

To the Diocesan Prelates,
Clergymen,
National Representative Assemblies,
and the Armenian Faithful
of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia

We greet you with pontifical blessings and warm Christian love from the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia in Antelias.

As you know, each year we invite our people to focus their attention on a sacred value, a major concern, or a serious challenge pertaining to our community life, with the aim of further organizing our national-ecclesiastical life, making our spiritual identity flourish more, and rendering the Armenian image more illustrious.

Motivated by this zeal, we had proclaimed the year 2003 the “Year of the Bible,” 2004 “Year of the Family,” 2005 “Year of Pursuit of National Rights,” 2006 “Year of the Armenian School,” 2007, “Year of the Armenian Language,” and 2008 “Year of Christian Education.” With the same expectation, we proclaim the year 2009

“YEAR OF THE YOUTH”

Indeed, our youth have occupied a permanent and primary place in our pontifical messages, thoughts and activities. Not only have we stressed the importance of the role of the youth in Armenian life, but we have also exerted special effort to involve our young people in the mission of the church. We dedicated our recent book, published in French, *For a Transformed World*, to the Armenian youth, reminding them that they are destined to play a critical role in the revival of our church and nation. Referring to the unique importance of the youth, the National Assembly, in its recent meeting at the Catholicosate in Antelias, stressed that “the youth are one of our important priorities.”

Proclaiming 2009 the Year of the Youth is not circumstantial or incidental. The youth constitute a primary concern for our church and nation. We cannot ignore the serious crises and just expectations, the rich potential and unique role of the youth.

* * *

We consider the present period in the history of humankind as the period of the revival of the youth. Indeed, when we look around, we surely notice that the youth are a dominant presence everywhere. They are an active presence in ecclesiastical circles, in the realm of culture, in the field of politics, in the world of business and in various other domains of society. The youth have begun to become a particularly visible presence at the highest levels of leadership. Based on this fact, religions, cultures, and political or economic organizations have begun to give primary importance to the youth, establishing special funds and developing programs, as well as creating various initiatives to motivate the youth to engage in creative work.

These are not random phenomena. The youth constitute the life blood of society, the backbone of a community and the heartbeat of a structure. In other words, they are the force of human life providing vitality and ensuring continuity, without which the life of a society shall fade, the pace of its work shall slow down, its will shall weaken, and the road leading to its future shall become dark.

During the recent decades, the structures functioning within the life of our church and nation have begun to emphasize the importance of the youth, to a greater or lesser extent, and in various ways. Indeed, a cursory look at our communities and organizations will show a gradually increasing zeal toward youth.

The Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, as well, has begun with the same concern, to reevaluate and underscore the urgent necessity of the presence and role reserved for the youth in our life. Thus, about six years ago, we established a special youth department within the Catholicosate. We suggested to our prelaties that special youth programs be cultivated within the framework of the activities and services of our prelaties. On three occasions, we organized pan-diasporan youth assemblies, and we made youth a separate agenda item at the last two General Assemblies. On various occasions, in the format of dialogue conducted in the English language, we discussed issues affecting today's youth, taking into consideration particularly our youth living in Western countries. Alongside these efforts, we paid special attention to our youth, insofar as inter-church and inter-religious relations, Christian and Armenian education, and other aspects of the Catholicosate's mission are concerned.

Despite these practical steps, we don't consider sufficient the work carried out to date with regard to the youth. Quite a bit remains to be done. We expressed the same concern at the last General Assembly, saying, "We must make the youth a priority issue for our church and nation. If we wish to strengthen the homeland, we must turn to the youth; if we wish to make the church more relevant, we must turn to the youth; if we wish to make culture flourish, again we must turn to the youth."

Now, based on this irrefutable fact, we wish first to share a few thoughts with our people and then invite our youth to seriously reflect on certain issues and concerns.

* * *

We wish to begin with the following oft-heard questions: Where are the youth today? What concerns and challenges are they facing?

Speaking about the youth, it is generally said that they are in crisis. From our perspective, the youth are not in crisis; rather, they are in search in the current troubled world. The search of the youth has three different dimensions that are closely interrelated. They are:

A. SEARCH FOR IDENTITY. The youths of today, regardless of which society they live in, are searching for their identity. The world, which is in a state of perpetual motion, where radical changes upset values and traditions, structures and systems, has driven the youth toward polarization, expressed sometimes as protest, sometimes through self-isolation, and sometimes through various other undesirable social behavior. The youths, who wish to be themselves, who are searching for their own image and unique way of expressing themselves, are virtually in a state of confusion. This psychological state of the youth often leads them to strange ways of thinking, behaving and living.

B. SEARCH FOR SPIRITUAL VALUES. The religions of the world were not able to keep pace with the new conditions generated by an ever-changing world. They remained self-contained and out of touch with the realities of the outer world. This situation often motivates youths having a special inclination and sensibility regarding spiritual life to search for spiritual values outside of the religious institutions to which they belong. When religions cannot satisfy the spiritual thirst of their youths, by becoming useful in their spiritual growth and formation and when religion as an effective means is exploited for other purposes, youths who are searching for religious truths become subject to harmful external influences.

