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Audience with members of the Synod of Bishops of the Patriarchal Church of Cilicia of the Armenians

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the Synod of Bishops of the Patriarchal Church of Cilicia of the Armenians.

The following is the Holy Father's address, which was read by Msgr. Filippo Ciampanelli:

Address of the Holy Father

Your Beatitude,
Dear Brother Bishops,

Welcome! It is a joy to welcome you to Rome and the tomb of the Apostles Peter and Paul on the feast of Saint Gregory of Narek, Doctor of the Church.

As Bishops, Successors of the Apostles, we have the responsibility of accompanying the holy People of God towards Jesus, the Lord and Friend of Mankind, our Good Shepherd. For this reason, on the day of our episcopal ordination, we committed ourselves to preserving the faith, strengthening hope and spreading the charity of Christ.

Dear Brothers, one of the great responsibilities of the Synod is precisely to give your Church the Bishops of tomorrow. I urge you to choose them carefully, so that they will be devoted to the flock, faithful to pastoral care, and not driven by personal ambition. They should not be selected on the basis of our own ideas or preferences, and great caution should be used with regard to those with "a nose for business" or those "always with a suitcase in hand", leaving their people orphaned. A Bishop who sees his Eparchy as a stepping-stone to another more "prestigious" position forgets that he is married to the Church and risks, if I may be allowed to use the expression, committing "pastoral adultery". The same thing happens when one wastes time scheming to get new jobs or promotions. Bishops are not bought in the marketplace; it is Christ who chooses them as Successors of

his Apostles and Shepherds of his flock.

In a world so full of isolation and loneliness, we must ensure that those entrusted to our care feel the closeness of the Good Shepherd, our own paternal concern, the beauty of fraternity and the mercy of God. The children of your dear people need the closeness of their Bishops. I know that they are in diaspora throughout the world in great numbers and sometimes in vast territories, where it is difficult for them to be visited. Yet the Church is a loving Mother and she cannot fail to seek every possible means of reaching them and offering them God's love in their own ecclesial tradition. It is not so much a question of structures, which are only a means of assisting the spread of the Gospel, but above all one of pastoral charity, of seeking and promoting the good with an evangelical outlook and an open spirit: here I think also of the importance of even closer cooperation with the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Dear Brothers, in this holy season of Lent we are called to contemplate the cross and to build on Christ, who heals our wounds with forgiveness and love. We are called to intercede for all, in breadth of mind and spirit. Like Saint Gregory of Narek, who prayed: Lord, "remember... those in the human race who are our enemies, but for their sakes give them forgiveness and mercy". With remarkable prophetic foresight, he added: "Do not exterminate those who snap their jaws at me, but transform them! Banish vicious earthly conduct and plant goodness in me and in them" (*Book of Lamentations*, LXXXIII).

Brothers, together with the priests, deacons, consecrated men and women, and all the faithful of your Church, you have a great responsibility. Saint Gregory the Illuminator brought the light of Christ to the Armenian people, who were the first, as such, to welcome that light into their history. Consequently, you are witnesses and, as it were, the "first-born" of that light, a dawn called to shine the rays of Christian prophecy in a world that often prefers the darkness of hatred, division, violence and revenge. You may well remind me that your Church is not large in numbers. Yet let us remember that God loves to work wonders with those who are small. In this sense, please do not fail to care for the little ones and the poor, by exemplifying an evangelical life far removed from the pomp of riches and the arrogance of power, by welcoming refugees and by supporting those in the diaspora as brothers and sisters, sons and daughters.

I would like to share with you another thing that I see as a priority: to pray much, not least to preserve the interior perspective that enables you to work in harmony as you discern the priorities of the Gospel, those dear to the Lord. In the words of the ancient Latin adage: 'Preserve order and order will preserve you'. Take care that your Synods are well prepared; the issues carefully studied and wisely evaluated; and that decisions, always and only aimed at the good of souls, are applied and tested with prudence, consistency and competence, ensuring, above all, full transparency, also where finances are concerned. Laws must be known and applied not out of a spirit of legalism but because they are instruments of an ecclesiology that allows even those without power to appeal to the Church with full and clearly codified rights, and not find themselves at the whim of the powerful.

A further thought I would like to confide and entrust to you has to do with *the pastoral care of vocations*. In our secularized world, seminarians and those being formed in the religious life need, today more than ever, to be solidly grounded in an authentic Christian life, far from any "princely pretensions". So too, priests, especially young priests, need to feel close to their Bishops, who will foster their fraternal communion, so that they will not grow discouraged by hardships but rather grow daily in docility to the creativity of the Holy Spirit, serving the people of God with the joy born of charity, not with the unbending and insensitive attitude of bureaucrats. In all things, let us foster hope: even though the harvest is always great and the labourers few, let us count on the Lord, who works wonders in those who trust in him.

Your Beatitude, dear Brothers, how can we not finally turn our thoughts to Armenia, not only in words but above all in our prayers, particularly for all those fleeing Nagorno-Karabakh and for the many displaced families seeking refuge. So many wars, and so much suffering! The First World War was supposed to be the last; it led to the formation of the League of Nations, the "precursor" of the United Nations, in the belief that this would be sufficient to preserve the gift of peace. Yet since then, how many conflicts and massacres have we witnessed, always tragic and always pointless. So often have I pleaded: "Enough!" Let us all take up the cry for peace, so that it may touch hearts, even hearts untouched by the sufferings of the poor and lowly. And above all, let us

pray. I pray for you and for Armenia; and I ask you, please, to pray for me!

I thank you for your presence and for your ministry. Before imparting my blessing, I would like to recite a prayer of Saint Nerses the Gracious. I ask you to pray it with me, in anticipation of the day when, God willing, we will be able to celebrate him at the same altar with our brothers and sisters of the Armenian Apostolic Church: “All-merciful Lord, have mercy on all those who believe in you; on my beloved ones, and on those who are strangers to me; on all those I know, and on those unknown to me; on the living and on the dead; even forgive my enemies, and those who hate me, forgive the trespasses they have committed against me; and relieve them from the malice they bear towards me, so that they become worthy of your mercy. Have mercy upon your creatures, and on me, a manifold sinner” (*I Confess with Faith, The 24 Prayers, XXIII*). Thank you.
