

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO ARMENIA
(24-26 JUNE 2016)

MEETING WITH CIVIL AUTHORITIES AND THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER

Presidential Palace
Friday, 24 June 2016

Mr President,
Honourable Authorities,
Distinguished Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It gives me great joy to be here, to set foot on the soil of this beloved land of Armenia, to visit a people of ancient and rich traditions, a people that has given courageous testimony to its faith and suffered greatly, yet has shown itself capable of constantly being reborn.

“Our turquoise sky, our clear waters, the flood of light, the summer sun and the proud winter borealis... our age-old stones ... our ancient etched books which have become a prayer” (ELISE CIARENZ, *Ode to Armenia*). These are among the powerful images that one of your illustrious poets offers us to illustrate the rich history and natural beauty of Armenia. They sum up the rich legacy and the glorious yet dramatic experience of a people and their deep-seated love of their country.

I am most grateful to you, Mr President, for your kind words of welcome in the name of the government and people of Armenia, and for your gracious invitation that has made it possible to reciprocate the visit you made to the Vatican last year. There you attended the solemn celebration in Saint Peter’s Basilica, together with Their Holinesses Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch-Catholicos of All Armenians, and Aram I, Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia, and His Beatitude Nerses Bedros XIX, Patriarch of Cilicia of the Armenians, recently deceased. The occasion was the commemoration of the centenary of the *Metz Yeghérn*, the “Great Evil” that struck your people and caused the death of a vast multitude of persons. Sadly, that tragedy, that genocide, was the first of the deplorable series of catastrophes of the past century, made possible by twisted racial, ideological or religious aims that darkened the minds of the tormentors even to the point of planning the annihilation of entire peoples. It is so sad that – in this as in the others two – the great powers looked the other way.

I pay homage to the Armenian people who, illuminated by the light of the Gospel, even at the most tragic moments of their history, have always found in the cross and resurrection of Christ the strength to rise again and take up their journey anew with dignity. This shows the depth of their Christian faith and its boundless treasures of consolation and hope. Having seen the pernicious effects to which hatred, prejudice and the untrammelled desire for dominion led in the last century, I express my lively hope that humanity will learn from those tragic experiences the need to act with responsibility and wisdom to avoid the danger of a return to such horrors. May all join in striving to ensure that whenever conflicts emerge between nations, dialogue, the enduring and authentic quest of peace, cooperation between states and the constant commitment of international organizations will always prevail, with the aim of creating a climate of trust favourable for the achievement of lasting agreements that look to the future.

The Catholic Church wishes to cooperate actively with all those who have at heart the future of civilization and respect for the rights of the human person, so that spiritual values will prevail in our world and those who befoul their meaning and beauty will be exposed as such. In this regard, it is vitally important that all those who declare their faith in God join forces to isolate those who use religion to promote war, oppression and violent persecution, exploiting and manipulating the holy name of God.

Today Christians in particular, perhaps even more than at the time of the first martyrs, in some places experience discrimination and persecution for the mere fact of professing their faith. At the same time, all too many conflicts in various parts of the world remain unresolved, causing grief, destruction and forced migrations of entire peoples. It is essential that those responsible for the future of the nations undertake courageously and without delay initiatives aimed at ending these sufferings, making their primary goal the quest for peace, the defence and acceptance of victims of aggression and persecution, the promotion of justice and sustainable development. The Armenian people have experienced these situations firsthand; they have known suffering and pain; they have known persecution; they preserved not only the memory of past hurts, but also the spirit that has enabled them always to start over again. I encourage you not to fail to make your own precious contribution to the international community.

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of Armenia's independence. It is a joyful occasion, but also an opportunity, in cherishing the goals already achieved, to propose new ones for the future. The celebration of this happy anniversary will be all the more significant if it becomes for all Armenians, both at home and in the diaspora, a special moment for gathering and coordinating energies for the sake of promoting the country's civil and social development of the country, one that is equitable and inclusive. This will involve constant concern for ensuring respect for the moral imperatives of equal justice for all and solidarity with the less fortunate (cf. John Paul II, *Farewell Address from Armenia*, 27 September 2001: *Insegnamenti XXIX/2* [2001], 489). The history of your country runs parallel to its Christian identity preserved over the centuries. That Christian identity, far from impeding a healthy secularity of the state, instead requires and nourishes it, favouring the full participation of all in the life of society, freedom of religion and respect for minorities. A spirit of unity between all Armenians and a growing commitment to find helpful means of overcoming tension with neighbouring countries, will facilitate the realization of these important goals, and inaugurate for Armenia an age of true rebirth.

The Catholic Church is present in this country with limited human resources, yet readily offers her contribution to the development of society, particularly through her work with the poor and vulnerable in the areas of healthcare and education, but also in the specific area of charitable assistance. This is seen in the work carried out in the past twenty-five years by the Redemptoris Mater Hospital in Ashotzk, the educational institute in Yerevan, the initiatives of *Caritas Armenia* and the works managed by the various religious congregations.

May God bless and protect Armenia, a land illumined by the faith, the courage of the martyrs and that hope which proves stronger than any suffering.