2020
YEAR OF ARMENIANS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

PROCLAMATION
OF CATHOLICOS ARAM I
OF THE GREAT HOUSE OF CILICIA

ANTELIAS
To the Diocesan Prelates,
Ecclesiastical Class
of the Great House of Cilicia,
Community Leaders
and Our Compatriots,

From the Monastery of Antelias of the Great House of Cilicia, we greet with pontifical blessing, warm Christian love and intense patriotism the World General Assembly, the Religious and Lay Councils of the Central Executive Council, the Prelates, the ecclesiastical class, the community leaders and our beloved people.

With deep satisfaction, we note that our decision to highlight a given feature or value intimately linked to our national life continues to have strong repercussions. As you know, we had proclaimed 2019 the “Year of the Armenian Press.” Indeed, not only in the Diaspora but across our national life, the press became the object of analysis and concern of our compatriots and, particularly, media outlets, the ecclesiastical class, journalists, intellectuals, as well as national, cultural and educational organizations. In this regard, the pan-Armenian conference organized at the monastery of Antelias by the initiative of the Holy See, was especially important.

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Dear Armenian people,

When we were thinking about the year 2020, on a contemporary issue to highlight for our collective reflection and analysis, our thoughts went to Armenians with special needs. According to information at our disposal, the number of fellow countrymen with special needs is beginning to grow noticeably, as a consequence of economic, social and medical factors as well as other causes. We therefore believe it is imperative to declare 2020

THE YEAR OF ARMENIANS
WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

We call persons with special needs those who are congenitally handicapped with physical, intellectual or emotional inabilities, those with total or partial incapacity, who are either born that way or have become so as a result of ulterior incidents. According to medical data, there are currently more than 20 types of incapacity or handicap, visible or not, extreme or otherwise. They have different roots, causes and treatment. Some are curable, some are incurable. Not so long ago, these people were considered deficient or invalid. Today, however, the definitions and terms of the past have mostly fallen into disuse and, instead, more moderate
and respectful names are being used. For example, instead of using “disabled” we now use “differently abled.”

The mentality of society and its treatment of persons with special needs has changed too. From the United Nations to religions, governments and organizations, specialized centers have been founded, funds have been established, and different plans have been developed, as well as different resources have been put to use, to facilitate their way of life. Thus, new, respectful ways and expressions have been adopted to interact with them. In the streets, buildings, and public spaces, special arrangements have been made. From airports to other transportation hubs, appropriate remedies have been implemented. They have priority of service and place in collective gatherings. They are beginning to be included in local or international committees, events, plans or projects. And this long list of practical steps in that direction can go on and on.

It is indispensable to add that modern society emphasizes the principle of equality. In other words, persons with special needs must have equal rights and obligations in all spheres of life and at all levels of society. A minimal oversight of their civil rights is deemed an instance of discrimination and injustice, and in some countries it is even considered a behavior addressed by criminal law. In 1992, the United Nations proclaimed December 3 the Day of Persons with Disabilities. At the same time, the “Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities” was adopted to emphasize the indispensability of defending their rights and paying careful attention to them. The 1983-93 period had also been declared the UN Decade of Disabled Persons. Indeed, there are several and different legal and practical measures adopted by the international community.

Naturally, the presence of persons with physical, psychological and behavioral disabilities in society is not new. In the Old Testament we even encounter important characters with such physical traits. Thus, the prophet Moses had a stammer and Samson was blind. Closer to our times, we may mention U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose two legs were paralyzed; celebrated writer Agatha Christie, who had a weak memory; famous composer Beethoven, who was deaf; renowned painter Van Gogh, who had psychological problems, and the acclaimed physicist Albert Einstein, who suffered from emotional disturbances. These and many other persons, who were born with mental or emotional problems or developed them later, have become great leaders and have attained unique achievements in many spheres. Also today there are people in similar conditions who are active in the life of their own respective nations.

In present times, as a consequence of terror attacks, wars and different incidents, the number of persons with special needs has begun to multiply. According to the latest statistics, their number is around 600 million. If in the past, for different reasons, they were kept away from society or the persons themselves hid their physical inabilities, these restrictions have been suppressed today and the mentality has changed. Modern society considers them an inseparable part of it, with equal obligations and rights.
What does the Bible say?

