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COMMEMORATION OF THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE 1915 EVENTS AT ST. PETER'S BASILICA

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The Holy Mass in Vatican

On 12 April 2015, a Holy Mass was led by Pope Francis at St. Peters Basilica to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the 1915 events. During the ceremony, Pope Francis declared Saint Gregory of Narek, a tenth-century monk and the author of the Book of Prayers / Book of Lamentations, a Doctor of the Universal Church. The President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan, Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin II, Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia Aram I, Patriarch of Cilicia of Armenian Catholics Nerses Bedros XIX and Catholicosates of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Patriarchate of the Armenian Catholic Church were also present in the liturgy.

In the Holy Mass, Pope Francis made two speeches that were named Greeting of the Holy Father[1] and Message of Pope Francis to Armenians.[2]

In the Greeting of the Holy Father, Pope Francis stated:

> ☀□□□□□ today too we hear the muffled and forgotten cry of so many of our defenceless brothers and sisters who, *on account of their faith in Christ or their ethnic origin*, are publicly and ruthlessly put to death - *decapitated, crucified, burned alive* - or forced to leave their homeland (emphasis added).

Pope Francis, added:

> In the past century our human family has lived through *three massive and unprecedented tragedies*. *The first, which is widely considered the first genocide of the twentieth century, struck your own Armenian people, the first Christian nation, as well as Catholic and Orthodox Syrians, Assyrians, Chaldeans and Greeks*. Bishops and priests, religious, women and men, the elderly and even defenceless children and the infirm were murdered. The remaining two were perpetrated by *Nazism and Stalinism*. And more recently there have been *other mass killings, like those in Cambodia, Rwanda, Burundi and Bosnia* (emphasis added).

In the Message of Pope Francis to Armenians, Pope Francis said: A century has passed since that horrific massacre which was a true martyrdom of your people, in which many innocent people died as confessors and martyrs for the name of Christ. Pope, underlining the Christian identity of the Armenians, stated that:

> Your Christian identity is indeed ancient, dating from the year 301, when Saint Gregory the Illuminator guided Armenia to conversion and baptism. You were the first among nations in the course of the centuries to embrace the Gospel of Christ. That spiritual event indelibly marked the Armenian people, as well as its culture and history, in which martyrdom holds a preeminent place, as attested to symbolically by the sacrificial witness of Saint Vardan and his companions in the fifth century.
>
> Your people, illuminated by Christs light and by his grace, have overcome many trials and sufferings, animated by the hope which comes from the Cross (cf. *Rom* 8:31-39). As Saint John Paul II said to you, Your history of suffering and martyrdom is a precious pearl, of which the universal Church is proud. Faith in Christ, mans Redeemer, infused you with an admirable courage on your path, so often like that of the Cross, on which you have advanced with determination, intent on preserving your identity as a people and as believers (*Homily*, 21 November 1987).

After underscoring the Christian faith and martyrdom of the Armenians, Pope Francis once again stated: This faith also accompanied and sustained your people during the tragic experience one hundred years ago *in what is generally referred to as the first genocide of the twentieth century*.

Pope Francis speeches galvanized the Armenian press and social media. Almost immediately, Armenian press and social media began cheering up and spreading the good news: Pope recognized the genocide! In fact, some Armenian media organs that had an eye on the main chance broadcasted the Holy Mass live.[3] After all, Popes recognition of the Armenian genocide was a great PR victory over the historical enemy, the Turk. As Simon Heffer wrote in International Business Times Kim Kardashian and Pope Francis left Turkey in PR disaster over Armenian genocide.[4] Then other press organs, too, began reporting Popes recognition.

Turkeys Reaction

On the same day, Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a press release on the statements of Pope Francis with a quite strong language.[5] Turkish MFA accused Pope Francis of discrimination between the sufferings by solely emphasizing the sufferings of the Christians and foremost the Armenians. With a selective point of view, he ignored the tragedies that befell on the Turkish and Muslim people who had lost their lives in World War I. Turkish MFA argued that:

> During this Holy Mass, history was instrumentalized for political aims. While overlooking the great sufferings and dark pages in remote geographies far away from Anatolia, and disregarding completely the cruelty of colonialism, only referring to our Christian brothers with whom we lived side by side in Anatolia for centuries, and who have nothing to do with the events of 1915, is unacceptable.

