

February 2, 2026

Dear Ambassador Brownback, Dear International Religious Freedom Summit Participants,

I greet you from Yerevan Kentron Prison, in the name of our crucified and risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

I regret that I cannot be with you in person as you campaign for freedom of religion and belief. But I am grateful to friends from Christian Solidarity International and the Swiss parliamentarian, Erich Vontobel, for the opportunity to communicate with you.

You are aware that not only I, but also three of my brother bishops, Mikayel Ajapahyan, Mkrtich Proshyan, and Arshak Khachatryan, have been spied on, arrested, interrogated, slandered in state-sponsored media campaigns and imprisoned on false charges.

Other faithful clergy of the Armenian Apostolic Church have been threatened and abused but have not yet been imprisoned. Among them is the head of our Church, Catholicos Karekin II. Prime Minister Pashinyan has publicly called him a “threat to national security.” He faces an unconstitutional state-sponsored campaign to force him out of office and replace him with a politically pliable cleric.

I am incarcerated today for a simple reason. My offense is to speak an unwelcome truth to power, in the non-violent spirit of Martin Luther King Jr.

That simple truth is that the Christian Armenian nation faces an existential threat.

The Republic of Armenia was created as a secure homeland for the victims of the Armenian Genocide and their descendants. But the dictator of Azerbaijan – who calls Armenia “Western Azerbaijan” – seeks to turn Armenia into a vassal state, unable to protect the Armenian nation and its interests.

Azerbaijan is supported in this effort by Turkey, which is building a zone of influence stretching from the borders of Israel to the Caspian Sea.

A crucial part of this project is to rob the Armenian Apostolic Church of its ability to speak with an independent voice in society. Why?

The Armenian Apostolic Church is a central pillar of the Armenian Christian nation. For much of its history it has been the nation's only unifying institution. It has survived wave after wave of violent persecution, by the Ottomans, the Soviets, and Azerbaijan.

The world is well aware of the Armenian Genocide and its brutal aftershocks, the most recent being the ethno-religious cleansing of Armenian Christians from Nagorno Karabakh less than three years ago.

Today, Armenia's national church is again under assault. Azerbaijan claims that the Armenian Apostolic Church is an "obstacle to peace," and demands that, as a condition for peace, the Armenian state render it incapable of fulfilling its historic role in the life of the nation.

Throughout its history, there have always been Armenians, even clerics, who became instruments for the persecutors of the Church. They have often done so in the name of peace.

"They say, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace." Such was the case in the time of the Prophet Jeremiah. Such is the case in Armenia today.

I ask you all to pray for me and the other clergy and supporters of the church who have been imprisoned in Armenia this year, and to encourage others to pray for us as well.

I also urge the Summit to put three requests to Vice President Vance, as he prepares to visit Armenia and Azerbaijan:

- 1) To make it clear to the president of Azerbaijan and the prime minister of Armenia that the United States will not accept the continued persecution of the Armenian Apostolic Church;
- 2) To tell both leaders to release their political prisoners – especially the 20 Armenians held hostage in Baku, and the four clergymen and supporters of the church imprisoned in Armenia;
- 3) To include the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin as a dialogue partner in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process.

Sincerely, *with love and prayer*
Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan

