

Catholicos Karekin II in

Heads of Sister Churches Renew Ties

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

The heads of the Armenian and Roman Catholic Churches met in the Vatican as Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin II's paid an official three-day visit to Rome. Pope John Paul II formally welcomed the Catholicos and his large delegation at the Apostolic Palace, his official residence in the Vatican. After a 45-minute private meeting between the two religious leaders, the Catholicos introduced his delegation to the Pope, which included senior bishops from Armenia and the Diaspora and Armenia's Ambassador to Italy, Gagik Baghdasarian. Some 75 lay Armenians from the US, Europe and South America also participated in the ceremonies.

"The Armenian Church has paid dearly for its fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus Christ," said the Pope in his welcoming remarks. "By God's grace, Armenia has found new freedom and independence. Yet Armenia still faces enormous challenges," he continued. "On the cultural and religious level there is still much to be done to fill the spiritual void left behind by a godless and collectivist ideology," a reference to Soviet years in Armenia. The Roman Pontiff assured that "the Catholic Church wants to stand with the Apostolic Armenian Church, to support its spiritual and pastoral ministry to the Armenian people, in complete respect for its way of life and characteristic identity."

In turn, Catholicos Karekin thanked the Pope for his warm welcome and invited him to Holy Ejmiatsin and Armenia to participate in the 1700th anniversary of adoption of Christian as state religion in Armenia, scheduled to take place next year.

In a Joint Communique, the Catholicos and the Pope acknowledged the Armenian and Catholic Churches' religious traditions and "complementary" doctrines and recognized the validity of each other's sacraments. The two leaders pledged to intensify their search for "closer communion" and cooperation.

Most noteworthy, the Vatican formally

acknowledged the Armenian Genocide. "The 20th century was marked by extreme violence. The Armenian genocide, which began the century, was a prologue to horrors that would follow. Two world wars, countless regional conflicts and deliberately organized campaigns of extermination took the lives of millions of faithful," stated the Joint Communique.

In his own address, Catholicos Karekin added, "We harbor a deep sense of gratitude to all those who rendered support to us in those terrible days. This feeling will never be extinguished from our hearts; nor will the affection we feel towards others who came to our aid during the Genocide, and during the earthquake of Spitak, the tribulations associated with our transition to independence, and the Karabakh movement." He then thanked the Pope for his "comforting and encouraging words spoken on numerous occasions [which] still ring in our ears."

Predictably, the recognition of the Genocide stirred anger in Turkey. Inundated with questions from the Turkish media, Patriarch Mesrob Mutafyan of Istanbul, in a diplomatically worded statement, said, "It had been our wish that the deliberations in Rome would be within the spheres of ecumenical dialogue and would not touch upon politically sensitive issues. The Joint Communique could have taken this point into consideration." Patriarchs Mutafyan and Torkom Manoogian of Jerusalem did not go to Rome to participate in the ceremonies due to the sensitivity of the political environment in both Turkey and Israel.

But the high point of the Catholicos' visit was the return of the relics of Armenia's patron saint, Gregory the Illuminator. During a religious service in St. Peter's Basilica, the relics, which for five centuries had been kept in the St. Gregory Convent in Naples, were handed to Karekin II. They will be placed in the new Cathedral being built in Yerevan, dedicated to the 1700th anniversary.

Interestingly, Armenians have had relics



of St. Gregory for centuries, but it was generally not reported in the media. The Hierarchical Sees of the Armenian Church – in Ejmiatsin, Antelias, Jerusalem and Istanbul – have carefully kept, guarded and venerated St. Gregory's relics which are used especially to bless the Holy Muron (oil) in the Apostolic Church. Indeed, many remember the controversy in the 1950s when St. Gregory's "right hand" was stolen from Antelias, challenging the Cilician Catholicosate's "legitimacy" to bless the holy oil. They were eventually found and returned.

Karekin II's visit to the Vatican follows the trail of his predecessors. The late Catholicos Vazgen I met Pope Paul VI in 1970 (AIM May 2000), followed by two meetings between Catholicos Karekin I and Pope John Paul II in 1996 and 1999. In 1967 Catholicos Khoren of Cilicia paid the first official visit of an Eastern Church leader to the Vatican, which was followed by the visits of Karekin I and Aram I. ■

Rome



Clockwise, left to right: Pope John Paul II, right, listens to Catholicos Karekin II at the Vatican; Catholicos Karekin II and Pope John Paul II wave to the faithful in St. Peter's Basilica; Catholicos Karekin II, amid the incense, kisses a vessel containing the relics of St. Gregory the Illuminator, returned to the Armenian Church by Rome; Catholicos Karekin II blesses a loaf of bread during a visit with Rome's Armenian community.

