



(ZENIT, June 23, 2016).- The Armenians are a “sensitive” people that do not forget the good received and the evil suffered, especially the Great Evil, the *Metz Yeghern*, the genocide (despite this word still provoking upsets in the Turkish government), which at the beginning of the century mowed down the life of one million and a half men, women, elderly and children.

To this pain, still burning after a century, Pope Francis will go to give relief with his trip this Friday through Sunday, during which, in an emotional stop at the Tzitzernakaberd Memorial of Yerevan, he will meet some ten descendants of the survivors of the extermination.

“A very important moment is envisioned,” said Father Federico Lombardi, who in a briefing Tuesday described the salient stages of the Pontiff’s trip – the 14th international one, the first in the Euro-Asian region – together with Monsignor Antranik Ayvazian, expert on the history, culture and situation of the Church in Armenia, and professor at the University of Yerevan.

Bergoglio’s trip takes place in the wake of John Paul II’s epochal visit in September of 2001, on the occasion of the 1,700th anniversary of the recognition of Christianity as the official religion. Moreover, Father Lombardi explained that the trip to Armenia is inserted in the framework of a two-stage pilgrimage in the Caucasus, which also foresees a visit to Georgia and Azerbaijan at the end of September. This second stage could not be realized now because of the absence of the Georgian Patriarch, committed in Crete given the Pan-Orthodox Council (in which, however, he did not take part). Therefore, there is no political conspiracy, much less so motives linked to the bloody conflict in Nagorno Karabakh, which divides the two regions.

The embrace of the Armenian people, however, could not be postponed. In fact, the Pope’s desire was to undertake a trip that would be the closest possible to the April anniversary of the *Metz Yeghern*, of which the centenary was observed last year, celebrated by the Pontiff in Saint Peter’s Basilica

together with the Catholicos, the highest authority of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

“Francis wished to return the visit,” said Father Lombardi, “and visit the Catholic community and encourage it to manifest its closeness, its support and its friendship.” Meanwhile, the Armenian people anxiously await the arrival of the Bishop of Rome. “There is no other talk than of the Holy Father’s visit. Letters and messages are arriving of the type: ‘Have us see the Pope’; let us see him at least up close,’” explained Monsignor Ayvazian. “There is a filial sentiment toward the universal Father of the Church, despite the fact that 90% of the population is not Catholic, especially at Yerevan. Everything is being lived in a key of joy, of serenity and in the hope that the future of Armenia will be better than the present.”

A present in which the slaughter of 1915-1916, under the Ottoman Empire, still weighs. As stated, Francis will remember it at the Tzitzernakaberd Complex, the so-called ‘swallow’s fortress,’ “obligatory stage for all personalities that visit Armenia,” underscored Father Lombardi. Bergoglio and the Catholicos will be received there by the President and by a group of children carrying photos and memories of the slaughter.

Then the Pope, after laying a floral wreath in the central chamber of the “everlasting flame,” and after songs and readings, will recite a prayer of intercession in Italian, which will be followed by the Our Father recited by each one in his own language. The visit will continue with a walk in the Garden of the Memorial, where a plant will be planted in memory of the visit, then the meeting will be held with the descendants of the persecuted.

All this will take place on Saturday, June 25, in the early hours of the morning. However, the Pontiff will arrive in Armenia the previous day, the 24th, at 3:00 pm (1:00 pm in Italy) after a four-hour flight from Rome. After a very brief welcome ceremony with the political and ecclesiastical authorities in the airport of Yerevan, in the afternoon the Pope will go on a prayer visit to the Armenian Cathedral at Etchmiadzin, where a greeting address is scheduled. This will be the first of five addresses, all in Italian, which the Holy Father will pronounce in the course of his trip.

Francis will go from the Cathedral to Yerevan for his courtesy visit to the President and the official meeting with some 140 political authorities, representatives of the civil society and of the Diplomatic Corps in the Presidential Palace; it will be followed by his personal meeting with the Catholicos and the presentation of the delegations, among which are 45 Apostolic Armenian Bishops.

The second day, after the visit to the Memorial, he will go to Gyumri, in the north of the country, main center of the Catholic presence in Armenia. In Vafrtanants Square, dedicated to the martyr hero of the Armenian people, a Votive Mass of Mercy will be celebrated. This is a novelty as “never in Armenia has an open celebration been held in the Square, because in the Armenian tradition one always prays in Church,” explained Father Lombardi. Another novelty is the tour in the popemobile that Francis will take (the only one of the whole trip), who will then go to a convent of Armenian Sisters that run an orphanage.

Planned for Saturday afternoon is a visit to the Armenian Apostolic Cathedral of the Seven Wounds and then to the Armenian Catholic Cathedral of the Holy Martyrs, the latter opened in September of 2015 by Cardinal Sandri. At the end of the day, the Holy Father will return to Yerevan for the Ecumenical Prayer Meeting for Peace in the Square of the Republic, “the most important event from the numerical point of view, where tens of thousands of people are expected,” said Father Lombardi.

Sunday, June 26 will open, instead, with a private Mass and a meeting with 14 Armenian Catholic Bishops from different areas of the diaspora and an additional 12 priests, in the Apostolic Palace at Etchmiadzin. Then, at 10 o'clock, Francis will take part in the Divine Liturgy in the Square and, with a 'break' of the rule, also in the solemn ecumenical lunch with the Catholics, the representatives of the churches and the papal entourage (among whom is Cardinal Sandri).

After greeting the delegates and benefactors of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Pontiff will go to the Monastery of Khofr Virap, thought-provoking place close to Mount Ararat, loved by the faithful because, according to tradition, it is the place where Saint Gregory the Illuminator was held prisoner for 13 years. In the room where the well is that imprisoned the Saint ten meters under the earth, the Pope will pray and donate an artistic lamp.

Then, on the Monastery's balcony, looking at the Ararat, a few steps from the border with Turkey, the Holy Father will release two doves in sign of a strong “desire for peace.” From here he will go to the airport for the return to Rome, foreseen for 8:40 pm Italian time.

Inevitably, during the briefings there were questions from journalists on the reluctance to use the term “genocide,” also on the part of Father Lombardi himself, who preferred to opt for the expression Metz Yeghern. Direct was the answer of the Vatican spokesman, who labelled the question an “obsession” on the part of the press: “None of us denies that there were these massacres,

but we don't want to make of this political-sociological arguments. It's an enormous tragedy and I prefer to use the term Metz Yeghern, which my Armenian brothers use and which has a much stronger meaning."

Metz Yeghern, explained in fact Monsignor Ayvazian, means "great uprooting, cutting out all the presence of a people in blood." It is what happened to the Armenian people already from the first centuries after Christ, culminating then in 1915 with the "historic error," of which the acknowledgement is still awaited on the part of Turkey.