

REV. DR. ABEL MANOUKIAN



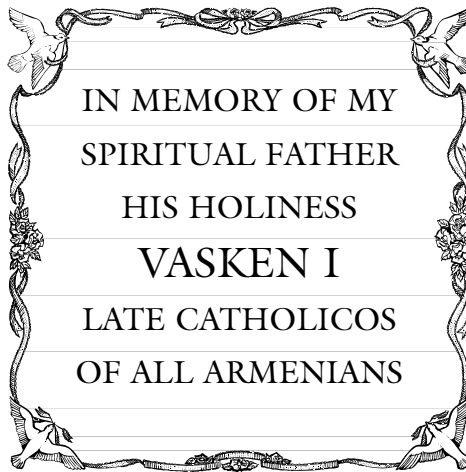
# THE ARMENIAN CHURCH PRESENT DAY CHALLENGES

REV. DR. ABEL MANOUKIAN

**THE ARMENIAN  
CHURCH  
PRESENT DAY CHALLENGES**

GENEVA  
2005





IN MEMORY OF MY  
SPIRITUAL FATHER  
HIS HOLINESS  
VASKEN I  
LATE CATHOLICOS  
OF ALL ARMENIANS



## FOREWORD

The Armenian Apostolic Church has recognized itself as the church of the people. Nation and church have identified with each other and become body and soul in perfect harmony, unity and communion.

Communion guarantees the unity of the church. It is the essence of the Church, the communion between the sacrament of the Lord and the faithful.

Both realities that form the church find their palpable expression in communication. Communication is the way, the living word, the writing, the tradition, the rite, the adoration, the law and right, the strength, the authority, the hierarchy and the dogma. In fact, it is everything that can explain communion and make it understandable.

Communion is the permanent value of religion, whereas communication is culture or creation with its uplifting beauty along with its inevitable provisional nature.

Communication can work as long as it is closely tied with communion. That is, as a means, it can help the believer, individual or community, to communicate with each

other and lead them to that spiritual source which is communion.

Communication is by nature provisional. It is subject to cultural changes and progressions as well as to the needs of time. Communication may weaken and fail in its function and in this case, independent of our will, our individual tastes and dispositions, our decision to refuse or accept, our desire to keep it as an immutable tradition, it has no value for the everyday life of the Church except becoming part of history. Even if it had once served its real purpose, it cannot keep its real mission in order to face the new challenges of time.

The lack of communication progressively numbs the vitality of the Church, doubtlessly paralyses its mission to form an "ecclesia", which paradoxically and unwillingly creates dispersion.

The main purpose of becoming a Church or forming a community is to remain in unity, to continually communicate with the mystic presence of God, receive the nourishment of a high spiritual life directly from Him, and be led to salvation through Him alone.

Reform is the fundamental and efficient way to face the lack of communication, dispersion, numbness, waste, and institutionalization, to come out of the dangerous deadlocks created by archaic and vain conventionalisms. It will help recreate communication, energy, the permanent value and the life-giving source of the church.

Every civilization, society, association, big or small, every religion and culture, inevitably turn to internal re-

forms in order to survive in a manner that would serve the real purpose.

The imperatives of time without a doubt present two choices only. One, to correspond to it and follow its progress by reforming itself to maintain its fast and continuous pace, and the other, to remain in the past and become history.

The articles assembled in this book are reflections on this subject, meaning to irrigate the dried up fields of the Church with a seriously thought reform, to revive the past into the present, to fertilize tradition with the demands and imperatives of modern times and to fundamentally bring the life of the church to productiveness.

The vivifying breath of reform within our Church systems in response to the substantial need of time, parallel to the ritual, administrative and canonical spheres, concentrates its attention mainly on the following principles.

a) The laic element of the Church, together with its historical administrative responsibilities, must necessarily be introduced also in the activities of the Church, be it religious, evangelical or apostolic. It is not a coincidence that the church calls the laity "believers or faithful". They are the ones who form the fundament of the Church and create the community of those who believe in Christ, which is the Church. Alas, that fundamental and great inner power of the Church remains passive and its participation in the life of the Church is only that of a spectator.

b) The authority and the higher functions of the Church must equally be at the disposal of all meritorious



people, independent of their status, celibate or married. One should consider the value of the candidates, i.e. their education in mind and spirit, their calling towards the Church and their character, not whether they are celibate or married.