Naturally, as Christians, to find the just direction regarding situations and concerns in our life, we must turn to the Bible, the source of divine revelation and the foundation of our Christian faith.

All the books that compose the Bible, from the Genesis to the Book of Revelations, are full of similar expressions and definitions, events and figures, which in different manners and with varying emphasis prove not only the presence of persons with physical or mental inabilities in society, but also about the careful treatment they received from the prophets in the Old Testament as well as from the Son of God and the Apostles in the New Testament. Indeed, a reference in passing in the Bible shows clearly the teaching of the Christian religion in this regard. We therefore do not consider it necessary to discuss this in detail. We want, however, to stress the following points with special emphasis:

a. The Bible does not consider the physical incapacity a divine punishment, but a trait of earthly life. God, as Heavenly Father, treats persons exposed to that situation with special love.

b. The Bible emphasizes that man is imperfect: he carries Adam’s sin. The Son of God became man to liberate man from the domination of sin and evil.

c. The flaws of man are considered an opportunity and a challenge to strengthen man’s faith and hope in God.

d. The healing of physical and other defects was also part of the salvation of Christ. Indeed, many are the instances, in which invalid persons, blind men, handicapped people or those who walked with a limp, were deaf or mute, were cured by Christ when they approached Him, moved by their faith.

The apostles of Christ had the same approach. The testimony of Paul the Apostle, who persecuted Christ and lost his vision, is significant in this sense. The same approach had the Church in the course of centuries. The theology and the ethics of the Christian faith stress that the physical, spiritual and intellectual dimensions make up the totality of the person. It is in this context that we should understand the concept of the “glorious body” (1 Corinthians 15.35-58). Therefore, helping persons with physical, mental or emotional flaws is one of the fundamental teachings of the Christian faith. The awareness of this can be found in the writings and teachings of the fathers of the Church for centuries. The patrological literature is full of several such examples.

Also today, the Christian world in general and the Church in particular, following the biblical teachings and the testimonies and exhortations of the fathers of the Church, turn their attention to the persons who need care and develop different plans. The World Council of Churches, as well as regional ecumenical councils and organizations, have given important attention to them in their plans and initiatives, as well as in articles of their bylaws, in order to involve them in the ecumenical movement.
THE PRESENCE OF ARMENIANS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN ARMENIAN LIFE

As is the case with any nation or society, naturally there have been and there are persons with special needs within the Armenian life.

According to information available to us, the number of people considered to have disabilities is around 189,400, divided into different groups according to their physical, mental or emotional traits and age. In 2010, the Armenian government ratified the UN declaration in support of the rights of people with special needs. Their rights are defended by the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, local agencies and a special committee in the National Assembly, as well as a number of organizations devoted to the defense of human rights.

In the Lebanese Armenian community, immediately after the Genocide we have had special centers to attend to the needs of people who were mute, blind, deaf or had other disabilities, established by the Federation of Philo-Armenian Swiss Committees. Those centers stopped operating approximately three decades ago, on the one hand because the number of people with such traits dropped and, on the other, because the maintenance of specialized centers has become too taxing. Nevertheless, the Zvartnots Center has been operating in Bourdj Hammoud for 33 years, under the auspices of the union of Armenian social servers. Approximately 35 children and teenagers participate in special courses and exercises at the center.

Likewise, for the past twenty years, the Agounk Center for Physical and Mental Disorders has been operating in Tehran. However, as we said, in Armenian life everywhere, we have persons of every age and condition who have special needs. We therefore want to list the following reminders and recommendations:

a. At the beginning of our proclamation, we noted that we should not approach people who need special care and attention with a discriminatory spirit or ignoring them, but as persons with equal rights and obligations. They have to feel that their difficult conditions cannot become a cause for them to be ignored or removed from our collective life, and we have to be aware of that.

b. Establishing special centers for similar conditions and keeping them away from society is now avoided everywhere. They live with their families, receiving medical attention when need be. We should adopt the same approach.

c. We have to carry out consistent work and create indispensable means to include them as a permanent and active presence in our community life. We have to inspire their trust with our approach, showing them that they do not have to be marginalized from our life. On the contrary, they belong in the mainstream and are an integral part of our community life.
d. As we have pointed out, modern society has created resources to make the life and work of people with special needs easier. We have to adopt the same approach in different spheres of our life and, particularly, in the activity of the centers and structures of our collective and community life, doing the utmost to facilitate their daily life.

