

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
TO THE NEW AMBASSADOR
OF THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA TO THE HOLY SEE***

Saturday, 15 September 2001

Mr Ambassador,

1. I am pleased to greet you at the presentation of the Letters accrediting you as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Armenia to the Holy See. I thank you for your courteous words and would be grateful if you could convey to H.E. Mr Robert Kocharian, President of the Republic, my gratitude for his greetings.

2. I am joyfully preparing to visit your country in a few days to meet the civil authorities and the Armenian people and to join in the celebrations for the 17th centenary of Christianity in Armenia. I will be happy to meet again with the President of the Republic, as I recall the visit he paid me at the Vatican two years ago, and to develop the cordial relations that exist between the Holy See and your country. My visit will also enable me to pursue and consolidate the approach of dialogue and the journey towards unity which was undertaken with the Armenian Apostolic Church, and above all with Their Holinesses Vasken I and Karekin I. I would like to commemorate them by recalling their attachment to the cause of unity, happily continued with His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians.

Through your mediation, I would like to thank the civil and religious authorities who have contributed to the preparation of my impending journey.

3. As you have just recalled, your country has a long history and a long Christian history. After its first evangelization, which tradition claims dates back to the Apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus, St Gregory the Illuminator brought about Armenia's conversion to Christianity at the beginning of the fourth century, by converting King Tiridates III, his family and his entire people. "The Baptism of the Armenian community, starting with that of her civil and military authorities, gave birth to a new popular identity that was to become a constitutive and inseparable part of "being Armenian" (*Apostolic Letter for the 1,700 anniversary of the Baptism of the Armenian People*, n. 2), making them the first officially Christian people in history. Since then this labour of evangelization has given rise to an original, powerful culture forged in the Christian faith, which Armenians down the ages have found to be an authentic means of safeguarding their identity. Armenia's history has been marked by great suffering, largely due to its location on the borders of great powers, and it has been occupied or annexed time and time again, but its cultural and religious identity has always survived. It can therefore be said that the Christian religious roots of Armenia are a constitutive feature of the nation.

After the enormous upheavals at the beginning of the last century that culminated in the tragic events of 1915 and the dispersion and exile that followed, your country resumed its national life before attaining its independence 10 years ago. As you underscored, the road is long for a people who aspires to find its proper place in the concert of nations through closer cooperation

with its neighbours and constructive international relations for its economic, social and cultural development. The Holy See encourages all peoples in their legitimate aspiration to prosperity and freedom. They should remember their duty to participate with patience and tenacity in building the nation while looking to the common good. Nor does it ever tire of calling them to initiate dialogue with their neighbours, so that they can foster a just and lasting peace among them and harmony among the nations. The Holy See does not doubt the Armenian people's capacity to achieve these legitimate aspirations.

4. Your presence gives me the opportunity to greet the members of the Catholic community resident in Armenia gathered round their Pastor, His Beatitude Nerses Bedros XIX, Patriarch of Cilicia of the Catholic Armenians, associated with his predecessor His Beatitude Jean-Pierre XVIII Kasparian. I will be happy to be able to meet the Catholic faithful, to pray with them and, as the Successor of Peter, to encourage them so they affirm ever more their faith in fidelity to their Baptism and to the heroic witness of so many of their brethren. May they also contribute to the ecumenical dialogue and, with all their fellow citizens, to the well being of the whole nation.

5. Welcome, Mr Ambassador, at the moment when you are beginning your mission as representative to the Holy See, and accept my cordial wishes for its success. You will always find welcome and understanding among my collaborators to help you to carry out your noble mission.

I wholeheartedly invoke an abundance of divine blessings upon Your Excellency, your family, your associates and upon the Armenian people.