



# The Holy See

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## ***APOSTOLIC LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II FOR THE 1,700th ANNIVERSARY OF THE BAPTISM OF THE ARMENIAN PEOPLE***

1. "O God, marvellous and ever provident, in accordance with your foreknowledge, you began the salvation of the Armenians".

The ancient liturgical hymn which praises God's initiative in the evangelization of your noble people, dear brothers and sisters, flows from my grateful heart on this happy occasion when you are celebrating the 1,700th anniversary of your ancestors' encounter with Christianity. The whole Catholic Church rejoices in recalling this providential Baptism, by which your noble and beloved nation definitively joined the ranks of the peoples who accepted new life in Christ.

"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (*Gal 3: 27*). The Apostle Paul's words reveal the singular newness that the Christian receives in Baptism. For in this sacrament the human person is incorporated into Christ, so that he can now say confidently: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (*Gal 2: 20*). This personal and unrepeatable encounter regenerates, sanctifies and transforms the human being, making him a perfect worshiper of God and a living temple of the Holy Spirit. By grafting the disciple on to the true vine that is Christ, Baptism makes him a branch that can bear fruit. Made a son in the Son, he becomes an heir to the eternal happiness prepared from the beginning of the world.

Every Baptism is thus an event marked by the loving encounter between Christ the Lord and the human person in the mystery of freedom and truth. It is an event with its own ecclesial dimension, like every other sacrament: incorporation into Christ also entails incorporation into the Church, the Bride of the Word, our immaculate and loving Mother. The Apostle Paul says in this regard: "By one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body" (*1 Cor 12: 13*).

This incorporation into the Church has particular prominence in the history of some peoples for whom conversion was a community act, connected with a specific event or circumstance. Whenever this happens, it is called the "Baptism of a people".

2. Seventeen centuries ago, dear brothers and sisters of the Armenian people, this shared conversion to Christ took place for you. It is an event that has deeply marked your identity, not only personally but as a community, so that we are

entitled to speak of the "Baptism" of your nation, even though Christianity actually reached your land much earlier. Tradition attributes its origins to the preaching and work of the holy Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew.

With the "Baptism" of the Armenian community, first received by the civil and military authorities, the people acquired a new identity that was to become a constitutive and inseparable part of Armenian life. It would no longer be possible to think that faith did not figure as an essential element among the components of this identity. For Armenian culture itself would receive an extraordinarily powerful impetus from the proclamation of the Gospel: its Armenian aspect would give a profoundly characteristic note to this proclamation, which would eventually be a driving force for an unprecedented development of the national culture. The invention of the Armenian alphabet, a decisive factor for the stability and definition of the people's cultural identity, would be closely associated with the Baptism of Armenia, and would be desired and conceived as a true and proper vehicle of evangelization, even more than as a way to communicate concepts and information. The new alphabet, the work of St *Mesrop-Masthoc*", in collaboration with the holy Catholicos *Sahak*, would enable Armenians to receive the best features of Syrian and Greek spirituality, theology and culture, and blend them all in an original way with the specific contribution of their own genius.

3. The conversion of Armenia, which occurred at the dawn of the fourth century and is traditionally dated to the year 301, made your ancestors realize that they were the first officially Christian people, well before Christianity was recognized as the religion of the Roman Empire.

In particular, it was the historian *Agathangelos* who, in a tale full of symbolism, recounted in detail the events that tradition says gave rise to this mass conversion of your people. The story begins with the providential and dramatic meeting of the two heroes on whom the story is based: *Gregory*, the son of the Parthian *Anak*, raised at Caesarea in Cappadocia, and the Armenian king, *Tiridates III*. It started, in fact, with a dispute: Gregory, asked by the king to make a sacrifice to the goddess *Anahit*, adamantly refused, explaining to the sovereign that there is only one Creator of heaven and earth, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. When he was therefore subjected to cruel torments, Gregory, aided by God's power, was unbending. Seeing his steadfast constancy in professing the Christian faith, the king had him thrown into a deep pit, a dark, narrow place infested with snakes, where previously no one had ever survived. But Gregory lived for many years in that pit without succumbing, fed by Providence through the compassionate hand of a widow.

