Pope Francis goes to Georgia

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Writing an account of the papal visit to Georgia for the Newsletter of the Community of Bose is a special responsibility for me. Years of collaboration with Bose have contributed to my ecumenical formation and strengthened my zeal for unity between the Christians. When it gets to the Orthodox-Catholic relations, I feel a kind of accountability to the community.

So, here I am writing this piece on my impressions of the visit of Pope Francis to my homeland. The bottom line is that it was an excellent event. But I will not end on that. I would point out its significance from four points of view: political, pastoral, bi-lateral, societal/public.

1 In front of civil authorities and diplomatic corps at the presidential palace in Tbilisi, Pope Francis spoke in defense of the sovereign rights of small nations. Under the current political circumstances, this is the most supportive message from the leader of 1.3 billion Catholics worldwide also, matching the motto of his pastoral journey to Georgia - *Pax vobis*!

2 Visiting a small community of the Catholics in Georgia (1% of the whole 3.7 mln. population of the country) is an expression of the immense support to them. To be a minority church in a majority Orthodox context is not an easy task, in general. Regretfully, the Catholic communities (of the Latin, Armenian and Chaldean rites) in Georgia struggle to fulfill all their wishes/to meet their objectives. The society, it seems, is too fragile to give a full support to minority churches.

It is worth noting that the Orthodox Church of Georgia is a powerful national symbol and it was suppressed for a long period in history until recently.

3 The meeting of Pope Francis with Catholicos-Patriarch Ilya II, the head of the Orthodox Church of Georgia, was emblematic: exchanging warm greetings, expressing fraternal love to one another, having a private conversation, exchanging memorable gifts, an icon and a compilation of the copies of the Georgian manuscripts from the Vatican library. They met four times, twice in the airport, once in the patriarchate, once in the Svetitskhoveli cathedral in Mtskheta. I believe, their personal encounter will have a significant impact on the church relations between the See of Rome and the patriarchate of Georgia. We shall see results in various aspects of bi-lateral relations. Georgia is the first among the fourteen *national* churches, or countries with the majority Orthodox, where Pope Francis paid an official visit, on invitation of the civil and church authorities.

4 Most importantly, Pope's visit has given impetus to some other broader reflection in the Orthodox Church of Georgia. Young Georgians, lay and ordained, feel that Pope's visit marked beginning of a new phase in life of their church. No urgent 'change' is expected but something has moved. Many people expressed their joy, hope, spiritual experience with regard the visit. I heard people saying that they could not imagine such a thing happening in their lifetime. Pope Francis' profound words, his irresistible pastoral simplicity and recognition of the ancient Georgian Christian roots found him a way into the hearts of a wider public. He was admired and loved. People were grateful for his presence in their land.

The climax of exchange of the spiritual gifts between the Holy Father and the Georgian public happened in the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral. Many people were invited by the Catholicos-Patriarch Ilya II: representatives of various sectors of the society, members of the synod, clerics, monastic, the Georgian civil authorities. They experienced some exceptional moments when Pope Francis was met by Catholicos-Patriarch at the Cathedral door with the church bells ringing. Accompanied by an ancient Georgian hymn the two church leaders entered the cathedral, stopped at the burial place of the Christ's tunic in silent prayer, walked down the nave hand in hand, sat down in front of the public and exchanged beautiful words of love in Christ. Father Serafim and members of the Assyrian community of the Orthodox Church of Georgia chanted in Aramaic. The TV2000 reporter noted: "Atmosfere e sensazioni uniche!"

Pope Francis encouraged the Orthodox Church of Georgia to stay together in prayer for one another as well as looking after the poor and combating the migration challenges.

"Georgia is wonderful, it is a land I didn't expect, a Christian nation to the marrow, eh!" noted the Pontiff.

I was a surprised to read how mainstream media covered the visit. There was no scandal to report but all details with potential negative connotations were brought to the public attention so that nothing positive was mentioned, contrary to what was reported by the local media in Georgia and in Vatican. I have never realized it before how detached can be media reporting from a context it covers.