

JOHN PAUL II

Address at Arrival Ceremony

Tbilisi, Monday, 8 November 1999

*Mr President,
Your Holiness,
Distinguished Guests,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. For years I have longed to come to this beloved land, especially since the visits to the Vatican by Your Holiness and by you, Mr President. Since then, – to use the words of the Apostle Paul – I “have sought all the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face” (*1 Th 2:17*) on your own soil; and God has heard my prayer. To him who alone is “holy and strong and immortal” (cf. *Trisagion*) I give thanks and praise.

I am grateful to you, Mr President, for your invitation to come to Georgia, for all that you have done personally to make this visit possible, and for your gracious words of welcome on behalf of the Government and the entire Georgian people.

I thank Your Holiness the Catholicos-Patriarch, since without your fraternal support I would not be here now to visit the Church over which Your Holiness presides, to greet you and the Holy Synod in the peace of Christ, and to honour the great Christian witness given by your Church through the centuries. I also come in the conviction that, on the eve of the third millennium of the Christian era, we must seek to build new bridges, so that with one heart and mind Christians may together proclaim the Gospel to the world.

“With brotherly affection” (*Rom 12:10*), I greet Monsignor Giuseppe Pasotto and the Catholic priests, religious and laity of the Latin, Armenian and Syro-Chaldean rites. I look forward to praying with my Catholic brothers and sisters in order to give thanks to God for their past perseverance and their present hope.

2. Standing for the first time on Georgian soil, I am deeply moved by the long and glorious history of Christianity in this land, stretching back to the preaching of Saint Nino in the early fourth century and the reign of King Vakhtang Gorgasali in the late fifth century. From that time onwards, Christianity became the seed of successive flowerings of Georgian culture, especially in the monasteries; and the Church became the guardian of the nation’s identity which was so often threatened. Time and again, Georgia was invaded and broken up, yet its identity and unity have survived to this day. This testifies not only to the great tenacity of the Georgian people, but also to the inexhaustible vitality of the Gospel in this land, since in the most turbulent times Georgia’s true anchor has been its faith in Jesus Christ.

Set between East and West, the Church in Georgia has always been open to contacts with other Christian peoples. At times, the bonds between the Georgian Church and the See of Rome have been deep and strong; and, though at other times there have been tensions, the awareness of our common Christian vocation has never faded completely. My presence among you now is a sign of how deeply the Catholic Church desires to foster communion with the Georgian Church, in response to Christ’s prayer on the night before he died for the unity of all his disciples (cf. *Jn 17:23*).

3. Christianity has contributed much to Georgia's past, and it must contribute no less to its future. Tomorrow marks the tenth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin wall – the result of extraordinary circumstances in which you, Mr President, personally played a substantial part – an event which symbolically opened a new era in the life of many countries. An atheistic ideology had sought in vain to weaken or even eliminate from this land the religious faith of its people. The followers of all religions suffered serious opposition. Today we must admire and give thanks for the witness of your perseverance. The recovery of Georgia's independence in 1991 was a great step forward. The task now is to stabilize peace throughout this region, to promote harmony and cooperation, and to ensure that freedom leads to a new flowering of culture, drawing on the strengths of your Christian past and producing a society worthy of this noble nation.

Certain clouds still linger as Georgia struggles to rebuild, materially and spiritually. But the biblical words apply: "the winter is past and the rain is over and gone" (*Song* 2:11). It is now time to sow the new seed. At the dawn of the new millennium, leaving behind all the sorrows of the past, may Georgia say in the words of the *Song of Songs*: "flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come and the voice of the dove is heard in our land" (*Song* 2:12).

Or, in the words of the great Georgian poet, Shota Rustaveli: "May good things be shared, like snowflakes in winter; may orphans, widows and the poor be enriched and comforted . . . may harmony reign; may the goat and the wolf feed side by side".

Mr President, Your Holiness, may the One "who can do more than we can ask or imagine" (*Eph* 3:20) grant Georgia such a future.

God bless this land with harmony, peace and prosperity!