

To the Prelates,  
Clergy,  
National Representative Assembly,  
And the Armenian Faithful  
Of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia

On the threshold of the year 2010, we greet you with pontifical blessing and warm Christian love from the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia in Antelias.

As you know, every year we invite our faithful to meditate upon a unique value, an important aspect, a pivotal concern or a serious challenge related to our church and community life, and to underscore, by effective means and concrete ways, its vital importance for the sake of the further organization and prosperity of our community life.

Based on the same expectation, and considering the important role reserved for the Armenian woman in the life of our people, we proclaim the year 2010 as

### **“THE YEAR OF THE ARMENIAN WOMAN”**

Indeed, women have started to occupy a central place at the present time, within the various spheres and structures of society, ranging from the family to the school, public organizations to governmental institutions, with their dominant voice and prolific activity.

As with this Pontifical Message we invite our faithful to put Armenian women under the spotlight during the current year, it is necessary to observe them on a wider historico-religious basis, so that we can properly define and comprehensively evaluate their particular place and role within Armenian life.

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### ***Women in the Bible***

As Christians, we consider the Bible to be the foundation of the truths, values and principles professed by us. Therefore, it is necessary to have the Bible as our point of departure when we speak about women. Indeed, the Bible asserts that Adam and Eve were created according to God’s image and were put by God under the obligation to jointly and equally multiply on this earth and rule over it (Genesis 1.27-28). Inasmuch as Oriental society is subject to the supremacy of the male sex, we also see woman generally presented with the same image in the Old Testament.

The image of woman appears totally reversed in the New Testament. Woman became worthy of God’s grace; the Son of God was incarnated through woman (Luke 1. 26-38). This event per se was a major revolution in a society that was under the supremacy of the male sex. Christ became the liberator of woman. Woman became a presence not only in the parables, miracles and teachings of Christ, but also in the redemptive mission of Christ through Holy Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. Prompted by the special respect they displayed toward women, Christ and then the Disciples rejected the male supremacy and female subordination, stressing the equality between man and woman.

Characteristic in the literature of the church fathers, in particular, is the antithesis of the “new Eve” – the Mother of God, who brought life to the world by giving birth to the world’s Savior – and the “old Eve,” who had brought death to the world. It is important to note that in the Holy Virgin Mary, the church wished to see not only woman, as paragon of moral virtues and values, but also as mother standing by her Son and participating in his suffering and joy.

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### ***Women in the Armenian Church***

Women, always through the Holy Virgin Mary, have been a permanent presence in the theological thinking and patristic or hagiographic writings of our church fathers, starting with St. Gregory the Illuminator. The same can be said about the liturgy of our church, where the frequent mention of the intercessor Holy Virgin Mary in prayers and hymns is a reminder of the necessity of seeing the Armenian woman according to the image of the Mother of God.

Starting from the first centuries, the participation of women in the life and mission of the Armenian Church as well has been important. We have had sisters and deaconesses participating in the social and charitable service of the church; we have had numerous women saints and martyrs, who have enriched the mission of faith of our church with their saintly life and witness, even at the cost of their lives. Armenian women have made their contribution to the spiritual and intellectual mission of the Armenian Church, whether it be through miniature painting, copying of manuscripts, translation or pedagogic work. Our first churches were named with feminine names: for example, St. Asdvadzadzin (Holy Mother of God), St. Gayane, St. Hripsime. Despite the generally oriental attitudes of our church with regard to women, Armenian women have never remained marginal in our life. Our church fathers have shown appreciation and solicitude toward women, dictated by their zeal of seeing the virtues of the Holy Virgin Mary in them.