It expressed its regret that Vatican gave credit to the one-sided interpretations of historical events and to religious discrimination that was not conducive to peace;

> Statements which are controversial in every aspect, based on prejudices, distorting the history and confining the sufferings in Anatolia, amid the conditions of World War I, to a single religious community are declared null and void by the Republic of Turkey and the Turkish nation.

Turkish MFA also reminded that genocide is a legal concept and widespread convictions cannot be the basis of using this legal concept randomly.

Again on that Sunday, Ambassador of Vatican to Ankara was summoned to the Turkish MFA and Turkish Ambassador at the Holy See, Mr. Mehmet Paçacı was called to Turkey for consultations.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, too, condemned Pope Franciss remarks on the events of 1915. During his speech at the meeting of Turkish Exporters Assembly on 14 April, President Erdoğan said:[6]

> Whenever politicians, religious functionaries assume the duties of historians, then delirium comes out, not fact. Hereby, I want to repeat our call to establish a joint commission of historians and stress we are ready to open our archives. I want to warn the pope to not repeat this mistake and condemn him.

Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu also criticized Pope Francis description of 1915 incidents as genocide" and deemed Pope Francis statement as unfortunate, incorrect and inconsistent.[7] The Turkish Prime Minister said that the primary duty of the religious leaders was not to engender renewed climate of conflict and hate from historic debates, but to invite people to peace and peaceful coexistence. Davutoğlu also reiterated the suggestion to create an international board of historians to investigate the issue. On another occasion, Davutoğlu said: We are ready to talk about historical incidents but we will allow nobody to insult or blackmail our nation over historical disputes.[8]

Question Marks that the Liturgy Raised

Surely, Vatican is the Holy See of the Catholic World and the Holy Mass held in this small and idiosyncratic state was meant for Christians. Therefore, references to Christian doctrine and mythology are understandable. However, Pope Francis framing of the highly politicized debate over the nature of the 1915 events raised concerns. Pope Francis framing the killings in 1915 as Christian martyrdom created a perception of willful ignorance of the suffering of the Muslims during the World War I and prioritizing the pain of Christian people over the pain of Muslim people.

Today, fundamentalists of both the Christian and Islamic faiths strain every nerve to create and raise tensions between the followers of two faiths. Therefore, strengthening the inter-faith dialogue is one of the urgent tasks of the people of wisdom. Unfortunately, Pope Francis approach, as the spiritual leader of approximately 1.200.000.000 Catholics, of basing the suffering of the Armenians on a religious ground neither contributes to the inter-faith dialogue nor fits to the historical realities.

Pope Francis speeches were precarious not only for misrepresenting the nature of the Armenian-Turkish conflict a hundred year ago. His Greeting of the Holy Father include distortions of some other facts, as well. As the Turkish MFA underlined in its above mentioned press release,[9] Pope Francis referred to the tragic events that took place in Bosnia and in Rwanda as mass killings, whereas these are recognized as genocides by competent international courts. He, however [called] the events of 1915 a genocide, despite the absence of any such competent court judgment[10]. The Turkish MFA stated that this is meaningful. It is not possible to explain this contradiction with the concepts of justice and conscience.

A possible explanation of Pope Francis speeches may lay in Vaticans long-term policy for the unification of the Catholic and Eastern Churches, or if this would not be possible in the mid-run, establishing the Vatican as *primus inter pares* before that prospective unification by instituting its hegemony in the Christian world by gaining the sympathy of the non-Catholic Christians.

Although, media paid close attention to Pope Francis speeches, Catholicos Karekin IIs speech at the same liturgy did not attract the attention it deserved. In his speech, Catholicos Karekin II stated that:[11]

> By the mercy of our compassionate God, our people have straightened their broken backs; new life has sprouted under the shelter of a reestablished statehood on an *eastern portion of Armenia* and in the communities of the Diaspora ☀ Today, our people live under an *illegal blockade implemented by Turkey and Azerbaijan*; *struggle for the right of our people to live free in Mountainous Karabagh*, and with faith in the triumph of justice, continue efforts for the sake of our rights-for the *universal recognition, condemnation, and just reparation for the Armenian Genocide* (emphasis added).