The tale continues, mentioning the attempts made in the meantime by the Roman Emperor Diocletian to seduce the holy virgin *Hrip'sime*, who, to escape this peril, fled from Rome with a group of companions to seek refuge in Armenia. The young girl's beauty attracted the attention of King Tiridates, who fell in love with her and wanted to make her his own. In the face of *Hrip'sime's* obstinate refusal, the king was enraged and had her and her companions cruelly tortured and killed. According to tradition, Tiridates was turned into a wild boar as a punishment for his crime and could not return to human form until, in obedience to a message from heaven, he released Gregory from the pit in which he had lived for 13 long years. Having obtained through the saint's prayers the miracle of being restored to human form, Tiridates realized that Gregory's God was the true one and decided to convert, along with his family and army, and to work for the evangelization of the whole country. This is how the Armenians came to be baptized and how Christianity was imposed as the nation's official religion. In the meantime Gregory had received episcopal ordination in Caesarea and traveled all over the land with Tiridates, destroying places of idolatrous worship and building Christian churches.

After a vision of the Only-begotten Son of God incarnate, a church was built in *Vagarshapat* and from this wondrous event took the name *Etchmiadzin*, that is, the place where "the Only-begotten came down". The pagan priests were instructed in the new religion and became ministers of the new worship, while their children formed the nucleus of the clergy and of the monasticism that followed.

Gregory soon withdrew to the desert to live as a hermit, and his youngest son, *Aristakes*, was ordained a Bishop and appointed head of the Armenian Church. In this capacity he took part in the Council of Nicaea. The Armenian historian known by the name of *Moses of Khoren* describes Gregory as our "first ancestor and father according to the Gospel"(1) and, to demonstrate the continuity between the apostolic evangelization and that of the Illuminator, recounts the tradition that Gregory had the privilege of being conceived next to the sacred memorial of the Apostle Thaddeus.

The ancient calendars of the still undivided Church celebrated him on the same day in both the East and the West as a tireless apostle of truth and holiness. The father in faith of the whole Armenian people, St Gregory still intercedes from heaven today, so that all the children of your great nation may at last gather round the one table prepared by Christ, the divine Shepherd of the one flock.

4. In addition to its legendary aspects, this traditional story contains elements of great spiritual and moral significance. The preaching of the Good News and Armenia's conversion are based above all on the blood of those who bore witness to the faith. The sufferings of Gregory and the martyrdom of *Hrip'sime* and her companions show how the first Baptism of Armenia was truly one of blood.

Martyrdom is a constant feature of your people's history. Their faith remains inseparably linked to the witness of blood shed for Christ and the Gospel. The whole culture and the very spirituality of Armenians are filled in the pride they take in the supreme sign of the gift of life in martyrdom. There we hear echoes of the groans for the suffering endured in communion with the Lamb sacrificed for the world's salvation. A symbol of it is the sacrifice of *Vardan Mamikonian* and his companions who, in the Battle of *Avarayr* (451) against the Sassanid *Yazdegerd II*, who wanted to impose the Mazdean religion on the people, gave their lives to remain faithful to Christ and to defend the national faith. On the eve of battle, as the historian Eliseus relates, the soldiers were urged to defend the faith in these words: "Those who believed that Christianity was like a garment for us will now know that they cannot take it from us any more than they can remove the colour of our skin"(2). This is an eloquent testimony of the courage that motivated these believers: to them, dying for Christ meant sharing in his passion and asserting the rights of conscience. There could be no denying the Christian faith, which the people considered the supreme good.

From then on, similar events frequently recurred down to the massacres of Armenians from the end of the 19th to the beginning of the 20th century, culminating in the tragic events of 1915, when the Armenian people were forced to suffer unprecedented violence whose painful consequences are still visible in the diaspora into which many of their children were forced. This memory must not be lost. Several times in the century just ended, my Predecessors paid homage to the Christians of Armenia who suffered a violent death(3). I too have wanted to recall the sufferings of your people: they are the sufferings of the members of Christ's Mystical Body(4).

