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## Encounter with the Catholic community of Latin rite in the Church of the Assumption

After his meeting with the Orthodox Patriarch and private lunch in the apostolic nunciature, the Pope transferred to the Church of the Assumption, of Latin rite, built by the Capuchin Fathers at the beginning of the twentieth century with the help of Propaganda Fide. The Church was closed for worship under the Soviet regime, and then requisitioned for other purposes. On 15 August 1999, liturgical memory of the Assumption, it was reconsecrated by the then substitute Secretary of State, Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re. The Latin Catholic Church in Georgia is small but significant, very present in society and active in education, welfare and healthcare. The diocesan synod of 2006 (the first of the Catholic Church celebrated in Georgia) gave an impetus to pastoral councils and the responsibilities of the laity. Given that the majority of priests are foreign, the first local priest was ordained in 1998, and four more were ordained afterwards; as a result, there is emphasis also on the preparation of permanent deacons, of whom there are currently nine, as well as nine seminarians and various priests *fidei donum*.

The Missionaries of Charity were the first religious congregation that entered the country after the fall of the USSR; they are present in Tbilisi in a community offering assistance to the poor and homeless. They were joined, almost at the same time, by the Camillian Fathers in 1991 and, from 1994, the Stigmatines who in Batumi and Kutaisi unite parish activity with work in favour of the elderly, children, young people in difficulty and people who live on the streets. For some years, in Akhaltsikhe, twenty kilometres from the border with Turkey, there is a community of Capuchins.

In the Church of the Assumption the Pope was received by Bishop Giuseppe Pasotto, apostolic administrator of the Caucasus. He was awaited by 250 people, including priests, men and women religious and representatives of the pastoral councils of various Catholic denominations throughout the country. After listening to testimonies by various people - a priest, a seminarian, a mother and a young person - the Pope addressed some extemporaneous remarks to those present:

"Good evening! Thank you, dear Brother, thank you. Now I will address all of you, integrating all the questions.

When you spoke [the Holy Father refers to the priest who offered his testimony], towards the end a thought came into my mind, and he [Monsignor Minassian] is a witness; it was something that happened as the Mass was concluding at Gyumri [in Armenia]. At the end of the Mass, I invited his Excellency and also the Bishop of

the Armenian Apostolic Church in that city to climb aboard the 'popemobile'. We were three bishops: the Bishop of Rome, the Catholic Bishop of Gyumri, and the Armenian Apostolic Bishop. All three: like a fine fruit salad! We followed the set route and then came down from the Popemobile. And as I was walking towards the car, an old lady who was there signalled me to come over. How old was she? Eighty? Not old... She seemed to be over eighty. I felt inclined to go over to her, because she was behind a barrier. She was a humble lady, very humble. She greeted me lovingly. She had a golden tooth, like the ones used in times gone by. And she said this to me: 'I am Armenian, but I live in Georgia. I've come from Georgia!' She had travelled eight hours, or six hours by bus, to meet the Pope. Then, a day later, when we were going to a location which I can't remember, about a two hours journey, I saw her there! I said to her: 'Dear lady, you have come from Georgia... so many hours of travelling, and then another two hours a day later to find me...'. 'Ah yes, it's faith!', she said. You have spoken to us about being *firm in the faith*. To be strong in the faith is the witness given by this lady. She believed that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, had left us Peter on this earth and she wanted to see Peter".

"To be firm in the faith means the capacity to *receive* faith from others, to *conserve that faith* and to *pass it on*. You said, speaking about being strong in the faith: 'to keep alive the *memory* of the past, the nation's history, and to have courage to dream and to build a bright future'. To be firm in the faith means to not forget that which we have learned, indeed, to make it grow and give it to our children. For this reason in Krakow I entrusted the youth with a special mission: to speak to their grandparents. Grandparents are the ones who have handed down the faith to us. And you, who work with young people, should teach them how to listen to grandparents, to speak to them, in order to receive the fresh water of faith, developing it in the present, making it grow – not hiding it in a drawer, no – developing it, making it grow and transmitting it to our children".

