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Visit to the Tzitzernakaberd Memorial and Holy Mass in Gyumri: safeguard the memory of the people

Vatican City, 25 June 2016 – The Pope's second day in Armenia began with a visit to Tzitzernakaberd, "the hill of swallows". Approximately twenty kilometres from Etchmiadzin, it is the location of the memorial to the massacre of the Armenian population under the Ottoman Empire in 1915. Inaugurated in 1967, a museum was added during the 80th anniversary of the massacre (1985), conserving evidence and documents relating to the "Great Evil" and a research centre affiliated to the Armenian National Academy of Sciences.

The Memorial consists of three parts: the Wall of Memory, the Mausoleum and the "Armenia Reborn" Column. The Wall of Memory – one hundred metres of basalt – is the entrance to the museum and is inscribed with the names of the cities and peoples who were victims of the Great Evil. The circular Mausoleum is made up of twelve slanting slabs of basalt, representing the number of provinces that fell victim to the mass violence, which surround an open-air space where an Eternal Flame burns. Next to the Mausoleum there is the "Armenia Reborn" Column, formed of two needles set in cement, 44 metres high, evoking the violent dispersion of the Armenian people and their union. Finally, next to the complex there is a row of trees planted by leaders and international figures who have acknowledged the genocide.

Upon arrival at the monumental complex, the Pope and the Catholicos were received by the president of the Republic, and they travelled the final part of the avenue leading to the Memorial on foot. The Pope laid a wreath at the foot of the monument, before a group of children who held banners bearing the names of the martyrs of 1915. Accompanied by Karekin II, he walked up the steps to the chamber of the Eternal Flame, where they both recited the Lord's Prayer, each in his own language, and listened to a reading, by an Armenian Apostolic bishop, from the Letter to the Hebrews, which stated "You endured a hard struggle with sufferings", and by a Catholic bishop, from the Gospel of St. John: "Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do". After raising a prayer for intercession, the Pope and the Catholicos, along with President Sargsyan, walked a short section of the garden. Francis blessed and watered a tree in memory of his visit. Upon arriving on the terrace of the monumental complex, Francis greeted a group of descendants of the Armenians persecuted following the massacre, who were saved and housed in Castel Gandolfo by Pope Benedict XV. Before leaving the Memorial to return to Yerevan for his air transfer to Gyumri to celebrate Holy Mass, the Pope signed the Golden Book with the following message: "Here I pray, with pain in my heart, that there be no more tragedies such as this, that humanity not forget and know how to conquer evil with good; may God grant peace and consolation to the

beloved Armenian people and the whole world".

Shortly after 10.35 a.m. local time (8.35 a.m. in Rome), the Holy Father arrived in Gyumri, the second-largest city in Armenia in terms of number of inhabitants (146,000), the seat of the Catholic Ordinariate for Armenian Catholics of Europe (around 600,000 in number), whose archbishop is Raphael François Minassian. Gyumri was the country's most industrialised city until 1988, when it was devastated by violent earthquake which forced its inhabitants to live for many years in prefabricated dwellings. Thanks to an international solidarity campaign led by the French-Armenian singer Charles Aznavour, funds were raised for its reconstruction, and the population expressed its gratitude by dedicating a statue to Aznavour.

From the airport, Francis transferred directly by car to Vartanàns Square, where he celebrated a thanksgiving Mass for the Mercy of God, following Latin rite, with readings in Italian and Armenian, preceded by greetings from the Catholicos who also attended.

"They shall build up the ancient ruins... they shall repair the ruined cities'. In this place, dear brothers and sisters, we can say that the words of the Prophet Isaiah have come to pass", the Pope began his homily. "After the terrible devastation of the earthquake, we gather today to give thanks to God for all that has been rebuilt. Yet we might also wonder: what is the Lord asking us to build today in our lives, and even more importantly, upon what is He calling us to build our lives? In seeking an answer to this question, I would like to suggest three stable foundations upon which we can tirelessly build and rebuild the Christian life".

"The first foundation is memory. One grace we can implore is that of being able to remember: to recall what the Lord has done in and for us, and to remind ourselves that, as today's Gospel says, He has not forgotten us but 'remembered' us. God has chosen us, loved us, called us and forgiven us. Great things have happened in our personal love story with Him, and these must be treasured in our minds and hearts. Yet there is another memory we need to preserve: it is the memory of a people. Peoples, like individuals, have a memory. Your own people's memory is ancient and precious. Your voices echo those of past sages and saints; your words evoke those who created your alphabet in order to proclaim God's word; your songs blend the afflictions and the joys of your history. As you ponder these things, you can clearly recognise God's presence. He has not abandoned you. Even in the face of tremendous adversity, we can say in the words of today's Gospel that the Lord has visited your people. He has remembered your faithfulness to the Gospel, the first fruits of your faith, and all those who testified, even at the price of their blood, that God's love is more precious than life itself. It is good to recall with gratitude how the Christian faith became your people's life breath and the heart of their historical memory".

