

**2011 YEAR OF THE ARMENIAN CHILD**  
**(Summary in English of the Pontifical Message of His Holiness Aram I)**

**To the Diocesan Prelates,  
Clergy,  
Community Leaders, and  
Faithful of the  
Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia**

We greet you with pontifical blessings, warm Christian love, and ardent national feelings. At the threshold of the New Year, we wish you a year full of health, happiness, success and divine grace.

As you know, in accordance with the lovely tradition started by us nine years ago, at the beginning of each year we invite our faithful to make a sacred value, a vital issue or an important event, which directly pertains to our collective life and concerns, the focal point of their thoughts and work.

In recent years, when we made *the family, the Armenian school*, as well as *religious and Armenian education* the topic of collective thought, stressing their pivotal place in our Christian and community life, naturally we also briefly touched on Armenian children and our concern and zeal with regard to them. Indeed, childhood is a critical stage, during which one's character is built and the future course of one's life is determined. Now, considering the vital importance of children and childhood, with the present Pontifical Message, we proclaim the year 2011

**THE YEAR OF THE ARMENIAN CHILD**

Before making our paternal suggestions about our individual and collective responsibility regarding Armenian children, dear fellow Armenians, let us take an overview of the presence of children in the Bible, and then briefly explain the approach of current society toward children.

**A.**

***Children in the Bible and the Life of the Church***

The Bible is the source of divine revelation. Therefore, it is the foundation of Christian faith and the heart of the church's life and mission. Any value or thought, event or phenomenon pertaining to Christian life must be evaluated in the light of the Bible. Now, when we speak about children, it is mandatory that we first turn to the Bible, in which children are mentioned frequently on various occasions. When God created Adam and Eve, he gave them the obligation to multiply. The family and the interrelationship between parent and child developed. We encounter numerous references about this in the Old Testament; thus, "***Children's children are the crown of old men; and the glory of children are their fathers***" (Proverbs 17:6). Elsewhere we read that God "***shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers....***" (Malachi 4:6). The upbringing of children is considered important in the Old Testament: "***Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it***" (Proverbs 22:6). The care of orphans, as well, is mentioned with particular importance: "***Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child***" (Exodus 22:22).

The attention shown toward children in the New Testament acquires new emphasis. The Son of God was born as an infant in a manger in Bethlehem. The profound respect and piety directed at the Infant Jesus, starting with the magi and ending with the elderly Simon, is a characteristic phenomenon. During his earthly mission, Christ not only approached children numerous times and often mentioned them in His parables but also stressed the importance of God's special love for children. The Son of God considered children the symbol of simplicity and humility: ***"Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven"*** (Matthew 18:4). Christ also considered children's innocence a precondition for entry into the kingdom of heaven: ***"Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven"*** (Matthew 19:14). On another occasion, he reminded, ***"Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven"*** (Matthew 18:3). Christ placed so much importance on the place of the child in the life of society that he even said, cradling a child in His arms and facing the people, ***"Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me...."*** (Mark 9:36-37).

Christ's disciples continued to display the same caring attitude with regard to children, always reminding parents, ***"Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged"*** (Colossians 3: 21). The church, which was called upon to continue Christ's mission, whether through its divines or ecumenical councils, its teachings or canons, gave pivotal importance to children and, particularly, their religious and moral education. Over the course of history, all churches, in their thinking and concern, education and evangelism, reserved a primary place for children, considering them the church's foundation and the basic element ensuring the continuity of society and guaranteeing its future.

Armenian children always occupied an important place in the life of the Armenian Church, as well. The highest degree of solicitude displayed by our church toward children found its practical expression particularly through social service and education.

## **B.**

### ***Children in the life of current society***

Children constitute one of the most pressing issues of today's world. Children, God's most fragile creatures, are immediately subject to the damages brought on by wars, biospheric and natural disasters, social and physical diseases, as well as moral vices on the increase in society and their consequences. According to various polls, there is a considerable increase in the infant mortality rate, despite the huge progress made in the social, medical and economic spheres. Indeed, millions of children are suffering as a result of poverty and disease all over the world; because of epidemics, millions of children are dying; as a consequence of social and moral ills, millions of children are becoming orphans and street urchins.

