



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO CATHOLICOS OF CILICIA***

Saturday, 25 January 1997

Beloved Brother,

During the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Your Holiness has come to visit the Bishop of Rome, at the place of martyrdom of the holy Apostles, Peter and Paul; we are holding this meeting in thanksgiving and the joy of hope. In welcoming the Armenian Pastor of the Great House of Cilicia, how can we fail to recall Paul of Tarsus, who became the Apostle *par excellence* of communion between the Churches, St Nerses IV the Gracious, the first Catholicos of Cilicia to undertake ecumenical dialogue systematically, and a few years later, St Nerses of Lambron, Bishop of Tarsus, known as “the second Paul of Tarsus” because of his burning zeal for unity? Thus, after the Second Vatican Council had irrevocably committed the Catholic Church to the ecumenical movement, the two Catholicoses of venerable memory, Khoren I and Vasken I, were keen to renew fraternal relations with my predecessor Pope Paul VI. Finally in 1983, I myself had the joy of receiving your predecessor in the See of Antélias, His Holiness Karekin II, who last December, as Catholicos of Etchmiadzin, returned to pay a visit to the Successor of Peter, thereby confirming our fraternal ties.

Your visit, Holiness, therefore is in keeping with our common will to advance on the way to perfect communion between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Catholic Church. I know the determination with which you laboured to create the Council of Churches of the Middle East, and then to develop it during your 17 years as prelate of your Church for Lebanon. Your experience in the service of Christian unity has been enriched since the World Council of Churches chose you as chairman of its Central Committee. And now you are the Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia.

Our meeting is not only one of two brothers who are happy to know one another and to pray together. It also signifies our responsibility to proceed together, to give a more visible expression to the spiritual reality of the communion that must join Christians in unity. You responded to the wishes I addressed to you in my Message on the occasion of your enthronement: "The Catholicate of Cilicia will deepen and extend its ecumenical commitment. I can assure you that the long-standing relations between the Catholicate of Cilicia and the Catholic Church will continue, with a growing ecumenical spirit and a vision of Christian unity".

Before touching on the concrete areas of our collaboration, there is one event, beloved Brother, which I cannot recall without emotion and which unites us in thanksgiving: the land of the Armenian nation is at last free and independent! You kept me fraternally informed of the progress of events, and in your reply after your enthronement you stated your primary concern: "Closer collaboration will be established between the Catholicate of Etchmiadzin in Armenia and the Catholicate of Cilicia in Antélias. I am firmly committed to it. The same commitment had been made by His Holiness Karekin I, Catholicos of All Armenians". In fact, it is in this framework, and with respect for both these jurisdictions, that we are seeking here to deepen our present relations.

The first link in our communion is that of the faith we have received from the Apostles. At this level, I am happy that we have succeeded in explicitly declaring our common faith in the one incarnate Word, true God and true Man. These declarations between the Catholic Church and the Coptic, Ethiopian and Syriac Churches have already signified openly the unity of these Churches in their faith in Christ the Lord, after centuries of misunderstanding. We can give thanks to God, because in her new-found unity and freedom, the Armenian Apostolic Church has been able to join her voice to this praise of faith.

In this perspective, two important moments in the years to come will give us the opportunity for fraternal co-operation in both their preparation and celebration: the Great Jubilee of the Mystery of the Incarnation and, the following year, the 17th centenary of the Baptism of the Armenian nation. On the occasion of this second celebration, all the Churches will be able to discover the spiritual riches of the Armenian Church and draw inspiration from them.

The Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, which will lead to impressive celebrations, requires the conversion of every Christian's heart, for the good of his community and that of inter-Church relations. We are called to see to it that the Mystery of the Incarnation, the source of salvation, will encourage everyone to act with brotherhood and solidarity. The Churches can only respond together to the mission of the Saviour who comes "to proclaim the Good News to the poor", by word and deed. The Armenian Church has learned the meaning of effective solidarity through suffering. Your Holiness, an immense field is open here for collaboration between our two Churches. In this service, the Owner of the vineyard is constantly hiring: pastors and theologians, men and women of all walks of life; everyone can work there.

At the level of pastoral collaboration, several signs invite us to persevere enthusiastically in our common efforts. During the Special Assembly for Lebanon of the Synod of Bishops, Archbishop Ardavatz Terterian was the Catholicate's fraternal delegate and I had the pleasure to discuss this viewpoint with him. You yourself, Your Holiness, recently took part in a meeting of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East and the Syriac Orthodox and Greek Orthodox Patriarchs of Antioch and, with trust and determination, you were able to take decisions together about pastoral problems. It is fortunate that these joint endeavours are regularly pursued. I also hope that the fraternal relations between the Catholicate of Cilicia and the Armenian Catholic Patriarchate will be strengthened. All these endeavours will lead to unity.

Lastly, there is one area which you and I hold especially dear, beloved Brother: that of culture. For decades, the Catholicate of Cilicia has been the creative centre for spreading Armenian culture through its theological seminary, its various institutes and its many publications, thanks to a large number of clerics and lay specialists. You know that a Catholic committee for cultural co-operation exists for the sake of more fruitful collaboration, and is intended to support the training of specialists. Finally, may I be permitted to add one wish: since the exchange of spiritual gifts strengthens the faith of each side and is essential to communion between the Churches, the translation of the extensive writings of the Armenian tradition into other languages can be useful to many Christians. I know that Mariological texts have already been translated, and I warmly hope that this invaluable work will extend to other fields of spiritual expression proper to the Armenian soul.

In communion with the All-Holy Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary, I pray with you to our great God and Saviour to bless our meeting and make it fruitful for his glory and for the coming of his kingdom.

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