The Armenian Apostolic Church is the utmost reflection of the spiritual life of our nation. Keeping up to date with the revolutions and the benefits brought by civilization, it has supremely adorned the house of "Torkom" and through the windy flows of history has led the vessel of Armenia to the present peaceful haven. We should not, through putrid and fundamentalist conservatism, submit the sails of the holy vessel of our national entity to immobility and rot. On the contrary, we should be reasonable and courageous, allowing the Armenian Apostolic Church to open wide its white and immaculate sails, welcome the present benevolent winds and lead its "Haigazian" herd towards a luminous future.

Rev. Dr. Abel Manoukian

### Acknowledgements

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# ONE YEAR AFTER THE 1700<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY<sup>(\*)</sup><sup>1</sup>

The 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the adoption of Christianity as a State religion in Armenia has passed away with the flow of time. Time brought it forth and took it away naturally and so swiftly. What is future soon becomes present and vanishes into the past in the twinkling of an eye. The past is an infinite ocean of solitude, in which inexorably perish all realities that have just crossed the fine line from the future to the present.

It is impossible to evaluate the future because it is unreal, just as it is meaningless to make the past productive because it is not reachable any more. The present is the tangible gold, it is the ‘now’ which is at our immediate disposal; it is the greatest and most precious gift that time offers to us. It is ours at this very moment which, alas, will slip away from our hands and will become the lasting and inviolable possession of the past.

It is also impossible to actualize all that slides away from the present to the past. An immense load of facts and figures, much bigger than we can ever imagine, disappears and perishes in the ocean of the past. Whatever remains there and may become objectively available to us is just history from which

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<sup>(\*)</sup> Translated by Lucy Melemetjian. Original publication - 2002, Geneva.

<sup>1</sup> Two basic questions, **Language** and **Canon Law** are not included in this article. The official liturgical language used in the Armenian Church and also the question of reforming the Canon Law will be the subject of a forthcoming article.

we can learn, at best, by studying and delving into the lives lived in the past, about the development of mankind, the cultural wealth it amassed, the experiences it gained, its achievements and failures, and finally, all that is worth mentioning. It is only on such a wide spectrum that our own face can be reflected and become recognizable as a human being, the only creature under the heaven and on earth that is endowed with reason.

What can immediately be made productive, what is beneficial in a meaningful context and most useful in the subsoil of reality, is none other than the “now,” that is the “present.” The personal and collective life of each one of us is precariously suspended from the meaning and value we give to the “present.”

Many people unwittingly ask a very generalized question: “What is the meaning of life?” A satisfactory answer can be found in putting a meaning in the present, to render the present productive by the minutes and the seconds that are granted to us borrowed from the future; they become present and in a wink they are already in the past.

Yesterday the 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary became history. It was yesterday that this important pan-Armenian event was still being celebrated by the three-pillared emblem, adopted by the Anniversary Committee of the Church, which so eloquently reflected in its symbolism the unity and integrity of the Nation, the Church, and the State.

We wonder, however, in what measure were they able to take advantage and to make good use of this golden opportunity, offered to us by time, to make our lives worthwhile and productive. We wonder if were justified the hopes of many who expected to see a “New Pentecost” in the 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary for the entire Armenian nation, both in Armenia and

the Diaspora. These are vital questions, but the “low-ranking” priests are deprived of the right to raise these questions by those on the higher echelons of the ecclesiastical hierarchy; and as to answering these questions, just forget it.

The question, of course, is not the celebration. Celebration is but the superficial part of the event. The essential is to give an existential meaning to the celebration and to relate it to the continuing force of life, in which case the 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary would have provided a blissful opportunity for a creative rebirth and rejuvenation all through the vast field of the Church, for new missions or at least for a new movement.

On May 22, 1994, some seven years prior to the official initiation of the 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, the then Catholicos of the See of Cilicia Karekin II (later Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin I of blessed memory), on his return to Antilias from Armenia, delivered an uplifting sermon at the St. Gregory the Illuminator Cathedral. The title of his sermon was “The 1700th Anniversary, a New Pentecost,” a title of prophetic inspiration, indeed, which perfectly expressed the entire contents of the sermon.

According to the information given in the *Acts of the Apostles*,<sup>2</sup> the Pentecost represents that crucial moment in the history of the development of the primitive Church, when the narrow circle of the persecuted Church in Jerusalem, consisting of the band of the apostles and gathered with fear in a cramped dark attic, received the Holy Spirit and turned Christianity into a world religion.

