

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE ARMENIAN SYNOD OF BISHOPS**

Monday, 23 June 1997

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. My heart is filled with holy joy as I welcome His Beatitude Jean Pierre XVIII Kasparian, Patriarch of Cilicia for Armenians, and the Synod of Bishops of the Armenian Catholic Church. The doors of the house of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, the doors of universal brotherhood, are open to welcome you all with a holy kiss, brothers in Christ and faithful witnesses of his Gospel.

I know that in these days you have gathered here in Rome to complete the study of the *ius particulare* envisaged by the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*. This is a most important and significant task. Indeed, if the purpose of the Code is to gather directives common to all the Eastern Churches already in full communion with this Apostolic See, nevertheless the Catholic Church knows that each of the Eastern Churches has her own history and specific traditions not only regarding the liturgy but also discipline. The Second Vatican Council recalls that "from the earliest times, the Churches of the East followed their own disciplines, sanctioned by the holy Fathers, by Synods, and even by Ecumenical Councils. Far from being an obstacle to the Church's unity, such diversity of customs and observances only adds to her beauty and contributes greatly to carrying out her mission, as has already been stated. To remove all shadow of doubt, then, this holy Synod solemnly declares that the Churches of the East, while keeping in mind the necessary unity of the whole Church, have the power to govern themselves according to their own disciplines, since these are better suited to the character of their faithful and better adapted to foster the good of souls" (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 16). The Council says further, "for the Catholic Church wishes the traditions of each particular Church or rite to remain whole and entire, and she likewise wishes to adapt her own way of life to the needs of different times and places" (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, n. 2).

2. Thus what you are finishing during these days is in a certain way the completion of the work represented by the Eastern Code: you are codifying the specific norms that concern your Tradition and are bringing to completion, while respecting the proper autonomy and freedom of your specific patrimony, the body of the legislation concerning your Church.

There is a symbolic value here which I want to recall: if the Holy See takes measures to guarantee the elements of common catholic membership, it also defends and safeguards the rights of the Eastern Churches *sui iuris* to express in established forms what is legitimately theirs, according to the following principle: "The evangelization of the nations should be so done that, preserving the integrity of faith and morals, the Gospel can be expressed in the culture of individual peoples; namely, in catechetics, their own liturgical rites, in sacred art, in particular law, and, in short, the whole ecclesial life" (*Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*,

can. 584, §2). The universal and the particular are therefore combined and mutually involved in the construction of the *una sancta*.

Being Catholic is in no way detrimental to your being Armenian; on the contrary, it supports and protects it, bringing it into intimate communion with many other expressions of the common faith and enabling other Churches to enjoy the contribution of your originality.

3. Venerable Brothers, may the codification of the *ius particulare* inspire you to model your pastoral action on it, so that you can "return to [your] ancestral traditions", as the Council hopes, even if you have fallen away "due to circumstances of times or persons" (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, n. 6). In fact, from respect for one's own identity comes the effort to live it integrally, both by striving to recover it fully and to make it as communicable as possible to the faithful of today. This involves a constant, concrete effort to rediscover your patristic and liturgical sources, so that catechesis, the spiritual life and even your sacred art may be inspired by them.

I keenly hope that your Church's life will always bear the imprint of the Armenian people's spirit, a spirit which is explicitly evidenced by so many religious monuments, as well as by literary works of priceless value. Some of these monuments have already been restored to their pristine splendour and to liturgical use, others, unfortunately, are still left to the ravages of time. By involvement in this enterprise, you will effectively contribute to rediscovering the common religious roots of the whole Armenian people, and you will be able to give a notable impetus to the progress of the ecumenical cause.

4. Dear and venerable Brothers, I know that you are preparing to recall with a solemn celebration the 17th centenary of the Armenian people's conversion to Christianity. This event offers the universal Church an opportunity for reflection and thanksgiving to the Lord, since you are the first people who, as such, embraced the faith and became Christian. For this act, as well as for your history of fidelity to Christ, for which you paid so dearly with your blood, I feel I must express heartfelt gratitude to you on behalf of the whole Christian People.

The events of that time show that no mass conversion is possible without personal, inner conversion: the history of King Tiridates and the deep travail of his soul, which led him from persecutor to defender of Christ and his People, is an eloquent sign of this profound truth.

Then the close link between the baptism of Armenia and the Church of Cappadocia, brought about by the figure of Gregory the Illuminator, reveals that fruitful ecumenical openness which has marked the whole history of the Armenian people and has led them to accept gratefully not only Cappadocian, but also Syrian, Byzantine and even Latin contributions. Armenians have known how to accept these contributions with great openness of spirit, combining them with the original elements of their own sensitivity: the result is an ecclesial and cultural model that is open and fruitful, and is a modern reference point for many other peoples.

5. With all my heart I hope and pray to God that Armenians may always be worthy witnesses to their glorious past. I trust that the celebration of the 17th centenary of your people's baptism may be a precious opportunity for you to strengthen the common bond of attachment, not only to your ethnic roots, but also to the common Christian faith, which is so closely identified with this attachment. In fact, to celebrate so important an event of the past becomes an even more

eloquent message of hope for people today, the more clearly it shows the unity of the contemporary effort of evangelization. A common origin cannot fail to lead to a common commitment to a common witness. Moreover, the more unity is reinforced by historical and religious memory, the stronger and more convincing will be the proclamation of the Christ who died and rose, which you are already called to renew in our time, in view of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000.

With these sentiments I assure you of my prayers for you present here, for your beloved Church, for the children of the Armenian people and especially for all who are suffering either spiritual or material hardships and trials. I invoke an abundance of heavenly favours upon each one of you through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin and your patron saints, as a pledge of which I cordially impart a special Apostolic Blessing to all.

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