

JOHN PAUL II***HOMILY***

Tbilisi Stadium, 9 November 1999

1. «*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son*» (Jn 3:16).

Dear Brothers and Sisters of Georgia, I am coming to you with this message of hope: God loves you! Our Father in heaven has given his only-begotten Son also for you, beloved children of this land rich in history. In this final year of the century and of the millennium, the year dedicated to God the Father, the whole Church is, so to speak, plunged into the mystery of God's love, so that renewed by the divine mercy, it will be able to cross the Holy Door of the Great Jubilee.

Without God, man cannot fully find himself, nor can he find his true happiness. Without God, man ends up, in fact, going against himself, because he is unable to build a social order sufficiently respectful of the fundamental rights of the person and of civic coexistence.

Church of God in this land of Kartveli, I come to you as a pilgrim from the See of Rome, honoured by the blood of Saints Peter and Paul, and I repeat to you the words of the Apostle of the nations: «*You are God's field, God's building ... God's temple is holy, and that temple you are*» (1 Cor 3:9, 17).

2. I am greatly moved and deep is the joy I feel as I visit you, Brothers and Sisters of the noble Georgian People. In the first place, I greet the President of Georgia, Mr Shevardnadze, and I thank him for having wished to honour this gathering with his presence.

With sincere affection, I embrace the entire Catholic community of the Latin rite living in this country, and its Apostolic Administrator, Monsignor Giuseppe Pasotto, the community of the Armenian Catholic rite, whose Ordinary, Archbishop Nerses Der Nersessian, is recovering in hospital: to him I wish to send my affection and best wishes. I also embrace the Assyro-Chaldean community, with its parish priest. In a special way, I greet all the priests and consecrated men and women.

I think also of those who are with us in spirit, in particular the sick and elderly, as well as those who have come from other countries. Georgia has always been in my heart in the difficult and sad years of persecution and now I am happy to be here to pray with you and give thanks to God for the regained freedom.

3. «*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but should have eternal life*» (Jn 3:16). This is the «good news» in which the source of hope for every man and woman is to be found! This is the Gospel seed which Christ, after his

resurrection, entrusted to the Church, so that she might sow it in the soil of history: «*God is love*» (1 Jn 4:8, 16) and his providence stretches to all creatures. The supreme sign of this love is the sacrifice of his only-begotten Son and the gift of the Holy Spirit who renews the human heart and the face of the earth.

The Church is about to celebrate in the *Great Jubilee* the two-thousandth anniversary of the birth of Christ, which coincides with the third millennium of the Georgian nation. I come among you, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, on the eve of the great Jubilee event, and I invite you to welcome in its fullness the great gift of this «year of the Lord's favour» (Lk 4:19).

I address this message not only to you, Brothers and Sisters of Georgia, but from this beloved land I proclaim it also to the Christian world of Europe, of which you have been an outpost. With its culture, history and faith, Georgia has always looked towards the West and has made its own contribution to Christian Europe. To the heart of every man and woman, I wish to repeat that God «has given his only Son» for each individual and for everyone. By his Incarnation, the Son of God has united himself in some way with every individual (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 22).

4. «*God is for us a refuge and strength*» (Ps 45:2). In this invocation, echoed in the Responsorial Psalm, I hear your voice, Brothers and Sisters of Georgia! I hear the voice of your ancestors, who have defended the Christian faith down the centuries with their love and sacrifices, sometimes facing hard and weighty persecutions. Together with other Christian brothers and sisters, the Catholics have contributed to the culture and civilization of Georgia. Even beyond the boundaries of Georgia and often in very difficult times, they have made known and appreciated the values and the illustrious people of their country.

Continue to live in the love of Christ, who calls his disciples to be merciful and understanding towards each other. This love requires Christians to commit themselves to make progress along the path to the full unity for which Christ prayed to his Father shortly before his Passion: «... may they all be one» (Jn 17:21).

Georgia has also been a land of special hospitality and welcome, serving as *a model of respect and tolerance* towards the followers of other religions. An eloquent sign of this deeply rooted capacity of yours to live and work together with all people of good will is the fact that not far from here the chief places of worship for Christians, Jews and Moslems stand close together.

5. Formed from early times in Christian values, the Georgian people have a keen sense of the sacredness of the family. May you always guard this great heritage: defend and promote the family in the social and political arena, but above all in your own lives be witnesses to fidelity in marriage and to responsibility in educating children.

Let Christian spouses and their families take the lead in announcing to the whole of society the Gospel of love by their example of a life which is simple, hard-working, hospitable, attentive to the poor, like the Holy Family of Nazareth. Today with great affection I bless your families, your children, your young people and your older people. Take the Pope's greeting into your homes!

6. Brothers and sisters, commit yourselves so that *the whole of society may become one great family*, open to true solidarity and peace. I know that this is not easy, partly because of the long period when atheism held sway here, a period in which all believers paid dearly. Through those many years, the Catholic community saw its presence reduced to a bare minimum. Brave priests, true examples of what the shepherd is called to be, made extraordinary efforts to nourish the faith, in so far as this was possible.

Today you find yourselves in a very fragmented situation, afflicted on the one hand by poverty, and tempted on the other hand by secular consumerism. Do not lose heart! Let the light and strength of the Gospel sustain you on your journey!

Always be generous towards those among you who are in need, as you are already doing in your support of *Caritas* and other praiseworthy forms of sharing. I know how much the Georgian people appreciate the tireless work of these ministries of charity which are offered in service of all, without distinction, looking only to the real need. With the help of Christian social doctrine, form honest and competent people who are willing to commit themselves in the social and political field in service of the common good.

7. Church of God in Georgia, let the living water of the Holy Spirit flow far and wide in your midst! Help your children to reject the mentality of this world and always to have an ear open to the Spirit of Christ the Redeemer, that they may discern what is good and perfect in the eyes of God (cf. *Rom* 12:2). Then you will be like a city set on a hilltop, whose light is not hidden, but which is for everyone a witness to truth and freedom, to love and peace.

May Mary most holy, living icon of God's love, protect you and accompany you always. As you enter the third Christian millennium, I entrust you to her maternal care and to the intercession of your patron saints.

People of God journeying in this beloved land of Georgia, go forth in confidence: *God has loved you so much!* May his love be your strength today and for ever! Amen.

(Pope John Paul II's Homily at Holy Eucharistic Liturgy, Tbilisi Stadium, 9 November 1999)