

## THE YOUTH: THE DRIVING FORCE FOR RENEWAL

The youth became one of the main foci of my recent pontifical visit to California, U.S.A. In fact, in my sermons, lectures, public remarks, meetings with church and community leaders and interviews with media I addressed issues and challenges pertaining to the youth, affirming the crucial role that they are called to play in our community life. This strong emphasis on youth was preceded by the publication of my new book, *Taking the Church to the People*, in which I clearly displayed my perspectives and convictions in respect to the Armenian youth.

My visit was essentially pastoral in its very nature, purpose and scope. Meeting with people at grassroots, observing their way of life, listening to their concerns and discerning their needs and priorities were, indeed, at the heart of my visitation program. Within this context, I not only talked about the youth, I also encouraged them to talk about their own experiences, frustrations and expectations. We shared concerns and views, learned from each other and built trust between the church and its youth. Three characteristic aspects captured my attention.-

1) *Our youth are ready to dialogue.* They consider themselves as integral part of our community life. They rightfully criticize those who attempt to marginalize them. They do not accept an imposed status quo. They believe that they have a great deal to contribute to church and community affairs and therefore they are ready to engage in a meaningful and realistic dialogue with community and church leaders. I greatly appreciate this sense of responsibility that I found with our youth. I strongly encourage any serious effort aimed at initiating a dynamic interaction with the youth. This interaction must be frank, open and inclusive and it must be based on mutual trust and understanding. Listening to the youth and empowering them should be the driving force of this dialogue. Indeed, monologue generates stagnation; dialogue creates progress; monologue leads to isolation, dialogue builds community.

2) *Our youth are eager to learn.* The youth whom I met in various contexts of my pontifical visit are ready not only to dialogue but also to learn from the old generation. Indeed, dialoguing is learning, it is mutually learning and growing process. The readiness of our youth to learn is a sign of hope. I came to realize through my encounter with the youth that they are well versed in their professions; they are also aware of the complexities of the present world. They need to know more about their church and the challenges it faces. Therefore, it is the primary obligation of community leaders to approach the youth, to embrace them and integrate them in community life, sharing with them their experiences and our expectations. Learning is not merely accumulating information; it is rather identifying with the concerns and challenges of our community and church.

3) *Our youth are committed to participate in the total life of the church and community.* Dialoguing and learning lead to participation. The youth are not satisfied with only engaging in dialogue or learning more; they want to be integrated in the work of the church and community; they want to be part of leadership and play an important role in decision making processes. This is indeed a legitimate expectation. I strongly support the youth's commitment to becoming a player in our public life. I consider it the obligation and right of the youth. Their sense of belonging to the community must be translated by their dedicated and active involvement in all aspects of community life. I believe that our human resources are the church's and nation's greatest and invaluable riches; and the youth occupy an important place in our human power.

During my meetings with our people I noticed both positive and negative aspects in our common life:

I witnessed on the one hand strenuous efforts towards community building; on the other hand I realized lack of enough efforts to respond to the spiritual needs of our people. Therefore, the formation of qualified and dedicated clergy is an urgent need.

I welcomed on the one hand the Prelacy's strong commitment to the Armenian school; on the other hand I was saddened to know that our children in majority are in non-Armenian schools. The cause should be identified and an alternative solution should be found.

I expressed on the one hand my joy to see our families around parish churches and community centers and organizations; on the other hand I was worried about those families who are on the fringes of Armenian life. Constant and consistent efforts must be made to bring these families to the fold of community.

I appreciated on the one hand the growing trends towards unity through mutual understanding and closer collaboration; on the other hand I was concerned to observe certain approaches which may not help deepen our unity. Indeed, unity must remain a top priority on our agenda.

We should not present a rosy picture of our church and community. Nor should we be emotional, biased or reactive. Besides significant progress and many achievements, there are also problems and deficiencies that must be addressed. A comprehensive and realistic assessment of our common life is the right path to follow. I publicly shared my concerns and expectations, and challenged our people, particularly the youth, to reflect seriously on these matters. I know that overcoming these contradictions and concerns is not easy. It requires common faith, hope and will. My visit was intended to remind our people of the pivotal importance of faith and love. Indeed, in faith we build our community and in love we deepen our God-given unity and look forward with renewed vision. My visit was also intended to become a wake-up call and a reminder that the renewal of our church and community must sustain and orient our reflection and action.

Indeed, in our common search for a renewed church, a more vibrant community and a better future the youth have a crucial role to play. I have full trust in our youth, and I invite them to assume their role.

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