Patriarch Kirill's speech at Echmiadzin cathedral

Your Holiness, Honorable Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos Karekin II of All Armenians,

Your Eminances and Graces,

Dear Fathers, Brothers and Sisters,

Dear Representatives of the Armenian state and public:

With great joy and warm feelings I have set foot today on the blessed and much-suffered Armenian soil sanctified by the toil of St. Gregory the Enlightener of Great Armenia and stained with the blood of martyrs for the faith of Christ cultivated by many generations of the fraternal Armenian people.

As primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, I would like to testify on behalf of all its faithful our deep respect for the spiritual tradition and culture of your people. Your historical roots throw back thousands of years and your culture has given the world immortal works of literature and art, architectural monuments and a distinctive religious written language.

Whoever comes to Armenia receives an indelible impression, looking at its main symbol, holy Mount Ararat, on which the forefather Noah's Arc had stopped. And today I can feel with awe that literary every stone in this land is a silent witness to great and glorious accomplishments, feats and works which have had a direct influence on the course of history of the entire humanity.

Christianity, which took root in Armenia thanks to the efforts of Sts Bartholomew and Thaddaeus, opened up a new page in the history of the Armenian people. Supported by a highly developed culture, scholarship and stable statehood, it was declared as the faith of all Armenians by King Tiridates III as far back the year of the Lord 301. The Christian faith was asserted among the people by the missionary efforts of Christ's great saint Gregory the Enlightener. The Armenian soil was washed at that time by the blood of martyrs, which, according to Tertullian, 'is the seed of Christianity'. The feat of martyrdom performed by the holy virgins Rhipsimia and Gaiania, called Hripsime and Gaiane in Armenia, contributed to the miraculous Christian conversion of King Tiridates, a former persecutor of the Church. In this way these saint testified by their feat to the divine truth of the Gospel's words: *Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds* (Jn. 12:24).

Throughout its 1770 year-long history, the Armenian Apostolic Church has acquired the right to name itself truly the soul of the Armenian people. The faith, traditions and customs of the Armenian people have rallied around the Church the entire millions-strong diaspora dispersed throughout the world. A considerable part of this diaspora lives in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus – the countries nourished spiritually by the Russian Orthodox Church.

Your Holiness, the first quarter of the 19th century saw the beginning of Armenia's joining the Russian Empire. At that time, it made it possible for the Armenian people to be defended against external enemies and to have an opportunity for a free national development. Since then there have been good and friendly relations between us, which are maintained to this day.

In spite of the fact that our Churches, for historical reasons, do not share the Eucharistic communion, we clearly realize our closeness. We see a reason for this in the commitment of both the Russian Orthodox and the Armenian Apostolic Churches to the early church Tradition. It is on its basis that the traditional values characteristic equally of the Eastern Slavic and Armenian cultures have been formed. It is the faithfulness to Christian tradition and its ethical ideals that links us and guarantees our co-work and friendship.

Together we have participated in the work of international Christian organizations and various religious forums and conducted a fruitful bilateral dialogue. We are gratified by the fact that Armenian students study in the Russian Orthodox Church's theological academies, which enables them to familiarize themselves with the faith, history, culture and tradition of peoples inhabiting the space of historical Rus'.

Today, in this Cathedral of the Holy First-Throne Echmiadzin founded by St. Gregory, where his holy right hand is kept, I again feel the need to develop and deepen our relations, so that we could bear an effective common witness before the world suffering at it is from divisions, enmity and injustice. St. Paul, instructing his disciple Timothy, says, *Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses* (1 Tim. 6:12). Our duty also lies in a common witness to the Tradition of the early Church before the Christian communities which have embarked on the path of liberalizing the moral teaching through a review of basic norms of Christian life.

We have no right to reduce the history of our friendship to past achievements, and our goal is to hand down to our posterity the experience and fruits of this cooperation thus laying a foundation for future relations based on the principles of Christian love, brotherhood and mutual understanding. I trust in this way we not only create the right model of international and inter-church relations but also serve the cause of unity commanded by our Lord Jesus Christ.

In conclusion, I would like once again to thank Your Holiness and all the people of the Armenian Apostolic Church for the invitation to come to the Armenian land, for the opportunity to venerate its old shrines and to see the life of your Church and your great and glorious people.

May the Lord bless our stay in the Armenian land through the intercession of St. Gregory the Enlightener.

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