

10 April 2003

## Official Response To The Letter Of The Greek Patriarch On The Holy Fire Saturday Ceremony

Concerning the Ceremony of the Holy Fire, there needs to be said that Cust presents the ceremony in six divisions.

1. Introduction
2. Conduct of the Ceremony
3. Participants in the Ceremony
4. Allocation of Space on the Floor of the Rotunda
5. Accommodation for Visitors
6. Order of the Ceremony

Now which of these divisions deals with the act of the ceremony? Whether the Introduction, or the Conduct or the Allocation of Space or the Accommodation for Visitors?

Of course "Order of the Ceremony" only, the division number six, that deals with the exact action of each rite respectively and that should be the base for any evidence connected with the privileges of each rite respectively in the ceremony.

In response to the letter of the Greek Patriarch, we would like to draw your attention to the following:

1. The Greek Patriarch's statement that *"the representative of the Armenian Patriarch does not enter the Tomb together with the Greek Patriarch but remains standing by the Stone of the Angel, thus receiving on that spot the Holy Fire from the Greek Patriarch upon His exit"* is based upon hearsay only and nowhere that kind of detail is mentioned in Cust's book. None of the persons presented in the letter of the Greek Patriarch as witnesses, has actively taken part in the Ceremony. The Greek Patriarch's witnesses have not been inside the Edicule to be regarded as valid witnesses. All of them have passed away. The testimonies attached to the Greek Patriarch's letter, which testify that *"the Armenian Bishop stands by the Stone of the Angel and watches"*, neither Cust nor any other legal source mentions it. If the Armenian Bishop accompanying the Greek Patriarch is supposed to wait at the Stone of the Angel or the Angel's Chamber, as Cust would say, then why is it not clearly said in the division "Order of the Ceremony"? Hence we draw our conclusion that His Beatitude's statement has no legal evidence, otherwise this would have been clearly stated in the "Order of the Ceremony" to avoid any misunderstanding.
2. The Greek Patriarch does not accept Cust's book as the only source of information on the issue while he quotes him for advocacy in favour of the Orthodox. If Cust's book is not the only source, then what are the other sources, which we haven't heard about? If the Greek Patriarch refers to the Firmans that the Greek Patriarchate has in its archives, similarly then the Armenian Patriarchate has Firmans in its archives, which deal specifically with this issue. If the Greek Patriarch aims to return to the pre-Status Quo times, then what for the Status Quo was established in 1852? One thing must be clear, that Cust's book so far remains the only authentic text, by which all of the privileges and rights of each rite concerned are guaranteed.
3. The Greek Patriarch instead of quoting from the "Order of the Ceremony", which is considered as the heart of the real procedure, quotes the division number 2 "Conduct of the Ceremony" where it says *"the ceremony is*



*conducted by the Orthodox Patriarch. There also participate a bishop of the Armenian Patriarchate, who alone accompanies the Patriarch into the Aedicule*" (p. 128/ p. 66) and also that *'the ceremony is however essentially the service of the Orthodox Church, and the representatives of the other rites participating, previously obtain permission from the Orthodox Patriarch to take part by proceeding to the Orthodox Altar and doing obeisance'* (ibidem). Now this must be considered as introductory "Who is who?" presentation to the Ceremony and not necessarily a legal declaration or order or procedure. It is merely "the conduct of the Ceremony" and not the "order of the Ceremony."

The quotation on the issue of obtaining permission from the Orthodox Patriarch and...doing obeisance, is also found in the division number 6 "Order of the Ceremony" which the Greek Patriarch has not mentioned in his letter. If it was a mere permission, to the extent that the Greek Patriarch may revoke it any time or under any circumstances, then it should have been detailed and presented in a sole division indicating exactly when and how and by whose decision and under what circumstances that permission may not be given. The issue of taking permission and doing obeisance must be understood as part of a mere traditional call on, a procedure showing Christian love and harmony and respect to one another by proceeding to the Orthodox Altar and doing obeisance. This is done so that the "Miracle" of the descent of the Fire occurs.

