

# 2007 - YEAR OF THE ARMENIAN LANGUAGE

## PONTIFICAL MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS ARAM I CATHOLICOS OF THE GREAT HOUSE OF CILICIA

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To the Diocesan Prelates,  
Clergy, and  
Church and Community Leaders  
of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia,  
and the Armenian people,

We greet you with pontifical blessing and warm Christian love from the Armenian Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia in Antelias, and we wish you a year full of divine grace, as well as rich in spiritual and national accomplishments.

The year of 2006 in the life of our people was characterized by the pan-national observance of the 1600th anniversary of the invention of the Armenian alphabet. In our Pontifical Encyclical issued on that occasion, we addressed the vital importance of the Armenian language embodied in the Armenian alphabet, saying, *“In the face of the frightful forces of globalization, which assimilates cultures, destroys communities, annihilates values and alters identities, the Armenian language must become, above all, a sacred forge of nation building and mighty shield of national self-defense for our people. It must remain a vital factor authentically expressing and comprehensively giving shape to the palpitations of our hearts, the flights of our souls and the conceptions of our minds. Furthermore, the Armenian language must become the unbreakable axis of the national belongingness and the strong cement of unity of our people scattered to all parts of the world.”*

In consideration of the 1600th anniversary of the invention of the Armenian alphabet, we proclaimed the year of 2006 as “Year of the Armenian School.” In response to our appeal, the Armenian school, along with its sacred mission of forming our men and women of the future as Armenians, was made the focal point of special programs in all dioceses of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia. And, as a natural follow-up to the 1600th anniversary of the Invention of the Alphabet and the Year of the Armenian School, we proclaim the year of 2007 as

### **“THE YEAR OF THE ARMENIAN LANGUAGE”**

Therefore, dear Armenians, let's see, through a cursory glance, what a profound significance and vital importance the Armenian language has had and does have for the Armenians.

#### **A.**

#### ***The Armenian Language: The Source of Armenian Identity***

Nations survive in time and space through their unique identity. Language plays a critical role in the creation, formation and preservation of a nation's identity. Language is not only a living link of communication among the constituent members of a nation, but also one of the most powerful factors of a nation's collective self-construction and self-expression. Therefore, with its unique phonetics, syntax and style, language, in a certain sense, reflects the characteristic features of a

nation, its inner torments, dreams and struggles.

The Armenian language, in particular, has been like this for our nation. A nation having a homeland, political freedom and independent church could not deeply root its nation building, fulfill the strengthening of its homeland and authentically express its identity without its own language. St. Mesrob Mashdots is the embodiment of this collective consciousness of our nation. It is from this viewpoint that it is necessary to read Goriun's work, "Life of Mashdots." St. Mesrob Mashdots was well aware of the fact that, as long as the Armenian people were lacking a written language, territorial, religious or political independence alone could not guarantee the total creation of their full identity. St. Mesrob Mashdots knew that, as long as the Armenian people remained subject to the Syriac and Greek cultures, and expressed themselves in those languages, they could not firmly establish their identity.

Now, with the invention of the Armenian alphabet, the course of the formation of the identity of the Armenian people was not only completed but it also became more crystallized and deeply rooted. The Armenian language became the mighty shield defending the Armenians' authentic identity in the face of historical calamities and disintegrating and disorienting currents. The Armenian language is the same today, if not more so, for the Armenians living in their homeland and especially those scattered to the four corners of the globe. Without the Armenian language, this living source of the Armenian identity, Armenian life will dry up in the national sense, losing its authentic Armenian image.

### **B.**

#### ***The Armenian Language: The Pivot of Armenian Culture***

Culture is the totality of a nation's mental and spiritual emotions and dreams, conceptions and aspirations as expressed in words and colors, sounds and forms. Language has a definitive role in all of this.

The Armenian language has become the backbone of Armenian culture, the main artery pumping blood to it. The Armenian language played a central role in the creation of the Golden Age and Silver Age in the history of Armenian culture. The Armenian language became the driving force in the creation and development of Armenian historiography, hagiography, literature and the press. In other words, the Armenian language has been the living means giving form and style, spirit and flight to the Armenian mind.