These blood-stained events, in addition to deeply marking your people's heart, have changed even their human

geography several times, continually forcing them to emigrate throughout the world. It is worthy of note that wherever Armenians went they took with them the richness of their moral values and cultural structures, inseparably linked to those of the Church. Guided by trusting knowledge of God's support, Armenian Christians were able to keep St Gregory of Narek's prayer firmly on their lips: "If my eyes behold the sight of the twofold danger of the day of misery, may I see your salvation, O provident Hope! If I lift my gaze to the terrifying path that encompasses everything, may your angel of peace come to meet me with sweetness!"(5). For even at the most tragic moments of Armenian history, the Christian faith was the driving force that marked the beginning of your suffering people's rebirth.

Thus the Church, following her children on their pilgrimage in the world as they search for peace and serenity, has been their true moral strength and become in many cases their only possible reference-point, the only authoritative centre supporting their efforts and inspiring their thought.

5. A second element of great value in your troubled history, dear Armenian brothers and sisters, is the relationship between evangelization and culture. The word "Illuminator", the epithet given to St Gregory, highlights his twofold role in the history of your people's conversion. "Illumination" is, in fact, the traditional term used in Christian language to indicate that through Baptism the disciple is called by God from darkness into his own wonderful light (cf. 1 Pt 2: 9) and is bathed in the splendour of Christ, the "light of the world" (Jn 8: 12). In him, Christians find the profound meaning of their vocation and mission in the world.

However, the Armenian word for "illumination" is enriched by a further meaning, for it also indicates the spread of culture through teaching, entrusted in particular to the monk-teachers who continued St Gregory's Gospel preaching. As the historian *Koriun* points out, the evangelization of Armenia brought victory over ignorance(6). The spread of literacy and the knowledge of the norms and precepts of Sacred Scripture at last enabled the people to build a just society in wisdom and prudence. Nor does Agathangelos fail to note how the conversion of Armenia entailed emancipation from pagan cults, which not only hid the truths of the faith from the people, but also kept them in a state of ignorance(7).

For this reason the Armenian Church has always considered the promotion of culture and of the national consciousness as an integral part of her mandate and has always worked to keep this synthesis living and fruitful.

6. The traditional account of the events connected with the conversion of the Armenians offers a point for further reflection. The powerful strength of faith shines out in St Gregory the Illuminator and in the holy Virgins, spurring them not to bow before the temptations of power and the world and enabling them to resist the most atrocious suffering as well as the most enticing allurements. In King Tiridates we can see the consequences of turning away from God: man loses his dignity, becoming a brute and thus a prisoner of his own desires. An important truth emerges from the whole tale: there is no absolute sacredness to power and not all that it does is always justified.

Instead, personal responsibility should always be accepted for one's decisions: if they are erroneous, they remain so, even if made by a king. Humanity is restored to its integrity when faith unmasks sin, when the wicked are converted and discover God and his justice.

The true identity of Christianity is reflected in the Christian edifices built where idols had been venerated: Christianity

accepts what is naturally valid in humanity's religious sense and, at the same time, can offer the newness of a faith that allows no compromises. In this way, by building up the holy People of God, it also contributes to the birth of a new civilization in which the most genuine human values are exalted.

7. While the 17th centenary of the conversion of Armenia is being celebrated, my thoughts turn to the Lord of heaven and earth. I would like to offer him the gratitude of the whole Church for having instilled so strong and courageous a faith in the Armenian people and for having never failed to sustain their witness.

I gladly join in this happy commemoration, in order to contemplate with you, dear brothers and sisters, the countless hosts of saints who came from this blessed land and now shine resplendently in the Father's glory. These figures are a rich treasure for the Church: they are martyrs, confessors of the faith, monks and nuns, sons and daughters reborn by the fruitfulness of God's Word. Among these illustrious figures, I would like to recall here Gregory of *Narek*, who probed the dark depths of human desperation and glimpsed the blazing light of grace that shines even there for believers, and St *Nerses Shnorhali*, the Catholicos who combined an extraordinary love for his people and its tradition with far-sighted openness to other Churches in an exemplary effort to seek communion in full unity.

