

Armenian Christmas From the Grotto
(18th January 1994)

Beloved Children of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church:

For many, many years now, it has been the tradition for the incumbent of the Holy See of St. James in Jerusalem, to seize the opportunity of his presence here in Bethlehem, on this auspicious Christmas night, to speak to you across the vast oceans and spaces that separate you from Jerusalem, the spiritual fount of our church and nation.

Inevitably, the message being broadcast from Bethlehem to all the other parts of the world where members of our far-flung Armenian community live, has included a prayer for the peace of Jerusalem, this immortal but troubled city of God.

This year, too, our message embodies a plea to the Lord of Creation. But this time round, our prayer carries a more pungent urgency because for the first time in living memory, we are filled with wild expectations of a just and durable peace in our region.

During the span of the past traumatic five or six years, the hounds of war ran wild across our beautiful land, devastating towns and villages, orphaning hundreds and hundreds of children, widowing countless women.

But today, as we kneel at the birthplace of Christ, we are filled with hope renewed. The day must come, and is near when all bloodshed will cease, and brothers estranged by decades of suspicion and hostility, will turn their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning forks.

The two valiant antagonists sharing an ancient ancestry, our cherished brothers, Arabs and Jews, have taken the first bold steps towards the creation of an atmosphere of trust. Arabs and Jews have decided that they will not learn or teach war any more, nor shall they teach their children to lift up arms against another.

Already the first harbingers of peace are hovering above our heads. The psychological barrier that prevented our Arab and Jew from sitting down together at a negotiating table, has been removed. The air is filled with euphoria. Our children are looking up at us, with hope in their eyes, asking the inevitable question: "Is there going to be peace this year?"

As we prepare to walk, hand in hand, to a brighter future, we pray that

God, in His unbounded compassion, will not hide His face from us in a little wrath anymore, but who with everlasting kindness, shall smile upon us at last. For had He not promised that every time we call, He shall answer? And every time we cry out, He shall say, "Here I am."

This is the message of Christmas, the infinite mercy of God, that was brought to the world on that momentous night, nearly two thousand years ago, when the shepherds heard the herald angels sing: "Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth and goodwill among men." On that night, the world received its most direct and unequivocal message yet, of hope and salvation.

Greater joy than this, man has never known, that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came down to earth in order to save us, to lead us unto His peace, and in saving us, to fulfill the will and promise of God.

With His birth on this hallowed spot, Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled all the prophecies, for the Lord gave a sign, that the Christ was to be born of a virgin, and would "know to refuse the evil and choose the good."

Reflecting upon the Good Word of God on this momentous night, we are reinforced in our reassurance of God's compassion and mercy. Let us open our eyes and our hearts and unstop our ears for a moment, and see the angels and hear their comforting words to the shepherds and through them, the world.

Let us renew our faith not only here, at the birthplace of Christ, or in Jerusalem, at His Sepulchre, or tonight, but everywhere and at every opportunity. Faith is not defined by time or confined by space. Like the life-bestowing sun or the gently invigorating breeze, it is omnipresent, gaining strength and endurance with each trial. The test of faith is not so much in outward manifestation, in genuflection, in wearing a hair-shirt, as it is in the still depths of the human heart, in our love for our fellowmen, in our imitation of Christ.

Let us pray, not only for the peace of Jerusalem, but also for the peace of the world, for the Motherland that is threatened by the forces of evil, for Bosnia, for Latin America, for the poor and starving in the African continent, for the maimed and dying, that God's will may prevail upon this earth, and that people might truly heed the message of Christmas and so that the earth may be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

In choosing to be born here, of all places in the world, in the tiny unremarkable village of Bethlehem, in the dark cave which He shared with the

beasts of the field, Jesus taught us the supreme lesson of charity, humility, compassion and courage beyond understanding.

He knew, this Man of Sorrows, that He was going to be brought as a lamb to the slaughter, that He will be numbered among the transgressors and bear the sins of many. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth, as a sheep is brought before her shearers. And He did not flinch from His mission. And He triumphed over the forces of evil and overcame the phantoms of desecration, to rise in glorious victory over death.

In our own time and age, we are beset by all sorts of travails and turmoils. The endless machinations of the devil will never cease. On every point on the map, people are facing daily trials and fighting unequal battles for survival. If it is not guns and bombs, incurable diseases or unendurable pain, it is natural disasters.

The torment is more acutely felt this year because it has been designated the International Year of the Family. At a time when humanity should devote all its efforts towards sanctifying the family life, following the saintly example of Christ's family, we find parent turned against child and brother against sister.

Although we are filled with compassion for all our brothers and sisters in distress, we refuse to surrender to despair. For "though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction," yet shall not He forget us.

Therefore let us pray: "O Jesus Christ, on this sacred night, when the world first received God's Good Tidings, grant us Your peace, so that we may rejoice in the mystery of your revelation, and fulfil the will of He that sent Thee".

Amen.

Patriarch Torkom Manoogian