



The Holy See

**ECUMENICAL CELEBRATION
PRESIDED OVER BY THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
AND CATHOLICOS KAREKIN II**

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Friday, 10 November 2000

«I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep» (Jn 10:11).

1. In the year 2001, the Armenian Church will celebrate the seventeenth centenary of the Baptism of Armenia through the ministry of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. Following the Good Shepherd, Saint Gregory laid down his life for his sheep. Because of his Christian faith, he spent many years imprisoned in a dark pit by command of King Tiridates. Only after this cruel suffering was Gregory free once again to bear public witness to his baptismal vocation in all its fullness and proclaim the Gospel to the men and women of his time.

The life of Saint Gregory foreshadowed the journey of the Armenian Church through the ages. How often has the Armenian Church been cast into the dark pit of persecution, violence and oblivion! How often have her children in their prison darkness echoed the words of the Prophet Micah: «But as for me, I will look to the Lord. I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me. Rejoice not over me, O my enemy! When I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be my light» (7:7-8). And this not only in the distant past; the twentieth century too has been one of the most tormented in the history of the Armenian Church, which suffered terrible hardships of every kind. Now, thank God, there are clear signs of a new springtime.

2. In today's celebration, I am delighted to return to Your Holiness a relic of Saint Gregory the Illuminator which has been kept in the Convent of Saint Gregory the Armenian in Naples, and venerated there for many centuries. The relic will be placed in the new Cathedral now being built in Yerevan as a symbol of hope and of the Church's mission in Armenia after so many years of oppression and silence. A place in the heart of a fast-growing city in which to praise God, to listen to Sacred Scripture and to celebrate the Eucharist will be an essential factor of evangelization. I pray that the Holy Spirit will fill that sacred place with his loving presence, glorious light and sanctifying grace. My hope is that the new Cathedral will

adorn with still greater beauty the Bride of Christ in Armenia, where the People of God have lived for centuries in the shadow of Mount Ararat. Through the intercession of the Mother of God and Saint Gregory the Illuminator, may the Armenian faithful draw new courage and confidence from their Cathedral. And may the pilgrims coming from far and wide experience the power of God's light radiating from that holy shrine as they continue their journey of faith.

3. In the Cathedral of Yerevan, as in all others, there will be the Altar of the Eucharist and the Patriarchal Chair. The Chair and the Altar speak of the communion which already exists between us. As the Second Vatican Council declared, «all know the love with which Christians of the East celebrate the Sacred Liturgy, especially the Eucharist, well-spring of the Church's life and pledge of future glory, in which the faithful united with the Bishop have access to God the Father through the Son, the Word Incarnate who died and was glorified, by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit». The Council Fathers went on to say that the Eastern Churches, «however separated they may be, have true Sacraments and above all, by virtue of the Apostolic Succession, the Priesthood and the Eucharist, by means of which they remain united with us by the closest bonds» (Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 15).

Through history there have been many contacts between the Catholic Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church; and there have been various attempts to restore full communion. Now we must pray and work fervently that the day will soon come when our Sees and the Bishops will be in full communion once more, when we can celebrate together, at the same Altar, the Eucharist as the supreme sign and source of unity in Christ. Until that day dawns, each of our Eucharistic celebrations will suffer the absence of the brother who is not yet there.

4. Dear and venerable Brother in Christ, Saint Paul speaks to us in the words we have heard from the Acts of the Apostles: «Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the Church of God, which he acquired with his own blood» (20:28). Ours is a great responsibility. Christ has entrusted to our pastoral care that which is most precious to him on earth: *«the Church which he acquired with his own blood»*.

I beg the Lord, through the intercession of Saint Gregory the Illuminator, to pour out his abundant blessings upon you, my Brothers in the Episcopate, and upon all the Pastors of the Apostolic Armenian Church. May the Spirit inspire and guide you in your pastoral ministry to the Armenian people, both in the land of your birth and throughout the world. To your fraternal prayer I entrust my own ministry as Bishop of Rome: that I may be able to exercise this ministry more and more as «a service of love recognized by all concerned» (Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint*, 95), so that *all will at last be one* (cf. *Jn 17:21*).

5. Let me conclude with the fervent plea which I made to the Mother of God thirteen years ago, during the Marian Year, and which rises from my heart again today:

«O holy Mother of God, ... look upon the land of Armenia, upon its mountains, where a countless host of holy and learned monks have lived; look upon its churches, upon the rocks which rise from rocks, filled with the radiance of the Trinity; look upon the stone crosses, memorials of your Son, whose Passion continues in the suffering of the martyrs. Watch over the sons and daughters of Armenia throughout the world... Inspire the desires and hopes of the young, that they may remain always proud of their origins. Grant that, wherever they may go, they will listen to their Armenian heart, for in those depths there will always be a prayer to their Lord and a sense of surrender to you who cover them with your mantle of

refuge. O most sweet Virgin, O Mother of Christ and Mother of us all, Mary» (*Homily*, Divine Liturgy in the Armenian Rite, 21 November 1987). Amen.

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