"The Apostle Paul, speaking to his beloved disciple Timothy, in the second reading, told him to hold fast to the faith which he received from his mother and grandmother. This is the path that we must follow, and this will help us mature greatly. *Receive the heritage, make it flourish, and pass it on*. A plant without roots does not grow. The faith without the roots of a mother and grandmother does not grow. Also, a faith which has been given to me and which I do not pass on to others, to the smallest, to my 'children', does not grow".

"To summarise: to remain strong in the faith we need to have *memory of the past, courage in the present and hope for the future*. This is what it means to be strong in the faith. And don't forget that Georgian lady, who was able to travel by bus six or seven hours to Armenia, to the city of Gyumri, where he [Monsignor Minassian] is Bishop, and was able to find the Pope again in Yerevan the next day. Please don't forget this image! It is the image of a woman who lives here: an Armenian woman but from Georgia! Georgian women are well known for being women of faith, strong, who take the Church forward!"

"And you, Kote [the seminarian] once said to your mother: 'I would like to do what that man is doing' [referring to the priest who was celebrating Mass]. At the end of your testimony you said: 'I am proud of being Catholic and of becoming a Georgian Catholic priest'. It is a journey. You did not tell us what your mother said, what your mother said when you told her: 'I would like to do what that man is doing'? [The seminarian replies: 'I was small and my mother said to me: "okay, do what he does!"... but I was small...] Once again a mother, a strong Georgian woman. That woman 'was losing' a son, but she praised God. She accompanied him in his journey. And Kote's mother also lost the opportunity of becoming a mother-in-law! But you gave us the key word: *memory*. To conserve memory is the first calling. To protect that moment, as you guard that memory: 'Mum, I would like to do what that man is doing'. This is not just a tale which came to your mind: it was the Holy Spirit that moved you. And to safeguard this by using your memory means safeguarding the grace of the Holy Spirit. I am saying this to all priests and sisters!"

"All of us, in our life, have, or will have, dark moments. Also we, who are consecrated, have dark moments. When it seems things are not working out, when there are difficulties in community life, in the diocese, in those moments, what we must do is *pause, and remember*. Memory of the moment I was touched by the Holy Spirit. As he said, from the moment he spoke those words: 'Mum, I would like to do what that man is doing': that is the moment we are touched by the Holy Spirit. Perseverance in vocation is rooted in the memory of that tender caress extended to us by the Lord and through which he has said: 'Come, come with me'. And this is what I advise all of you consecrated persons: don't turn back when there are difficulties. And if you do want to look back, let it be remembering that moment. That's all. And so the faith remains strong, vocation remains strong.

With our weaknesses, our sins; we are all sinners and we all need to go to confession, but the mercy and the love of Jesus are greater than our sins".

"And now I would like to speak about two things which you said, but [first] tell me: is it so cold in Kazakhstan during winter? Really? Go ahead anyway! And now, Irina. We have spoken to the priest, to religious, to consecrated persons about a strong faith; but what is *faith in a marriage*? Marriage is the most beautiful thing that God has created. The Bible tells us that God created man and woman, created them in his own image. That is to say, the man and woman who become one flesh, are the image of God. I understood, Irina, as you explained the difficulties that arise so often in marriage: the misunderstandings, the temptations. 'Well, let's solve this through divorce, so I can find another man, and he can find another woman, and we can start again'. Irina, do you know who pays the divorce fees? Two people pay. Who pays? [Irina replies: both pay]. Both? More! God pays, because when 'one flesh' is divided, the image of God is soiled. And the children pay. You do not know, dear brothers and sisters, you do not know how much children suffer, the little ones, when they witness the arguments and the separation of parents! Everything should be done to save a marriage. But is it normal to have arguments in marriage? Yes, it is normal. It happens. Sometimes 'plates fly'. But if love is real, then peace is made quickly. I offer this advice to spouses: argue as much as you want, but don't let the day end without making peace. Do you know why? Because 'the cold war' of the day after is extremely dangerous. How many marriages are saved when they have the courage at the end of the day to not make speeches but rather offer a caress, and peace is made! It is true, there are more complex situations, when the devil gets involved and entices the man with another woman who seems more beautiful than his wife, or when the devil entices the woman with another man who seems better than her husband. Ask for help straightaway. When this temptation comes, ask for help immediately".