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### ***Women in Armenian History***

It is a known fact that Armenian women have always played an important role during peaceful times of our history, as well as those full of upheavals. Anahid was the main goddess of the Armenians during the pagan period of Armenian history. Asdghig, Nane and others were also goddesses. The role of Armenian women, experienced new development with the introduction of Christianity to Armenia. In this regard, it is important to highlight a few facts:

#### ***a) Armenian women as mothers***

Armenian women, as mothers, have had singular importance in the thinking and life of the Armenian people. Starting from the pre-Christian period, the Armenian people have seen the Armenian mother as the “source,” “life giver,” “breath and vitality” (Agathangelos) of the nation’s perpetuity. The Armenian people have wished to see Armenian women essentially and mainly as mothers, rendering motherhood into a supreme and most sacred virtue. Armenian mothers have been not only the source of reproduction and productivity, but also the example of self-sacrifice, service and loyalty. The model of the Armenian woman as mother has been considered so sacred for our people that our sacred national values are qualified with the word “mother” – mother tongue, mother Armenia, mother church.

#### ***b) Armenian women as teachers***

Education has been one of the vital areas of calling for Armenian women. The historian Yeghishe mentions that in the period following the Vartanantz War of the fifth century, when fear and uncertainty were prevailing in Armenia, the Armenian women devoted themselves to the noble work of educating orphans. They believed that in order to continue the Vartanantz War, which had been waged for our religious beliefs and fatherland, it was necessary to educate new generations with the same spirit and vision. Throughout the history of the Armenian people, Armenian women were and have remained the most committed educators of the new generations. Indeed, during the dark ages following the fall of the Cilician kingdom, who,

besides Armenian women, maintained the Armenian identity intact and strong among our generations? Who, other than Armenian women, taught the Armenian alphabet to thousands of orphans on the sands of Der Zor? Who, if not Armenian women, became the faithful apostles committed to the formation of Armenian-Christian character among the new generations under the unfavorable conditions presented by the Diaspora?

#### ***c) Armenian women as public servants***

Armenian women have also participated in the political and public realms of the life of the Armenian people. Queens and princesses have been not only the faithful spouses and close supporters of their husbands, but also their worthy advisors. We are familiar with the special role played by numerous women such as Queen Ashkhen and Princess Khosrovitukhd in the critical periods of Armenian history, from Armenia to Cilicia and then the Diaspora. The weighty obligation assumed by Armenian women involving the formation and preservation of the family has never prevented them from assuming responsible positions in the spheres encompassing political and generally the public life of our nation. In these contexts, they have made a considerable contribution to the development of Armenian political thinking and the organization of our national life. Here it is necessary to mention the increasingly prominent presence of Armenian women in the political field, following the regaining of Armenia's independence, as well as the active participation of Armenian women in the efforts being carried out in the Diaspora in the pursuit of the Armenian cause.

#### ***d) Armenian women as intellectuals***

Throughout our history, Armenian women have always remained in the spotlight as promoters of cultural values. The numerous manuscripts written through the patronage of women belonging to princely and aristocratic families, the churches erected through their charity and the khatchkars prepared at their bidding are manifest realities. Armenian women made an important contribution to the blossoming of literature, starting from the 18th century and especially during the Revival period. Srpuhi Dussap, Zabel Asadour, Zabel Yessayan and others became the advocates of the cause for women's education, freedom and equality. The Armenian theater and music too, as well as other branches of the arts, registered great achievements, by both national and international criteria, through the large presence of women.

#### ***e) Armenian women as defenders of the dignity of the Armenian people***

Armenian women, fortified with Christian faith and strengthened with national spirit became valiant soldiers in the liberation struggle of the Armenian people, by the side of their warrior husbands, brothers or fathers. They defended the sanctity of their families, the freedom of their fatherland, and the moral, spiritual and intellectual values of their nation and church, even at the cost of their lives. In the course of our history, we come across a large number of Armenian women, who have constituted eloquent witnesses to the militant spirit of our people, starting from the Vartanantz War and continuing down to the battles waged for freedom during the Cilician period, from the revolt at Zeitoun to the heroic battle of Sardarabad. Numerous are the moments and incidents during the Armenian Genocide, in which Armenian women upheld the honor of their nation through the courageous positions taken by them. Furthermore, the history of the Karabakh liberation struggle is full of the names of women who participated with total devotion in the victories achieved.

