

## Armenian Christmas in Bethlehem

January 19, 1996

Dear children of the Armenian Apostolic Church, all over the world, and men and women of good will everywhere,.

The joyous occasion we are celebrating in this eternal city, this year, will go down in the annals of the Holy Land as one of the most auspicious and momentous.

Never before in the modern history of this region have expectations risen so high, or the sense of euphoria, now pervading this land, been based on more solid ground.

As we kneel here, before the humble birthplace of the Saviour of Mankind, and relive the historic days and events that have made 1995 a milestone in our lives, we cannot escape the realization that we are actually living history..

Christmas at the end of 1995 has been like no other.

This has been a year filled with turmoil and heartache, danger and fear, tears and bloodshed, yet, at the same time, it has been a year that has seen the birth of a new promise.

For the first time, the people of this whole region are being ushered into an era of peace and fulfilment, that will more than make up, for so many lost past years. Here's a chance we have all been waiting for, to make peace.

But if we want to achieve everlasting peace, we must all join hands in working to ensure that this vibrant promise is realised, and that this golden opportunity is not lost.

We, as Armenians, guardians of an ancient and hallowed legacy, can also be direct beneficiaries of the fruit of peace. We must therefore join our brethren the Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews, in contributing to the peace and welfare of the land, to the best of our abilities, working towards the fulfilment of our destiny in the Holy Land.

Just as, two thousand years ago, a twinkling star led the three Wise Men to Bethlehem and kindled the hope of mankind with the promise of salvation, so also, on a smaller scale, have the latest political developments here, kindled for us the hope of a new peaceful era.

There is jubilation in Bethlehem. Our brethren Palestinians celebrate the return of this holy town into their control. And there is relief in Israel that a burden has been lifted from the shoulders of our brethren Israelis.

We congratulate them both on their courage, their determination and their foresight.

[ It was these that have made it possible, for the first time in 28 years, for Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem to be graced with the presence of a Palestinian national leader, undeniable witness to the world of the changing of the guard and of the times.]

This however, has not been achieved without a struggle. Perhaps the price has been too high, but, the fruit bought with it, is sweet to the taste.

[ We pray that the Palestinian flag that flutters over Manger Square will truly be the harbinger of a new era of peace, and love and understanding for the people of this troubled region which has suffered for so long, so unnecessarily. ]

[ We ask that both Palestinian and Israeli forget the pain and anguish of their past struggle, and join together in building new bridges of understanding and cooperation, for the mutual benefit of coming generations. ]



Therefore, as we celebrate the birth of Christ, let us also celebrate the rebirth of hope for Israel and Palestine, for Jordan and all the countries in the region, and wherever there is disharmony and animosity.

And also for Armenia. We, proud children of the legendary giant Haig and the immortal hero David of Sassoon, have a lot to be thankful for. Despite our troubled and painful history, we continue to thrive, both in the Motherland and the Diaspora. Despite the vagaries of history which has seen countless other nations sink into oblivion, we have survived, our nation and our church intact, our spirit as undaunted as ever.

The past year has borne witness to a further regeneration of our faith and strengthening our national resolve.

[ Armenians all over the world have reacted with jubilation over the election of a new Catholicos whose ties with another branch of our church ensures the intensifying of a dialogue that will, hopefully, result in the long hoped-for reunification of our universal church. ]

And the political developments in the Motherland have testified to our people's determination to make nationhood succeed.

Christmas 1995 shall indeed remain unique. But as we take stock of developments on the worldly scale, we must not forget our spiritual needs. For, what does Christmas really mean to us, Christians? What is the true message of this extraordinary event that marks the birth of Jesus Christ, God's Only Begotten Son? And how do we, as Christians respond to that message?

In the simplest of terms, Christmas has always been a message of hope and salvation. We must never lose track of this, even though we are constantly

bombarded by more insistent commercial underpinnings, that are robbing it of its simplicity and integrity.

Our commitment must never falter. Even though, in the words of one of the Christian church's greatest mystics, our "spirit is often outraged by everything absurd," we must never lose the hope that "it could become again a virginal spirit in the clean, simple darkness of pure faith.

May the Lord, vouchsafe it ever so.

And may, the bells of our faith in Christ, ring harmoniously with the singing of the angels: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, and good will toward men."

Amen