



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
FOR THE SOLEMN INAUGURATION
OF THE ROME-ARMENIA EXHIBITION***

Wednesday, 24 March 1999

1. It is a great joy for me to take part in the solemn inauguration of the Rome-Armenia Exhibition, sponsored by the ancient and glorious See of Echmiadzin and the Embassy of Armenia to the Holy See, with the cooperation of the Vatican Apostolic Library.

I wish to express sentiments of deep esteem and consideration to His Excellency Mr Robert Kocharian, President of the Republic of Armenia, who has wished to be present on this occasion. In thanking you, Mr President, for your kind words, I express the hope that Armenia, in its challenging journey to a deserved prosperity, will experience increased international solidarity and benefit from the guidance of enlightened statesmen dedicated to the common good, so that all citizens may be encouraged to play their part in the nation's development.

A particular reason for rejoicing is the presence, on this solemn and significant occasion, of His Holiness Karekin I, Catholicos of All the Armenians, accompanied by His Beatitude Patriarch Torkom, Archbishop of Jerusalem, and other illustrious Prelates, priests and lay people of the Apostolic Church of Armenia. You have wished to honour the Church of Rome in the most beautiful manner accorded to Christians: by the witness of charity and the holy kiss of communion.

Your Holiness, I deeply appreciate this delicate gesture, which constitutes a new and important chapter in the history of the common quest for full unity between Christ's followers. Despite the difficulties of the journey, you and the illustrious guests accompanying you have wished to show once again how much you believe in the ecumenical task, to which you have tirelessly devoted your energies. Again I thank you for your words of historic importance on the occasion of your visit to Rome in December 1996, words which were echoed the following month by His Holiness Aram I, Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia. To His Holiness Aram I, Catholicos of the Great House

of Cilicia I send a warm fraternal greeting and invoke abundant divine blessings upon his ministry.

You have taught your people and your Church that communion is an imperative for Christ's followers and an essential condition "so that the world may believe" in their testimony. Communion does not mean the absorption and loss of one's own identity. Rather, it is a shared pilgrimage to the one Lord, preserving what is specific and gaining the strength and richness that comes from universality. May the Father of all blessings grant Your Holiness many years as head of the Armenian Church, in the expectation of new initiatives which will renew the hope of those who believe that the Church of Christ is one, that she "can only be one, one and united" (Address to the Pontifical Oriental Institute, *Insegnamenti* XVI, 2 [1993], 1458).

I address warm greetings to my dear Brother, His Beatitude Jean Pierre XVIII Kasparian, Patriarch of Armenian Catholics, who has also come here today to be with us, accompanied by other Bishops of his Church. Full communion with the See of Peter, while making this Church an integral part of the Catholic family, does not separate it from the marvellous heritage of spiritual life and culture which brings so much honour to the Armenian people, but rather commits it to a witness of renewed vigour on behalf of unity.

2. The theme of the exhibition and this gathering of the highest ecclesiastical and civil figures representing the Armenian people is no ordinary event. It is indeed highly symbolic: it points to the openness, the readiness for encounter, and the cultural achievement which have marked the entire history of the Armenian people.

Despite opposition and even open persecution, Armenians did not close in upon themselves, but considered it vital, not only for their own survival but also for authentic development, to engage in an open and intelligent exchange with other peoples. From others they borrowed elements of enrichment, blending them in the crucible of their own unmistakable uniqueness. They have always shown initiative and courage, ever sustained by the power of the Gospel which shaped their history and provided a solid foundation for their life. The Armenian diaspora, painful experience though it was, is a sign of this dynamic vitality which remains exemplary even today.

And when this attachment to the Gospel involved, as often happened, the sacrifice of life itself for the sake of fidelity to the Christian faith, Armenians showed by their martyrdom what wonders of strength grace can work in those who accept it. The universal Church can only express constant and profound gratitude for this sacrifice, which at times served as a living shield protecting Western Christianity, sparing it dangers which might have proved extremely grave.

3. The relationship between Armenia and Rome preceded the coming of Christianity, but Christianity soon became the very reason for that relationship. For many centuries, free from the misunderstandings and divisions which arose between the West and the Greek world, this relationship was marked by cordial good will. The embassies which the Armenian Church sent to

Rome were received as an attestation to a pure and consistent faith. On numerous occasions the Popes sent gifts of liturgical objects to the Armenian Catholicos as a sign of fraternal esteem, and it is significant that today the mitre and the crozier are still part of the sacred vesture of Armenian Prelates.

The Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia was a privileged meeting-point for Latins, Greeks and Syrians: a remarkable commitment to ecumenical fraternity flourished there. Communion between the Armenian Church in that region and the Church of Rome reached an intensity perhaps never attained in other cases. The cultural exchange was fruitful and beneficial, despite considerable difficulties. If it failed to yield more lasting fruit, this was in part due to the intransigence of some who perhaps were not able to appreciate fully the value of so providential an opportunity. On the Roman side, some of this lack of understanding was the result of tragic internal conflicts in the Western Church and the emergence of new canonical and theological concepts which made it more difficult to understand the ancient spiritual heritage of the East. For us today all of this is a motive of profound regret, and it obliges us not to overlook the opportunities which the Spirit is giving us in calling all Christ's followers to communion.

4. The objects on display in the Sala Regia — from the fragment of Noah's Ark from Echmiadzin, to the archaeological finds from ancient Cilicia — are not mere memorabilia; they are signs of the great things which God has done for the Armenian people. They are an invitation to ever deeper self-knowledge and ever greater self-esteem. If in those distant times enlightened and courageous men such as Nerses Shnorhali and Nerses of Lambron amazed the world, and continue to do so even today, with an admirable balance between love of their own culture and openness to the cultures of others, their example — and later the similar shining example of Abbot Mechitar of Sebaste — must be a lesson and an inspiration for us all in the present.

In times long past, saintly Armenians showed great enthusiasm for the unity of the Church, with respect for the dignity of all and for the specific character of each. They were ahead of their times, proclaiming values which were not fully understood. Now that those values have become part of our universal patrimony, we can be no less than they were: we must have the courage to undertake holy actions which will overcome prejudices and stereotypes.

Together in the footsteps of Christ: may this be the hope and the prayer of all Christians on the eve of the Third Millennium and the eve of the seventeen hundredth anniversary of the Baptism of Armenia.

May God always bless and protect your people throughout the world, wherever they bear witness to the faith and to the learning of the Fathers. From heaven may the Holy Martyrs and the revered Shepherds of the Church of Armenia intercede for us with Mary, the Mother of love.

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