#### ***f) Armenian women as social workers***

The role of Armenian women in the field of social work has always been pivotal. They have not remained indifferent to the needs and concerns of our people, particularly when conditions in our life

have been tragic. With exemplary devotion, Armenian women have buckled down to the task of gathering and educating the orphans, taking care of the sick, providing shelter to the poor, widows and widowers, comforting those in mourning, and financially assisting the indigent. In our history, the names of those women having occupied a worthy place in the field of philanthropic service, as well, are numerous, starting with Queen Ashkhen and continuing with Shushanig Bahlavuni of the 10th century, as well as the recent past and present, who were helpful and continue to be helpful to the needy children of the Armenian people -- their larger family – putting them ahead of their own families.

Within this sphere, and with special importance, we wish to mention the Armenian Relief Society, whose centennial coincides with the current year. Indeed, this pan-national Armenian women's organization has had a highly significant role in Armenian life during the past hundred years. It wasn't only a society pursuing women's rights but also one motivating Armenian women to further engagement and commitment. It wasn't only the eloquent witness to the virtues of Armenian women but it also reminded Armenian women that they must value themselves through the path of service, above and beyond all else. We said the following in our Pontifical Encyclical issued on the occasion of the ARS's centennial:

*“Celebrating the centennial of the ARS's founding means making an evaluation of its hundred years of service. The ARS became totally dedicated service, particularly in the educational and social realms of our life.*

*Observing the centennial of the ARS's founding means appreciating the activity of a pan-Armenian institution in a fitting manner. In terms of its birth and direction, its activity and purpose, the ARS was and remained pan-national, harmoniously interrelating the local and the pan-Armenian in its life and mission.*

*Celebrating the centennial of the ARS's founding means marking the centennial of an organization having experienced our pan-national crises, participated in the realization of our dreams, and made its important contribution to our struggle for survival.*

*This is how the ARS perceived itself and it is with this faith and will, this awareness and commitment that the ARS organized its work and accomplished its plans, bringing its consistent and active participation in our community life and always remaining a service-oriented active reality on the main page of Armenian life.*

*Therefore, it is not possible to comprehensively evaluate the history of the Armenian Diaspora without the ARS. It is not possible to understand the organization of the diasporan communities and accomplishments made after the Armenian Genocide without the dedicated service of the ARS.*

*Indeed, besides its important contribution to the organization and development of the Diaspora, the ARS also brought its committed participation to the Karabakh liberation struggle and the task of strengthening Armenia and rebuilding the homeland, in general, after Armenia regained its independence, during the past almost twenty years.*

*The centennial celebration must become an occasion for the ARS to subject itself to reexamination in terms of its internal structures, priorities and modus operandi. Under the present conditions of an ever-changing world, the ARS, like all our institutions, inevitably is in need of internal renewal and reprogramming in the face of gradually advancing new demands and challenges in the life of our nation.”*

This cursory glance at the centuries-old history of the Armenian people shows that Armenian women, with their multifaceted responsibilities, have played a vital role in our community life, while remaining firmly attached to our spiritual and moral values, our religious and national traditions, as well as our pan-national ideals and aspirations. Despite the prevailing conservative approach towards women, our people, generally speaking, have not manifested a discriminatory spirit toward Armenian women, have not considered them inferior and not kept them on the margin of society. Rather, they have shown special love and solicitude toward their women – a phenomenon that can be considered unique to a certain extent among oriental peoples.

Naturally, the course of our history, the evolution of Armenian life, and the emerging new conditions and realities, around us have sometimes positively and sometimes negatively affected the place, position and role of women in Armenian life.

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### ***Women in the Present Times***

Issues and challenges, concerns and demands pertaining to women have, to all intents and purposes, become dominant on the agendas of all societies, cultures, governments and also religions, to a greater or lesser extent. In the life of radically and rapidly changing societies, the place of women has often become an important factor giving rise to dissension and prompting protest and riot. In fact, conservative and radical, defensive and apologetic, traditional and modern approaches are often in conflict.