In spite of the fact that the sermon of the Catholicos was widely published in the Armenian press and also separately by

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<sup>2</sup> *Acts 2:1-42.*

the Catholicate of Antilias,<sup>3</sup> it met the fate of many similar works and was entirely forgotten within a few months and lost in the commotion of the 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. The message of His Holiness, the essence of his sermon, was not heeded to and many people were carried away by the dazzling and transient pageant.

In order to grasp the substance of His Holiness' message we should read his thoughtful expressions as follows: "How should we value the 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary within the context of the life of our people and the history of the world? This is an exceptional occasion given to us, and I do not think that there is another nation in the world that can celebrate the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its church. Consider this as a special privilege bestowed upon us, grasp it in your minds and approach it accordingly."<sup>4</sup>

"Dear beloved, it is one thing to have merit, another to acknowledge having it. As a nation we have earned this merit; but if we do not know the value of having this merit, then what is it worth having it? We are honored today in the world for having the merit bequeathed to us from our forefathers. Sometimes we proudly tell foreigners that we are the first nation in the world that recognized Christianity statewide as national religion. Yes, it is easy to say this, but our own and proper merit should consists in rating it highly with our lives, works, creativity, and testimony. Be proud of what your ancestors have given to you, but do not be satisfied with it; add to it your honor that you will earn through your living testimony."<sup>5</sup>

"The 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary must not become a simple rem-

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<sup>3</sup> *Catholicos Karekin II, The 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, The New Pentecost (thoughts and experiences), In Preparation of the Celebration of the 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Proclamation of Christianity in Armenia as State Religion. Antilias, 1994.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 46.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 45.

iniscence or just the glorification of a past event; It must rather be a revitalization of the religious life of our people today, a sort of spiritual renewal of the Armenian Church.”<sup>6</sup>

“I offer the 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary to God as a chalice, beseeching Him to bless it and turn it into a new Pentecost in the life of our nation.”<sup>7</sup>

In commenting on the work and the courageous and visionary spirit of that noble apostolic representative, St. Gregory the Illuminator, Catholicos Karekin underlines the fact that the Illuminator “was able to discern in Christianity those principles and the secret miraculous power by which the human life can soar high and with a creative thrust can bring about a transformation among nations and countries. St. Gregory’s basic merit did not consist in seeing this elation and his personal captivation by it; it was rather in changing it to a national movement and a vision.”<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, what His Holiness Karekin the First hoped to see through the 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary was the realization of his prophetic vision, the birth of a new Pentecost, which would turn into a national movement to bring forth a “spiritual renaissance, a transformation, and a transfiguration” in our nation and, in the words of St. Nerses the Gracious, to make us a “new people.”

In spite of the fact that on a national level and with the participation of the Armenian Catholic and Evangelical Churches we celebrated the Anniversary through the whole year, we endeavored to revive in our lives the memory of the historic event; we tried to appraise in scholarly conferences the proof of the proclamation of Christianity as State religion in Armenia; we organized pilgrimages to arouse enthusiasm; conse-

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 47.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 447-48.

<sup>8</sup> *See* With the Breath of St. Gregory the Illuminator, *pp.* 58-58.

crated the 1700<sup>th</sup> Holy Myron (Chrism) in Etchmiadzin and Antilias, and we built in Yerevan, the Capital of Armenia, a Cathedral named after St. Gregory the Illuminator as a permanent monument to the jubilee event. We also anointed diocesan prelates, consecrated bishops for dioceses both in the Homeland and the Diaspora, we welcomed Armenian and foreign political personalities, spiritual leaders from large and small churches, etc. Despite all these however, in the background of all the real efforts related to the 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary jubilation, as praiseworthy as they may be, may we be allowed to point out that there was one very essential thing that was missing: the “1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary-New Pentecost,” the substance, that was specifically mentioned with profound inspiration and forceful emphasis by His Holiness Karekin I in his sermon as mentioned above.

Did the voice of the Supreme Being resound in the ears of the wind-strewn Armenian communities? Was the entire House of Torgom filled with the spirit of vigilance? Did the fiery tongues descend also upon our national values, such as our Nation, Church, and State? It is hard to say. Where is that 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary “which instead of being just a remembrance or a celebration day of a past event, was supposed to have ushered in a religious revival in the life of our people, a kind of spiritual renewal of the Armenian Church?”

