



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE MECHITARIST ORDER
ON THE THIRD CENTENARY OF THEIR FOUNDING**

Saturday, 3 July 2001

Dear Religious of the Armenian Mechitar Congregation,

1. I am especially delighted to welcome you today, on the occasion of your Institute's foundation.

My thoughts go to the exceptional figure of Abbot Mechitar, who stands out in a wholly original and prophetic way in the Christian East and in his relationships with the Church of Rome. We feel him spiritually present at our meeting. He certainly rejoiced from Heaven for the recent reunification of the two branches of our Congregation, fruit of the desire to seek together the roots of the charism of your monastic life to serve the new needs of the Armenian people in a renewed and united spirit.

With the life of Mechitar of Sebaste the history of Armenian monastic spirituality reaches a new highpoint. In a period of great decadence, due to certain social-political circumstances, Mechitar understood that holiness was the highest and most efficacious means to restore dignity, vigour and moral and civil commitment to his people. He was first of all a seeker of God, as every monk is called to be. He wanted to seek God in the precise context of Armenian monastic life, recognizing in it an inexhaustible reservoir of holiness and a singular environment for cultural deepening of the values of the tradition, thanks to the celebrated academies and the institution of the "*vardapet*", the doctor-monk, responsible for spreading Christian doctrine through preaching and discipleship.

2. Still young, Mechitar undertook a pilgrimage that led him to numerous monasteries of Armenia.

He knew what he was looking for, and when his expectations were disappointed, because the

Christian way of life, or the style of community life, or the quality of intellectual effort did not seem to be up to the standard that he considered necessary for his people, he went elsewhere in search of further enrichment.

In his pilgrimage, he also met Latin religious and drew new ideas for reflection from his knowledge of their spirituality. He did this without impairing the total fidelity to the authentic Armenian tradition.

This contact between the East and the West constituted a part of his personal experience, and profoundly marked the cultural events and the very identity of the Armenian people. Very influential to this end were the historical circumstances that led Mechitar and the order he founded to establish themselves in Venice, the natural bridge of a West reaching towards the East. From that time forward the island of St Lazzaro became the "little Armenia". Today it is still a goal of pilgrimages and a place where the national identity grows and is corroborated, bearing abundant spiritual and cultural fruits.

3. The characteristic element of the Mechitarist spirituality is the search for holiness, through an intense prayer life and a no less demanding dedication to cultural studies, primarily focused on the great Armenian patristic sources. Mechitar wanted to safeguard the Armenian monk-doctor from losing himself in an itinerant life, with the weakening of the profound sense of his own identity. For this reason he laid down that the monks should live a common life in a monastic house, under the protection of obedience. The monasteries thus became centres of spiritual formation and cultural studies, and exercised an extraordinary influence on that intellectual aristocracy that was in great part at the origin of the cultural, political and social rebirth of the Armenian people in successive periods.

Mechitar and his monks should be recognized for having worked for and even now working still for the full recomposition of unity between the Church of the West and the Church of the East. For Mechitar communion with the See of Rome was an inseparable element of the faith. In such communion he saw the fulfilment of a longing ever present in many Armenians, including many ecclesiastics of high rank. He was convinced that the faith of the Armenian Church, beyond the differences of theological terminology and historical misunderstandings, enjoyed such full orthodoxy that communion with Rome could only be its logical seal. Consequently, he held to the theology, the liturgy and the spirituality of the Armenian Fathers with scrupulous fidelity, making every effort to transmit their rich patrimony integrally to succeeding generations.

4. Dear sons of Mechitar, it is up to you to hold on to this heritage and keep it alive. You have come through a difficult period that has put your community to the test. Now with farsighted intuition, you must support the signs of rebirth that can be glimpsed in a number of sectors of the ecclesial community.

The first task is to know your people better in order to know how to respond adequately to their

expectations. Do not be afraid to be open to new horizons, rethinking and updating ancient forms, if the needs of the time require it. In this regard, in conducting some of your activities it can be appropriate to call upon the collaboration of the laity. Such a step would allow them to see their specific contribution more appreciated.

At the centre of your daily life keep the monastic life. The personal search for God, the loving familiarity with the Sacred Scripture, the constant reference to the writings of the Armenian Fathers, the faithful, complete, extended celebration of the prayer of the Armenian Church have to be the sources from which you draw your daily strength. In the common journey of monastic rediscovery, you will benefit a great deal from collaborating with your brothers of the Apostolic Armenian Church. It will be a further example of the "frontier ecumenism" that monasticism can achieve, if it does not withdraw into isolation or fundamentalism, but knows how to welcome a brother it meets on the way in the name of the sincere seeking of the Father's face.

5. Your history and the intuitions of your Founder place you in a privileged position in ecumenical dialogue. You are loved and esteemed by all your Armenian brothers, who look to you with trust and veneration. Live up to such an extraordinary vocation. Put the instruments of your knowledge at the service of the Armenian Catholic Church and be with her a ferment of pastoral openness, in full fidelity to the spirit of your Fathers. With your contribution, you will help reinforce the dialogue between the Apostolic and Catholic Armenians bringing to it the light of new and bolder spiritual acquisitions.

Following the explicit will of your Founder, renew your full commitment to studying your theological patrimony, and even your nation's cultural riches. Make sure that you have up to date instruments and new skills, to preserve and renew the love for study that St Nerses of Lambron held to be a sign of divine love and that Mechitar wished to be the distinctive characteristic of his monastic institution. I am certain that your homeland, Armenia, and the Armenian Apostolic Church await this from you in a spirit of collaboration and ecumenical openness.

6. Remember that poverty is an inseparable characteristic of monastic life. May your riches be the Lord whom you carry in your hearts. Consider the treasures of art and history, entrusted to you by your people, as true and proper relics, especially those manuscripts that are inscribed with the living history of men and events, preserving their memory for future generations. May the events of the past teach you not to confuse material prosperity with the depth of the spiritual life: prosperity often stirs up idolatrous cravings that undermine the religious experience at its roots. It is a lesson that must not be forgotten. Educate your young people to the sobriety that alone makes light the heart and enables it to reach upwards, to seek God. Remember that you are the faithful and disinterested stewards of what belongs to the Church and to the history of your people.

Pay close attention to the formation of the young monks, with an attentive, prudent and gradual selection, carried out, if possible, in the territory of origin of the young men, at least in the first

phases, to avoid dispersion and false mirages. Educate them about the benefits and risks of freedom, in order to create responsible persons. Prepare your young monks gradually to take over the duties suited to their level of formation, so they can learn to be effective leaders of the People of God.

7. Dear Brothers, these 300 years of the history of your Congregation are a treasure for the universal Church. She loves and esteems you and will not cease supporting your spiritual and moral growth, recognizing in you the sons of the venerated Abbot Mechitar, to whom she owes admiration and gratitude.

I entrust you to the maternal intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who was so close to your Founder. May She help and protect you, obtaining for you from the Lord every grace and heavenly consolation.

With these wishes I bless you from my heart.