Indeed, the history of the world during the past fifty years is full of movements, initiatives and efforts seeking to ensure women's equality and establish their rights. As of the very first day of the founding of the United Nations, the tendency to give an important role to women has always been present, especially among the Western countries. Prompted by the commitment to give new impetus to women's movements and to underscore the rights and role of women in the political, economic, social and other realms, the United Nations proclaimed the 1976-1985 decade as "***Decade for Women.***" The member countries of the United Nations committed themselves to eliminating all kinds of discrimination and violence against women.

The ecumenical movement, as well, has given special importance to the role of women in the life of the church and society in general. The World Council of Churches, in turn, proclaimed the 1988-1998 decade as the "***Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women,***" appealing to all churches to reevaluate the role of women within the life and mission of the church, while respecting the socio-cultural perceptions, traditions and environment of each church.

The various and numerous initiatives taken by international organizations, religions, governmental structures and non-governmental organizations undoubtedly achieved a certain result. Compared to the past, women's presence in public life today is more visible, and the discrimination that exists with regard to women has diminished to a certain extent. At the same time, however, the mentality and even the modus operandi of considering women inferior continues to exist in certain cultures and societies. Therefore, it is necessary to generate a realistic dialogue involving religious traditions, socio-cultural perceptions and human rights.

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### ***The challenges faced by women today***

Among the numerous challenges, crises and issues presently faced by women, it is important to focus our attention on the following realities:

- a) We often see and hear unacceptable behavior with regard to women, when they are used as means to achieve immoral purposes, when they become tools for men's pleasure and glory seeking. Such approaches regarding women must be considered severely condemnable by all religions, cultures and societies. Seeing women who are created by God and meant to stand for moral values in such situations is highly revolting and absolutely intolerable.
- b) Violence against women is gradually increasing too, in various ways, through visible and invisible means, in families and institutions, as well as the collective life of society. This brutal behavior by institutions and members of the male sex, in general, against women, who are devoid of the ability to defend themselves physically, is severely condemnable by religious and moral standards; it is also considered a criminal offense in certain societies. Even the least form of violence against women, must be eradicated from the life of society. This is rightfully one of the primary demands of women's movements.
- c) Immense work is being carried out today in terms of reestablishing equality between men and women and giving it practical and tangible expression. Women, having been ignored and oppressed down

through the centuries, and even having become simply the prisoners of men's pleasure and whim in certain cultures, are rejecting this inhuman spirit and behavior, and demanding justice. Indeed, equality between men and women, is one of the fundamental principles of Christianity. It's true, man is man and woman is woman, with different anatomical systems and different characteristics but they are equal in terms of rights and obligations. St. Paul reminds that "*Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord. For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman, but all things of God*" (I Corinthians: 11.11-12).

- d) The matter of women's participation in the life of society also occupies an important place in women's movements. As a consequence of the discriminatory spirit that exists toward women and their being considered unequal by men, women's participation in the life of society still remains limited in certain societies and cultures. In actuality, the roads leading to certain spheres of society are still closed to women; also, the possibilities of assuming important positions in the fields of politics, economics, government and others are either negligible or totally non-existent in many societies. While understanding the religious and cultural traditions and perceptions behind such attitudes and modus operandi, women, as beings equal to men, are meant to fully realize their god-given virtues and rights, obligations and calling in all areas of the life of society and on all levels. Such an approach with regard to women must not stem merely from our solicitous attitude toward women but also from the concern and zeal to further organize the life of society and flourish it through the active participation of women.

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### ***What do we expect from Armenian women?***

We are living under the mighty power of a liberal universal culture in the present globalized world. Armenian women are also living and working in the same society, exposed to the concerns, issues and challenges that we briefly touched upon.