"Faith is also hope for your future and a light for life's journey. Faith is the second foundation I would like to mention. There is always a danger that can dim the light of faith, and that is the temptation to reduce it to something from the past, something important but belonging to another age, as if the faith were a beautiful illuminated book to be kept in a museum. Once it is locked up in the archives of history, faith loses its power to transform, its living beauty, its positive openness to all. Faith, however, is born and reborn from a life-giving encounter with Jesus, from experiencing how His mercy illumines every situation in our lives. We would do well to renew this living encounter with the Lord each day. We would do well to read the word of God and in silent prayer to open our hearts to his love. We would do well to let our encounter with the Lord's tenderness enkindle joy in our hearts: a joy greater than sadness, a joy that even withstands pain and in turn becomes peace. All of this renews our life, makes us free and open to surprises, ready and available for the Lord and for others".

"It can happen too that Jesus calls us to follow Him more closely, to give our lives to Him and to our brothers and sisters. When He calls – and I say this especially to you young people – do not be afraid; tell Him 'Yes!' He knows us, He really loves us, and He wants to free our hearts from the burden of fear and pride. By making room for Him, we become capable of radiating His love. Thus you will be able to carry on your great history of evangelisation. This is something the Church and the world need in these troubled times, which are also a time of mercy".

"The third foundation, after memory and faith, is merciful love: on this rock, the rock of the love we receive from God and offer to our neighbour, the life of a disciple of Jesus is based. In the exercise of charity, the Church's

face is rejuvenated and made beautiful. Concrete love is the Christian's visiting card; any other way of presenting ourselves could be misleading and even unhelpful, for it is by our love for one another that everyone will know that we are His disciples. We are called above all to build and rebuild paths of communion, tirelessly creating bridges of unity and working to overcome our divisions. May believers always set an example, cooperating with one another in mutual respect and a spirit of dialogue, knowing that 'the only rivalry possible among the Lord's disciples is to see who can offer the greater love!'"

"In today's first reading, the prophet Isaiah reminds us that the Spirit of the Lord is always with those who carry glad tidings to the poor, who bind up the broken-hearted and console the afflicted. God dwells in the hearts of those who love Him. God dwells wherever there is love, shown especially by courageous and compassionate care for the weak and the poor. How much we need this! We need Christians who do not allow themselves to be overcome by weariness or discouraged by adversity, but instead are available, open and ready to serve. We need men and women of good will, who help their brothers and sisters in need, with actions and not merely words. We need societies of greater justice, where each individual can lead a dignified life and, above all, be fairly remunerated for his or her work.

All the same, we might ask ourselves: how can we become merciful, with all the faults and failings that we see within ourselves and all about us? I would like to appeal to one concrete example, a great herald of divine mercy, one to whom I wished to draw greater attention by making him a Doctor of the Universal Church: St. Gregory of Narek, word and voice of Armenia. It is hard to find his equal in the ability to plumb the depths of misery lodged in the human heart. Yet he always balanced human weakness with God's mercy, lifting up a heartfelt and tearful prayer of trust in the Lord who is 'giver of gifts, root of goodness... voice of consolation, news of comfort, joyful impulse... unparalleled compassion, inexhaustible mercy... the kiss of salvation'. He was certain that 'the light of God's mercy is never clouded by the shadow of indignation'. Gregory of Narek is a master of life, for he teaches us that the most important thing is to recognise that we are in need of mercy. Despite our own failings and the injuries done to us, we must not become self-centred but open our hearts in sincerity and trust to the Lord, to 'the God who is ever near, loving and good', 'filled with love for mankind ... a fire consuming the chaff of sin'.

"In the words of St. Gregory, I would like now to invoke God's mercy and His gift of unfailing love: Holy Spirit, 'powerful protector, intercessor and peace-maker, we lift up our prayers to You... Grant us the grace to support one another in charity and good works... Spirit of sweetness, compassion, loving kindness and mercy... You who are mercy itself... Have mercy on us, Lord our God, in accordance with Your great mercy'".

After the Eucharist the Pope expressed his deep gratitude to the Catholicos Karekin II and to Archbishop Minassian for their gracious words, along with Patriarch Ghabroyan, all the bishops present, the priests and the authorities who had warmly welcomed him.

"I thank all of you here present, who have come to Gyumri from different regions and from nearby Georgia. I especially greet all those who with such generosity and practical charity are helping our brothers and sisters in need. I think in particular of the hospital in Ashotsk, opened twenty-five years ago and known as 'the Pope's Hospital'. It was born of the heart of St. John Paul II, and it continues to be an important presence close to those who are suffering. I think too of the charitable works of the local Catholic community, and those of the Armenian Sisters of the Immaculate Conception and the Missionaries of Charity of Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta. May the Virgin Mary, our Mother, accompany you always and guide your steps in the way of fraternity and peace".

Francis toured the square by popemobile to greet all the participants in the Mass, and then proceeded to the convent of Our Lady of Armenia, whose nuns run an orphanage caring for sixty children. The convent complex, where the Pope lunched, also comprises a professional school, whose students welcomed him.
