

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO H.E. Mr ARMEN SARKISSIAN, FIRST AMBASSADOR
OF THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA TO THE HOLY SEE***

Saturday, 25 March 1995

Mr Ambassador,

It is my pleasure to welcome you today to the Vatican and to accept the Letters of Credence by which His Excellency President Levon Ter-Petrosian appoints you Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Armenia to the Holy See. I am grateful for the greetings you bring from the President, and I would ask you to relay to the leaders and people of Armenia the assurance of my prayers for the harmony and prosperity of your country in this new stage of its national life. This is a significant occasion, as you are the first Ambassador of the newly independent Republic of Armenia to be officially accredited to the Holy See; in a special way, therefore, I wish to offer you my cordial good wishes for the success of your mission.

The Catholic Church looks with great respect at the long Christian tradition of the Armenian people and nation, which in the year 2001, as Your Excellency has pointed out, will celebrate the 1700th anniversary of their acceptance of Christianity. As the Armenian Church prepares to elect the new Catholicos of All Armenia, my thoughts turn to the meeting of my predecessor Pope Paul VI with Armenian Catholicos Vasken I. In that historic moment of common prayer and fraternal dialogue, Paul VI marvelled at how completely the Christian faith, "the light of the Gospel", had permeated Armenian culture, serving as a source of unflinching courage for the Armenian people as they endured numerous trials (cf. Paul VI, *Meeting with the Armenian Catholicos Vasken I in the Sistine Chapel*, 9 May 1970).

The memory of the tragedy visited upon your people at the close of the last century and in the first decades of our present century, as well as the awareness of similar atrocities being committed in various parts of the world today, must serve to strengthen the conviction that violence is never a valid way of solving the disputes which arise between peoples; force can never provide lasting solutions of justice and peace.

It is in this light, and with a heavy heart, that I turn my thoughts to the present confrontation between your country and the Republic of Azerbaijan concerning the region of Nagorny-Karabakh. I express the hope that both parties will spare no effort in arriving at a negotiated settlement and that everything will be done to ensure an immediate response to the urgent humanitarian needs of the affected populations. The conflicts now in course in the Caucasus region, as well as those in the Balkans, pose serious questions regarding what means may be used to ensure harmonious coexistence between different peoples. Clearly the way of negotiation, with the help of international institutions if necessary, is the only way to ensure that the legitimate demands and aspirations of all parties will be given their proper weight and attention.

As the Armenian people and Government press on with the democratic reforms and economic restructuring which their refound independence requires, the Catholic Church too will continue to offer whatever assistance and support is possible in accordance with her specific nature and mission. Just as the Church was able to respond to the disastrous 1988 earthquake in Armenia with humanitarian aid, including the donation of the Hospital "Redemptoris Mater" in Ashotzk, so she wishes to contribute to the life of the nation through her works in the fields of education, healthcare and social service. This is the Church's way of fulfilling her mission of service in the world, working for the transformation of society according to the teachings and example of her Divine Founder.

Accordingly, it is not the Church's desire that she should enjoy special privileges from the Armenian Government, but that she should enjoy the freedom to act according to the Gospel mandate which has been given her. This involves the freedom to organize herself at the local and national levels in order better to meet the spiritual needs of the Catholic faithful and to be able to extend compassion and help where required. The faithful too must be free to form communities of faith and service under the local Church leadership, while a just solution should be sought to the Armenian Catholic community's existence in relation to the law on religious freedom and according to international standards.

Mr Ambassador, your presence here is one of the signals of the new era which is dawning for the Republic of Armenia. I am confident that, through your work in the diplomatic mission you are undertaking today, this new era will also include the deepening of the bonds of friendship and co-operation between your nation and the Holy See. I assure you that the various offices of the Roman Curia will be ready to assist you in the fulfilment of your duties in any way they can. Renewing my good wishes for the success of your mission, I invoke the blessings of Almighty God upon you and upon the Government and people of Armenia.

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