"And this is what you [Irina] were saying, about helping couples. And how do we help couples? We help them by offering *welcome, closeness, accompaniment, discernment, and integration* into the body of the Church. To welcome, to accompany, to discern, to integrate. In the Catholic community we should offer help to save marriages. There are three words: they are words of gold in married life. I would ask a couple: 'do you love each other?' 'Yes', they might say. 'And when one of you does something for the other, do you know how to say thank you? And if one of you does something truly wicked, do you know how to ask for forgiveness? And if you want to plan something, [for example] having a day in the countryside, or something else, do you know how to ask the other's opinion?' Three words: '*May I?*'; '*Thank you*'; '*Sorry*'. If couples use these words, 'sorry, I made a mistake', 'can I do this?', or 'thank you for this lovely meal you've made' – '*can I?*'. '*thank you*', '*sorry*' – if couples use these words, a marriage will progress nicely. It is a help".

"You, Irina, mentioned a great enemy to marriage today: the theory of *gender*. Today there is a world war to destroy marriage. Today there are ideological colonisations which destroy, not with weapons, but with ideas. Therefore, there is a need to defend ourselves from ideological colonisations. If there are problems, make peace as soon as possible, before the day ends, and don't forget the three words: 'may I', 'thank you', 'forgive me'".

"And you, Kakha, spoke about a Church that is open, not closed in on itself, a Church which should be open to all, a Church as mother – mothers are like this. There are two women that Jesus wanted for all of us: his mother and his spouse. And these two resemble each other. The mother is the mother of Jesus, and he left her as our mother. The Church is the spouse of Jesus and she too is our mother. With mother Church and mother Mary we can move forward confidently. And there we find again the woman. It seems that the Lord has a preference to advance the faith of women. Mary, the Holy Mother of God; the Church, the Holy Spouse of God – even if sinful in us her children – and the grandmother and mother who have given us the faith".

"And it will be Mary, the Church, the grandmother, the mother, to defend the faith. Your ancient monks used to say – and listen well: 'When there is spiritual turmoil, we need to take refuge under the mantle of the Holy Mother of God'. And Mary is the model of the Church, she is the model of womanhood, yes, because the Church is a woman and Mary is a woman".

"And now one final thing, who said it? Precisely Kote, yet again: the problem of ecumenism. Never fight! Let the theologians study the abstract realities of theology. But what should I do with a friend, neighbour, an Orthodox

person? Be open, be a friend. 'But should I make efforts to convert him or her?' There is a very grave sin against ecumenism: proselytism. We should never proselytise the Orthodox! They are our brothers and sisters, disciples of Jesus Christ. Due to historical circumstances which are so complex we are where we are today. Both they and we believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and we believe in the Holy Mother of God. 'And so what should I do?' Do not condemn. No. I must not do this. Friendship, walking together, praying for one another. Praying and carrying out works of charity together, when this is possible. This is ecumenism. But never condemn a brother or a sister, never refrain from greeting an Orthodox brother or sister because they are Orthodox".

"I would like to end, again with poor old Kote. 'Holy Father', you said towards the end, 'I am proud of being Catholic and of becoming a Georgian Catholic priest'. To you and to all of you, Georgian Catholics, I ask, please, that you defend us from worldliness. Jesus spoke to us forcefully against worldliness; and in the discourse of the last supper he asked the Father: 'Father, defend them [the disciples] from worldliness. Defend them from the world'. Let us ask for this grace together: may the Lord free us from worldliness; may he make us men and women of the Church; strong in the faith we have received from our grandparents and mothers; strong in the faith which is sure under the protection of the mantle of the Holy Mother of God".

"Just as we are, without moving, let us pray the *Ave Maria* to the Holy Mother of God. And now I will give you the blessing. And I ask you, please, to pray for me. Pray for me".

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