We said “Renewal.” This is the most alerting watchword for today’s essential needs, imperative needs, which is the ultimate and primordial condition for the flourishing of new possibilities within the national-ecclesiastical life in our modern society. Without the slogan mentioned above, without the serious implementation of a “Reform,” it is difficult indeed to imagine, even to hope for, the materialization of “New Pentecosts” in the “triforium” of the Armenian Church.

However resounding the festivities of the 1700<sup>th</sup> may have been, even if more boisterous be those of the 1800<sup>th</sup> and the following centuries, it is all the same as long as no creative force is born in the green fields of times of yore of the Armenian Church. If the old is not grafted with new sap, or the past with all its sacredness is not fertilized with the vital cells of the present, it will not be able to survive and fight against the inevitable erosion of time. It would be naïve to think that the Church can perpetually keep its previous ideals and moral greatness in carrying out its historic mission on the ever-changing horizons of the present and the future, and continue to express itself with its same positive role and vitality, without refreshing and renewing its intrinsic forces.

In June 26 to 30, 2001, a convention was held in Bossey, near Geneva, organized by the Catholicate of Cilicia, dedicated in general to the topic of “The Spiritual Culture of the Armenian Church.”<sup>9</sup> In his presentation, His Holiness Aram I, in connection with reforming the Armenian Church, made a very important contribution in regard to the celebrations of the 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.

Though we appreciate the work of the participants, the realistic result and the concise conclusion<sup>10</sup> reached at the convention were not really that much interesting as was the speech<sup>11</sup> of Catholicos Aram about the main message of the 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. “The greatest challenge facing the Armenian Church is its renewal that should encompass its entire collective life. All the children of our nation should participate

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<sup>9</sup> *For a detailed report about this convention see the review Hask, 6-7 June-July, 2001, pp. 518-528.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid. p. 468.*

<sup>11</sup> *Delivered at the WCC center in Geneva on July 29, 2001. The English translation was published in Antillas “Aram I, The Armenian Church Beyond 1700th Anniversary.”*



in this work. All the problems of the Church should be discussed with a realistic approach taking into consideration the particular conditions of our life. This should be the major message of the 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.”<sup>12</sup>

Highlighting the whole importance of the subject in question, Father Grigor Chiftjian, the editor of the review *Hask*, the organ of the Catholicate, exclaims: “Reform! Reform! Reform! If our Church wants to continue to spread the ‘Good news’ of the Gospel of Christ, then it has no other choice but to transform itself into service. A church that has buried itself in the past cannot be of any service to the present society.”<sup>13</sup>

The See of Cilicia was known to have been rather conservative, even intransigent, in its religious, doctrinal and particularly traditional concepts. But today, under the diasporan conditions and in view of the weakening of national identity, the regression of the race, and, finally, the multiple dangers of assimilation, it has raised high the luminous torch of reform and is definitely ahead of the other hierarchic sees of our Church. And this forward step is due to the fact that by its rich and wise experience it has come to the realistic conclusion that even the richest traditions of the past can not be invested in the present, just like devaluated currency that does not buy anything.

“Ex nihilo nihil fit” (nothing comes from nothing) says the well-known Latin proverb. In this case it is not the tradition that is not worth anything by itself, but it is its impracticality, in other words, its uselessness for the demands and conditions of modern life.

May we be permitted to say, that the Church today re-

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 521.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 468.

sembles a rich market with an abundance of things that the contemporary man does not need. The philosopher Socrates went to a market one day and exclaimed, “Oh, there are so many things here that I do not need.” Nowadays, the Armenian believer, standing in the church with his arms spread and with a burning heart, exclaims, “How much spiritual riches has our Church to offer; but alas, I wish it would give me just a small portion of it as a comforting balm for my everyday worries.”

