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Mass in Meskhi Stadium: blessed are communities poor in means but rich in God

This morning at 10 a.m. Pope Francis celebrated Holy Mass at Meskhi Stadium in Tbilisi, attended by the Georgian civil authorities, representatives of the Patriarchate of Georgia, the Patriarch and the Chaldean Synod, and numerous representatives of the Armenian Catholic Church, along with members of other Christian confessions.

It should be emphasised that the Christian denominations present in Georgia (Latins, Armenian Catholics, Assyrian-Chaldeans, Baptists, Lutherans) meet almost on a monthly basis to discuss religious matters, and they meet for their ecumenical prayer on 25 January. In Georgia there also exists a Council for religions in which around twenty denominations participate under the aegis of a civil defender. Many of these confessions and religions were represented at the stadium for the Mass celebrated by the Holy Father.

In his homily, the full text of which is reproduced below, Francis recalls that it was an urgent mission of the Church to receive and transmit God's consolation, which does not eliminate problems but which gives the strength of love, which helps one to bear suffering in peace, and he emphasises the importance of not closing oneself up in an ecclesial "micro-environment", instead sharing wide horizons open to hope. He also praised Christian communities who live with evangelical simplicity, poor in means but rich in God, and the small but beloved flock of Georgia for its dedication to charity and formation. On the day that the Church commemorates her, he made several references to St. Therese of the Child Jesus and her "little way" to God.

"Among the many treasures of this magnificent country, one that stands out is the importance of women. As St. Therese of the Child Jesus, whom we commemorate today, wrote: 'they love God in much larger numbers than men do'. Here in Georgia there are a great number of grandmothers and mothers who unceasingly defend and pass on the faith that was sown in this land of St. Nino; and they bring the fresh water of God's consolation to countless situations of barrenness and conflict.

This enables us to appreciate the beauty of God's message in the first reading: 'As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you'. As a mother takes upon herself the burdens and weariness of her children, so too does God take upon Himself our sins and troubles. He Who knows us and loves us infinitely, is mindful of our prayers and wipes away our tears. As He looks at us, He is always moved and becomes tender-hearted,

with a love from the depths of his being, for beyond any evil we are capable of, we always remain His children; He wants to take us in His arms, protect us, and free us from harm and evil. Let us allow these words of the Lord to resound in our hearts: ‘As a mother comforts, so will I comfort you’.

The consolation we need, amid the turmoil we experience in life, is precisely the presence of God in our hearts. God’s presence in us is the source of true consolation, which dwells in us, liberates us from evil, brings peace and increases our joy. For this reason, if we want to experience His consolation, we must give way to the Lord in our lives. And in order for the Lord to abide continually in us, we must open the doors of our hearts to Him and not keep Him outside. There are doors of consolation which must always be open, because Jesus especially loves to enter through them: the Gospel we read every day and carry around with us, our silent prayer in adoration, confession, the Eucharist. It is through these doors that the Lord enters and gives new flavour to reality. When the door of our heart is closed, however, His light cannot enter in and everything remains dark. We then get accustomed to pessimism, to things which aren’t right, to realities that never change. We end up absorbed in our own sadness, in the depths of anguish, isolated. If, on the other hand, we open wide the doors of consolation, the light of the Lord enters in!

Yet God does not console us only in our hearts; through the prophet Isaiah He adds: ‘You shall be comforted in Jerusalem’. In Jerusalem, that is, in the city of God, in the community: it is when we are united, in communion, that God’s consolation works in us. In the Church we find consolation, the Church is the house of consolation: here God wishes to console us. We may ask ourselves: I who am in the Church, do I bring the consolation of God? Do I know how to welcome others as guests and console those whom I see tired and disillusioned? Even when enduring affliction and rejection, a Christian is always called to bring hope to the hearts of those who have given up, to encourage the downhearted, to bring the light of Jesus, the warmth of His presence and His forgiveness which restores us. Countless people suffer trials and injustice, and live in anxiety. Our hearts need anointing with God’s consolation, which does not take away our problems, but gives us the power to love, to peacefully bear pain. Receiving and bringing God’s consolation: this mission of the Church is urgent. Dear brothers and sisters, let us take up this call: to not bury ourselves in what is going wrong around us or be saddened by the lack of harmony between us. It is not good for us to become accustomed to a closed ecclesial ‘micro-environment’; it is good for us to share wide horizons open to hope, having the courage to humbly open our doors and go beyond ourselves.