I would especially like to thank Armenians for their long history of fidelity to Christ, a fidelity that has known persecution and martyrdom. The children of Christian Armenia shed their blood for the Lord, but through their sacrifice the whole Church grew and was strengthened. If today the West can freely profess its faith, this is also due to those who sacrificed themselves, making their bodies a bulwark for the Christian world to its furthest reaches. Their death was the price of our safety: they now shine brightly, clothed in white robes and singing the hymn of praise to the Lamb in heavenly bliss (cf. *Rv 7: 9-12*).

The Armenian people's heritage of faith and culture has enriched humanity with treasures of art and genius that have now spread throughout the world. Seventeen hundred years of evangelization make this land one of the cradles of Christian civilization, which is revered and admired by all the disciples of the divine Teacher.

Ambassadors of peace and industriousness, Armenians have crossed the world and with the hard work of their own hands have made a valuable contribution to transforming it and bringing it closer to the Father's plan of love. The Christian people rejoice in their generous and faithful presence, and hope that they will always find sympathy and understanding in every part of the world.

8. Now I would like to mention in a particular way all who are working so that Armenia can rise again from the long years of suffering under totalitarian rule. The people are looking for concrete signs of hope and solidarity, and I am certain that the grateful memory of their Christian origins is a consolation and encouragement to every Armenian. I trust that the living memory of the marvels God has worked among you, dear Armenian faithful, will help you fully to rediscover the dignity of man, of every person, whatever his condition, and spur you to rebuild your country on moral and spiritual foundations.

I offer my fervent wishes that the faithful will courageously persevere in their dedication and their already notable efforts, so that tomorrow's Armenia will flourish again with the human and Christian values of justice, solidarity, equality, respect, honesty and hospitality, which are the basis of human society. If this happens, the Jubilee of the Armenian people will

have borne abundant fruits.

I am sure that the 1,700th anniversary of the Baptism of your beloved nation will be a significant and exceptional moment for vigorously pursuing the path of ecumenical dialogue. In recent years, the already cordial relationship between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Catholic Church has been given a decisive impetus by the Pope's meetings with that Church's highest authorities.

How can we forget, in this regard, the memorable visits to the Bishop and Christian community of Rome by His Holiness *Vazken I* in 1970, by the unforgettable *Karekin I* in 1996 and 1999, and the recent visit of *Karekin II*? Furthermore, the presentation of the relic of the Father of Christian Armenia for the new cathedral of Yerevan, which I recently had the joy of making to His Holiness *Karekin II* in the presence of the Armenian Catholic Patriarch, is yet another confirmation of the deep bond between the Church of Rome and all the children of St Gregory the Illuminator.

This journey must continue with trust and courage, so that we can all be more faithful to Christ's command: *ut unum sint!* In this perspective, the members of the Armenian Catholic Church must make their crucial contribution by "prayer above all, by their example, by their scrupulous fidelity to the ancient traditions of the East, by better knowledge of each other, by working together and by a brotherly attitude towards persons and things"(8).

In a few days I will preside at a solemn Eucharist of praise with Armenians and for Armenians, to thank God for the gift of faith they have received from him and to pray that the Lord "will reunite all peoples in his holy Church, built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, and will keep her unblemished until the day of his second coming"(9). At that celebration, the brothers and sisters who already live in full communion with the See of Peter and thus enrich the Catholic Church with their own irreplaceable contribution, will be present at the one Table of the Bread of Life. But I fervently hope that this sacred thanksgiving will embrace all Armenians, wherever they may be, to express with one voice, in the holy kiss of peace, everyone's gratitude to God for the gift of faith.

9. My thoughts turn to the "Mother of Light, Mary, the Blessed Virgin who gave birth in the flesh to the Light that shines from the Father and who became the dawn of the Sun of justice"(10). Venerated with deep affection with the title *Astvazazin* (Mother of God), she has been constantly present in that people's troubled history. The liturgical and homiletic texts, in particular, reveal the treasures of the Marian devotion that down the centuries has been a regular feature of Armenians' filial attachment to the Handmaid of the great mystery of salvation. In addition to commemorating her each day in the Divine Liturgy and in all the hours of the Divine Office, the Church's prayer provides for feasts throughout the year that recall her life and its principal mysteries. The faithful turn to her with trust, asking her to intercede with her Son: "Temple of Light without shadows, ineffable Bridal Chamber, who put an end to the sad curse of Mother Eve, implore your Only-Begotten Son, who reconciled us to the Father, to deliver us from all anxiety and grant peace to our souls"(11). Mary, Our Lady Help of Christians, is venerated as the Queen of Armenia.

