



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Religion must never be reason for violence

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. I thank the Lord who in the last days gave me the chance to successfully accomplish the apostolic pilgrimage to Kazakhstan and Armenia. It was an experience that left the most wonderful impressions and feelings in my heart.

The visit had a twofold goal. In *Kazakhstan* it was a *Pastoral Visit to the Catholic community*, who live in a prevalently Islamic country which ten years ago got out from under the harsh and oppressive Soviet regime. In *Armenia* I went *as a pilgrim* to pay homage to a *Church of very ancient origins*: the Armenian people, in fact, are celebrating the 1700th anniversary of when they became officially Christian. It is this identity, which, even at the cost of martyrdom, they have maintained till now.

Once again I want to express my gratitude to the Presidents of the Republics of Kazakhstan and of Armenia, who with their invitation opened to me the doors of their noble countries. I am grateful for the courtesy and the warmth with which they received me.

I express my love and gratitude to the Bishops and Apostolic Administrators, to the Priests and Catholic Communities. My sincere thanks go to all those whose organization made a great success of the apostolic pilgrimage, that I so much desired and prepared at length in prayer.

2. In *Kazakhstan* the *theme* of the Pastoral Visit was the commandment of Christ: *"Love one*

another". It was very important to carry this message into that country where over a hundred ethnic groups live together and cooperate with one another to build a better future. The city of Astana, where my visit took place, has become the capital for less than four years and is a symbol of the rebuilding of the country.

I clearly detected in my meetings with the Authorities and with the people the will to overcome a harsh past, with its oppression of human dignity and human rights. Who in fact can forget that hundreds of thousands of persons were deported to Kazakhstan? Who can forget that its steppes were used to test nuclear arms? For that reason, as soon as I arrived, I wished to visit the *Monument to the Victims of the Totalitarian Regime* to focus on the starting point from which to look to the future. Kazakhstan, a multi-ethnic society, has rejected nuclear arms and is intent on building a peaceful and united society. The great monument to the *"Mother Country"*, which was backdrop to the altar where I celebrated Mass on Sunday 23 September, symbolically recalls this resolve.

Thanks be to God, the Church with the help of a renewed diocesan structure is experiencing rebirth. I wanted to be close to that community and its Pastors, committed to a generous and difficult missionary task. With great feeling I paid homage together with them to the memory of those who spent their lives in hardship and persecution in order to bring Christ to the local populations.

In the Cathedral of Astana, with the Ordinaries of the countries of Central Asia, with the priests, men and women religious, seminarians and faithful, who came from the border countries, *I entrusted Kazakhstan to Our Lady, Queen of Peace*, the title by which she is venerated in the national shrine.

3. *"Love one another!"* These words of Christ challenge Christians first of all. I directed them above all to Catholics, exhorting them *to live in communion with one another and with their Orthodox brothers*, who are more numerous. I encouraged them to *cooperate with the Muslims* to foster genuine progress in their society. From that country, in which the followers of different religions live together in peace, I reaffirmed with force that *religion must never be used as a motive of conflict*. Christians and Muslims, together with the believers of every religion, are called to *repudiate violence firmly* in order to build up a humanity that loves life, that develops in justice and solidarity.

To the *young people of Kazakhstan*, I gave a message of hope, reminding them that God loves them personally. With great joy I perceived the strong and vibrant echo of this fundamental truth in their hearts. The meeting with them took place at the University, a place that is always dear to me, where the culture of a people is developed. With the representatives of the *world of culture, art and science*, I recalled the religious foundation of human freedom and the mutual relations between faith and reason, exhorting them to safeguard the spiritual values of Kazakhstan.

4. When I left that great country in Central Asia, I arrived as a pilgrim in *Armenia*, to pay homage to a people who for 1700 years have linked their history with Christianity. For the first time ever the Bishop of Rome set foot on this beloved land, evangelized, according to the tradition, by the Apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus, which, through the work of St Gregory the Illuminator, became officially Christian in 301.

The *Cathedral of Etchmiadzin*, the Apostolic See of the Armenian Church, goes back to 303.

There I went as soon as I arrived and again before I left, as is the custom for pilgrims. There I prayed at the *tombs of the Catholicoi* of All Armenians, among whom were Vazken I and Karekin I, who created the present cordial relationship between the Armenian Church and the Catholic Church. In the name of this brotherly friendship, His Holiness Karekin II, with exquisite courtesy, wished to give me hospitality in his residence and accompanied me at each moment of the pilgrimage.

5. In its long history, the Armenian people have paid a terrible price for their fidelity to their own identity. Just think of the tremendous *mass extermination of the beginning of the 20th century*.

As a perennial memorial to the victims - about a million and a half in three years - the solemn *cenotaph* is located near the capital in Yerevan, where, together with the Catholicos of All Armenians, we prayed intensely for all the dead and for peace in the world.

In the *new Apostolic Cathedral of Yerevan*, dedicated to St Gregory the Illuminator and newly consecrated, the solemn *ecumenical celebration* took place with the veneration of the Relic of the Saint, which I gave to Karekin II, last year, on the occasion of his visit to Rome. This sacred rite, together with the Common Declaration placed a meaningful seal on the bond of charity that unites the Catholic Church and the Armenian Church. In a world torn by conflicts and violence it is more necessary than ever before that Christians be witnesses of unity and builders of reconciliation and peace.

The *Holy Mass on the new "High Altar"* in the open air in the garden of the Apostolic See of Etchmiadzin, though it followed the Latin Rite, was celebrated with "two lungs", with readings, prayers and chants in the Armenian language and with the presence of the Catholicos of All Armenians. No words can express the personal joy of those moments, in which one could feel the spiritual presence of so many martyrs and confessors of the faith who with their lives gave witness to the Gospel. Their memory should be honoured forever: we must obey Christ who asked his disciples to be one, with total docility.

The final stop on my apostolic journey was the *Monastery of Khor Virab*, which means "deep well". There, in fact, according to the tradition, is to be seen the well that is 40 metres (131 feet) deep in

which the King Tiridates III held St Gregory the Illuminator prisoner on account of his faith in Christ, until the saint with his prayers obtained a miraculous healing, and the King was converted along with his whole family and the entire people. There I received as a symbol of the faith with which Gregory enlightened the Armenians, a torch (a light drawn from the well of St Gregory the Illuminator), which I solemnly placed in the new chapel, inaugurated in the Hall of the Synod of Bishops. That light burns for 17 centuries! It burns in the world for 2,000 years! It is asked of us Christians, dear brothers and sisters, not to hide the light but that we feed it so that it direct the path of humanity on the ways of truth, love and peace!

I extend a warm welcome to the deacon class of the Pontifical North American College, together with their parents, families and friends. Likewise, I greet the new seminarians from the Pontifical Beda College. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Ireland, Scotland, Denmark, Australia, Japan and the United States, I cordially invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.