The Armenian language continues to remain the pivot of Armenian culture, one of the main roads leading the Armenians to their intellectual and spiritual values and traditions. Without the living and vivifying presence of the Armenian language, Armenian culture will become emptied of its true contents, will lose its authentic spirit and specific identity. Without the Armenian language, the Armenian culture, as one of the principal means of defining and expression of our identity and solid pillars of our existence, will lose its particularity and vitality.

### **C.**

#### ***The Armenian Language: The Keeper of the Armenian Faith***

Faith, no matter what the religion, expresses itself through a given culture. And the expression of faith within the contours of a culture is accomplished mainly by means of language. The interrelationship between faith and language, with different approaches and emphases, is an important aspect of all religions. In the case of Christianity, language has had and still has a decisive role.

This fact is explicitly discernible in the case of our church too. Our church fathers have often emphasized that, with the creation of the Armenian alphabet, God spoke in Armenian with our

people, and the relationship between the Armenians and God became more alive and immediate. Indeed, the all-consuming passion of St. Mesrob Mashdotes to create a unique alphabet and written language for the Armenian people was not prompted by the sole concern of finding a means of self-expression for them; underlying it too was the zeal to bring the Armenian people closer to God, to give conscious depth to the Christian faith in their hearts and souls.

Therefore, faith and language have been present in our history with an inseparable association. After all, was it not largely by way of the Armenian language that the Christian faith expressed itself with an Armenian imprint in the lives of the Armenian people? Was it not by way of the Armenian language that the Bible was given to our people in their mother tongue? Was it not by way of the Armenian language that the most important works of Christian thought were written or translated? The Armenian language Armenianized the Christian faith, giving it an Armenian spirit and personality. Furthermore, it was by way of the Christian faith that the Armenian language, in a certain sense, became sanctified, becoming the most authentic voice, the most vigilant guardian, and the most powerful defender of the Armenian faith.

Today the Armenian language is the same for the Armenians. Indeed, will it be normal to any Armenian to approach God, to pray to God in a foreign language? Isn't it the same for any given nation? This conscious zeal must take firm root among our people. We must always bear in mind that our forefathers shed their blood for the preservation of their identity. Thus, the approaches disposed towards the broad use of foreign languages during our rituals, which are being suggested in certain Western communities, are unacceptable. Such steps will only have negative consequences in every sense.

#### **D.**

#### ***The Armenian Language: The Guarantor of the Existence of the Armenian Nation***

Language plays a critical role in the strengthening and preservation of a nation's existence, alongside homeland, faith and culture. Language keeps the roots of a nation's identity healthy. Again, language guarantees a nation's integrity and perpetuity. This is an irrefutable truth, based on historical fact, for all nations.

In the greater field of nations, the Armenian language became an abundant spring supplying water to our "little flower bed" for it to exist and survive. Down through history, foreign values and traditions have often made inroads in our life; we were often surrounded by other nations, cultures and languages; our life often became subject to frightful upheavals, crises and massacres. However, our nation survived through all these vicissitudes and flourished. Our nation maintained its existence, not by means of scepters and armies but through its faith and culture, as well as the alphabet which made the Christian faith an incarnational reality and articulated the Armenian culture in all its dimensions and aspects in our life.

Indeed, when others chained our will to live freely, the Armenian language became one of the most tangible expressions of Armenian identity and self-determination. When we became divided through the exigencies of history, the Armenian language became the pivot of our integrity; the Armenian language became the cement of affiliation with one nation, one homeland and one culture, transcending all kinds of geographical, doctrinal, political and ideological boundaries.

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This is, indeed, the miracle of the Armenian language, the miracle-working Armenian language....

St. Gregory the Illuminator became the solid pillar of the Armenian faith; King Vramshabouh, the forger of Armenian independence; St. Mesrob Mashdotes, in turn, the creator of the Armenian

identity. The Armenian language had a pivotal role in the faith-sustained struggle of our people, for survival, identity and independence.

The Armenian language became a homeland for Armenians without a country. It became a home for homeless Armenians, a fountain of light in the darkness of the world, and a beacon of hope on the roads of despair.

