



The Holy See

DIVINE LITURGY IN THE ARMENIAN RITE
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 1700th ANNIVERSARY
OF THE "BAPTISM OF ARMENIA"

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 18 February 2001

1. *"It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (Jn 6: 63).*

We have just heard these words spoken by Jesus at the synagogue of Capernaum after the multiplication of the loaves, which took place near the Sea of Tiberias. They are part of the great discourse "on the bread of life" and prompt us to meditate on the immense gift of the Eucharist: "If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever" (cf. *Jn* 6: 51). Jesus is the Eternal Word of salvation, the bread come down from heaven which becomes the supreme gift for the salvation of all humanity, a gift sealed by the sacrifice of the Cross.

By taking part in the banquet of the Word and the Bread of eternal life, we enter into intimacy with the great mystery of Faith. We mystically ascend Golgotha, where the truth that frees and the love that transforms the world triumphed. The crucified and risen Christ welcomes us today to his table and once again gives us his Spirit.

2. *"It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail"*. Let us listen again to these words as we commemorate the 1,700 years of the Baptism of the Armenian people. Seventeen centuries ago the word of Christ rang out in Armenia, when the preaching of St Gregory the Illuminator and the will of King Tiridates III, converted to the faith, made that land a place blessed and consecrated by the Spirit. In those days God made his dwelling among Armenians and they became worthy, as the liturgical hymn says, "to enter the tabernacles of heaven and inherit the kingdom".

They were inwardly transformed by the Spirit. And the people were transformed: through the seal of the Spirit an entire nation could begin to call upon, bless and praise the Saviour's name.

It was an alliance which was never reconsidered, even when fidelity cost blood, and exile was the price for refusal to deny it. St Vardan is an example of this, a hero not only of fidelity to Christ when faced with the violence of the

Sassanids, but also of the right of every conscience to follow its inner dictates.

3. Dear brothers and sisters of the Armenian people, we are here today to thank you. Thank you not only for those glorious beginnings, but also for a whole history that is steeped in Christianity and almost identified with it. The Bishop of Rome acts as spokesman for this gratitude and expresses it to you as a most beautiful and heartfelt gift. For this event, in addition to celebrating the Eucharist with you and for you, I was very pleased to address an Apostolic Letter to Armenians, in order to stress the value of this anniversary not only for you but for the whole Church.

Thank you, Your Beatitude, for this Eucharistic celebration, which sees us sharing together in the Body and Blood of the Lord and for your cordial words of greeting. Thank you for bringing with you Armenian priests, religious and lay people from around the world. I offer my greeting and blessing to them and to those who were unable to come but are spiritually united with us. Let us also send our kiss of peace and fraternal best wishes to our brethren of the Armenian Apostolic Church, which is celebrating this year of holy memories with great solemnity.

4. Today's celebration invites us to reflect on our roots. History is not the sum total of moments, but a flow of interconnected events. We all carry within us even distant echoes of the faith, culture and sensibilities of generations and generations. We are all called to pass something on to the generations to come.

In looking at Armenians, as at other Christian peoples, we cannot fail to note that the Christian faith has marked the deepest fibres of their self-awareness. The Armenian alphabet was also created to express and to spread the Gospel and to translate the Bible, the liturgy and the writings of the Fathers in faith. Art, social and family life, even public institutions found a sure reference-point in Christian belief.

With the ever stronger influence of secularization in the modern world, it is sometimes difficult to continue to hold fast to this spiritual patrimony which has made you a "Christian" nation.

Faith is sometimes regarded as only a gift and personal search, and not as the common belonging to a people. How can we prevent the social achievements of the modern era from losing the riches of the continuity of a people and their faith? This is the task which today's celebration spurs us to reflect on more deeply.

5. The proclamation of the Gospel was called "illumination", and Gregory, the great saint who made Armenians a Christian people, was called the "Illuminator". With one voice let us thank God for this illumination through Christ, the Light of the world. A light that the darkness could not overcome, even in the dark years of militant atheism.

In this same basilica, the heart of Christianity, I recently had the joy of entrusting to the fraternal hands of His Holiness Karekin II, Catholicos of All Armenians, a renowned relic of the holy Illuminator. Today I will do the same with Patriarch Nerses Bedros XIX. Present among Catholics and Apostolics, the relics of the same saint are the symbol of a close unity in faith and a strong encouragement to unity in Christ. I am sure that, venerated by the Armenian people without distinction, they will increase the communion that Christ desires for his Church. Thus brotherhood will be strengthened in charity. We are not dividing the relics, but, are working and praying that those who receive them will be united. The same roots and a continuous history of saints and martyrs can prepare a future for your people of full participation and a visible

sharing of faith in the same Lord.

This is a task to which, dear brothers and sisters, you will not tire of responding faithfully and courageously. May you be supported by the heavenly intercession of your many compatriots who, in the dark periods of persecution, paid with blood for their fidelity to the Lord. I am thinking in particular of the many mothers and grandmothers who, when the Church was forced to be silent, "illuminated" their loved ones with the saving Word and by their own example of Christian life.

6. Dear brothers and sisters, I have had the opportunity to know the Armenian people since the years of my youth, and I cherish a great desire to go as a pilgrim of hope and unity to your homeland. I would like to have made this visit earlier, if only to offer my beloved brother Catholicos Karekin I a last farewell, but the Lord decreed otherwise. I am now anxiously awaiting the day when I will at last be granted, please God, to kiss your beloved land steeped in the blood of so many martyrs; to visit the monasteries where men and women sacrificed themselves spiritually to follow the paschal Lamb; to meet today's Armenians, who are striving to regain their dignity, stability and security of life. With their brethren of the Armenian Apostolic Church and, in particular, with the Catholicos and the Bishops, let us all, Catholics and Apostolics, proclaim once again that Christ is the only Saviour. In him alone is there Life; only his Gospel can restore the past greatness of your people. In your veins flows the blood of saints; the waters of redemption were poured upon your history. Nothing can resist the renewing power of grace.

7. Armenian people, keep your gaze firmly set on Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life! He is the hope that never disappoints, the Light that dispels the darkness of evil. Christ guides your steps: be not afraid!

The Holy Mother of God is protecting you; the Armenian saints are interceding for you, especially St Gregory the Illuminator, whom we will shortly invoke as "the pillar of light for the holy Armenian Church", and "the saving ark of the Armenian people".

The Bishop of Rome and the whole Catholic Church are also close to you. Armenian people, whom today I embrace with affection, go forth in the faith of your fathers and pass its torch on to the generations to come.

And you, Christ our God, grant us all to be worthy one day of entering the heavenly abode of light and to inherit your kingdom prepared for your saints from the beginning of the world.

Glory to you, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and always and for ever and ever. Amen!