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The Pope explains his trip to the Caucasus: I went to confirm the Catholic Church there and to encourage the journey to peace and fraternity

Pope Francis dedicated the catechesis of this morning's general audience, which took place in St. Peter's Square, to his recent trip to Georgia and Azerbaijan, for which he thanked the Lord. He also gave thanks again to the civil and religious authorities in both countries, especially the Patriarch of All Georgia, Ilia II – "whose witness was very good for my heart and for my soul", he said – the Sheikh of the Muslims of the Caucasus, and all the bishops, religious and faithful who expressed such "warm affection".

The trip was the continuation and completion and the one made in June to Armenia, which culminated in the plan to visit the three countries of the Caucasus to "confirm the Catholic Church that lives in them and to encourage the journey of these peoples to peace and fraternity", as expressed by their respective themes: "Pax vobis" in Georgia and "We are all brothers", in Azerbaijan.

"Both countries have very ancient historic, cultural and religious roots", explained the Pope, "but at the same time they are living in a new phase: in fact, they celebrate this year the 25th anniversary of their independence, after having spent most of the twentieth century under the Soviet regime. And in this phase they encounter many difficulties in various areas of social life. The Catholic Church is called to be present, to be close, especially in charity and human development, and wishes to do so with the other Churches and Christian communities and in dialogue with other religious communities, with the certainty that God is the Father of all and we are all brothers and sisters".

In Georgia this mission is pursued naturally "through collaboration with our Orthodox brethren, who form the vast majority of the population. Therefore, it was a very important sign that when I arrived at the airport of Tbilisi, along with the president of the Republic there was also the venerable Patriarch Ilia II", the Holy Father observed. The encounter with the Patriarch the same afternoon was "moving, as was the following day's visit to the Patriarchal Cathedral, where the relic of the tunic of Christ, symbol of the unity of the Church, is venerated. This unity is corroborated by the blood of many martyrs of various Christian confessions. Among the most troubled community is that of the Assyrian-Chaldeans, with whom I experienced in Tbilisi an intense moment of prayer for peace in Syria, Iraq and all the Middle East".

The Pope recalled that the Mass with the Catholic faithful of Georgia – Latins, Armenians and Assyrian-Chaldeans – is celebrated on the feast day of St. Therese of the Child Jesus, patron of the missions. “She reminds us that the true mission is not proselytism, but rather attraction to Christ, starting with the strong union with Him in prayer, worship and concrete charity, which is service to Jesus present in the least of our brothers. That is what is done by the men and women religious I met in Tbilisi, and also in Baku: they do so with prayer and with works of charity and development. I encouraged them to be steadfast in their faith, with memory, courage and hope. And then there are Christian families: how valuable their presence is in welcoming, accompanying, discernment and integration in the community!”

“This type of evangelical presence as a seed of the Kingdom of God is, if possible, even more necessary in Azerbaijan, where the majority of the population is Muslim and there are just a few hundred Catholics. Thanks be to God, they have good relations with all, and in particular they maintain fraternal bonds with Orthodox Christians. Therefore in Baku, capital of Azerbaijan, we experienced two moments that faith knows how to keep in good relations: the Eucharist and interreligious dialogue. The Eucharist with a small Catholic community, where the Spirit harmonises the different languages and gives the strength of witness; and this communion with Christ does not prevent, but rather drives the search for encounter and dialogue with all those who believe in God, to build together a more just and fraternal world. From this perspective, addressing the Azeri authorities, I expressed my hope that good solutions may be found to the issues that remain to be addressed, and that all the populations of the Caucasus may live in peace and mutual respect”.

“God bless Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, and accompany the journey of His holy pilgrim people in those countries!” exclaimed Francis at the end of his catechesis.
