



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC VOYAGE IN ARMENIA
MASS IN LATIN RITE

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

*External Grand Altar
Etchmiadzin, 27 September 2001*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,
I greet you and bless you all!*

"The Lord is my light and my salvation" (Ps 26:1).

1. These words of the Psalm resounded in Armenian hearts when the Christian faith, first proclaimed in this land by the Apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus, became the religion of the nation seventeen hundred years ago. From that time on Armenian Christians have lived and died in the "grace and truth" (*Jn 1:17*) of our Lord Jesus Christ. The *light and salvation* of the Gospel have inspired and sustained you at every stage of your pilgrimage down the centuries. Today we are honouring and commemorating Armenia's fidelity to Jesus Christ at this Eucharist, which His Holiness Catholicos Karekin II, with a brother's love, has invited me to celebrate on the holy ground where the Son of God appeared to your father in faith, Saint Gregory the Illuminator.

How the Bishop of Rome has longed for this day! With intense joy, I greet His Holiness the Catholicos, his fellow Archbishops and Bishops and the faithful of the Armenian Apostolic Church. I warmly greet Archbishop Nerses Der Nersessian and Coadjutor Archbishop Vartan Kechichian and, through them, my thoughts go to His Beatitude Patriarch Nerses Bedros XIX, and to the Armenian Bishops and faithful throughout the world. I embrace the priests, the men and women religious, and all of you, sons and daughters of the Armenian Catholic Church from the various parishes. I greet Bishop Giuseppe Pasotto, Apostolic Administrator of the Caucasus of the Latins and all who have come from Georgia and from other parts of the Caucasus.

2. For many years the voice of the priest fell silent in your churches, but still the voice of the people's faith was heard, full of devotion and filial affection for the Successor of the Apostle Peter.

When evil-hearted men fired upon the Cross on the bell-tower of Panik, they sought to offend the God in whom they did not believe. But their violence was directed above all against the people who had gathered the stones to build a house for the Lord; against you who in those churches had received the gift of faith in the waters of Baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit in Chrismation; against you who gathered to share in the heavenly banquet at the Eucharistic table; against you who, in those places of prayer, had your marriages blessed that your families might be holy, and bade farewell to your loved ones in the sure hope of being reunited with them one day in heaven.

They fired upon the Cross; but still you sang the praises of the Lord, guarding and venerating the clerical robe of your last priest as a trace of his presence among you. You chanted your hymns in the sure knowledge that from heaven his voice was one with yours in praising Christ the eternal High Priest. You adorned your places of worship as best you could; and beside the images of Jesus and his Mother Mary, there often stood the picture of the Pope of Rome alongside the picture of the Catholicos of the Armenian Apostolic Church. You understood that where Christians were suffering, though divided among themselves, there already existed a profound unity.

3. That is why your recent history has not been marked by the sad opposition between the Churches which has so troubled Christians in other lands not far from here. I still remember when, once the winter of ideological atheism was past, the late Catholicos Vazken I invited the Holy See of Rome to send a priest to the Catholics of Armenia. I chose for you then Father Komitas, one of the spiritual sons of Abbot Mekhitar. This year the Mekhitarist community celebrates three hundred years since its foundation. Let us give thanks to the Lord for the glorious witness which the monks have given; and let us be grateful to them for all that they are now doing to renew Armenian culture!

Although no longer young, Father Komitas immediately and enthusiastically agreed to join you in the difficult task of reconstruction. He came to live in Panik, where he restored the Cross which gunfire had sought to destroy. In a spirit of fraternity with the clergy and faithful of the Armenian Apostolic Church, he re-opened and embellished the church for the Catholics who had defended it for so long. Now he lies beside it, close even in death to his people, as he awaits the Resurrection of the dead.

4. Later, with the fraternal understanding of Catholicos Vazken, who in the national Parliament had defended the rights of Catholics in Armenia, I was able to send you as pastor another Mekhitarist, Father Nerses, whom I ordained a Bishop in Saint Peter's Basilica. He is the son of a confessor of the faith who paid for his fidelity to Christ in Communist prisons. To Archbishop Nerses I wish to say a special word of thanks. When asked, he was quick to leave his beloved Mekhitarist community on the island of San Lazzaro in Venice to serve among you as a loving father and

revered teacher. Now he is helped by Archbishop Vartan, another spiritual son of Abbot Mekhitar. I wish him too a long and fruitful pastoral ministry.

Together with his former Vicar, who then became Bishop for Armenian Catholics in Iran, and now with the Coadjutor Archbishop, the priests and the religious women who give themselves so generously for the sake of the Gospel, Archbishop Nerses has taught you and shown you that the Catholic Church in this land is not a rival. A fraternal attitude pervades all our relations. Just as in the years of silence you placed the picture of the Pope beside the picture of the Catholicos, so in today's liturgy we shall pray not only for the Catholic hierarchy but also for His Holiness Karekin II, Catholicos of all Armenians.