Since 1930's the Calendar of Easter Religious Ceremonies booklet has been published annually by the joint consent and approval of the Greek and Armenian Patriarchates and the Custody of the Holy Land (Franciscans).

In these booklets the meaning of the "permission and obeisance" is clearly stated.

Up to 1944 the statement is:

... *"Coptic and Syrian Orthodox clergy proceed from the Coptic Chapel and the Chapel of St. Necodemus, respectively, via the southern portion of the Rotunda, to the Armenian Vestry to do obeisance to His Beatitude the Armenian Patriarch, and to deliver to Him their respective bundles of Holy Fire Candles.*

... *"Armenian, Coptic and Syrian Orthodox Clergy proceed from the Armenian Vestry to the Altar of Katholicon via the Stone of Unction and the southern door of the Katholicon to do obeisance to His Beatitude the Orthodox Patriarch. They return to the Armenian Vestry by the same route."*

Since 1945 until this year of 2003, the same Calendar of Easter Religious Ceremonies booklets have the following statement:

... *"Coptic and Syrian Orthodox clergy proceed from the Coptic Chapel and the Chapel of St. Necodemus, respectively, via the southern portion of the Rotunda, to the Armenian Vestry to make their traditional call on His Beatitude the Armenian Patriarch, and to deliver to Him their respective bundles of Holy Fire Candles.*



... *“Armenian, Coptic and Syrian Orthodox Clergy proceed from the Armenian Vestry to the Altar of Katholicon via the Stone of Unction and the southern door of the Katholicon to make their traditional call on His Beatitude the Orthodox Patriarch. They return to the Armenian Vestry by the same route.”*

Also, it will be fitting to quote here the Status Quo book, in Armenian, concerning the rights and privileges of the Armenian Patriarchate, published in 1880, where it says, “The representative of the Armenian Patriarchate accompanied by the Orthodox Dragoman go to the Greek Patriarch in order to *congratulate him* on this Day” (page 46). They do not approach to receive permission but to congratulate him. The same can be said about a written request, which the Greek Patriarchate does in writing for the Orthodox Christmas Eve Ceremony on January the 6<sup>th</sup>, to receive written permission to stand on the steps of the Grotto, in the Armenian Section of the Church of Nativity. And each year the Greek Patriarchate receives that permission. This does not mean that the Armenian Patriarchate may reject their request.

4. On the issue that “the Armenian Patriarchate and the Custody of the Holy Land together with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate are common owners, with equal rights on the Sepulchre of Christ and on the Church of the Resurrection”, the Greek Patriarch states that this position of ours holds true in other cases but not in the present. We would like to remind His Beatitude that on this specific day the Church of Holy Sepulchre is divided into two sections, Southern and Northern, namely, Armenian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox. It should be specifically stressed here that prior and during the Holy Fire Ceremony, in the division number 3 “Participants in the Ceremony”, everything is divided equally, and especially as it says *“Apart from the Patriarch and the Armenian Bishop, the following clergy and laymen take actual part in the service at different periods: - A Bishop, Archimandrite, Dragoman, and Sexton of both Orthodox and Armenian rites, a lay representative of each of these rites, and one Coptic and one Jacobite, either a cleric or a layman...”* (p. 66, 68). Within the division number 6 “Order of the Ceremony” as *“the door of the Sepulchre is sealed by the Moslem Guardian in the presence of one Archimandrite of the Orthodox and one of the Armenian rites, standing one on each side close to the door... The Orthodox clergy are always stationed on the north side of the door, the Armenian on the south.”* (p. 68), this shows that everything is done in the presence of the two rites only, namely, The Orthodox and Armenian. And all is done equally.

