

ARAM

SERVANT OF JESUS CHRIST AND WITH THE UNFATHOMABLE WILL OF GOD
AND THE ELECTION OF OUR NATION, HEAD OF BISHOPS AND
CATHOLICOS OF THE ARMENIANS OF THE GREAT HOUSE OF CILICIA

GRACE, LOVE AND PEACE FROM THE LORD AND PONTIFICAL GREETINGS
FROM US AND BLESSING FROM THE RIGHT HAND OF OUR FATHER,
SAINT GREGORY THE ILLUMINATOR

The desire and will to live free and independent, even at the risk of known death, has become one of the most remarkable aspects of the many decades of Armenian history beginning with Haig Nahabed. Our history is rich with heroic struggles against oppression.

This is what happened in our recent history on May 28, 1918, when the Armenian people, with the faith and determination of Vartan Mamigonian and Ghevont Yeretz, re-established its own sovereign country to live free on its ancestral land in accordance to the collective will of the people. May 28 is a precise and meaningful turning point in Armenian history after the fall of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia (1375) making the Armenian people subject to foreign powers. What a providential event this was when considering that just a few years earlier the Armenian Genocide took place in the Ottoman Empire, and in Yerevan the Armenian nation's tricolor flag of independence was raised!

The establishment of the first Armenian Republic on May 28 was not easy. Indeed, the wounds left by World War I had not been resolved. The October Revolution (1917) that took place in Russia led to Russia's departure from the Caucasus leaving the Armenians alone against the Turks. On the external front the circumstances surrounding Armenia and the geopolitical gains to be received were not in our favor. On the internal front Armenia was fragile and did not have an organized army and healthy economy.

Under these conditions the Turkish army begins to move toward Yerevan. It was, without doubt, difficult for the small Armenian forces to defend the length of the battleground, stretching from the Black Sea to Vaspuragan. The Armenian people were faced with a new Avarayr. At this decisive moment Aram Manoogian was declared supreme commander. Our people, young and old, clergy and laity, intellectual and commoner, follow Aram's appeal and under the motto "freedom or death" shed blood in Karakilisa, Sardarabad, and Bash-Abaran for the independence of the fatherland with their conscience engagement. At the battles at the doors of Yerevan, the victorious Armenian people declare their fatherland's independence.

The Republic of Armenia born on a small portion of historic Armenia faces serious crises, refugees and orphans everywhere, famine and epidemics spreading, and no foreign assistance. In spite of the many terrible internal and external problems surrounding the new Republic, the country gradually forms its parliament, government, judicial system, and army. The Republic's tricolor flag is confirmed, "Mer Hairenik" is sung, and Armenia receives international recognition.

The Armenian Church had a significant role in the forming of Armenia's independence. V. Rev. Fr. Karekin Hovsepian (later Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia, 1943-52) was a participant in the battles at Sardarabad with his fiery sermons encouraging our soldiers. Kevork V, Catholicos of All Armenians, directed a message to our people, "Do not put your hope on foreigners," and "mobilize all of our nation's capability for the sake of a free fatherland." From the suffering Cilician world, Sahag II, Catholicos of Cilicia, in the claws of tribulation, raised his voice in prayer beseeching God "Let the rainbow beautified by Armenian blood that connects Mt. Taurus to Massis be the promised land for all Armenians in the world. Let it be the fiery column that leads to a united, total and free Armenia." Hovhaness Toumanian, the spokesman for the intelligentsia says, "Our dream of yesterday is already a reality. Armenia is free. She is recognized throughout the world as a sovereign republic, standing in line with the other nations with her tricolor flag."

Genocidal Turkey continues to brandish its sword toward Armenia with continuous attacks on various fronts, economic blockades, and diplomatic pressure, and they begin to wear-down Armenia's internal strength. The expected military and economic assistance from Russia does not materialize. The Treaty of Sevre (August 10, 1920) signed in view of Armenia's hopeful horizon is rapidly obscured. As noted by Simon Vratzian, the last Prime Minister of Armenia, "Armenia is placed between the Bolshevik hammer and the Turkish anvil."