It's true that Armenian women have not come out in public with the expressions of protest uttered by the women of other societies. For the most part, they have accommodated themselves to their situation, sometimes quietly enduring and suffering. Again it is true that, compared with the women of other nations, Armenian women are generally conservative and faithfully adhere to their religious and national values and traditions. However, let us also not forget that in recent years, the number of cases running counter to this exemplary state of affairs has begun to become considerable in our life.

Discussions about these issues must take place within our families and institutions with a realistic and self-critical spirit. In other words, the sometimes ambiguous and vague, sometimes conservative and liberal mentalities and perceptions, approaches and modus operandi must be subjected to a comprehensive and serious evaluation. We have expectations from Armenian women, as do they from our church, and institutions. Within the context of mutual expectations, we wish to touch upon a few concerns:

- 1) Armenian women must remain ***a model radiating moral, spiritual and national values*** in our life. As mothers called upon to rear tomorrow's generation, Armenian women must internalize the supreme values and authentic traditions of our church and nation. In this regard, the highest degree of caution must be shown toward our families. Our families must be sustained by moral and spiritual values. While the father provides for the family financially, it is the mother who gives moral and spiritual nourishment to the family.
- 2) ***Motherhood*** not only is part of a woman's anatomical system but is also a sacred calling given by God. Therefore, it is with a profound awareness of responsibility that a woman must approach her maternal mission, which does not consist solely of bringing children into the world but also, and especially, of giving those children and the entire family moral education and national spirit. The maintenance of the sanctity of the Armenian family, in the spiritual, moral and national sense, is

the primary and sacred obligation of the Armenian mother. That, in turn, is why motherhood in our life has always been synonymous with behavior full of caring, love and solicitude. Motherhood has also been the index of a way of living and modus operandi full of spiritual, moral and national values and traditions.

- 3) As we saw, the effort to ensure women's *equality* in the feminist movements occupies a special place. Women have generally been considered equal to men in our life. However, we expect more; there must be more. Now, if a discriminatory spirit with regard to women still exists in certain areas of our collective life or organizations, if there are still individuals who hold responsible positions or are simply fathers of families, and who demonstrate a discriminatory attitude toward women, such a spirit or approach is unacceptable as far as our church is concerned. Although we respect the differences pertaining to the anatomical systems of man and woman, as well as the specificities of socio-cultural environment, we feel that the Christian principle of non-discrimination must be literally implemented in our life.
- 4) As far as *participation* is concerned, the doors that are closed to, and the positions that are unapproachable for, Armenian women in our community life must not exist. The mentality of considering certain positions specifically for men and others for women is not only anachronistic but also, once again, does not correspond to Christian principles. Why shouldn't women who are endowed with the same gifts and qualities as men – and sometimes more so – assume responsible positions? It is necessary for Armenian women to participate, to the maximum extent, in not only women's organizations but also the organizing and flourishing of our community life. This can be made possible by considering them as persons capable of assuming positions and obligations on an equal basis with men.

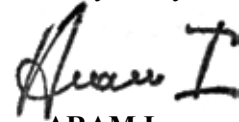
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In proclaiming the year 2010 as the *Year of the Armenian Woman*, it is our expectation that Armenian women will, first and foremost, reflect on the qualities bestowed upon, and calling given to, them by God, as well as the extremely important obligation entrusted to them by our church and nation. Then we expect that they will subject themselves to reevaluation, with the commitment of accomplishing their mission with greater responsibility and fidelity. On the other hand too, it is our expectation that our church, all the institutions operating in our life, our families and faithful further deepen their treatment of Armenian women with love, respect and solicitude. Let us not forget that, without the pivotal role played by women, alongside men, our collective life will lose much of its vitality and quality.

Now, we call upon the prelates of our dioceses, clergy, diocesan authorities and all our organizations to place value upon the *Year of the Armenian Woman* in our collective life, with this spirit and approach, responsibility and commitment.

With warm paternal love,

Prayerfully,

  
ARAM I

**CATHOLICOS OF THE GREAT HOUSE OF CILICIA**

*December 31, 2009*

*Antelias, Lebanon*

*(Translated by Aris G. Sevag)*