

APOSTOLIC VOYAGE IN ARMENIA
WELCOME CEREMONY

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II

*Zvartnotz International Airport
Yerevan, 25 September 2001*

*Mr President,
Your Holiness,
Dear Armenian Friends,*

1. I give thanks to Almighty God that today, for the first time, the Bishop of Rome stands on Armenian soil in this ancient and beloved land, of which your great poet Daniel Varujan once wrote: "From the villages to the far horizons / the land spreads forth as mother" (*The Call of the Lands*). For a long time I have awaited this moment of grace and joy – and most especially since the visits to the Vatican by yourself, Mr President, and by Your Holiness, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians.

I am deeply grateful to you, Mr President, for your gracious words of welcome on behalf of the Government and people of Armenia. I take this opportunity to thank the Civil and Military Authorities, as well as the Diplomatic Corps accredited to Armenia, for welcoming me here today. In greeting you, my esteem and friendship extend not only to the Armenians living here in your homeland, but also to the millions scattered throughout the world who remain faithful to their heritage and identity, and today look to their land of origin with renewed pride and gladness. Their hearts too beat with the sentiments described by Varujan in one of his poems: "My soul delights to plunge into the shining wave of blue, / to sink, if need be, into the celestial fires; / to know new stars, the ancient long lost homeland, / from where my soul has fallen and still weeps remembering heaven" (*Nights on the Threshing Floor*).

2. Your Holiness, Catholicos Karekin, with fraternal love in the Lord I embrace you and the Church over which you preside. Without your encouragement I would not now be here, a pilgrim on a spiritual journey to honour *the extraordinary witness of Christian life borne by the Armenian Apostolic Church through so many centuries*, and not least in the Twentieth Century, which for you was a time of unspeakable terror and suffering. The whole Catholic Church shares your deep joy and the joy of all Armenians on the *Seventeen Hundredth Anniversary of the proclamation of Christianity as the official religion of this cherished land*.

I embrace my Brother Bishops and all the faithful of the Catholic Church in Armenia and the surrounding regions, eager to confirm you in the love of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the service of your neighbour and of your country.

3. I am deeply moved as I think of the glorious history of Christianity in this land, going back according to tradition to the preaching of the Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew. Later, through the witness and work of Saint Gregory the Illuminator, *Christianity for the first time became the faith of an entire nation*. For ever, the annals of the universal Church will say that

the people of Armenia were the first as a whole people to embrace the grace and truth of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Since those epic times, your Church has never ceased to sing the praises of God the Father, to celebrate the mystery of the Death and Resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ and to invoke the help of the Holy Spirit, the Consoler. You zealously guard the memory of your many martyrs: indeed, martyrdom has been the special mark of the Armenian Church and the Armenian people.

4. Armenia's past is inseparable from her Christian faith. Fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus Christ will contribute no less to the future which the nation is building beyond the devastations of the past century. Mr President, dear Friends, *you have just celebrated the tenth anniversary of independence*. That was a significant step on the path towards a just and harmonious society in which all will feel fully at home and see their legitimate rights respected. Everyone, especially those responsible for public life, are called today to be genuinely committed to the common good, in justice and solidarity, putting the progress of the people ahead of any partial interests. This is also true in the urgent search for peace at the regional level. Peace will only be built on the solid foundations of mutual respect, justice in inter-community relations, and magnanimity on the part of the strong.

Armenia has become a member of the Council of Europe, and this indicates your determination to work with decision and courage to implement *the democratic reforms of the country's institutions* needed to guarantee respect for the human and civil rights of its citizens. These are difficult but also challenging and uplifting times for the nation. May they be met by a firm resolve on the part of everyone to love their country, and sacrifice themselves for the spiritual and material well-being of its people!

God bless the Armenian people with freedom, prosperity and peace!