Catholicos Karekin IIs remark reestablished statehood on an eastern portion of Armenia is the expression of considering the eastern territories of Turkey as Western Armenia. Those who are familiar with the Armenian political lexicon know very well that Western Armenia

is not simply a geographic naming; it is the expression of the territorial demands over Eastern Turkey. Yet, by employing the term Western Armenia, Catholicos Karekin IIs once again repeated the Armenian claim on some parts of the internationally recognized territory of the Republic of Turkey. It must be noted that the present Armenian-Turkish border was set by the treaties of Kars and Moscow in 1921.

The discourse of illegal blockade of Turkey is one of chief elements of the Armenian propaganda. Yet, contrary to that propaganda repeated by Karekin II, there is no such illegal blockage. It is true that the land-border between Armenia and Turkey was closed by the latter in 1993 following Armenias occupation of the Azerbaijani territory of Kelbejar. However, people and goods travel between the two countries via air or the Georgian territory. Turkey does not impose any sanctions to countries that develop political and/or economic relations with Armenia. As to the blockage of Azerbaijan, what is illegal here is Armenias occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent districts, which constitutes 1/5 of Azerbaijani territories. Azerbaijan, too, closed its borders with Armenia in response to that illegal occupation of Azerbaijani territories.

The Holy Mass is a religious ceremony and, in an ideal world, speeches are expected to be in that nature. Sure, we do not live in an ideal world. However, we still have the right to expect a Catholicos to refrain from ungrounded propaganda during a Holy Mass.

Different Opinions in Italy

Following the strong reaction of Turkey, Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Paolo Gentiloni, who met with the Armenian Eduard Nalbandyan on 10 April 2015 to exchange views on principal international concerns, particularly the tensions in the Mediterranean region and the Middle East, recent developments in the Iranian nuclear negotiations and the crisis in Ukraine,[12] said Turkeys strong reaction to Vatican doesn't seem justified to me, bearing in mind that John Paul II said something similar 15 years ago.[13]

Prime Minister of Italy, Matteo Renzi also commented on the issue. During his meeting with students at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., the Prime Minister said: The Popes statement on the recognition of the Armenian Genocide was absolutely righteous, and if Turkey wants to join the European Union, it must adopt the European values. He added:

> I support Turkeys European integration, but Ankara needs to make a decision and accept that it shares our value. The Pope voiced very clearly what had been perpetrated in Armenia, Turkey reacted to it, and Foreign Minister Gentiloni criticized Ankaras statement. At this point, Turkeys integration process depends on Ankara.

On the other hand, the Secretary to the Italian Prime Minister Sandro Gozi said:[14]

> I believe that it is never appropriate for a government to take official positions on this issue, for me, it is my personal opinion, it was. But a government should not use the word genocide ☀ With the government in Ankara are committed to talk about

> democracy, human rights and minorities. We believe that dialogue and negotiation are used to solve these problems and not the confrontation...there is a historical absolute and reading of history creates strong divisions. For us we do politics is better to look to todays problems of politics. No government is expressed in an official manner: this is the task of historians.

Notably, Matteo Salvini, the leader of the racist/xenophobic Lega Nord also defended Pope Francis against Turkey by stating:

> Turkey is unworthy to enter Europe, but to withdraw ambassadors! Now I write to Renzi and the Presidents of the Commission and the European Parliament to ask to close the negotiations for Turkeys entry into Europe ☀□□□□□ to Pope Francis that took courage to speak the truth about the Armenian Genocide.

The Flip-flopping Germany

The controversial liturgy in Vatican raised doubts in Germany, as well. On 13 April 2015, the German government stated that it was the task of the historians to study the 1915 events. Deputy spokeswoman of the German government Christaine Wirtz said Germany would not intervene in the debate around the events of 1915.[15] She stated that:[16]

> This is a question that the German federal government would not intervene [in]. It is a question that should be dealt with historians and experts ☀□ would not put myself into the position of a referee and decide which historical assessment is the right one.

According to Bloomberg TV, she also said:[17]

> While its very important that Turks and Armenians reconcile over the killings, such a coming to terms with the past cant be forced on someone from abroad -- its a domestic issue, Christiane Wirtz, a government spokeswoman, told reporters last week.