There is, however, an underlying condition to receiving God’s consolation, and His word today reminds us of this: to become little like children, to be ‘like a child quieted at its mother’s breast’. To receive God’s love we need this littleness of heart: only little ones can be held in their mothers arms.

Whoever becomes like a little child, Jesus tells us, ‘is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven’. The true greatness of man consists in making himself small before God. For God is not known through grand ideas and extensive study, but rather through the littleness of a humble and trusting heart. To be great before the Most High does not require the accumulation of honour and prestige or earthly goods and success, but rather a complete self-emptying. A child has nothing to give and everything to receive. A child is vulnerable, and depends on his or her father and mother. The one who becomes like a little child is poor in self but rich in God.

Children, who have no problem in understanding God, have much to teach us: they tell us that He accomplishes great things in those who put up no resistance to Him, who are simple and sincere, without duplicity. The Gospel shows us how great wonders are accomplished with small things: with a few loaves and two fishes, with a tiny mustard seed, with a grain of wheat that dies in the earth, with the gift of just a single glass of water, with the two coins of a poor widow, with the humility of Mary, the servant of the Lord.

This is the surprising greatness of God, of a God Who is full of surprises and who loves surprises: let us always keep alive the desire for and trust in God’s surprises! It will help us to remember that we are constantly and primarily His children: not masters of our lives, but children of the Father; not autonomous and self-sufficient adults, but children who always need to be lifted up and embraced, who need love and forgiveness. Blessed are those Christian communities who live this authentic gospel simplicity! Poor in means, they are rich in God. Blessed are the Shepherds who do not ride the logic of worldly success, but follow the law of love: welcoming,

listening, serving. Blessed is the Church who does not entrust herself to the criteria of functionalism and organisational efficiency, nor worries about her image. Little and beloved flock of Georgia, who are so committed to works of charity and education, receive the encouragement of the Good Shepherd, you who are entrusted to Him, He Who takes you on His shoulders and consoles you.

I would like to summarise these thoughts with some words from St. Therese of the Child Jesus, whom we commemorate today. She shows her ‘little way’ to God, ‘the trust of a little child who falls asleep without fear in his Father’s arms’, because ‘Jesus does not demand great actions from us, but simply surrender and gratitude’. Unfortunately, however, as she wrote then, and which still holds true today, God finds ‘few hearts who surrender to Him without reservations, who understand the real tenderness of His infinite Love’. The young saint and Doctor of the Church, rather, was an expert in the ‘science of love’, and teaches us that ‘perfect charity consists in bearing with the faults of others, in not being surprised at their weakness, in being edified by the smallest acts of virtue we see them practice’; she reminds also that ‘charity cannot remain hidden in the depths our hearts’. Together let us all implore today the grace of a simple heart, of a heart that believes and lives in the gentle strength of love; let us ask to live in peaceful and complete trust in God’s mercy”.

After the Eucharistic prayer, Bishop Giuseppe Pasotto greeted the Pope on behalf of all of the Catholic denominations in the country. Pope Francis responded as follows:

“I am grateful to Msgr. Pasotto for his kind words offered on behalf of the Latin, Armenian and Syro-Chaldean communities. I greet Patriarch Sako and the Chaldean Bishops, Monsignor Minassian and also those from neighbouring Armenia, and all of you, the beloved faithful from the various regions of Georgia. I thank the president, the authorities, the beloved friends of the Armenian Apostolic Church and of the Christian communities gathered here, and in a particular way I thank the faithful of the Georgian Orthodox Church who are present. In asking you to please pray for me, I assure you of my own prayerful remembrance and to all of you I renew my gratitude: Didi madloba! [many thanks!]”.