders represented diverse faith and belief groups including Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Bahá'í, Buddhist, Sikh, and Hindu.

Among the faith leaders were Australian-Ukrainian Cardinal Mykola Bychok, Rabbi Ralph Genende, Uniting Minister the Most Reverend Bill Crews, Dr Rateb Jneid of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, and the Reverend Canon Shannon Smith.

ACU Vice-Chancellor and President Professor Zlatko Skrbis said interfaith gatherings were a powerful response to rising tensions that threatened Australia's social cohesion.

“At this event last year, I noted that we live in a time when division and misunderstanding often dominate the discourse,” Professor Skrbis said.

“That has only intensified in the 12 months since - 2026 has been a particularly difficult year for social cohesion in this country.

“The power of interfaith dialogue is that it can bring different people into the same room, and around the same table, close enough to hear one another. Face to face, we’re more likely to choose our words with care – and the way we speak to one another matters.”

The 2026 ACU Parliamentary Interfaith Breakfast was held weeks out from the first anniversary of the Bondi terror attack.

ACU has hosted interfaith breakfasts for political and faith leaders since 2014. The event has been held at Australian Parliament House, co-sponsored by Speaker of the House of Representatives the Hon Milton Dick MP, since 2023.