Regarding the concepts of Church and tradition, Vazrik Basil, one of our young Armenian-German intellectuals and theologian, expresses his worries as follows in the *Haratch* daily of Paris:<sup>14</sup> “The Armenian Church is known as a ‘traditionalist’ institution. [...] A few aspects prove the contrary. ‘Traditionalism’ often means ‘repetition’ of order, ritual, structure, etc., established during the course of time. In this way it is not the ‘tradition’ that is preserved, but what is ‘transmitted,’ that which is stable, known and apparent. Whereas ‘tradition’ is dynamic, the act of creating what is to be transmitted is new and unknown. Each generation, with its individual experience and environment, must create what is to be ‘transmitted.’ Therefore, what is to be ‘repeated’ is not that which is set to be ‘transmitted,’ but it is the very act of creating it, that is ‘tradition’ in action. In this sense the Armenian Church is not ‘traditionalist’ but a ‘preserver of what is transmitted.’”<sup>15</sup>

“From the Christian point of view God does not only exist, He is also alive, He has a living existence, whose essence is communication, He within Himself as Trinity, and externally as Revelation. Therefore, if God is a living communication and if that communication is a ‘mystery,’ then the ‘tradition’ of the Church is as much authentic as that communica-

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<sup>14</sup> Haratch, *Sept. 14, 2001, issue 20.252, p. 2.*

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

tion is in active course by means of rites, theology, art, ecclesiastical institutions, and other means. In fact, being just a ‘preserver of what is transmitted’ deprives us from this vitality, because, from the Christian point of view, this unknown but ever-fresh ‘mystery’ is restrained by the known and the visible, that is, by that which is ‘transmitted’.”<sup>16</sup>

There is a huge difference between “tradition,” “traditionalism,” and “being true to what is transmitted.” One, condenses in itself life and unlimited communication, generating new possibilities and creating new experiences to ascend toward the “mystery,” whereas the other objectifies the “mystery,” materializing gradually the divine “deep mystery, inaccessible and uncreated” into a kind of idolatry whereby they tend to enslave men to religion by means of artificial ceremonies that are completely void of any meaning and purpose and lack true communication.

Returning to the important message of His Holiness Catholicos Aram the First regarding the reform of the Armenian Church, we can sum it up as follows:

A. The theology of the Armenian Church must come out of the past, from the textbooks and the narrow context of religious ceremonies, and should relate itself to the life of the people living in the modern world.

B. The Armenian Church must come out of its institutional structure and thinking, should enter into the life of the people to fulfil a pastoral mission. Christianity has become a formal presence in the Armenian life. It has to be changed to a living reality.

C. The Armenian Church needs to redefine its national identity.

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<sup>16</sup> See Haratch, *Sept. 15-16, 2001, Issue 20.253, p. 2.*

D. The Armenian Church has a universal and a local character. Being the same and only Armenian Church and living in different environments, it has often adopted different ways of life, different ways of thinking, has different worries and priorities. How is it possible to respect the local conditions on the one hand, and also preserve its identity and integrity on the other?<sup>17</sup>

The message of Catholicos Aram I is very clear and explicit. We can only wish and hope that the proposals concerning the reformation of the Armenian Church do not become “a voice crying in the wilderness,”<sup>18</sup> but materialize unconditionally in the life of the Church and find also their practical expression on national levels.<sup>19</sup>

The call for the reform of the Armenian Church, a seriously meaningful appeal and an imperative need, must fall on the fertile soil of the Church so that, like the beautiful parable of the seeds in the Gospel, “they bring forth fruit, some thirty-fold, some sixty, and some a hundred.”<sup>20</sup>

It is exactly at this point that Dr. Yervand H. Kassouni, Professor Emeritus of Armenology, in an article published in *Tchanaser*,<sup>21</sup> raises very aptly the crucial question: “Who is going to reform?”

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<sup>17</sup> See Hask, Issue 6-7, June-July, 2001, pp. 519-520.

<sup>18</sup> Matt. 3:3.

<sup>19</sup> Upon the publication of Catholicos Aram’s input regarding church reform, Rev. Father Grigor Tchiftjian wrote an article in Hask (issues 9-10, September-October 2001, p. 724) which he concludes with the following appeal: “His Holiness Catholicos Aram of the Greater House of Cilicia opened the way to REFORMING THE ARMENIAN CHURCH, and, braced up with the idea of RENEWAL, he invites all the sons and daughters of our people who have a vision for the future of the Armenian Church and our nation to a heart-searching self-criticism, thus becoming pioneers of RENEWAL, the ultimate desire of all.”

<sup>20</sup> Mark 4:8,20.

<sup>21</sup> See Y. Kassouni, “Who is going to reform?” *Tchanaser*, June-July, 2001, pp.145-46.