Likewise, on 19 April 2015, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier rejected using the word genocide in an ARD TV interview.[18]

Yet, in an unaccustomed manner, on 20 April 2015, media reported that the German government changed its position and backpedaled from its long since policy of non-interference in the genocide politics. According to the reports, Chancellor Merkel's spokesman Steffen Seibert said that the German government (a coalition of the Merkels conservative Christian Democrats and Social Democrats) would support a resolution in parliament on 24 April 2015 declaring the 1915 events an example of genocide. Reuters reported that Seibert said that:[19]

> The government backs the draft resolution ... in which the fate of the Armenians during World War One serves as an example of the history of mass murders, ethnic cleansings, expulsions and, yes, the genocides during the 20th century,

Merkels spokesman Steffen Seibert said the government would support a resolution to be presented to parliament on Friday after the chancellors conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) and their Social Democrat (SPD) coalition partners agreed to the move at meetings on Monday.It is also reported that it is also expected that German President Joachim Gauck is also going to use the term genocide at a religious service in Berlin on 23 April. [20]

Again ambiguously, no senior German official, but a junior official of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs will attend the commemoration in Yerevan on 24 April.

It has to be noted that, there have been a contorvery in Germany on the official definition of 1915 events as genocide. Whereas, the Greens and the Left Party have been supporting the usage of the term genocide, Christian Democrats and Social Democrats have been against that.[21]

Putins Comments

Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is to attend 24 April Armenian genocide commemorations in Yerevan,[22] also commented on the Popes remarks. He rather in a unclear way said that he is confident that the situation with the speech by Pope Francis in the Vatican on the genocide of Armenians will be resolved.[23] He continued:

> I don't want to interfere in the polemic between the Pope and Turkey. Popes are so authoritarian. I consider the Pope to have so much authority in the world that he will find a way to achieve understanding with all people on our planet, regardless of their religious affiliation.

Putin said he is not familiar with the situation, adding: I am confident that people in Turkey are smart and flexible enough to resolve any problems that may arise.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon on the Liturgy in Vatican

A day after the Liturgy in Vatican, on 13 April 2015, Associated Press (AP) reported that the UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric made some comments on the Liturgy in Vatican two days ago. The AP quoting Dujarric reported that[24]:

> Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon considers the slaughter of Armenians by Ottoman Turks 100 years ago atrocity crimes," but he isn't supporting Pope Francis' description of the killings as the first genocide of the 20th century,

The AP reported that[25]:

> [Dujarric] said the secretary-general firmly believes that the commemoration and continuing cooperation between Armenians and Turks "with a view to establishing the facts about what happened should strengthen our collective determination to

prevent similar atrocity crimes from ever happening in the future.

> Dujarric said in response to a question that Ban did not envision an international commission to examine the facts, saying: "There've been discussions with the countries concerned, and communities concerned and I think it's important that those discussions continue."
>
> He sidestepped several questions on whether the secretary-general agreed with the pope's (SIC!) characterization, and whether Francis was right to raise the issue.

The AP also reported that the spokesperson of the EU Foreign Affairs Maja Kocijancic said the EU encourages the countries to consider additional, meaningful steps that would pave the way toward full reconciliation.

The Joint Declarations of Pope John Paul II and Catholicos Karekin II in 2001

Following Pope Francis remarks labeling the 1915 as genocide, the first official comment came from the Vaticans spokesman, Rev. Federico Lombardi. Speaking at a press conference, Lombardi stated:[26]

> What the Pope said seems as clear as day to me: he said it, he articulated it, he referred to the joint declaration made by John Paul II and Karekin [in 2001], that is, he used the term genocide in continuity with a previous use of the word, he underlined the historical context, recalling the Armenian genocide which was one of many other terrible things that occurred last century and which are still occurring today.

The spokesman continued: his message was very clear for those who wanted to embrace it and included a positive reference to his hopes for a reconciliation and dialogue between the Turkish people and the Armenian people.

Referring to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğans reiteration of the proposal to establish a joint commission of historians, the spokesman said:

> I found the subject of the mixed historical commission and the historical archives which Erdogan mentioned interesting. I think that, in relation to this, Sundays event gave a further strong impulse for a reflection, in line also with the Popes vision, that encompasses the present day too and can be a lesson for history and for today with the intention and wish for further reflection and dialogue.