Our poets considered the Armenian language *“the home of the Armenians in the four corners of the world”* (M. Ishkhan); they have characterized it as *“the anchor of the ship,” “the seal of identity,” “the ray of our hope”* (K. Emin) and moreover *“the ever-shining light”* that *“never became extinguished from foreign winds...,” “mighty weapon, against which arrow and scimitar would become powerless...”* (P. Sevak).

Foreign linguists and Armenologists, in turn, have admired the compact logic, special flexibility, stylistic richness and musical appeal of the Armenian language, even considering it *“the sole language for speaking with God”* (Lord Byron).

The Armenian language remains the same for us 1600 years later. Therefore, one must not approach the Armenian language with the usual understanding. Khachatur Abovian has correctly defined the critical role of the Armenian language when he wrote, *“Oh language, language, if it weren't for language, what would man be like? It is language and faith that keep a nation together, connect one to another. If you change your language and deny your faith, then how else can you say what nation you belong to?”*

However, today, in Shahnour's words, *“the language is retreating, the language is retreating, the language is retreating...mea culpa, mea culpa to Ararat.”* We are so, so guilty and, therefore, obligated to say mea culpa to our history, our ancestors, our saints, our heroes....Yes, the Armenian language is retreating everywhere, in different ways and in every sense. The Armenian language is retreating –

- when the prodigious creation of Mesrob becomes distant from Armenian families;
- when pupils speak a foreign language in Armenian schools;
- when the Armenian language is distorted on the pages of the Armenian press;
- when the prayers of our fathers are uttered in a foreign language in our church;
- when even the 1600th anniversary of the invention of the Armenian alphabet is glorified in a foreign language....

The most frightening weapons of the past 1600 years were not able to kill the Armenian language. Today, however, we are the ones who are killing the Armenian language, sometimes with our indifference, sometimes with our ignorance, sometimes with our infidelity, sometimes with our xenophilia and *“so forth...”*

We must be conscious, alert and stringent.

The Armenian language is one of the “holiest of holies” of our nation; woe unto us if we are not faithful to this God-given sanctity.

The Armenian language is one of the supreme treasures of our life; woe unto us if we don't look after this sacred treasure.

The Armenian language is one of the golden bridges leading Armenians to God; woe unto us if we destroy this sacred bridge with our very own hands.

The Armenian language is one of the true paths leading Armenians to their roots; woe unto us if this road becomes dark in the course of our life.

Thus, moving away from the Armenian language means moving away from our identity, from our history, from our common dreams as a nation.

In the fifth century, we told Yezdigerd, who was trying to destroy the faith of the Armenian people, with collective determination, *“No one can move us from this faith, neither sword nor fire, neither angels nor men...”* Today, we must tell the “Yezdigerds” of today, with the same resolve, that no one can move us away from the Armenian language, which is cemented with our faith and the blood of our martyrs.

Each and every Armenian must approach the Armenian language with this deep awareness and firm commitment. Therefore, with this same spirit and zeal, we wish to bring to the attention of our people the following basic points

1

*The Armenian language must always be used*

At first glance, this appeal directed at our people may seem strange. However, the use of foreign languages has begun to become an increasingly palpable presence in the life of our people. The causes of this regrettable phenomenon are sometimes beyond our immediate grasp, but its consequences can be very grave for our nation. If we attempt to find a general reason for the use of foreign languages, particularly in our Western communities, it is the profound influence of the conditions surrounding us on our people and especially the younger generation. We are quite familiar with our communities and we know that our youngsters live in such environments, where the use of foreign languages has effectively become obligatory, while the means to prevent it are limited and ineffective. However, in the face of this difficult situation, we do not have the right to display a defeatist spirit, a passive stance and an indifferent attitude.

Indeed, sometimes in certain situations the role of language has become less important in the formation and preservation of the Armenian identity. We must be especially careful and sensitive in our approach to this matter. Understandable circumstances having arisen from obligatory situations must not be rendered into natural phenomena, acceptable principles or common standards. Armenian is our mother tongue. We must know Armenian and speak Armenian; this point cannot become a bargaining chip. Naturally this requires serious and persistent effort.

