

November 8, 1999

*On Monday afternoon, November 8, the Holy Father was taken to the Patriarchal Palace in Tbilisi for a meeting with Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II and the members of the Holy Synod. After being welcomed by Ilia II, the Pope gave the following address in English. Here is the text.*

Your Holiness,  
Your Eminences,  
Your Excellences, beloved Brother Bishops

1. I am profoundly grateful to divine Providence for this meeting, which is taking place almost 20 years after the historic first visit of the Catholicos-Patriarch of the ancient Apostolic Church of Georgia to the Apostolic See of Rome. At that time we exchanged the holy kiss of peace and promised that we would pray for one another. Today, thanks to your kind invitation, I have the joy of returning your fraternal visit. Personally I consider it a great gift of God to have the opportunity to express once more my veneration and esteem for the Church entrusted to your care. From the first preaching of the Gospel in these lands, the Church in Georgia has borne noble witness to Christ and inspired a culture rich in evangelical values; today, in a new climate of freedom, the Apostolic Church of Georgia is turned to the future with confident trust in the power of God's grace to bring about a new springtime of faith in this blessed land. In the peace of Christ therefore I greet Your Holiness and the Archbishops and Bishops of the Holy Synod. It is significant that this first visit of a Bishop of Rome to the Orthodox Church of Georgia is taking place on the eve of the Great Jubilee of the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of the Son of God, sent by the Father for the redemption of the world. The Great Jubilee is an invitation to all believers to join in a hymn of thanksgiving for the gift of our salvation in Christ, and to work together for the triumph of his kingdom of holiness, justice and peace. At the same time the Jubilee challenges us to acknowledge, in a spirit of sorrow and repentance, the divisions which have arisen between us during this millennium, in open contradiction to the will of the Lord who prayed that all his disciples might be one (Jn 17:21). May this encounter and the kiss of peace which we will exchange be a grace-filled step towards a renewed fraternity between us, and towards a more truly shared witness to Jesus Christ and to the Gospel of eternal life!

2. I wish to assure you of the Catholic Church's veneration and admiration for the Church of Georgia. Having its roots in the original Jerusalem community, the Church of Georgia is one of the earliest Christian communities. Linked to the preaching of the Apostle Andrew, it owes the actual conversion of the king and the nation to St Nino. A Western author, Rufinus, in his "Ecclesiastical History", offers us a very ancient description of the life of the saint, who preached the Gospel of the Lord from her prison by word and prayer, penance and miracles. The "living pillar" which her prayer succeeded in raising to support the temple being built, after no human instrument or effort could raise it, is a beautiful image of herself, the true pillar of the Georgian people's faith. Holy and learned monks gave this land, which according to tradition was the custodian of the Lord's tunic, many of its lasting monuments of culture and civilization. Even the alphabet was devised as an instrument for the preaching of the word of God in the language of the people. Hosts of martyrs shed their blood for the Gospel when it was an offence punishable by death to profess the Christian faith: from the nine child martyrs of Kola to St Shushanik, St Eustachius of Mtskheta, Abo of Tbilisi, to Queen Ketevan. For this Christian history and culture, Georgia merits the recognition of the universal Church. The century which is about to end has likewise seen in this land a host of confessors and martyrs. Thus your country has been made holy once more by the blood of the witnesses to the Lamb offered for our salvation. I implore their intercession before God for our Churches, that we may walk together on the path of the peace which only the risen Lord can give. 3. Here, at this providential moment, I cannot fail to thank God for the results of the contacts which have taken place between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church in recent years, beginning with the historic meeting between the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I and Pope Paul VI. Through their openness to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and their deep personal commitment, those two great leaders set our Churches on a path which, by God's grace, has seen the growth of a dialogue inspired by charity and fully theological. Ever since the establishment of the Joint International Commission, I have closely followed the progress of the dialogue, which is of the utmost importance for the cause of Christian unity. Basing its study on what Catholics and Orthodox have in common, the Commission has made notable progress.

From its establishment within Orthodoxy by a unanimous decision of all the Orthodox Churches, the Commission has dealt with themes of primary importance, such as the *Mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the light of the mystery of the Holy Trinity; Faith, Sacraments and the Unity of the Church; the Sacrament of Order in the Sacramental Structure of the Church, and the importance of Apostolic Succession for the sanctification and the unity of the People of God*. The Commission continues to deal with questions which pose not a few difficulties in the journey which our Churches have undertaken together.

I am confident that the documents of the dialogue can serve as a basis for clarifying our relationship and for avoiding misunderstandings where Catholics and Orthodox live side by side. The work must continue, and whatever obstacles appear along the way can be patiently resolved in a spirit of brotherhood and sincere love of the truth.

In this context, I recall with pleasure the fruitful contacts between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church of Georgia which began at the time of the Second Vatican Council, to which your Church sent observers. Your Holiness' visit to Rome marked another intense moment of brotherhood and communion. Here I would mention also that in 1991 the late Archbishop David of Sukhumi and Abkhazia, together with other fraternal delegates, took part in the first Special Assembly for Europe of the Synod of Bishops, which reflected on the need for a new evangelization, the most urgent challenge facing our Churches after the changes of the last decade. As Christian Europe prepares to cross the threshold of the new millennium, how necessary is the contribution of Georgia, this ancient crossroads of culture and tradition, to the building of a new culture of the spirit, a civilization of love inspired and sustained by the liberating message of the Gospel!

4. In recent years, as a result of your country's newfound freedom, the relations between our Churches have become more direct. The Catholic Church, for her part, has been able to provide for the pastoral care of her faithful. It is my ardent hope and

daily prayer that cooperation between our Churches will increase at every level, as an eloquent and necessary expression of the witness to the Gospel which Orthodox and Catholics are called to give. I assure you that my representative in Georgia will make every effort to foster this relationship of cooperation and understanding in a spirit of true Christian charity, free from misunderstanding and distrust, and marked by complete respect. He knows how much this means to the Bishop of Rome. No matter how difficult the path of reconciliation, we must implore the Holy Spirit to bring to completion what we, in obedience to the Lord, seek to make possible. Your Holiness, dear Archbishops and Bishops of the Orthodox Church of Georgia, I thank you once more for having me here as a guest. Faithful to the commitment which we made many years ago, I assure you of my continued prayers that the Lord will grant the venerable Church of Georgia ever increasing strength and vitality to carry out its apostolic mission. Upon you, dear Brother, and upon all the Bishops who share with you the responsibility of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the land of Georgia, I invoke the light and wisdom of the Holy Spirit. "To God who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than we can ask or think, to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen". (Eph 3:20-21).

ORE, November 17, 1999

*Information Service* 102 (1999/IV) 230-232