It seems like the Vatican spokesman implies that the Pope Francis remarks led to such a proposal to form a historical commission. Otherwise, he is unaware that this proposal was made by Turkey for many years but was disregarded by the Armenian side.

The joint declaration that the Vatican spokesman mentioned was issued during Pope John Paul IIs visit to Armenia for the celebration of the 1700th anniversary of Christianity as the state religion of Armenia in September 2001. The sentence referred by Pope Francis was: [27]

> The extermination of a million and a half Armenian Christians, *in what is generally referred to as the first genocide of the twentieth century*, and the subsequent annihilation of thousands under the former totalitarian regime are tragedies that still live in the memory of the present-day generation (emphasis added).

During his visit to Armenia, Pope John Paul II also had used the words Metz Yeghern during his prayer at the Armenian Genocide Memorial (Tsitsernakaberd).[28] Metz Yeghern (the Great Catastrophe) is a word used by Armenians to refer to the Armenian Genocide. Furthermore, during his farewell speech to Armenia, Pope John Paul II, this time, said: The terrible events at the beginning of the last century which brought your people to the brink of annihilation...[29]

Furthermore, the word genocide was also used by the Vatican prior to John Paul IIs visit to Armenia. The joint communiqué of Pope John Paul II and Catholicos Karekin II issued at the end of Karekin IIs visit to Vatican in November 2000 said: The Armenian genocide, which began the century, was a prologue to horrors that would follow.[30]

Putting the Dispute on the Correct Ground: The International Law

The dispute on the 1915 events has been going on for decades since 1970s. At its first stages, it was a dispute that was tried to be won by the merit of smoking barrels and exploding bombs. Radical Armenian nationalists organized under the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) and Justice Commandos for the Armenian Genocide-Armenian Revolutionary Army (JCAG-ARA) killed about seventy Turkish and non-Turkish people between 1975 and 1986 in order to bring the Armenian question back into the Worlds attention. Ironically, Turkish Ambassador in Vatican Taha Carım was killed on 9 June 1977 in Vatican by the JCAG-ARA. On 17 April 1980, again, JCAG-ARA attempted to assassinate the Turkish Ambassador Vecdi Türel in Vatican. Türel and his official chauffeur were wounded. The terrorists in both cases were never caught by the Vatican security forces. Notably, it is widely believed that JCAG-ARA was the underground organization of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaksutyun, which is a legal party in Armenia and provides support to President Sargsyans ruling party. It is also widely believed since 1950s Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia has been under the influence of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaksutyun.

Today, newspapers, internet websites, concert and lecture halls are the battle fields of this dispute. Whereas Armenian side imposes the idea that Armenian genocide is an indisputable fact and there is no need for the study of those events, Turkish side insists on the formation of a historical commission composed by Armenian, Turkish and other historians. For that, whereas Turkey invites all the scholars to its archives, Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaksutyun, the party that was the main Armenian actor in the 1915 events, keeps the doors of its archives in Boston closed to scholars other than few that are affiliated with the party. The same is also true for the Boghos Nubar Archives in Paris.

Given that situation, it has to be noted that Armenia, Turkey and the third-parties often miss a crucial point. This crucial point is the simple fact that genocide is a legal term defined by the 1948 *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*. Article VI of this Convention states:

> Persons charged with genocide or any of the other acts enumerated in Article III shall be tried by a competent tribunal of the State in the territory of which the act was committed, or by such international penal tribunal as may have jurisdiction with respect to those Contracting Parties which shall have accepted its jurisdiction.

Therefore, an event can only be established as the crime of genocide by the judgement of a valid court. This means, even historians are not the ones to judge on the legal character of an event, not to say novelists, musicians, celebrities or politicians. There are no barriers against initiating legal processes and, for that reason, those who make accusations shall bring their cases to the valid courts. This is the only way to solve the controversy over the 1915 events, of course, if this controversy is really wanted to be solved.

Last but not least, one has to recall that Vatican is not just a Holy See and the Pope is not just a spiritual leader. Vatican is a state and the Pope is the head of this state. Therefore, the Pope, just like any other head of any other state, has the responsibility to respect international law and the valid legislations.

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