



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
TO HIS BEATITUDE NERSES BEDROS XIX
PATRIARCH OF CILICIA OF THE ARMENIAN CATHOLIC CHURCH**

Monday 13 December 1999

*Your Beatitude,
Dear Bishops of the Armenian Catholic Church,
Brothers and Sisters!*

1. With heartfelt affection I welcome you to this nurturing city, sanctified by the blood of the Apostles Peter and Paul, the See of that Bishop who is himself built upon the rock which is the Church's foundation and whose mandate is to confirm his brethren in the faith.

A special welcome in the holy kiss of brotherhood to you, venerable Brother Nerses Bedros XIX. A few days after your election as Patriarch of Cilicia for Armenian Catholics, after receiving ecclesiastical communion from me, you have come here as a joyful sign and expression of your communion and that of your Church with the Successor of Peter. This event celebrates the goodness of the Lord who has so loved us that he has granted us to share fully in the same faith.

We have shown this gratitude in the highest and most solemn way given to Christians: by concelebrating the same Eucharist and exchanging the holy gifts of the Body and Blood of the Lord, our common hope.

I am particularly grateful for your affectionate words to me. As you did in your first Pastoral Letter, in your address today you also cited the holy Armenian doctor Nerses the Gracious, whose name you have taken as you accept your new responsibility as father and head of the Armenian Catholic Church, together with the name of Peter which, in accordance with a beautiful and significant tradition of love for this Apostolic See, is taken by all Armenian Catholic Patriarchs.

In addition to the depth of his teaching and the edifying witness of his life, St Nerses is particularly dear to me for the great ecumenical openness which prompted him to love and appreciate contact with the other Christian Churches and to long ardently for the re-establishment of full communion between them.

Your Beatitude, I hope that you will follow in the footsteps of the man who has become your patron saint and that you will untiringly promote communion, first of all in your Church, then in the wonderful symphony of catholicity and, lastly, in the ardently desired path to full communion with the beloved brethren of the Armenian Apostolic Church, which you mentioned in your greeting and to which I also send the kiss of peace and my best wishes as the feast of Christmas approaches.

2. You are taking up your sensitive responsibility at a time of special grace, but also of considerable difficulty. Great joy is granted to us on the eve of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, a time of grace which reveals to faith the true meaning of history and of humanity's journey towards the Lord who comes. This rejoicing is increased by the fact that in 2001 the people of Armenia will celebrate the 1,700th anniversary of their conversion to Christianity. The history of Armenians would be truly incomprehensible if one failed to consider this event, so deeply etched in their life and its events, particularly through the heroic witness of martyrdom. As you wrote: "To understand our history well, let us read it with Christian eyes.... Every person seeks happiness, but there is no true happiness without the Light, without Christ" (Pastoral Letter, n. 6).

Joy, yes, but joy still marked by the difficulties in which the Armenian people find themselves, especially in their mother country which has recently been tormented by tragic events. Your people can be assured of the Pope's affection, closeness and prayer.

3. Your ministry asks of you vibrant spiritual strength. The absorbing task of reorganizing the Armenian Catholic Church awaits you; its starting-point consists in confirming and reinforcing her faith. There is no true renewal or authentic progress except in faith, a faith which must first be known, deepened and celebrated. The preaching of St Gregory the Illuminator is inscribed in your hearts: it should be brought to life, made conscious and witnessed to. In this way your people's holiness will not only be something to boast of, as if it belonged to the past, but a source of commitment in the present to giving a consistent witness of life. Our world, its illusions and its false gods call for a new "martyrdom": that of consistency, and there is no consistency without an ever deeper assimilation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This will be achieved through a return of hearts and minds to Scripture, to your liturgy, to your Fathers who have so enriched the Christian patrimony.

This is primarily your duty, Most Blessed Brother. You are already known and esteemed for conscientious commitment to your work and strongly supported by your abandonment to God's will; it is also a duty of the Synod over which you preside. An important way to celebrate the events of salvation in the time that awaits us is to make the Synod of Bishops the true driving force

of communion in ecclesial faith and life. For this to happen, a great sense of responsibility is asked of everyone and an awareness that the good of the Church extends far beyond personal horizons and even those of each pastoral context, however important: it is the good of the people, the good of the Church, and must be able to operate within the broad horizons that it requires.