In your kindness, Your Holiness, you have invited the Bishop of Rome to celebrate the Eucharist with the Catholic community at Holy Etchmiadzin, and you are honouring us with your presence on this joyful occasion. Is this not a wonderful sign of our common faith? Does it not express the yearning of so many of our brothers and sisters who wish to see us advance quickly on the path of unity? My own heart is eager to hasten the day when we shall celebrate together the Divine Sacrifice which makes us all one. At this altar which is your altar, I beg the Lord to forgive us our past failings against unity and to lead us to the love that overcomes all barriers.

5. Dear Catholic brothers and sisters, you are rightly proud of this ancient land of your ancestors, and you too are heirs to its history and culture. In the Catholic Church the hymn of praise rises to God from many peoples, in many tongues. But this blending of different voices in a single melody in no way destroys your identity as Armenians. You speak the sweet tongue of your forebears. You chant your liturgy as you were taught by the holy Fathers of the Armenian Church. With your brothers and sisters of the Apostolic Church, you witness to the same Lord Jesus, who is not divided. You belong neither to Apollo, nor Cephas, nor Paul: "You belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God" (1 Cor 3:23).

6. As Armenians, with the same rights and duties as all Armenians, you are helping to re-build the nation. I am certain that in this momentous task our brothers and sisters of the Armenian Apostolic Church look upon the members of the Catholic community as children of the same mother, the blessed land of Armenia, land of martyrs and monks, of scholars and artists. The divisions which arose left the root intact. We must rival one another – not in creating division or in accusing each other – but in showing mutual charity. The only rivalry possible among the Lord's disciples is to see who can offer the greater love! Let us remember the words of your great Bishop Nerses of Lambron: "There is no way of being in peace with God, for anyone, if men are not first at peace among themselves... If we love, and this is our measure, love will be our inheritance; if our measure is resentment and hatred, then all we can expect is resentment and hatred".

At this time Armenia needs from all her sons and daughters fresh efforts and new sacrifices. Armenia today needs all her children to work wholeheartedly for the common good. For that alone

will ensure that the honest and generous service of those in public life is met by the trust and esteem of the people; that families are united and faithful; and that every human life is lovingly welcomed from the moment of conception and carefully nurtured even when stricken by sickness or poverty. And where will you find strength for this great common effort? You will find it where the Armenian people have always found inspiration to persevere in their high ideals and defend their cultural and spiritual heritage: *in the light and salvation which come to you from Christ.*

Armenia hungers and thirsts for Jesus Christ, for whom so many of your ancestors gave their lives. In these difficult times, people are looking for bread. But when they have it, their hearts will still long for more – a reason for living and a hope that sustains them in their daily toil. And who will move them to put their trust in Jesus Christ? You, Christians of Armenia, and all of you together!

7. All Armenian Christians look together to the Cross of Jesus Christ as the world's only hope and as Armenia's true light and salvation. On the Cross you were all born from the wounded side of Christ himself (cf. *Jn 19:34*). You cherish the Cross because you know it to be life not death, victory not defeat. You know this because you have learnt the truth which Saint Paul declares to the Philippians – that his imprisonment only served to advance the Gospel (1:12). Consider your own bitter experience, which was an imprisonment of a kind. You have taken up your Cross (cf. *Mt 16:24*) and it has not destroyed you! It has in fact re-created you in mysterious and wonderful ways. That is why after seventeen hundred years you can say with the prophet Micah: "Rejoice not over me, O my enemy; for when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be my light" (7:8). Christians of Armenia, after the great trial, now is the time to rise! Rise with him who in every age has been your light and your salvation!

8. On this ecumenical pilgrimage, I very much wanted to visit the places where the Catholic faithful live in greater numbers. I would have liked to pray at the tombs of the victims of the terrible earthquake of 1988, knowing that many are still suffering its tragic consequences. I wanted personally to visit the *Redemptoris Mater* Hospital, which I was happy to contribute at the time of Armenia's distress, and which I know is much appreciated for the service it offers, thanks to the tireless work of the Camillians and the Little Sisters of Jesus. But none of this has been possible. Know that all of you have a place in my heart and in my prayer.

Dear brothers and sisters, when you return home from this holy place, remember that the Bishop of Rome came to honour the faith of the Armenian people, among whom you are especially dear to him. He has come to celebrate your faithfulness and courage, and *to praise God who has granted you to see the day of freedom.* Here at this splendid altar, let us remember those who struggled to see this day and did not see it, but who contemplate it now in the eternal glory of God's Kingdom.

May the great Mother of God, whom you love most dearly, watch over her Armenian children, and keep you all – the little ones, the young people, the families, the elderly, the sick – safe for ever

beneath her protective mantle. *Armenia semper fidelis!* God's blessings be upon you always!
Amen.