The Armenian family, first of all, plays a crucial role in the effectiveness of this effort. Those parents, who do not show any zealotry with regard to teaching the Armenian language to their children or insisting them to speak Armenian in the home, deserve blame. On the other hand, those parents, who, remaining faithful to their identity, sometimes even compel their children to speak Armenian, starting at a young age, are to be greatly appreciated. When the Armenian language begins to resound on the lips of Armenian children within the Armenian home, they never forget their mother tongue, even in the most difficult conditions of their lives.

After the family, the Armenian school plays a pivotal role in the constant use of the Armenian language. The Armenian school is the citadel of the defense of the Armenian language. It is the source of the perpetuation of the Armenian language, and the apostle of the spread of the Armenian language. By carrying out various initiatives, the institutions functioning in our communities can also contribute to the use of the Armenian language.

When the use of a language is in retreat, the identity of the nation to which it belongs gradually fades, and the roots of its existence gradually weaken. No matter how difficult the conditions surrounding us may be, we consider the daily and constant use of the Armenian language the

foremost obligation of each and every Armenian.

## 2

### *The Armenian language must be used properly*

Any language is subject to external influence over the course of time, and therefore change and corruption. Linguists exercise the necessary control so that the language keeps its accuracy to the greatest extent possible.

A cursory look at the history of the origin and evolution of the Armenian language shows that the Armenian language has become subject to changes not only outside Armenian soil but also even in Armenia itself. The influences borne by the Armenian language became more evident particularly in the diasporan reality. Indeed, the Armenian language presents a motley picture today, with its Eastern and Western variants, its Mashdotsian and Abeghian orthographies and, furthermore, its various usages in different diasporan communities.

By virtue of conditions, the Armenian language used in Armenia is of high quality linguistically and grammatically. But, within the Diaspora, with the exception of a few communities, enormous mistakes are being made in the use of the Armenian language, both verbally and in writing, sometimes even by teachers of the Armenian language, intellectuals and the press. A retreat has begun in the proper use of the Armenian language. This worrisome phenomenon must be arrested at all costs and as quickly as possible.

The Armenian school is called to make an important contribution to this serious task. It is within the Armenian school that the Armenian child will begin to learn Armenian correctly. We must not just blame the new generation for not speaking Armenian correctly; we must ensure the possibilities of teaching the new generation the correct Armenian. We must not just deplore the fact that there is a lack of teachers giving instruction in the Armenian language; we must prepare new teachers by making the teaching profession attractive in all respects. We must not just criticize the absence of textbooks; we must furnish the means of preparing new textbooks.

Insofar as the matter of orthography is concerned, the existing duality must come to an end. Armenia and the Diaspora must return the Armenian language to its roots – the orthography of Mesrob Mashdots – through mutual understanding and in stages.

## 3.

### *The Armenian language must be cleansed of foreign influences*

Being in a permanent interrelationship with its immediate environment, any language becomes subject to mutual influence. And, the less a language is used and the more limited the number of its users, the more easily it becomes exposed to foreign influence.

Indeed, it is a phenomenon equivalent to a miracle that the Armenian language, despite its permanent contact with its environment, especially during the Cilician period and subsequently in the Diaspora, to all intents and purposes, has been able to solidly maintain its grammatical structure, the foundation of its linguistic thought and its rich vocabulary. However, in recent decades, Eastern Armenian in Armenia and Western Armenian in the Diaspora both began to abundantly use foreign words and such linguistic expressions and styles that don't form part of the vocabulary of the Armenian language and constitute a deviation from the specificities of the Armenian language.

It's true that the extensive use of Russian words in Armenia has begun to make a concession to a certain extent; however, the necessity to cleanse the Eastern Armenian language remains imperative. Individual Armenians, particularly in the Diaspora, sometimes are bound to resort to

foreign words when it comes to professional topics. But quite often foreign words are used to be fashionable. And this is precisely where the danger lies. The Armenian language is so rich in its vocabulary and so flexible in its forms of expression that Armenians are not obliged to resort to foreign languages.

