

ADDRESS AT SVETITSKHOVELI CATHEDRAL

November 8, 1999

*After meeting Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II and the Holy Synod, the Holy Father went to the Patriarchal Cathedral of Svetitskhoveli in Mtskheta, the country's former capital. The cathedral (built 1010-1029) rests on the remains of a fourth-century church and is the spiritual centre of the Georgian Orthodox Church. According to local tradition, the cathedral preserves Christ's seamless tunic. After various liturgical hymns were sung, the Catholicos-Patriarch addressed the Holy Father, who then gave the following greeting in English.*

*"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing" (Eph 1:3).*

Your Holiness and Beatitude,

1. For me this is indeed a moment of true blessing from almighty God, source of our consolation and hope, who gives me this opportunity to greet the Catholicos-Patriarch and the Holy Synod of the Apostolic Church of Georgia, here in the Patriarchal Cathedral of Svetitskhoveli. This historic building symbolizes the Georgian Church, and down the centuries it has been a haven of spiritual strength for the nation in every circumstance, joyful as well as sad. The significance of the material building lies in the fact that it speaks to us of that superior reality which is "God's building" (1 Cor 3:9) "made of living stones" (cf. 1 Pt 2:5). Here the holy liturgy is celebrated, in which the pilgrim Church on earth expresses the spiritual bond which unites her with the Church in heaven through the communion of saints. The very stones and the holy icons of this Patriarchal Cathedral speak to us of the saints and martyrs of this land who are in the company of Mary, the Great Mother of God, and of all the holy men and women in paradise! Indeed, according to the constant faith of the Church, the union between those who are still making their pilgrim way on earth with those who sleep in the peace of Christ is constantly reinforced by an exchange of spiritual gifts. Through the fraternal concern of the saints in heaven we are helped in our weakness (cf. Lumen gentium, n. 49).

Your Holiness, 2. The words of the Letter to the Hebrews come to mind: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. (Heb 12:1). We cannot doubt that the course which lies before the Church at the dawn of the third millennium is that of *proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Saviour, to the men and women of today, with no less*

*fervour and conviction than had the great evangelizers of the past.* We give thanks to God that the Church in Georgia has continued down the centuries to preach the Good News with steadfast faith and proven fidelity.

The Lord guides human history, and he teaches us to interpret that history. Today, new horizons open up before Christians everywhere, and in particular the Holy Spirit inspires us to hear the plea of Christ himself: "that they may all be one ... so that the world may believe that the Father has sent him" (cf. Jn 17:21). Such a future will never be the result of our work alone; *it will be a great gift and grace from God.*

3. Therefore, to the glorious Ever-Virgin Mary, to her spouse St Joseph, to St Andrew and all the holy Apostles, to all the martyrs and saints I prayerfully entrust the future of our respective Churches.

May the candles we have lighted this evening be a symbol and pledge of our common commitment to let Christ shed his light on the path ahead, dispelling every trace of darkness and gloom and showing the way to a brighter future.

May the Holy Mother of God, the guardian of Georgia, the one who, through the work of the Holy Spirit gave the Author of Life to the world gather in her mantle of love the Church of Georgia. May she guide Your Holiness and your brother Bishops in shepherding the people entrusted to your care, so that they may respond with renewed fidelity to God who calls us to be holy as he himself is holy (cf. Lv 19:2; Mt 5:48).

To the Father of all consolation I entrust this beautiful land, that through a renewed discovery of its Christian heritage Georgia may grow in harmony and prosperity, for the happiness of its people and for greater stability, cooperation and peace throughout the whole region.

ORE, November 17, 1999

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