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The Pope in Georgia: we are united by our common witness to the Christian tradition

The Holy Father arrived shortly after 3 p.m. (local time, 1 p.m. in Rome) in Tbilisi, capital of Georgia, for the first stage of his trip to the Caucasus on the theme “Pax vobis”, an invocation of peace for the region. The logo for the apostolic trip in Georgian territory is the cross typical of the country, with curved arms, framed on one side in red, the colour of the Georgian flag, and on the other in yellow, that of the Vatican flag.

In the airport, after a four-hour flight, the Pope was welcomed by the president of the Republic Giorgi Margvelashvili and his wife, accompanied by the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, His Holiness and Beatitude Ilia II. Two children in traditional costume offered him a basket of grapes in the presence of state authorities and representatives of civil society.

The capital of Georgia has 112,000 baptised persons, almost two per cent of the country’s population, and is the place with the highest concentration of Catholics along with the southern area where entirely Catholic villages exist. The Catholics of the country are predominantly of Latin and Armenian rite, with a small community of Assyrian Chaldean rite as well as a group of immigrants, predominantly American, European and Indian. In Tbilisi there are two Catholic churches of Latin rite: the Cathedral of the Assumption in the historic centre and the parish church of Sts. Peter and Paul, where a mission of the Neocatechumenal Way made up of priests, missionary families and laypeople has been present since 1991.

After a brief discussion with President Margvelashvili, his wife and the Patriarch in a small room at the airport, the Holy Father transferred by car to the presidential palace in Tbilisi where he pronounced his first discourse of his visit to Georgia, before the country’s political and religious leaders, the members of the diplomatic corps and representatives from the world of culture.

“I thank Almighty God for granting me the opportunity to visit this blessed land, a place of encounter and vital exchange among cultures and civilisations, which, since the preaching of St. Nino at the beginning of the fourth century, discovered in Christianity its deepest identity and the solid foundation of its values”, began the Pope. “As St. John Paul II observed when visiting your country: ‘Christianity became the seed of successive flowerings of Georgian culture’, and this seed continues to bear fruit. Recalling with gratitude our meeting in the Vatican last year and the good relations which Georgia has always maintained with the Holy See, I sincerely thank you, Mr President, for your gracious invitation and for your cordial words of welcome in the name of the Authorities of the

State and all the Georgian people”.

“The centuries-old history of your country shows that it is rooted in the values expressed in its culture, language and traditions. This places your country fully and in a particular way within the bedrock of European civilisation; at the same time, as is evident from your geographical location, Georgia is to a great extent a natural bridge between Europe and Asia, a link that facilitates communication and relations between peoples. Through the centuries this has facilitated commercial ties as well as dialogue and the exchange of ideas and experiences between diverse cultures. As your national anthem proudly proclaims: ‘My icon is my homeland... bright mountains and valleys are shared with God’. The country is an icon expressing its identity and tracing its features and history; its mountains, rising freely towards heaven, far from being insurmountable walls, give splendour to the valleys; they distinguish them, connect them, make each one unique yet all open to the one sky, which covers them and offers them protection”.

He went on to address the president, noting that twenty-five years have passed since Georgia’s independence was proclaimed. “During this period when Georgia regained its full liberty, it built and strengthened its democratic institutions and sought ways to guarantee the most inclusive and authentic development possible. All of this was not without great sacrifice, which the people faced courageously in order to ensure their longed-for freedom. I hope that the path of peace and development will advance with the consolidated commitment of all sectors of society, so as to create conditions for stability, justice and respect for the rule of law, hence promoting growth and greater opportunities for all”.

“The peaceful coexistence among all peoples and states in the region is the indispensable and prior condition for such authentic and enduring progress”, he emphasised. “This requires increasing mutual esteem and consideration, which can never lay aside respect for the sovereign rights of every country within the framework of international law. So as to forge paths leading to lasting peace and true cooperation, we must recall that the relevant principles for a just and stable relationship between states are at the service of a practical, ordered and peaceful coexistence among nations. Indeed, in far too many areas of the world, there seems to be a dominant way of thinking which hinders keeping legitimate differences and disagreements – which can always arise – within a climate of civilised dialogue where reason, moderation and responsibility can prevail. This is all the more necessary in the present historical moment, with no shortage of violent extremism that manipulates and distorts civic and religious principles, and subjugates them to the dark designs of domination and death”.

Therefore, he added, “We should wholeheartedly give priority to human beings in their actual circumstances and pursue every attempt to prevent differences from giving rise to violence that can cause ruinous calamity for people and for society. Far from being exploited as grounds for turning discord into conflict and conflict into interminable tragedy, distinctions along ethnic, linguistic, political or religious lines can and must be for everyone a source of mutual enrichment in favour of the common good. This requires that everyone make full use of their particular identity, having the possibility, above all else, to coexist peacefully in their homeland, or freely to return to that land, if for some reason they have been forced to leave it. I hope that civil authorities will continue to show concern for the situation of these persons, and that they will fully commit themselves to seeking tangible solutions, in spite of any unresolved political questions. It takes far-sightedness and courage to recognise the authentic good of peoples, and to pursue this good with determination and prudence. In this regard, it is essential to keep before our eyes the suffering of others, in order to proceed with conviction along the path which, though slow and laborious, is also captivating and freeing, and leads us towards peace”.

“The Catholic Church, which has been present for centuries in this country and has distinguished itself in a particular way for its commitment to human promotion and to charitable works, shares the joys and concerns of the Georgian people, and is resolved to offer its contribution for the well-being and peace of the nation, by actively cooperating with the authorities and civil society. It is my ardent desire that the Catholic Church may continue to make its own authentic contribution to the growth of Georgian society, thanks to the common witness to the Christian tradition which unites us, its commitment to those most in need, and the renewed and strengthened dialogue with the ancient Georgian Orthodox Church and the other religious communities of the country. May God bless Georgia and give her peace and prosperity!”