C. SEARCH FOR MORAL VALUES. Multi-religious, multi-racial and multi-cultural societies, in which a visible clash takes place between worldviews and traditions, values and standards, sometimes even with brutal means and expressions, have begun to give birth to a new order of moral values and perceptions. In this situation, some see a retreat of traditional moral values; others, the emergence of new values consonant with the realities of today's world. Hence, certain realities and perceptions that are considered morally unacceptable by some have become natural for others. In the face of this confusing situation, the youth are searching for a clear orientation with regard to moral values.

Naturally, the Armenian youth, who form an integral and indivisible part of current society, are also under the influence of these same bewildering conditions today. We need to be realistic. We cannot live isolated in today's world. We are in a permanent and existential interaction with our environment. The clear-cut divisions of "ours" and "yours" in today's society have virtually begun to disappear. Therefore, the search of today's youth is also the search of Armenian youth; their problems are also the problems faced by Armenian youth.

* * *

Along with all this, and perhaps above it all, in our judgment, the Armenian youth face three serious challenges.

First, **the Armenian youth are in need of sound spiritual-intellectual formation.** The Christian-Armenian formation of youth constitutes an essential factor in building the identity of youth. Without Christian and Armenian education, the self-understanding of Armenian youth will be vague, and they will lose the clear direction of their lives in the face of winds blowing from all corners of the world. The formation of Armenian youth takes place within the Armenian school. The family and the church have a pivotal role to play in the absence of an Armenian school. Therefore, knowledge of Armenian history, and the transmission of our religious, national, moral and cultural traditions and values to the new generation must be considered a primary obligation by the family, school and church. Indeed, Armenian youth having a sound spiritual and Armenian upbringing will be able to face responsibly and boldly the moral and social evils abounding in today's society.

Second, **Armenian youth must render the national and international into a harmonious and balanced presence in their lives.** In today's globalized world, where boundaries, times, spaces and differences no longer exist, where societies are proceeding toward one collective entity, which is being expressed with one common culture and socio-economic system, unfortunately the national has begun to give way to the universal, the local to the global. We cannot confront the growing challenges of globalization. It is necessary to have a realistic and critical dialogue with globalization and with its norms and paradigms. Now, it is incumbent on the Armenian youth who are part of the reality of today's world to cling to the national, while being receptive to the international. They don't have the right to ignore one or the other or set one against the other. Both of them are necessary. It is true that it is difficult to keep both at the same time; indicating a preference is perhaps easier. However, such an approach will exclude Armenian youth either from today's world or from Armenian life. Conscious Armenian youth are expected to make the national and the international a complementary and coherent presence in their lives. The harmonious and interactive presence of these two dimensions in the lives of Armenian youth will also enrich our collective life.

Third, **Armenian youth must consider remaining Armenian in the Diaspora a daily struggle**. After the Genocide, the Armenians decided to remain Armenian under the difficult conditions of the Diaspora at the cost of utmost sacrifice. The factors distancing us from Armenianness today are numerous and diverse, and the Armenian youth are constantly and directly exposed to the immediate influence of such conditions. It is under such circumstances that Armenian youth are called upon to cling firmly to their roots. Armenianness is not merely a hereditary connection; it is essentially a strong attachment to our values, traditions and ideals; allegiance to our identity and to its imperatives and participation in our community life. No matter what conditions Armenian youth find themselves, they must live their Armenianness with this awareness and commitment.

* * *

The Armenian youth have their difficulties, concerns and also viewpoints regarding the issues and problems affecting today's society, in general, and our national-ecclesiastical life, in particular. In other words, Armenian youth are not indifferent and passive; they have things to say and also expectations from us.

a) Above all, the Armenian youth expect us to have **a serious approach** with regard to them, to bear in mind their presence in our family, our institutions and community life. Generally speaking, the older generation often ignores the presence, and particularly the role, of the youth, not considering it all that vital. Our indifference often gives rise to rebellion among the youth; our criticism directed at them engenders disobedience or even withdrawal from Armenian life. It is essential for our attitude toward the youth to change. We must appreciate the youth's role and encourage their unique contribution in various aspects of our life.

b) The youth expect to play **the role of participant** and not follower. It is necessary to convince the youth with factual data that they don't belong to the periphery of our life but rather the main page, not just to the future but to the present as well. It is necessary to convince the youth, through practical initiatives, that they are not in the passive state of observers but participants and even leaders. In other words, the youth must know that they are closely involved in all spheres of our community life. They must approach Armenian life with this consciousness.

c) The youth also expect for grownups not to just dictate or command but to talk with them, **to hear them**. The Armenian youth have things to say, and we must be ready to listen to them. Therefore, a sincere and realistic dialogue must take place between the older generation and the youth. Our relationship and collaboration with the youth must be based on dialogue. Indeed, it is possible to generate mutual trust, as well as constructive and beneficial cooperation, only through frank dialogue.

