



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
TO HIS HOLINESS KAREKIN I
CATHOLICOS - SUPREME PATRIARCH OF ALL ARMENIANS**

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Catholicos - Supreme Patriarch of All Armenians*

1. Since my official visit to Armenia and to the Armenian Apostolic Church has had to be postponed and circumstances prevented me from meeting Your Holiness at the close of my pastoral visit to Poland, I am writing to assure you of my spiritual closeness at this difficult time of ill health, as you offer a moving witness to the suffering Christ.

I am entrusting this message to Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, who will personally convey to Your Holiness my sentiments of profound esteem and fraternal affection. I recall with gratitude the two visits which, as Catholicos and Supreme Patriarch of All Armenians, you made to me in Rome, and I cordially greet all the Members of the Holy Synod and the entire Armenian Apostolic Church, to which I extend my very best wishes.

2. I have greatly desired to visit Armenia, where in the shadow of Mount Ararat the Christian faith has taken deep root and flourished. Brought by the Apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus, and nourished also by the contribution of the Churches of Cappadocia, Edessa and Antioch, the Christian faith has shaped Armenian culture, just as Armenian culture has contributed to enriching the understanding of the Christian faith in new and unique ways. In these days, the Armenian Liturgy is celebrating the memory of the holy translators, Sahak and Mashtots. The creation of a national alphabet by the monk Mashtots was a significant step towards the formation of a new Christian culture in Armenia.

A few months ago I had the honour of joining Your Holiness in the Vatican to inaugurate an exhibition devoted to Armenian history and culture. What a magnificent heritage it is, so imbued

with Christian spirituality! Those peoples who follow the teaching of Christ have no need to give up their own identity. On the contrary, Baptism provides them with a new source of sustenance for their genius as a nation. I look forward eagerly, Your Holiness, to being able when circumstances permit to experience at first hand the remarkable creativity which has characterized and shaped the Armenian people down the centuries.

Living in the shadow of Mount Ararat, Armenians have always been a «frontier» people. Throughout their history, this geographical situation has left a profound mark on them. In fact, drawing on the missionary, spiritual, liturgical and cultural heritage of the entire Christian «*oikoumene*», the Armenian Apostolic Church developed its own identity in a spirit of great openness to the different ecclesial traditions around it. Over the centuries, it engaged in direct and fruitful exchanges with the Syriac, Byzantine and Latin traditions.

The same spirit of openness enabled it to help and support the neighbouring Churches when they had to face moments of trial and adversity. The Armenian Apostolic Church's present contribution to the ecumenical movement is part of a long tradition of openness and fraternal exchange.

3. Within Christianity, East and West have never been completely isolated from each other; there have always been moments of interaction and areas of mutual enrichment between them. Your Holiness, I join you in praying that the theological and spiritual heritage of our respective traditions will continue to enrich us mutually. May we be enabled to live in fidelity to Saint Paul's teaching: «There is a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are all kinds of works, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one» (1 *Cor* 12:4-6).

While many ecumenical efforts down the centuries failed to produce results, the spirit and principles which inspired them have lost none of their value. How can we fail to recall here the efforts made by Catholicos Nerses Schnorhali to promote communion between the Armenian and Byzantine Churches? His letters to the Byzantine Emperor remain an ecumenical witness of the first rank, still able to inspire us as we move towards the establishment of full communion between the Catholic Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church. The one condition necessary for union, as Catholicos Nerses Schnorhali declared in one of his letters, is *the truth of faith in charity*. May we come to rediscover our full communion precisely in *the truth of faith in charity*!

Your Holiness, this is my desire and the desire of the entire Catholic Church. The visit of Cardinal Cassidy in my name, to bring you this message, is meant to be a confirmation of this hope.

4. Since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church have fostered new and deeper bonds of communion. When Pope Paul VI and Catholicos Vazken I exchanged the kiss of peace, they sealed a new relationship between our Churches. That was on 9 May 1971. And since that memorable day, how many happy meetings and exchanges have

brought us closer together! I wish to thank you in particular, Your Holiness, for all that you have done and are doing to ensure that the desire of Christians for full unity is realized. From the time that you took part as an Observer in the Second Vatican Council, you have constantly worked for a fuller communion between our Churches. When you visited Rome in December 1996, we were able to sign a Joint Declaration in which we noted with joy that «the recent developments of ecumenical relations and the theological discussions carried out in a spirit of Christian love and fellowship have dispelled many misunderstandings inherited from the controversies and dissensions of the past». May these happy developments inspire us to continue to seek the best ways to restore full communion between our Churches, so that we may be able to witness together to the love of God.

5. A crucial question on the path towards full communion concerns the ministry of the Bishop of Rome. Since my election to the See of Peter, I have sought to exercise this ministry as an effective service to the communion of all the Churches. Inspired by the mission of Peter, I have striven to be the servant of unity, and I shall continue to do so. But the exercise of this service of unity concerns us all. That is why, in my Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint*, I asked the Holy Spirit «to shine his light upon us, enlightening all the Pastors and theologians of our Churches, that we may seek — together, of course — the forms in which this ministry may accomplish a service of love recognized by all concerned» (No. 95).

May the Holy Spirit help us now to concentrate our efforts so that, with the greatest tact, patience and love, we may restore the fabric of the undivided Church. Where we cannot at the present time find a way forward, the future will surely show us new paths. In view of this, it is desirable that there be a commitment to establish new forms of pastoral cooperation between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Catholic Church. This cooperation could help us to find fresh ways of growing closer, and gradually lead to overcoming any remaining sources of tension.

6. Your Holiness, following the great social and political changes which Armenia has experienced in the last ten years, you too have before you a vast field for the renewal of the Church.

The Armenian Apostolic Church is not alone in facing this great challenge.

The building in the centre of Yerevan of a new Cathedral dedicated to Saint Gregory the Illuminator is a powerful symbol of the new energy which your Church is experiencing. May the Lord bless the many initiatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church and enable you to benefit from that solidarity of all the Churches urged by Saint Paul: «Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ» (*Gal 6:2*).

7. On a number of occasions Your Holiness has spoken of fortitude and a spirit of endurance as special characteristics of the Armenian people and the Armenian Apostolic Church. It is most significant that everywhere in Armenia one finds «khatchkar», those massive stones representing

the glorious Cross of the Saviour. Throughout your history they have been carved and placed wherever Armenians wished to acclaim or invoke their Redeemer. These «khatchkar» have become a special symbol of the trials and humiliations which the Armenian people have had to suffer. And how much they had to suffer, especially at the beginning of this century!

The Cross of Christ has been your daily experience. But like the Virgin Mary at the foot of the Cross, the Armenian people have remained faithful in the face of every adversity. The Cross of Christ has been your glory and your strength. I pray that throughout Armenia the dawn of a new day will give fresh meaning to the glorious symbols of the «khatchkar», making the peaceful and solemn power of the Redeemer shine forth ever more brightly. May the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ and Mother of the Church, sustain all the faithful in their trust in God and in their commitment to Christian witness.

Your Holiness, I remain close to you in prayer and with you I give glory and praise to him who never ceases to gather his own into unity: our one Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

From Rome, 29 June 1999, Solemnity of the Apostles Peter and Paul