

**The Conferral of the Silver Rose of Saint Nicholas
Upon His Beatitude Patriarch Mesrob II Mutafyan
Monday January 12, 2009
The Cathedral of the Mother of God, Istanbul, Turkey
Laudatio by Rev. Guido Vergauwen, OP
Rector Magnificus, University of Fribourg, Switzerland**

Today we have gathered together in prayer here in the cathedral of the Mother of God in order to confer the Silver Rose of St. Nicholas upon His Beatitude Patriarch Mesrob Mutafyan. To hear the name “Mesrob” in this context directs our thoughts immediately to that great Armenian of the early centuries, the heavenly patron of His Beatitude Patriarch Mesrob Mutafyan, to Mesrob (b. 361) the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, with which in an extraordinarily effective manner he was able to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to the Armenian people. The name of St. Mesrob stands for both culture and faith, and this explains very well the meaning of the Silver Rose of St. Nicholas: it honors both academic and ecclesial distinction.

Perhaps it is never possible to separate faith and science, theological study from *sentire cum ecclesia*. But the Armenian tradition has preserved the unity of faith and reason in a unique way -- only we Dominicans have the same tradition. The Armenian Church confers the titles of Vardapet and Dzairaguin Vartapet, both academic and ecclesial degrees which then priest Mesrob Mutafyan received in 1981 and 1986. I as a good Dominican received such a degree -- we call it Magister -- in November 2008. The scientific and ecclesial honor of the Silver Rose of St. Nicholas is given to individuals like St. Nicholas – as well as St. Mesrob I can add this time – who have worked for the unity of Christians, for peace among men.

The idea of conferring a rose, a symbol of Jesus, the rose of the root of Jesse (Isaiah 11:10), is not new. The Bishop of Rome Leo IX (1002-1054) first conferred a golden Rose on the fourth Sunday of Lent, *Laetare* Sunday, to Catholic monarchs. Later the Rose was given also to women such as Queen Joan I of Sicily in 1386, and the Grand Duchess of Luxembourg in 1956. Pope John Paul II gave it to a number of Marian sanctuaries such as those at Czestochowa, Loretto, Fatima and Lourdes. This year the Pope’s Rose will be given to the Marian sanctuary of Altötting in Germany. We have enlarged the circle of those receiving such a Rose. The Ecumenical Institute of the University of Fribourg in Switzerland and the Eastern Churches Institute in Regensburg, Germany, have created, instead of a golden Rose, the silver Rose of St. Nicholas.

The foundation’s council is composed of three persons: Fr. Guido Vergauwen, OP, the present rector of the University of Fribourg; Dr. Barbara Hallensleben, Professor of Dogmatics in the Faculty of Theology of the same University of Fribourg, a member of the International Theological Commission and several other international dialogue commissions; and Msgr. Nikolaus Wyrwoll, Director of the Eastern Churches Institute in Regensburg, Consultor for the Catholic Bishops of Germany and for the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in the Vatican.

The Foundation’s charter stipulates that the recipients of the Silver Rose of St. Nicholas will be persons who 1) in their lives, like St. Nicholas, have made visible God’s love for mankind, the

“Menschenfreundlichkeit Gottes” 2) are rooted in the life of their ecclesial communities and who, in the power of the Spirit, give witness to the mission of the Church *in universum mundum* (throughout the world), and 3) work together for reconciliation and deeper communion in the Church, in humanity and the totality of creation. This is why we wished to confer the Silver Rose of St. Nicholas on His Beatitude Patriarch Mesrob.

The Silver Rose was awarded for the first time in 2006 when the recipient was Metropolitan Kirill of the Moscow Patriarchate. In 2007 it was given to Abbess Josephina of the monastery of Varatec, perhaps the largest monastery in the world with more than 500 nuns. In 2008 we gave the Silver Rose of St. Nicholas to Msgr. Eleuterio Fortino, of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in the Vatican.

The charter of the Silver Rose of St. Nicholas Foundation provides for a series of steps to prepare the Rose for presentation. It must be forged in the monastic tradition, by the goldsmiths of the Benedictine Monastery at Münsterschwarzach. Then it must be blessed by the Bishop of Rome – this was done this time on December 5 – and must be placed on the tomb of St. Nicholas in Bari – done this year on the feast of St. Nicholas on December 6. The Bari Dominicans have possession of St. Nicholas’ relics, and today Fr. Damiano, rector of the Basilica of St. Nicholas, is with us as well as the Mayor of Bari, His Excellency Michele Emiliano.

The mission *in universum mundum* was a part of Minas Mesrob Mutafyan’s experience since his childhood. Born in Istanbul on June 16, 1956, he began his studies at the Armenian school in Taksim; he later studied at the English High School in **Nisantas** and in Stuttgart, Germany. In 1979 he received his Baccalaureate in Sociology, Philosophy and Theology in Memphis, USA. He was ordained a priest the same year by His Beatitude Patriarch Shnork I in Istanbul.

The young priest once again went out into the world – in Greek *universum mundum* translates as *katholiki oikumeniki* – and finished his Master’s Degree in Ancient History and Biblical Archaeology at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. At the same time he was teaching Old Testament in the Armenian Theological Seminary in Jerusalem. In 1982 Mesrob returned to his native city to serve as secretary to Patriarch Shnork. He fulfilled his military service at Burdur (1983-1984), and then served on the island of Kinaliada, first as rector and then after September 21, 1986, as bishop of the church of St. Gregory the Illuminator. A statue of St. Gregory the Illuminator is now found at the northern corner of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, where those visiting the basilica’s grotto and cupola pass by. The young bishop Mesrob was able to see St. Peter’s Basilica personally in 1988 and 1989 when he was a theology student at the University of St. Thomas, directed by the Dominican Fathers in Rome. In 1988 when the earthquake struck Armenia Bishop Mesrob was able to interest Italian public opinion in this catastrophe; the first relief flight by Caritas International to the city of Gyumri was accompanied by Msgr. Albert Rauch of the Eastern Churches Institute of Regensburg. Bishop Mesrob then returned to his native city, and in 1990 was elected president of the Synod. On October 14, 1998, he became the 84th Armenian Patriarch since 1461 when Sultan Mehmet instituted a patriarchate for the Armenian, Syrian and Coptic Christians of the Ottoman Empire.

In 2003 the new patriarch received a Doctor of Divinity degree from The Catholic University of America in Washington. For more than four centuries the Armenian Patriarchs of Istanbul had

responsibility for the immense Ottoman Empire and Patriarch Mesrob expanded this even further in an effort to contribute to reconciliation and deeper communion in the Church, humanity and all of creation. He did his best to reduce tensions, for example, between the new Republic of Armenia and the powerful Armenians outside the country, and undertook many apostolic voyages to Israel, Armenia, the Vatican, the USA, Germany, Italy, Greece, Romania, Belgium, Gibraltar, Lebanon, Japan and France.

Faith cannot exist without reason; theology and participation in the Church must be taken together. Thus Patriarch Mesrob works with Patriarch Bartholomew and other Christian leaders to ensure adequate formation of the priests and Christian religion instructors in Turkey. He has visited Turkish Presidents Suleyman Demirel, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, and Abdulla Gül, Foreign Minister Abdulla Gül, Culture Minister Atilla Koc, Education Minister Hüseyin Celik, and Interior Minister Abdülkar Aksu.

Thus it gives me great pleasure to confer solemnly the Silver Rose of St. Nicholas (today one could also say of St. Mesrob Mashtotz) upon His Beatitude Patriarch Mesrob II Mutafyan.