

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE CAUCASUS
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

*Small Throne Room
Thursday, 24 April 2008*

Dear and Venerable Brothers,

"Peace be with you!"

The greeting of the Risen Jesus to his disciples gathered in the Upper Room I address to you whom he has put in charge of the portion of God's People who live in the Caucasus. I am glad to meet you together, after having the opportunity of speaking to each one of you personally on your *ad limina* visit. They were interesting conversations, thanks to which I was able to become better acquainted with the situations of your respective communities and the hopes and worries that you have on your minds, and I thank the Lord for the apostolic work you carry out with great dedication and love for Christ and for the Church. I greet you with affection, and I would like to extend my cordial thoughts through you to the priests, your first collaborators, the consecrated people and all the faithful of your communities, as well as to the members of the other Christian Denominations and of the other Religions present in the Caucasus, a land rich in history and culture, a melting pot of civilization and the crossroads between East and West. Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Secretary of State, who has just returned from his visit to your Churches, spoke enthusiastically to me of your region.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, your peoples underwent important social changes on the road to progress, but difficult situations still endure: there are numerous poor and unemployed people as well as refugees whom war has driven far from their homes, leaving them prey to insecurity. Yet the troubled events of the past century have not extinguished the flame of the Gospel, which in the course of the generations has found fertile ground in the Caucasus, although violent clashes, both internal and external, have not been lacking which have claimed many victims, among whom the Church lists numerous martyrs of the faith.

Your pastoral activity is therefore deployed in a territory where many social and cultural challenges endure and where the Catholic community constitutes a "little flock" which lives its faith in contact with other Christian Confessions and other Religions. Indeed, Catholics of the Armenian, Latin and Chaldean Rites coexist with Orthodox, members of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Jews and Muslims. In such a multi-religious context it is important that Catholics continue and increasingly intensify their collaboration with the other Churches and with the followers of other Religions, as already happens in many places.

Moreover, wherever Communism did not succeed in eroding the Catholic identity, insidious types of pressure must be prevented from weakening the sense of ecclesial belonging in some people. I therefore join in the aspiration of your Catholic communities to obtain recognition of their juridical personality with respect for the Catholic Church's own nature. Subsequent to the

dialogue under way between Catholics and Orthodox, I likewise hope that brotherhood, which must characterize mutually respectful relations between the Churches, will grow despite the differences that still exist. May you be guided by the words with which St Paul exhorted the Christians of Rome to remain faithful even in affliction, "knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom 5: 3-5). Therefore, encourage and sustain your faithful so that in the face of difficulties they do not lack the joy of professing their faith and of belonging to the Catholic Church! It is the joy that wells up in the heart of whoever follows Christ the Lord and is ready to witness to his Gospel.

While I was listening to the experiences of each one of you concerning your respective communities, I remembered Jesus' words: "The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" (Mt 9: 38). Yes, venerable Brothers, pray and have prayers said so that the Lord's vineyard may not be deprived of labourers. Continue to promote vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life. It is necessary to ensure that future generations in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia can count on clergy who are holy, live their vocation joyfully and dedicate themselves generously to the care of all the faithful. In the first place, may you yourselves be wise and reliable guides of the People of God; uphold the family, who are its living cells. Because of the mentality inculcated in society and inherited from the Communist period, families today meet with many difficulties and are scarred by the wounds and attacks on human life that are unfortunately recorded in many other parts of the world. May it be your task, as primarily responsible for the pastoral care of the family, to educate Christian spouses to "bear witness to the inestimable value of the indissolubility and fidelity of marriage [which] is one of the most precious and most urgent tasks of Christian couples in our time" (*Familiaris Consortio*, n. 20).

Dear and venerable Brothers, the Pope supports you and is beside you in your demanding mission as Pastors of Christ's flock living in the Caucasus. I know the zeal that burns in your hearts and I know the effort you make to spread the Gospel of hope. I am particularly struck by the attention which, with different charitable activities, you pay to the needs of the poor and of people in difficulty, thanks to the precious contribution of men and women religious and lay people. And I am pleased to emphasize that these activities are carried out with an evangelical spirit, in the awareness that: "For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being" (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 25). Ensure that every community always works with this spirit. Teach all the faithful to bear witness with their lives to the love of Christ without a second aim, because for Christians "charity... cannot be used as a means of engaging in what is nowadays considered proselytism. Love is free" (*ibid.*, n. 31c). Your task as educators in the faith and as Pastors of Christ's flock also requires relations of constant collaboration among you, impressed with trust and mutual support. Nor should regular meetings and moments be lacking in order to draw up effective pastoral plans, especially as a preparation for the sacraments. These programmes should focus above all on the formation of the faithful's conscience in accordance with the Gospel ethic and with special attention to youth. Dear Brothers, when you return to your communities convey to all you meet my most cordial greeting, accompanied by the assurance of my constant remembrance in prayer that God will make your ministry fruitful.

May the Virgin Mary watch over you and your communities. May it be she who obtains for you the gift of unity and peace so that, journeying on in Christ's Name, you may build together, over and above diversity, a society in which justice and peace prevail. I impart my Blessing to you who are present here, to the faithful whom the Lord has entrusted to your pastoral care and to all the inhabitants of the Caucasus.

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