The unnecessary use of foreign words is absolutely unacceptable; such a course only leads to the degeneration of the Armenian language. The purification and crystallization of the Armenian language is an urgent necessity. Therefore, every Armenian must consider the healthy and clean maintenance of the Armenian language a sacred obligation, keeping it away from the presence of foreign words and sayings.

#### 4.

#### *The Armenian language must be taught in a programmed manner*

The constant and correct use of a language, as well as its preservation in pristine condition, is greatly dependent on its instruction. A language survives a long time when it is transmitted without interruption from one generation to another. But a language remains durable, vital and pristine when its transmittal, or instruction, is carried out in a programmed manner and with the utilization of pedagogically approved methods.

The Armenian school is engaged in this extremely important task in Armenian life. The Armenian language has a pivotal place and role in the Armenian school's mission of building tomorrow's Armenians. The proper teaching of the Armenian language is what makes the Armenian school an Armenian school. It is not possible to provide an Armenian education, to inculcate the new generation with the Armenian spirit without the Armenian language. Therefore, the teaching of the Armenian language within our schools must be carried out with the highest degree of meticulousness. The Armenian language and the subjects taught in Armenian must occupy the foremost place in the curriculum of the Armenian school, and their instruction must be carried out in a programmed manner, far removed from all kinds of random approaches and hasty arrangements.

Wherever Armenian schools don't exist, the Armenian press and Armenian books must become the school for teaching the Armenian language. The church also has an important role in this regard. Our rite, the sermons delivered in church, the relationship between the clergy and the flock, the Sunday school operating under the aegis of the church, and the functions organized by the church can greatly contribute to the healthy preservation and teaching of the Armenian language.

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Hence, the Armenian language is so vital for the Armenian people and its safe preservation is so imperative; so too is its constant and correct usage. Woe unto us when we keep a distance from the Armenian language. Woe unto us when we keep the Armenian language distant from our persons, our homes, our institutions, our life. Without the Armenian language, our life will become emptied of Armenian values, traditions, and the genuine Armenian identity. During the course of our history, we opened up to others, we respected others but we refused to be like others, sticking to our faith, identity and language. Let us not forget that, besides our faith and homeland, our language also preserved us; the Armenian language strengthened our existence; it shaped our identity. Again, the Armenian language, today and always, is the mighty shield of our national struggle, the bond of our unity, the stamp of our identity.

In proclaiming the year 2007 the **“Year of the Armenian Language,”** we wish for all the sons and daughters of our people to consciously and responsibly reflect on the singular importance

and critical role of the Armenian language in our individual and collective lives alike.

Therefore, we strongly recommend

- to the **dioceses** of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, to the Prelates and Church and Community Leaders, to refocus in the life of our people the irreplaceable role and pivotal importance of the Armenian language, by means of special initiatives and in light of the thoughts outlined, analyses made and concerns expressed in our Pontifical Message.
- to our **benefactors**, to practically support initiatives aimed at re-organizing the teaching of the Armenian language by strengthening the Armenian school, the spread of the Armenian press, the publication of Armenian books and the preparation of Armenian teachers.
- to our **institutions** and those in charge of them, to continue with renewed commitment the support and encouragement shown by them with regard to the Armenian school, by subjecting the Armenian school to comprehensive reorganization, and giving primary importance to the teaching of the Armenian language in that context.
- to our **press** and its servants, to transform their journalistic work into a national, cultural and educational mission for the pristine preservation and effective teaching of the Armenian language.
- to our **teachers**, especially the teachers giving instruction in the Armenian language, to show special meticulousness regarding the teaching of the Armenian language, considering it a sacred calling.
- to our **parents**, to speak Armenian only in their homes, to teach only Armenian to their children and to direct them toward Armenian values and traditions, toward Armenian life.
- Finally, to our people, especially our **youth** having undertaken the commitment to live in the Armenian mode, saying in the words of Khachatur Abovian: "I'm telling you, the newly matured Armenian youths who are more precious to me than my own life, learn ten languages but cling tightly to your language, your faith."

With paternal love,

Prayerfully,

Aram I,  
Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia

January 1, 2007  
Antelias, Lebanon

(Translated by Aris G. Sevag)