This question is, indeed, the most vital in the current situation as it represents one of the starting points of the renewal movement. But it is necessary to discuss it in four directions: a) why reform, b) what to reform, c) how to reform, and d) who will carry out the reform.

## **A. WHY TO REFORM THE CHURCH?**

We have tried to answer this question previously. Within the series of publications related to the 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary we have published an article<sup>22</sup> (later in book form with English and French translations<sup>23</sup>) where we have examined our Church in its glorious past, in the face of present challenges, and in its dire need of a radical reformation. It is therefore superfluous to repeat here our observations and analyses directly related to the question above.

At this juncture, we would like to make a precision: the necessity of reforming the church is not aimed at just filling up the deserted pews or increasing the number of the faithful who attend the church services. The aim is to find out how the Church can gather together the “Ecclesia” (derived from its own name meaning those who “assemble before the Lord”), how can it unite and keep them united in the love and faith of Christ, and how can it fulfil its mission to preserve and to lead them under changing civilizations, cultures and world views and, furthermore, within the multinational and multicultural context of the present era.

How can the Church adjust its spiritual vocation to the contemporary man whose verbal thinking, world view, manner

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<sup>22</sup> See Rev. Dr. Abel Oghlukian, *"The National and Religious Unprescriptible Value of the Armenian Holy Apostolic Church,"* Haratch, October 12, 13, 2001, issues 20.012 and 20.013, Paris.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* Geneva, 2001.

of appreciating values, social mores, habits, moral concepts, and worries about the immediate present are basically different from those that are collectively called Christian doctrine or Christian morality?

The question then does not reside in the preoccupation of making the Church live; but it is how the Church will be able to continue, through its vocation of service, to be useful to the man of today and tomorrow; and how, in the present and future circumstances, it will achieve its fundamental mission which is none other than leading men to salvation. How will the Church face firmly life's new and multiple challenges, when man has fundamentally changed its attitude in regard to the historic, traditional, doctrinal, and institutional bases of the Church?

## **B. WHAT SHOULD BE REFORMED IN THE CHURCH?**

The Armenian Holy Apostolic Church is one of the most ancient eastern churches with its apostolic origin, orthodoxy, history, sacredness, and holy traditions. We are inclined to confess that any arbitrary change or neologism introduced into its traditional and doctrinal principles seems to be trespassing on its identity and sanctity, just like the smallest speck that diminishes the value of a pure diamond. On the other hand we cannot deny the evidence that traditions too are susceptible to change and subject to influences. Some of the basic changes survive, as others simply disappear in time and due to customs, but also new religious movements and new manifestations of religious zealotry start budding gradually in the field of the Church.

In this respect, we can cite numerous examples from history showing later intrusions into the Church, imposed at various times, due to social exigencies and circumstances related

to historic events and figures, which have eventually become sacred and inalienable practices in our universal and national Church. Here are a few examples:

a) The Christian Church was a lot simpler in its primitive and apostolic days; its Confession of Faith was entirely based on the Person of Jesus Christ and the idea of Resurrection. In the Acts of the Apostles the Credo of the Church is summed up in the following concise and comprehensive words: “Jesus of Nazareth who was delivered up, tortured, crucified and slain whom God raised up from the dead.”<sup>24</sup>

In the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, as the result of heretical movements and acrimonious theological disputes, the Church adopted a much more complicated Credo formulated by the Ecumenical Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, which is the Confession of Faith we profess in the Armenian Church during the celebration of the Holy Divine Liturgy.

This little example shows that the Church of today is not the same as it was in the days of the apostles. The progress of time, the changing cultures and mentalities, the reforms in social life have changed or introduced into Christianity and its doctrine a number of elements that were surely unknown in the primitive Church.

b) Beginning in the 13<sup>th</sup> century in Cilicia, under the Latin influence, Catholicos Gregory III of Caesarea, himself a latinophile, began to introduce into the Armenian Church Hymnal a special canon known as the order of “Magnificats,” a series of pious hymns, dedicated to the Virgin Mary. In spite of the fact that in the 13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries an organized opposition was raised in a number of our religious centers, particularly in Eastern Armenia where the clergy was vehemently op-

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Acts 2:22-24, 3:13-15, 4:10.

posed to any union with the Latins, and also in spite of the evidence that Gregory III of Caesarea was a dubious person, the “Magnificats” still remain in the hymnody of the Armenian Church and have become since long an indivisible part of it like precious jewels among our sacred songs.