On the other hand, the exploitation of children in an organized manner and on a world scale, in nightclubs and/or on battlefields, as well as the abduction of children and/or their utilization for harmful purposes, have in effect rendered them objects of illegal and immoral commerce. Unfortunately, such activities are continuing and, furthermore, expanding despite rigorous prosecution by various countries.

Indeed, the acts of violence being committed against children and the attempts to approach them in an inappropriate manner, in a moral sense, are frequently featured in major news stories in the international press. Furthermore, efforts have started to become commonplace in terms of involving individuals and institutions in such acts through contrived means and securing huge

sums by resorting to legal measures or by compromising the given circumstances. Thus, defenseless, unaware and innocent children today have become captives of their environment, whose duty is to give them support and protection, and the target of exploitation. Now you can imagine the terrible suffering and anxiety of those poor children. This is why religions, governments and organizations have begun to give primary importance to children, allocating a considerable part of their budgets to programs associated with children.

Within this context, it is worth mentioning the special children's division established by the United Nations, known by the name United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). The purpose of this structure of the United Nations is to render assistance to children by resorting to practical initiatives, as well as giving financial help to programs and efforts pertaining to children. In order for the work of the aforementioned structure to become more organized and consistent, as well as to make the participation of governments more active, and their commitment regarding children firmer, the United Nations organized an international congress in 1989, at which the "*Convention on the Rights of the Child*" was unanimously declared.

The purposes of the aforementioned Convention are: a) to defend the rights of children; b) to take care of children's needs; c) to create broad possibilities for the growth and development of children. In light of these fundamental purposes, it is also mentioned in the same Convention that it is necessary to exert every effort so that children live healthily, not become subject to harmful influences, remain free from exploitation, not become the victims of discrimination, maintain a high level of dignity, and participate in sociocultural life to the utmost degree.

UNICEF's headquarters are located in the UN building in New York City. Professional centers associated with the various facets of its extensive activity operate in Switzerland, Denmark, Belgium, Italy and Japan, and there are numerous UNICEF offices in 190 countries.

Despite the special importance given to children in today's society, what is missing in the multifaceted efforts being carried out in that regard is religious and moral education, which we consider fundamental for the sound development of children and the formation of their character.

### *C.*

#### *The necessity of religious and moral education for our children*

In recent years, when we touched upon the Armenian family and the Armenian school, in addition to the life and mission of the Armenian Church, in our messages and publications, we stressed how imperative Christian and Armenian education were for Armenian children. Indeed, it is in these three cherished environments of our community life that the religious and Armenian formation of tomorrow's Christian Armenian person takes place. In other words, it is in these three spiritual and intellectual furnaces that Armenian children become forged with our spiritual, moral and national values and traditions. Here it is worth touching separately on the major role of the family, the school and the church:

1. In the past, when we made *the family* the subject of discussion and evaluation, we said that the Armenian child opens its eyes to the world within the Armenian family, where its physical growth is also accompanied by its spiritual-moral growth. We also said that Armenian parents are the first and permanent educator when it comes to the Armenian child's spiritual and Armenian education and formation. The Armenian family has always been like this for us, in terms of its life, environment and calling. That is why the Armenian family, in a certain sense, is church, school and homeland all wrapped in one for our people. The foundation of our

Armenianness is laid in the Armenian family; our roots are planted in the Armenian family. Therefore, you can imagine how critical the role of the family is in the child's education.

Now, what kind of character can tomorrow's Armenian have, when there is a foreign and alienating presence within the Armenian family; when the Armenian family is removed from the spiritual and national sanctities and values that it is called upon to embrace; when social and moral vices have begun to penetrate the Armenian family; when the Armenian family is indifferent as regards our perceptions and traditions? Indeed, it is not with the textbook that Armenian parents shall educate their child but rather with the values and virtues radiating from the sacred family atmosphere. It is not with beatings and punishments that Armenian parents shall rear their child but rather through parental love and caring. It is not solely with the provision of physical sustenance that Armenian parents shall mold their child but rather with life-giving nourishment coming from spiritual and moral truths and values.

