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Francis to the Armenian authorities: this people knows suffering and persecution but has the spirit always to start over again

Vatican City, 25 June 2016 – Yesterday afternoon Pope Francis met with the political authorities, representatives from the world of culture and the diplomatic corps in the presidential palace of Yerevan, where he had previously met in private with the president Serzh Sargsyan, who introduced his family members. The Pope presented him with a medallion commemorating the trip, depicting St. Gregory the Illuminator.

In his address, the full text of which is given below, the Holy Father pays homage to the Armenian population, who "even at the most tragic moments of their history, have always found in the cross and resurrection of Christ the strength to rise again and take up their journey anew with dignity", and expressed his hope that the 25th anniversary of Armenian independence may be "a special moment for gathering and coordinating energies for the sake of promoting the country's civil and social development of the country, one that is equitable and inclusive".

"It gives me great joy to be here, to set foot on the soil of this beloved land of Armenia, to visit a people of ancient and rich traditions, a people that has given courageous testimony to its faith and suffered greatly, yet has shown itself capable of constantly being reborn", said the Pope, who went on to quote Yeghishe Charents' Ode to Armenia: "Our turquoise sky, our clear waters, the flood of light, the summer sun and the proud winter borealis ... our age-old stones ... our ancient etched books which have become a prayer".

"These are among the powerful images that one of your illustrious poets offers us to illustrate the rich history and natural beauty of Armenia", he continued. "They sum up the rich legacy and the glorious yet dramatic experience of a people and their deep-seated love of their country".

He went on to thank the president for his kind words of welcome in the name of the government and people of Armenia, and for his gracious invitation enabled the Holy Father to reciprocate the visit he made to the Vatican last year, when he attended the solemn celebration in St. Peter's Basilica, together with Their Holinesses Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch-Catholicos of All Armenians, and Aram I, Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia, and His Beatitude Nerses Bedros XIX, Patriarch of Cilicia of the Armenians, recently departed.

"The occasion was the commemoration of the centenary of the Metz Yegh rn, the "Great Evil" that struck your people and caused the death of a vast multitude of persons. Sadly, that tragedy, that genocide, was the first of the deplorable series of catastrophes of the past century, made possible by twisted racial, ideological or religious aims that darkened the minds of the tormentors even to the point of planning the annihilation of entire peoples. It is so sad that – in this as in the other two– the great powers looked the other way".

"I pay homage to the Armenian people who, illuminated by the light of the Gospel, even at the most tragic moments of their history, have always found in the cross and resurrection of Christ the strength to rise again and take up their journey anew with dignity. This shows the depth of their Christian faith and its boundless treasures of consolation and hope. Having seen the pernicious effects to which hatred, prejudice and the untrammelled desire for dominion led in the last century, I express my lively hope that humanity will learn from those tragic experiences the need to act with responsibility and wisdom to avoid the danger of a return to such horrors. May all join in striving to ensure that whenever conflicts emerge between nations, dialogue, the enduring and authentic quest of peace, cooperation between states and the constant commitment of international organisations will always prevail, with the aim of creating a climate of trust favourable for the achievement of lasting agreements that look to the future".

The Holy Father emphasised that the Catholic Church wishes to "cooperate actively with all those who have at heart the future of civilisation and respect for the rights of the human person, so that spiritual values will prevail in our world and those who befoul their meaning and beauty will be exposed as such. In this regard, it is vitally important that all those who declare their faith in God join forces to isolate those who use religion to promote war, oppression and violent persecution, exploiting and manipulating the holy name of God".

"Today Christians in particular, perhaps even more than at the time of the first martyrs, in some places experience discrimination and persecution for the mere fact of professing their faith", he observed. "At the same time, all too many conflicts in various parts of the world remain unresolved, causing grief, destruction and forced migrations of entire peoples. It is essential that those responsible for the future of the nations undertake courageously and without delay initiatives aimed at ending these sufferings, making their primary goal the quest for peace, the defence and acceptance of victims of aggression and persecution, the promotion of justice and sustainable development. The Armenian people have experienced these situations first-hand; they have known suffering and pain; they have known persecution; they preserved not only the memory of past hurts, but also the spirit that has enabled them always to start over again. I encourage you not to fail to make your own precious contribution to the international community".

"This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of Armenia's independence. It is a joyful occasion, but also an opportunity, in cherishing the goals already achieved, to propose new ones for the future. The celebration of this happy anniversary will be all the more significant if it becomes for all Armenians, both at home and in the diaspora, a special moment for gathering and coordinating energies for the sake of promoting the country's civil and social development of the country, one that is equitable and inclusive. This will involve constant concern for ensuring respect for the moral imperatives of equal justice for all and solidarity with the less fortunate. The history of your country runs parallel to its Christian identity preserved over the centuries. That Christian identity, far from impeding a healthy secularity of the state, instead requires and nourishes it, favouring the full participation of all in the life of society, freedom of religion and respect for minorities. A spirit of unity between all Armenians and a growing commitment to find helpful means of overcoming tension with neighbouring countries, will facilitate the realisation of these important goals, and inaugurate for Armenia an age of true rebirth".

"The Catholic Church is present in this country with limited human resources, yet readily offers her contribution to the development of society, particularly through her work with the poor and vulnerable in the areas of healthcare and education, but also in the specific area of charitable assistance. This is seen in the work carried out in the past twenty-five years by the Redemptoris Mater Hospital in Ashotzk, the educational institute in Yerevan, the initiatives of Caritas Armenia and the works managed by the various religious congregations".

"May God bless and protect Armenia, a land illumined by the faith, the courage of the martyrs and that hope which proves stronger than any suffering", Francis exclaimed at the end of his address in the presidential palace.

He then transferred to Etchmiadzin to meet privately in the Throne Room with the Catholicos Karekin, to whom he presented a mosaic of the Virgin and Child, produced by the Mosaics Studio of the Fabric of St. Peter, reproducing a detail of a fresco discovered in 2000 in the Roman basilica of Ara Coeli. Following their meeting, the Catholicos presented to the Holy Father a delegation of 45 Armenian Apostolic bishops, and after signing the Golden Book, Francis retired to his apartments in the Apostolic Palace, close to the Throne Room.