St Gregory of *Narek*, the great Marian *Vardapet* (Doctor) of the Armenian Church, whom I also recalled in the Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*(12), certainly shines with glory among the Armenian saints who praised the Mother of God. He greets the Blessed Virgin as the "Chosen Seat of the will of the Uncreated Divinity"(13). With his words, may the Church in her celebrations pray to heaven that this Jubilee of the Baptism of Armenia will be a cause of rebirth and joy:

"Accept the hymn of blessing  
 from our lips  
 and deign to grant this Church  
 the gifts and graces of Zion  
 and Bethlehem,  
 so that we may be worthy  
 to partake of salvation on the day  
 of the great manifestation  
 of the imperishable glory  
 of your Only-begotten Son  
 and our immortal Saviour"(14).

I invoke the fullness of divine blessings on the entire Armenian people and on their forthcoming celebrations, making my own the words of the historian Agathangelos: "In addressing these words to the Creator, let them say: "You are the Lord our God", and let him say to them: "You are my people"(15), to the glory of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*From the Vatican, 2 February 2001.*

## IOANNES PAULUS II

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### Notes

(1) *Storia dell'Armenia*, Venice 1841, p. 265.

(2) *Storia di Vartan e della guerra degli Armeni contro i Persiani*, chap. 5, Venice 1840, p. 121.

(3) Cf. Benedict XV, *Address at the Sacred Consistory* (6 December 1915): AAS VII (1915), 510; *Letter to the Leaders of the Belligerent Peoples* (1 August 1917): AAS IX (1917), 419; Pius XI, *Address at the Consistory for the Beatification of the Ven. John Bosco and the Ven. Cosmas of Carboniano* (21 April 1929): *Discorsi*, II, 64; Encyclical Letter *Quinquagesimo ante* (23 December 1929): AAS XXI (1929), 712; Pius XII, *Address to the Armenian Faithful* (13 March 1946): *Discorsi e messaggi*, VIII, 5-6.

(4) *Homily at the Divine Liturgy in the Armenian Rite* (21 November 1987), n. 3: *Insegnamenti XI/3* (1987), 1177; *Address at the Opening of the Rome-Armenia Exhibition* (25 March 1999), n. 2: *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 31 March 1999, p. 6; *Address to Karekin II during His Visit to Rome* (9 November 2000): *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 15 November 2000, p. 5.

(5) *Il libro della lamentazione*, Parola II, b, ed. Studium, 1999, pp. 164-165.

(6) Cf. *Storia della vita di san Mesrob e dell'inizio della letteratura armena*, Venice 1894, pp. 19-24.

(7) Cf. Agathangelos, *Storia*, 2, Venice 1843, pp. 196-198.

(8) Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on the Eastern Churches *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, n. 24.

(9) The ancient "Canticle for all the feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary", in *Laudes et hymni ad SS. Mariae Virginis honorem ex Armeniorum Breviario excerpta*, Venice 1877, XVII, 118.

(10) Catholicos Isaac III, "Hymn for the feast of the Holy Cross", in *Laudes et hymni ad SS. Mariae Virginis honorem ex Armeniorum Breviario excerpta*, Venice 1877, XIII, 88-89.

(11) St Nerses Shnorhali, "Hymn in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary" during Lent, in *Laudes et hymni ad SS. Mariae Virginis honorem ex Armeniorum Breviario excerpta*, Venice 1877, IX, 81.

(12) Cf. n. 31: AAS 79 (1987), 404.

(13) *Discorso panegirico alla B.V. Maria*, Venice 1904, pp. 16; 24.

(14) Ibid.

(15) *Storia*, 2, Venice 1843, p. 200.

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