This is the way our parents have been, whereby they have become the object of our great respect and profound reverence. The upbringing of the children has been a top priority for them, even under the most difficult conditions. We also expect our present-day parents to be the same. The indifferent and negligent attitude displayed toward their children by parents spoiled by material possibilities and dominated by worldly pleasures is unacceptable to us. Indeed, we become filled with indignation when we see and hear that children who are supposed to nurse at their mothers' bosoms have been put in the care of hired nannies; when we see and hear that children in the most sensitive years of their lives have been put under the charge of governesses, so that their mothers won't be deprived of their moments of recreation. Today, in reality, the maid spends more time with the child than its mother. Furthermore, it is not acceptable for children, who are the legitimate offspring of the Armenian people, to enter the baptismal font of an Armenian church with a foreign name, and to attend a non-Armenian school, thereby becoming subject to steps distancing them from their true roots and native environment.

This way of life that is progressively making inroads into our families has begun to pollute the environment of the Armenian family, which is steeped in religion and Armenianism, and damage the course of the child's growth and formation. One can't remain indifferent in the face of these growing influences that deviate from our national perceptions and are gradually becoming more widespread. Armenians having spent their childhood in such an environment will surely revolt in their adulthood for having been raised under such conditions. Who is guilty, if not the parents and the parents alone? Indeed, parents play a pivotal role in building the future of our nation. By resorting to the aforementioned means, they can alienate their children from the church and community, and unfortunately, there are such parents. Parents can also render a great service to the Armenian people by giving birth to numerous children and rearing them in the Armenian mold. It is our profound wish that the number of such parents multiply.

2. When we frequently touch upon *the school*, we always remind those in charge of our educational institutions that the calling of the Armenian school is not just providing knowledge; rather, it is giving Armenian children spiritual and moral education. This is the *raison d'être*, the purpose of the Armenian school. For our people, the Armenian school is and remains, along with family and church, a sacred mission whose goal is to impart Christian and Armenian education to the coming generations. Now, any retreat or concession in this regard is not acceptable under any circumstances.

The primary obligation of the Armenian teacher is educating Armenian children. Teachers are the second parents of the Armenian children. Starting from the lowest kindergarten classes, besides their parents, children face teachers and follow their lead, and even their manner of

speaking and movements. At this stage, teachers set the example for the children. Their role in the children's education is so influential that when the children grow up, they don't forget their teachers, even in their advanced age.

We greatly appreciate the solicitous care provided by the Armenian school to the Armenian children. However, we expect more. We know full well that educating children under the present circumstances isn't easy; it's a serious challenge. The immediate environment of Armenian children is so full of depraved and contagious phenomena; sometimes, such scenes unfold before their eyes and they hear such expressions that they absorb them like sponges, resulting in negative consequences on the formation of their character. Therefore, it is not sufficient to merely resort to new teaching methods or just issue reminders at parent conferences. We must double our efforts in carrying out the task of educating Armenian children.

3. For the **Armenian Church**, the education of Armenian children continues to remain a priority, with its religious and Armenian components. Within this sphere, the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, through the Sunday schools it has founded, has played a beneficial role in the past and continues to do so with renewed vigor. Last year was the 80th anniversary of the founding and activity of our Sunday schools. On this occasion, we said the following in our pontifical encyclical:

“In past years, the Sunday schools accomplished a huge amount of work in religious education in diasporan Armenian communities, in general, and within the dioceses of the Great House of Cilicia, in particular. The Sunday schools were not ordinary and casual undertakings; rather, they became important institutions within the administrative-organizational system of the dioceses, with their special by-laws, teaching staff and curriculum. The catholicoi of our Holy See not only encouraged the activity of the Sunday schools but also established the position of General Executive Director of Sunday Schools within the Catholicosate at Antelias, to closely follow their work.

“Now, in light of the dedicated service performed and achievements made during the past 80 years, we are called upon today to not only rejoice but also to continue, with renewed commitment, the mission of providing religious and moral education to the new generation. Today, we are surrounded by the type of currents coming from a globalized world, which distort our Christian image, corrupt our national identity and lead our youngsters astray on a daily basis. Therefore, more than ever before, we see the acute need to infuse the life of our young generation with spiritual and moral values. It is this sacred mission in which the Sunday schools are engaged.”

