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LETTERA DEL SANTO PADRE GIOVANNI PAOLO II A SUA SANTITÀ ARAM I CATHOLICOS DI CILICIA

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Pubblichiamo di seguito la Lettera che il Santo Padre Giovanni Paolo II ha inviato a Sua Santità Aram I Catholicos di Cilicia in occasione del 1700° anniversario del Battesimo della Nazione Armena:

To His Holiness Aram I

Catholicos of Cilicia

"*Jesus came and said to them: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age*" (*Mt* 28:18-20).

Between the two solemn liturgical celebrations of Ascension and Pentecost, these words of the Risen Lord are proclaimed in all Christian communities. In the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, celebrating today the 1700th Anniversary of the Baptism of the Armenian nation, they resound with a particular significance. These words of Jesus explain why, in the year 301, Saint Gregory the Illuminator baptized the Armenian King Tiridates III, and they illumine the resulting fact that shortly thereafter the whole Armenian nation came to confess the Christian faith and to be baptized. "The whole Catholic Church rejoices in recalling this providential Baptism, by which your noble and beloved nation definitively joined the ranks of the peoples who accepted new life in Christ" (*Apostolic Letter for the Baptism of the Armenian People*, 2 February 2001).

The Risen Lord assured his disciples: "I am with you always, to the close of the age". How many times in the course of Armenian history have your people put their whole trust in these words! In glorious times, when the Armenian nation could live the Christian faith in freedom and joy, this promise of the Lord was remembered with confidence and pride. In dark periods, when bitter persecution and expatriation tormented the Armenian nation, it was remembered in desolation and pain. On this 1700th anniversary celebration, may all Armenians be able to look again to the future with trust, assured that the Lord never abandons his faithful flock.

The Catholicosate of Cilicia represents in a particular way the age-old pilgrimage of Armenian Christianity. When the ancient Armenian kingdom was attacked and eventually destroyed, many of the faithful fled to Cilicia, where a new kingdom was established, with Sis as its capital city. In this area, Armenian Christianity prospered for centuries, until in the late 19th and early 20th centuries drastic political and social shifts caused the Armenian faithful to be again dispersed. Many of them fled to neighbouring countries, especially to Lebanon and Syria, while others set out for a world-wide diaspora. The horrible massacres that led to the death or the emigration of so many of your ancestors are part of your common memory. They inflicted deep collective and personal wounds that are still in need of healing. To the Apostle Thomas, Jesus said: "Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe" (*Jn* 20:27). Armenian hands have repeatedly touched the painful wounds inflicted on the suffering Body of Christ. But likewise, the splendour that radiates from the glorified Body of Christ has never ceased to illuminate Armenian hearts and minds.

Situated at a kind of crossroads between different peoples and cultures, the Catholicosate of Cilicia established, since the Middle Ages, cordial relations and fruitful exchanges with Byzantine, Syriac and Latin Christianity. Many saintly shepherds and spiritual leaders of Cilicia worked assiduously for reconciliation and full communion among Christians. They followed the teaching of Nerses of Lambron, who wrote: "I think it is useful to remind Your Piety that love is the first of all God's commandments. . . the Lord gave us this precept, which was new at the time. . . Let us not contravene it by nurturing jealousy towards other Christians" (*Letter to King Levon of Cilicia*). Down the centuries, cordial relations also developed between the Catholicosate of Cilicia and the Catholic Church. Frequent exchanges of letters and visits, and even attempts to restore full communion, were part of this continuing fraternal communication.

The 1700th Anniversary of the Baptism of Armenia represents a providential opportunity to celebrate and renew the fraternal bond between the Catholic Church and the Armenian Church. In recent times, an increase of contacts has given rise to a new closeness. With regard to the Catholicosate of Cilicia, His Holiness Catholicos Khoren I paved the way, visiting the Church of Rome and Pope Paul VI in 1967. His Holiness Catholicos Karekin I, who knew the Church of Rome very well, since he was present at the Second Vatican Council as an observer, visited me twice, in 1983 and in 1992. Finally, Your Holiness has followed in the ecumenical footsteps of both your illustrious predecessors. On the occasion of your visit to Rome in 1997, we had the great joy of signing a Common Declaration, in which we stated that "when Christian communities are more deeply engaged in ecumenical dialogue, a serious rapprochement supported by mutual respect and understanding is the only sound and reliable way to full communion" (25 January 1997).

Your Holiness is a dedicated promoter of Christian unity and you hold a position of high responsibility in many ecumenical bodies, including the World Council of Churches and the Middle East Council of Churches. Consistent with the best tradition of the Armenian Church, always open to other ecclesial traditions as complementary rather than contradictory, Christian reconciliation and fellowship have been among your primary concerns. I pray that the Holy Spirit will sustain your ecumenical commitment and make it increasingly fruitful, as we set out on a new Christian millennium.

To mark the 1700th Anniversary celebration of the Baptism of Armenia I am greatly pleased to be able to send you a prestigious relic of Saint Gregory the Illuminator as a gesture of affection in the Lord. I have recently sent a similar relic to His Holiness Karekin II, Catholicos of Etchmiadzine, as well as to His Beatitude Nerses Bedros XIX, Armenian Catholic Patriarch of Cilicia. As shared gifts between Catholics and Apostolics, "the relics of the same Saint are the symbol of a close unity in faith and a strong encouragement to unity in Christ. I am sure that, venerated by the Armenian people without distinction, they will increase the communion that Christ desires for his disciples. Thus brotherhood will be strengthened in charity. We are not dividing the relics, we are working and praying that those who receive them will be united. The same roots and a continuous history of saints and martyrs can prepare a future for your people of full participation and a visible sharing of faith in the same Lord" (*Homily at a Divine Liturgy in the Armenian rite*, 18 February 2001, No. 5).

On this happy occasion I have asked Cardinal Walter Kasper to convey to Your Holiness the assurance of my heartfelt prayer for the Catholicosate of Cilicia and for the entire Armenian people. I make my own the beautiful prayer of the Armenian tradition: "We thank you, Father Almighty, who did prepare for us the Holy Church as a haven, a temple of holiness, where the Holy Trinity is glorified. Alleluia. We thank you, Christ the King, who did

grant us life through your life-giving and holy Body and Blood, grant us forgiveness and your great mercy. Alleluia. We thank you, Spirit of Truth, who have renewed the holy Church. Keep her without blemish through the faith in the Trinity from henceforth for ever more. Alleluia" (*Prayer of Thanksgiving after Communion*). With these sentiments I embrace you as my dearly beloved Brother in the heart of the Risen Saviour.

From the Vatican, 20 May 2001

IOANNES PAULUS II

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