5. Concerning the Greek Patriarch’s position with regard to the entrance into the Holy Sepulchre which he calls a “Controversial passage”, which says *“The Patriarch enters the Holy Sepulchre accompanied by the Armenian Bishop”* (p. 134/ p. 69), “*Holy Sepulchre*” is used in the sense meaning “the Tomb” and that is what Cust has on page 69. He says, *“The door is then opened and the Patriarch enters the Tomb, accompanied by the Armenian Bishop”*. He does not say the Edicule but the Tomb. How can someone proceed into the Tomb? Of course by entering the Edicule. In pages 13-33, Cust describes each holy place within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in detail. With regard to the Edicule, on page 22, Cust clearly states *“The Edicule which encloses the Chapel of the Angel and the Tomb...”* The Tomb is one of the chambers of



the Edicule. The Edicule is the building in whole, whereas the Tomb one of its two chambers. Concerning the Greek Patriarch's explanation on the disrobing issue, as he says, *"Indeed where does the Patriarch disrobe? Before the burial chamber? No, before the Edicule."* is right as long as he continues with Cust's words *"The door is then opened and the Patriarch enters the Tomb, accompanied by the Armenian Bishop"*.

6. The Greek Patriarch states that *"Consequently according to Cust as well after the opening of the door of the Edicule and the Armenian commonly enters it, whereas no mention whatsoever of an entrance further in is made"*. The common sense would say 'no mentioning whatsoever of not entering further in', equals to 'an entrance further in'. The Greek Patriarch is omitting Cust's words concerning the entrance further in: *"The door is then opened and the Patriarch enters the Tomb, accompanied by the Armenian Bishop"*.
7. The Holy Fire that is passed through the northern (orthodox) opening first, holds true and that is clearly stated in Cust's book, a fact we do not deny at all.
8. On page 69, Cust says, *"The procession (of the Greek Orthodox rite) circles the Rotunda three times. On arriving in front of the Sepulchre for the third time, ... The Bishop of the Armenian Church, who is to accompany the Patriarch into the Sepulchre, here joins His Beatitude."* If we shall begin misusing the words Cust used in his book then we will find ourselves in chaos. Here the word *"Sepulchre"* is also controversial. What does he mean by the word *"Sepulchre"*? Did he mean the *"Edicule"* or the *"Tomb"* itself? If Cust indeed meant the Edicule, then there is no any evidence of the Greek Patriarch's entrance to the *Tomb*.
9. Concerning the Greek Patriarch's argument with the representative of the Armenian Patriarchate Fr. Samuel Aghoyan, the Armenian Superior of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, His Beatitude states that Fr. Samuel had *to stand by the Stone of the Angel and that he prevented him from entering the burial chamber, and when the dispute commenced, "he (Fr. Samuel) was able to obtain the Holy Fire from Us with the intention of passing it on first"*. This is not true. Father Samuel was inside the Tomb. Lit his candle from the oil-lamp placed on the Tomb. And when he was ready to exit, His Beatitude pulled Father Samuel's arm to go behind him, for him to exit first. Father Samuel mentioned to His Beatitude that this is the third year he is serving, therefore he was to exit. And he did. His Beatitude also emerged, and while Father Samuel was at the Southern hole, His Beatitude went over (instead of going to the northern hole), pushed Father Samuel away, and with his hand put out Father Samuel's candles of the Holy Fire. How befitting is it for a ranking religious man to act as such, particularly in the Holiest Place of Christendom?
10. Concerning the Greek Patriarch's statement that *"during the past years...the representative of the Armenian Patriarchate did indeed enter the burial chamber, due to the illness of Our predecessor or due to the lack of exact knowledge of somebody from us..."* holds not true either. The Late Greek Patriarch Diodoros I, was sick only during his last 3-4 years. *"...or due to the lack of exact knowledge of somebody from us?"* what kind of exact knowledge we are discussing here, that the representative of the Armenian Patriarchate has no right to enter the Holy Tomb? Where is it written specifically that the Armenian Bishop has no right to enter the Holy Tomb and



that the Armenian Bishop receives the Holy Fire from the Greek Patriarch only? Cust doesn't mention this, nor any other legal source has it.

11. As the Greek Patriarch relies heavily on their "orthodox" sources, the Armenian Patriarchate relies on its published Armenian sources and not just diaries, which give a clear image on the Order and Procedure of the Holy Fire Saturday Ceremony.
  - a. A book on the ceremonies of the Holy Week, in Armenian, dated 1839, clearly states that both the Greek Patriarch and the Armenian Bishop, each holding a bundle of 12 candles, enter the Holy Tomb and they light from the lamp therein. The Copts and the Syrians light their candles in the Ante-chamber from the Armenian Bishop's Holy Fire, according to their ancient custom.
  - b. A book, on the Status Quo and on the privileges of the Armenian Patriarchate in the Holy Places, in Armenian, published in 1880, states clearly that "Greeks on their third circle around the edicule, their Patriarch approaches the entrance to the Edicule, to whom immediately joins the Armenian Bishop, and both with a bundle of 12 candles in their hands enter inside and behind them the door of the edicule is closed. Both of them together after saying a short and silent prayer in the tomb, light their candles and come out of the tomb. They give their lit candles from the openings; the Armenian from the southern and the Greek from the northern windows..."
  - c. A calendar, in Armenian, dated 1912, states clearly that both the Greek Patriarch and the Armenian Bishop, each holding a bundle of candles, enter the tomb, where both of them kneel down and read psalms, after doing so, both of them light their candles from the lamp therein and then proceed together to the Ante-chamber to pass the Holy Fire from the northern and southern windows of the edicule. The Greek from the northern opening and the Armenian from the southern opening.

## CONCLUSION

- i. The Greek Patriarch advocating in their favour, quotes from Cust's division number 2 "Conduct of Ceremony" instead of quoting from the division number 6 "Order of the Ceremony", thereby creating a dilemma of a twisted interpretation of the issue.
- ii. The Greek Patriarch brings forward testimonies, which are not part and parcel of the Status Quo of Cust. These testimonies are based on hearsay only. His Beatitude's statement is fabricated and has no legal evidence.
- iii. The Greek Patriarch does not accept Cust's book as the only source of information yet he quotes from it for advocacy in favour of the Orthodox.
- iv. The "Conduct of the Ceremony" from which the Greek Patriarch quotes must be considered as introductory "Who is who?" presentation to the Ceremony and not necessarily a legal declaration or order or procedure.
- v. The Greek Patriarch's statement pertaining to the issue of obtaining permission from the Orthodox Patriarch and doing obeisance to the Greek Altar, must be understood as part of a



mere traditional call on or a mere symbolic gesture of congratulation for the Day. As stated in the booklets of the Calendar of Easter Religious Ceremonies, published since 1930's, by the joint consent and approval of the Greek and Armenian Patriarchates and the Custody of the Holy Land (Fransiscans).

- vi. The Greek Patriarch's statement pertaining to the common ownership in the Holy Places, includes also the Ceremony of the Holy Fire, since the Church of Holy Sepulchre that day is divided into two, northern and southern. And during any actual act in the ceremony, representatives from the Orthodox and Armenian rites are always present. All is shared equally.
- vii. The Greek Patriarch's statement pertaining to the Patriarch's entrance to the Holy Tomb alone, while the representative of the Armenian Patriarchate has no right to enter at all, Cust clearly states the "Order of the Ceremony" *"The door is then opened and the Patriarch enters the Tomb, accompanied by the Armenian Bishop"*. On page 22, Cust describes the Edicule as having two chambers, the Angel's chamber and the Tomb. The representative of the Armenian Patriarchate accompanies the Greek Patriarch inside the Holy Tomb.
- viii. The Greek Patriarch's statement pertaining to "no mention whatsoever of an entrance further in is made (for the Armenian)", then how shall we interpret Cust's words pertaining to the entrance, which says, *"The door is then opened and the Patriarch enters the Tomb, accompanied by the Armenian Bishop"*?
- ix. The Greek Patriarch's statement pertaining to the passing the Holy Fire through the northern (orthodox) opening first, holds true. Cust clearly states it.
- x. The Greek Patriarch's statement pertaining to the dispute between him and our representative is not true.
- xi. The Greek Patriarch's statement pertaining to the "due to the illness of our predecessor or due to the lack of exact knowledge of somebody of us" holds not true. The Late Greek Patriarch Diodoros I, was sick only during his last 3-4 years. His predecessors behaved correctly and according to the Status Quo and not due to lack of exact knowledge.
- xii. As the Greek Patriarch relies on Orthodox sources, we also rely on our Armenian published sources.

Divan of the Armenian Patriarchate  
Of Jerusalem