People need the tender concern of their Pastors. Each Bishop must feel strongly committed to the expectations of the sheep of his flock. The holy doctor Nerses has Christ the Lord say of the episcopal ministry: "As I did not devote myself to pleasures but took up the priesthood for the human race, enduring the cross and death, so you too must fight to the death for the sheep of your fold, which I purchased with my blood" (Encyclical Letter, Chapter IV).

4. Priests will be the principal object of your care: they ask for help in truly and concretely finding the root and meaning of their ministry in Christ, and not in social status or personal prestige. In today's world boasting of one's own position in the Church, in addition to openly contradicting the Lord's command, is considered by the faithful themselves as a useless form of separation and pastoral insensitivity. What do we, men of the Church, have to boast about, knowing our sin and our weakness? We will boast of one thing only: the Cross of Christ, which has conquered death.

To priests, whom he calls the "midwives of God's children" (ibid., Chapter V), the holy Patriarch Nerses gives two valuable instructions: first of all, to grow in the knowledge of God and his word. He very practically asks them not to run "absent-mindedly through the mystical words of the prayer you are offering, as water runs through a pipe ... but always with the greatest attention, and if possible, with tears and great fear, as if you were drawing them at that very moment from your heart and mind" (ibid.).

Renewing one's own response to Christ also means working, in prayer and study, to gain a deeper understanding of one's vocation. To do this, it will be important to learn diligently and to have constant recourse to those treasures of spirituality of the Armenian tradition, because one understands God better when one approaches his words with the language and sensitivity of one's own Fathers.

This is particularly true of the liturgy whose purity and dignity will be your special concern, in the certainty that it will speak in a wonderful way to your children's hearts. The first liturgical reform, in fact, is the assimilation and knowledge of the traditional common prayer.

5. The second commitment indicated by Nerses is that of harmony in charity: "I beg you all", he writes, "not to rush into useless discussions and conversations: instead, be ready and prompt for reconciliation and peace" (ibid.). The People of God need to see priests who love one another and compete in their esteem for each other. This is the first condition if they are to be able to love those entrusted to them. With this powerful witness young people can look at them as possible models to imitate. With God's help, the scarcity of vocations will be remedied when the Church

really seems transparent in her witness, credible in her preaching and ardent in fraternal love. There is no lack of young people who want to follow Christ. We must not disappoint them.

I also entrust to your care the monks and men and women religious, whom the Holy Catholicos describes as "pillars of the world, angels clothed in flesh and stars that shine upon the earth" (ibid., Chapter III). Armenians, as do all the Eastern Churches, find in monasticism strength for their faith, a prayerful soul, a reminder of the end times and a model of fraternal life. Armenian Catholic men and women religious have worked together in times of difficulty for the entire Armenian people, serving them regardless of Church membership, to create sound and harmonious personalities, distinguished by their upright morals, depth of culture and patriotism. May this treasure not be jeopardized. May the heritage of entire generations not be lost. Not only the Pope asks this of you, but all the Armenian people, for whom the service of culture is also a guarantee of survival.

6. Your Beatitude, your sons and daughters have confidence in you and are expecting your fatherly word and effective guidance. May the Spirit guide your steps, support your intentions and inspire your decisions.

When you return to your residence in Lebanon, and when you travel around the world to strengthen in faith the Armenians who are entrusted to you and are found everywhere with their intelligent hard work, bring them the Pope's affection and prayers along with your greeting and blessing.

One last time, in the words of your heavenly protector, St Nerses, I "ask you, the Bishops, the priests and the religious who belong to you to pray for my many needs to the One who in every place is close to all who call upon him in truth ..., so that all of us, shepherds and flock, will reach the heavenly goods in order to possess paradise in Christ. To him be glory and power, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. Amen". (Discourse for his consecration as Catholicos).