Commemoration of the 5th Anniversary of the Najaf Historic Interfaith Summit; Address by Bishop Elias Lorenzo, OSB

In the name of God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful.

Distinguished scholars, respected leaders of the Greater Washington Chapter of the Council of Shia Muslim Scholars of North America, honored elders, and dear friends:

Along with His Eminence, Cardinal McElroy, I am deeply grateful for the invitation to be with you today in this sacred space, and I thank you for your generous hospitality. It is a privilege to join you in commemorating the fifth anniversary of the historic meeting in Najaf between His Holiness Pope Francis and Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani—a meeting whose significance continues to resonate far beyond that single moment in time. That encounter in Najaf was not a political gesture, nor a symbolic courtesy. It was a profound act of moral witness. It demonstrated that authentic religious leadership speaks most powerfully through humility, listening, and shared responsibility for the dignity of every human person. In a world fractured by conflict, suspicion, and the exploitation of religion for violence, that meeting offered a different vision—one rooted in conscience, restraint, and peace.

For the Catholic Church, the meeting reflected a conviction that has been deepening for decades: that interreligious engagement—especially with Islam—is not optional, but essential to our moral vocation in the modern world. This conviction has been articulated and strengthened through sustained initiatives such as the **U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' National Catholic–Muslim Dialogue**, which for many years has

brought Catholic bishops and Muslim scholars together in structured, sustained conversations marked by honesty, respect, and intellectual rigor.

The USCCB's National Catholic–Muslim Dialogue offers an important model of how such engagement can take shape—not as episodic encounters, but as an ongoing process grounded in mutual learning, trust-building, and shared concern for the common good. Its history and format remind us that genuine dialogue requires patience, consistency, and a willingness to listen deeply, especially amid disagreement. Its continued importance is all the more evident today, in light of the leadership and witness of the late Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV, both of whom have emphasized that dialogue across religious traditions is a concrete expression of faith, not a departure from it.

For Shia Islam, Najaf stands as a center of moral authority built on scholarship, independence of conscience, and responsibility toward society—values that command deep respect far beyond the Shia community itself. What united Pope Francis and Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani was not theological agreement, but a shared moral clarity: that faith must never be used to justify oppression; that the poor, the displaced, and the marginalized must never be forgotten; and that the sanctity of human life transcends borders, sects, and ideologies.

As we look back five years later, the importance of that meeting has only grown. Sadly, we continue to witness war, religious persecution, the erosion of truth, and growing indifference to human suffering. Against this backdrop, Najaf remains a moral reference point—a reminder that religious

leaders have a unique responsibility to defend the vulnerable, restrain power, and promote peace rooted in justice.

Gatherings such as this one matter—especially in these days. They remind us that Catholic–Shia relationships are not abstract ideas, but living commitments expressed through dialogue, friendship, and cooperation. Through the work of bodies such as the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Catholic Church continues to affirm that interfaith dialogue is not merely aspirational, but practical—fostering mutual understanding, reducing suspicion, and opening space for collaboration in service to human dignity and social peace.

I wish to express particular appreciation to the scholars and leaders of this community for your continued investment in interfaith dialogue—not as a public relations effort, but as a moral duty. When faith communities encounter one another sincerely, they help heal a world suffering from division and despair.

As a Bishop of the Catholic Church, I affirm my hope that the spirit of Najaf will continue to guide us: encouraging us to listen more deeply, to stand together against injustice, and to teach future generations that faith is a force for reconciliation, not conflict.

May God, the Merciful and the Just, bless this gathering, bless your community, and bless our shared efforts for peace. And may the legacy of Najaf continue to inspire courage, humility, and hope in all who seek the good of humanity.