e. Modern knowledge endows ample opportunities to persons in such difficult situation. Therefore, we have to make our utmost effort to create the means for specialized attention and cure for the cases in which permanent and temporary care are needed.

f. It is imperative to include them in our organizations, structures and committees, showing them respect and confidence in them and giving them responsibilities. They are in charge of the highest offices in several countries. What counts are the emotional and intellectual virtues and abilities and the will to serve the nation.

g. We must create the specialized and material means for children and teenagers with congenital and curable impairments for their definitive healing.

h. Our nation, with its church, state and organizations, is obligated to assist materially the persons who are prevented by their condition from working and, hence, earning an income.

i. Finally, it is unbecoming for our nation to be indifferent towards a child who has difficulties for hearing, speaking, learning or walking or faces similar problems. It is unbecoming for our nation to see helpless people in the streets, with physical impairments, and, as in the story from the Gospels, be indifferent. We have to assist by all possible means all the members of our nation who suffer from such condition. This is the sacred duty of every Armenian and the entire Armenian nation.

Now, what is the role of our church? The approach of Christ towards persons who suffer from physical, social and emotional problems must be the guide for its service. The example of Nerses the Great, one of our patriarchs of the 4th century, is emblematic in our church’s life, with his dedication and care towards those in need. Today our church, through its figures and the development of social and humanitarian plans, is called to enter into our family and community life and, in accordance with its setting and conditions, serve the Armenians in need.

What is the role of the state of Armenia? Defending the rights of these Armenians is doubtlessly fundamental. But first, the state must assist them in all possible specialized ways and afford them the social and material means, at the same time including them in the state structures, naturally always affording them specialized and practical advantages.

What is the role of our organizations? The structures that operate within our community are not self-sufficient. We expect, however, that they do their utmost to help our compatriots who are in such circumstances.

Finally, what is the role of structures in the Armenian life that provide humanitarian, social and healthcare services or, rather, those structures that are devoted to serving? They assist the people with special needs with the highest devotion, to their credit. The Zvartnots Center is a
living example. We are certain that they will continue their service with renewed faith and dedication.

By declaring the Year of the Armenians with Special Needs, with patriarchal love and blessing, we urge:

1) Our nation, to remember in our prayers, thoughts and works all our fellow Armenians in such difficult circumstances, and to always remember them: in Armenia, in Artsakh and in the Diaspora, throughout the world, and to deepen our love and care, our attention and our devotion for them, showing in practice that they are an integral and inseparable part of our national life.

2) Our religious, state, community, beneficent organizations to do their utmost to serve these Armenians in specialized, social or material ways as we have a collective obligation towards them.

3) The Prelates of all our dioceses and our national organizations to do all within their possibilities, in the light of the recommendations that stem from our proclamation, to provide practical assistance to our compatriots with special needs.

4) To our wealthy fellow Armenians, to allocate part of their material resources to our compatriots in difficulties, by establishing special funds or helping through state, church or community structures.

Let us remember the parable of the Good Samaritan told by Christ (Luke 10.25-37). Let us not remain indifferent towards our compatriots who are confined by physical inability, but turn to the Good Samaritan. Rest assured that our nation will become greater, our church will shine more, our homeland will bloom even more, when then number of Good Samaritans within our nation grows. Blessed are our compatriots whose name is inscribed in the history of our church and our nation as Good Samaritans.

We want to close our Patriarchal Proclamation with the simple yet deeply meaningful prayer of the Armenian Church:

“Dispel the pain and heal the sickness of thy people, Lord our God, and grant to all perfect health by the sign of thine all-conquering cross through which thou removed the weakness of mankind and condemned the enemy of our life and salvation. Thou art our life and salvation, beneficent and all merciful God, who alone can forgive us our sins and remove diseases and sickness from us, to whom are known our needs and necessities. Bestower of gifts, grant thy bounteous mercy to thy creatures according to their individual needs, through whom thy Holy Trinity is always glorified and praised, now and always and forever and ever. Amen.”

With warm patriarchal love,

Prayerfully
Aram I, Catholicos
The Great House of Cilicia

January 1, 2020
Antelias, Lebanon