It is mandatory that our approach to children's education become all-inclusive. Education, which is carried out with a narrow perspective, a dogmatic spirit and outdated methods can produce the opposite result. We must know what to transmit to the children through a progressive approach, as well as what to keep them away from, both in regular school and in Sunday school. We also must know how to educate the children by applying the kinds of means that are in keeping with the present conditions and concerns of life, as well as being appealing and effective. Within this sphere, the cultivation of children's literature corresponding to modern standards and present-day needs, the proper use of audiovisual aids, the preparation of enticing programs of interest to children, organizing special children's gatherings and other appealing initiatives can be of great help in carrying on the work of educating our children.

#### **D.**

#### ***Overall guide for the education of children***

Children are our hope and refuge insofar as our future is concerned. If we wish to make our church flourish, strengthen our homeland and guarantee our nation's future, we must turn to our children and, following Christ's commandment, give utmost importance to them, within the family, the school and the church and, generally speaking, within our community life.

Children cannot correctly and fully express their expectations, concerns, needs and preferences, as well as their sorrows and joys. We must approach them and show them, practically speaking, that they are surrounded by individuals who love and care for them. We must find the right ways of relating to, speaking and working with them.

Parents are the ones opening their children's path to the future, followed by the school and the church. Along that path, children need care, so we must care for them; children need education, so we must educate them; children need protection, so we must protect them; and children need loving affection, so we must give them loving affection.

In today's world full of various and diverse evils –

It is necessary to educate children, while keeping them away from unhealthy environments, extravagant lifestyles, dissolute forms of behavior, perverting relationships, unpleasant conversations and various forms of violence.

It is necessary to educate children by making them understand the need and desirability of having a loving and respectful relationship with their parents, friends, the opposite sex, the unfamiliar, and the biosphere.

It is necessary to educate children by inculcating in them love and zeal with regard to our spiritual, moral, cultural and national values, and traditions, our church and homeland, our pan-Armenian aspirations and dreams.

It is only with this approach and outlook that we will be able to transform children into tomorrow's

Conscious human beings,  
true Christians,  
committed Armenians.

#### ***E.***

#### ***Come, let's jointly take Armenian children under our care***

In proclaiming the year 2011 "*The Year of the Armenian Child,*" we expect the aforementioned thoughts, concerns and aspirations pertaining to children become the topic of serious and comprehensive discussion by our institutions and our people. Living in different environments, naturally Armenian children are subject to different influences. Now, during our discussions, in addition to common concerns and approaches, it is necessary to point out the differences and determine corresponding approaches and adopt modus operandi, for the sake of the sound spiritual, moral and national education of Armenian children.

Presently, we appeal to our Prelates and community leaders, our families, those in charge of our educational institutions and, generally speaking, the organizations operating in our various communities, to display the utmost solicitude and zeal with regard to our children. Our solicitous attitude toward Armenian children must be tangibly expressed by applying the following measures in particular –

1. In light of the concerns indicated by us, parents must consider it their obligation to also give priority to their children's Christian and Armenian education at home, along with their physical growth.
2. Our schools, particularly in their kindergarten and primary divisions, must review the education being offered, with emphasis on their religious, moral and Armenian contents, by employing such means and methods that will have appeal to our children.
3. Parents and educators must exert consistent effort to see to it that our children regularly and actively take part in programs outside the family and classroom. Within this sphere, special importance must be given to the Sunday school.
4. Our Prelacies must give new impetus to the Christian education that is being provided within the dioceses, particularly the development of programs connected with children on the parish level.
5. Finally, we earnestly appeal to our benefactors and prosperous Armenians to give their best and utmost to our children:

By establishing nurseries and kindergartens with modern equipment designed especially for use by children.

By establishing funds with the purpose of cultivating children's literature and issuing publications.

By establishing special assistance funds for sick, poor and orphaned children.

Armenian children are the children of the nation and church. Therefore, let's jointly take the Armenian children under our care, wipe the tears of the Armenian children, relieve their pains, minimize their suffering and, in practical terms, contribute to their sound physical and moral, spiritual and national growth and education. Let us not ever forget Christ's commandment: "***And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me***"

We pray to God that He care for and rear the children of our nation with His blessings.

(Matthew 18:5).

Prayerfully,  
**Aram I, Catholicos of the  
Great House of Cilicia**

January 1, 2011  
Antelias, Lebanon

(Translated by Aris G. Sevag)