There are fateful times in history when it is advisable to shun adventurous approaches and partisan considerations, and adopt a correct decision departing from the nation's or fatherland's general and supreme self-interest. Indeed, acting against the Soviet Union could lead to Armenia's destruction. The salvation of the fatherland is above all else. In this dangerous situation the Sovietization of independent Armenia (December 2, 1920) and bearing the heavy and bitter consequences of the totalitarian regime, was the right path.

The popular February uprising (1921) that took place in Armenia against the oppressive communist regime, is reminiscent of the events in Turkey of April 24—arrests, exile, and death. Under popular pressure by the people, the committee for the salvation of the fatherland replaces the communist leaders, who had fled, but they could not save the undefended, famished, epidemic-ridden fatherland. On April 2, 1921, the Red Army marches toward Armenia. The last leaders of the Armenian Republic leave Armenia taking with them the tricolor flag of independent Armenia, to continue the ideological struggle for Armenian independence in the Diaspora.

Centuries of human history testifies that regimes are temporary, regardless of powerful support. Nations with their fatherland and culture are eternal. The communist regime was unable to kill the concept of freedom in the lives of the Armenian people. Indeed, the Diaspora with its divisive policy could not extinguish the hope of independence and obscure the vision of all-

Armenia and of united Armenians. And therefore, the first Armenian Republic established on May 28, 1918, and the dictated conditions of December 2, 1920, with the change of regime, the Armenian Republic re-established its independence on September 21, 1991.

Independence is a sacred value and the people are the establishers and defenders. Therefore, Armenian independence must remain above all ideological and political approaches and differences. The first Armenian Republic established after the Genocide and under international turmoil has deep meaning for Pan-Armenians. It is necessary therefore to evaluate and celebrate the 100th anniversary of this historical event on this platform.

The Caucasus has always been filled with inner turmoil and subject to decisions by far and near powers, and geopolitical interests and decisions. We lost Armenia's first independence because of the strong storms surrounding us. Today also the Caucasus area is in the same condition. Therefore—be careful! Armenian people, let us correctly read “the signs of the time,” and not distance ourselves from the soil of our fatherland, and remain faithful to the independence of our fatherland, to the sacred posterity left by our old and new heroes who established independence with their blood, and strengthen Armenia's military, economy, and international diplomatic ties. The strengthening of Armenia and Artsakh and the strengthening of independence are the foundation of our national demand and our guarantee of our nation's bright future.

Now, therefore, on January 1, 2018, at the threshold of the 100th anniversary of the first Armenian Republic, with this Pontifical Encyclical from the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia in Antelias, we direct this appeal:

To our Prelacies: To mark this important date in our recent history with prayers of thanksgiving for the Republic and with community oriented events and various programs.

To our Organizations: In the spirit of unity make this historical event worthy with various events that commemorate and evaluate it with popular and wide participation.

To our Educational Institutions: In our efforts to establish Armenian identity in our life, emphasize the meaning of independence as the strong foundation of our fatherland's strength and perpetuation.

To our Intelligentsia: Through research and lectures in Armenia and the Diaspora analyze and re-appreciate the role of the first Republic, protect the spirit of independence, and revive the ideals of the creation of Armenia's second independence.

To our People: Have a broad knowledge of the first Armenian Republic and reflect on the unique importance of independence in the life of our people by reading, listening, and attending different events.

We must remain faithful to the fatherland's independence, built with blood and sweat and defend it at all cost. This is the message of the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Republic. Those who shed blood on the road to independence are heroes and martyrs. Therefore, let us bow down to the creation and defense of the first Armenian Republic, just as from May 28 up to this day we bow before the memory of our known and unknown innocent heroes who fought, served and were martyred.

May you live forever in the Lord, be strengthened with the grace of the Holy Spirit, and be forever blessed by us. Amen.

ARAM I
CATHOLICOS OF THE GREAT HOUSE OF CILICIA

Encyclical delivered at the Catholicosate in
Antelias, Lebanon, in the year of our Lord,
January 1, 2018, and the Armenian year of 1467.