* * *

Just as the youth have expectations from the older generation, likewise the older generation has expectations from the youth, has things to say to the youth. The apostle Peter exhorts the youth, saying, "Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders...Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5: 5-8). These days, so

many “devils,” often in sheep’s clothing, are walking around our youth everywhere and at every instant. . . . The Armenian youth must know the clear path of their life, which is characterized by the following fundamental principles.

a) **Faithfulness.** The faithfulness of the Armenian youth to their roots is essential for the healthy maintenance of their identity. No matter how much the present-day globalized world tries to distort the identity of the Armenian youth, they must always cling to the values and traditions, spiritual and moral precepts and convictions forming their unique identity. It is today’s youth that will guarantee the bright future of the Armenian people through their steadfast faithfulness.

b) **Participation.** Faithfulness to our identity presupposes participation in our life. Indeed, where organized collective life exists, Armenian youth do not have the right to keep their distance from it. Where community life is absent, Armenian youth who are faithful to their roots must seek other ways to articulate correctly their identity and belonging to common Armenian life. There is such a great need for the active and conscious participation, the rich potential of our youth, in Armenia and the Diaspora.

c) **Renewal.** All the structures operating in our national life, including the church, are in immediate need of renewal. It is not possible to function with a mentality inherited from the past. Our structures must not become reduced to museums. It is mandatory that we keep in step with the demands of today’s society, naturally without straying from our fundamental values, our identity. Ignoring the old is not right; however, renewing the old is imperative. This is where the unique contribution of the youth, who are familiar with the conditions of today’s world, comes in.

d) **Vision.** Nations and religions, institutions and governments flourish and advance through concerted programs and forward-looking activity. It is essential for us to have a vision that is receptive toward the future and will lead us toward it. It is essential to adopt a new way of thinking and *modus operandi* if we wish to make our nation, our communities, and our church more organized and viable. Innovation becomes superficial if it doesn’t spring from new vision. Copying others becomes detrimental, when it is done at the cost of losing our own. A youth speaking at the General Assembly said, “Where past experience, present-day reform and foresight into the future are absent, retreat and defeat are inevitable.” The youth are called upon to inject new sap into our life, with their new approaches and perspectives, new perceptions and methodologies.

* * *

The Armenian Church has an important role to play regarding the issues raised and expectations laid out. The church often says, “Where is our youth?” The youth likewise say, “Where is our church?” Instead of criticizing one another, it is necessary for the church and the youth to seek each other out, to approach each other and to speak with each other. Instead of just making suggestions, it is necessary for them to listen to each other. Furthermore, instead of just speaking with each other, it is necessary for them to work together. We often speak about the wound but we don’t think about the remedy; we often deride one another but we don’t have the courage to accept our deficiency and correct it.

Another youth said at the General Assembly: “We expect from our church programs corresponding to the concerns and conditions of present-day life.” We share this fair expectation of our youth. Yes, our church is in need of renewal. However, it is not enough to talk about this, to criticize and keep one’s distance from the church. The Armenian youth must participate in the imperative task of renewing their

centuries-old church. Our church can be renewed only through knowledgeable and committed youth, and the church's mission of faith can be effectively realized in the life of our people only with a renewed Armenian Church.

The awakening of spiritual values has started to become a palpable presence among our youth. Our church must not ignore this positive development. On the contrary, through appealing means, it must make the Armenian youths participants in its life and mission, in a practical way. Each youth must know that he/she is the adopted child of God bought with Christ's blood, and that God's house, the Church, is his/her true home. Furthermore, if there are youths who, for one reason or other, have withdrawn from the church, the role of the church's pastor must be to leave the ninety-nine sheep and go after the one having strayed (Matthew 18: 12).

Let us not forget the words of the Apostle John: "I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you" (I John 2: 14). The Armenian youth must become strong in God; they must grow through the life and witness of their church. They must resist modern-day perils with the shield of their spiritual, moral, and national values.

Therefore, the Year of Armenian Youth must become the occasion for our church to manifest tangibly its concern and support toward Armenian youth. It must also serve as a challenge to Armenian youth to strengthen their Armenian-Christian identity and their national roots and actively participate in the life and mission of their church, the flourishing of their homeland and the progress of their people.

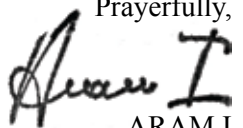
Thus, with these thoughts and expectations, as well as with paternal love, we call upon all our dioceses, organizations and institutions:

- a) To reemphasize the important place and critical role of Armenian youth in the life of our people, by means of special events, programs and efforts.
- b) To generate youth movements, specifically to inculcate Armenian youths who are living in foreign environments with our national, spiritual and cultural values and to lead them toward Armenian life.
- c) To carry out organized and persistent work, by making the youth real participants in the life and activity of our dioceses, organizations and communities.
- d) To encourage students to pursue higher education in different areas of specialization and entrust them responsible positions at the level of leadership.

We firmly believe that we shall be able to ensure the dynamic contribution of our youth by sharing their concerns through dialogue, by assisting with their plans and programs, initiatives, and vision.

We pray to Almighty God that He bless our youth all over the world with His heavenly graces.

With warm paternal love,

Prayerfully,

ARAM I

CATHOLICOS OF CILICIA

December 31, 2008

Antelias, Lebanon

(Translated by Aris G. Sevag)