c) One of the oldest traditions of our Church has been to eat only vegetables during the fasting season. Beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, not only in Armenia but in the Diaspora as well, even in monastic circles, consumption of fish was also permitted. We wish we had been satisfied with this, but on the contrary, due to the existing conditions of life, this and other similar practices have already become marginal for a large majority of our people, whereas in certain sister churches these fasting habits have been replaced by individual acts of charity.

d) Divine services are part and parcel of our church life. The observance of the canonical hours, such as the Sunrise, the Morning, and the Mealtime Offices, with their third, sixth, and ninth hour divisions, as well as Evening and Night Offices, have altogether ceased in many churches both in Armenia and the Diaspora, because of the fact that nowadays the working hours, social conditions and other obligations do not allow the man of today to participate in these inspirational services. The priests may carry on their duties, but how can their echoes reverberating on the walls of an empty church serve their purpose?

e) According to an ancient rule in our Church, the believers can receive Holy Communion during the celebration of the Holy Divine Liturgy only after having done penance and having fasted from the night before. The severity of this rule has unwittingly created a dismal situation so that only a few have the courage to receive the Holy Communion “with awe and faith.” This situation sharply restricts the number of believers



wishing to receive the Holy Communion and limits them only to the Christmas and Easter celebrations. Many priests who are inclined to improve this unnatural situation, allow the believers within their pastoral field to dispense moderately with this rule of fasting thus giving them the opportunity to partake of the Holy Communion at any Sunday Mass they wish.

f) It is a very appropriate custom in the Armenian Church that for the sacraments of baptism and matrimony the godfather or the best man whose function is to bear witness of the faith, should obligatorily be a child of the Armenian Apostolic Church, baptized and married in that Church. Due to the increasing number of mixed marriages, particularly in the West, in Europe and North America, many Armenian families have members of Armenian and foreign origin belonging to various denominations. In this age of Ecumenism, it is not possible to impose on them the faith and doctrinal principles of the Armenian Church, nor to demand of them to renounce their faith and ethnic identity. Therefore, it is very difficult for people who belong to other faiths to accept the role of godfather or best man in the Armenian Church. This is another new problem that wasn't even imagined in the past.

These and many other similar examples prove beyond doubt that numerous customs and traditions in the Church have entirely lost their usefulness and are in rapid decline soon to be forgotten entirely. On the other hand there are emerging new standards and demands relevant to the new circumstances of life that like new seeds are shooting their green sprouts in the fertile field of the Church.

Here once again emerges the question asked above: What to reform? Certainly not what is useless, and not what is harmful. Instead, whatever is to be reformed, should be an asset to the Church.

Here is an example. It is a tradition in the Armenian Church to administer the bread and wine of the Holy Communion to the lip or mouth of the believer. Due to the fact that the individual is considered sinful before the mystery of Christ's body and blood, he should not have any manual contact with it. The practice is different in most parishes in North America where to safeguard the believer against new diseases and noxious contaminants, the bread of the Holy Communion is placed in the hand of the believer and he puts it in his mouth. This kind of a novelty, however, has no bearing at all on Church reform. Similarly, abridging the Holy Divine Liturgy and cutting short certain rites do not translate into reforming the Church and hoping that the believers will fill the pews in astronomical numbers.

The Church reform should begin with intensified efforts in those areas that have been neglected the most, such as the Catechism and youth movements. If we have not been able to acquaint our youth with and make them acquire a basic knowledge about the Gospels and the Armenian Church, about the martyrological history of the latter and its beneficial role and mission in the life of our people, then we must readily confess that we have utterly failed in our responsibility of imprinting the Armenian stamp upon the new generation.

What a joy it was to see within the sphere of the 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary the creation of a youth movement at the Holy See of Etchmiadzin with the unified efforts of our people in Armenia, Artsakh and the Diaspora. A special office was established on this occasion and during the months of July and August, 2001, a series of important events took place which brought together some 3000 youth from the Homeland and around the world. Perhaps the number was not very impressive; nonetheless, it was significant enough to light a spark that

could eventually set ablaze the future horizons of an Armenian youth movement.

How sad it is that this youth movement that sprouted under the care of the Church faded very quickly along with the autumn of the 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. The enthusiasm of the youth should have been kept alive with the idea of the 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and the message it conveyed. It should have occupied its appropriate and unique place within the structure of our Church and progressively create its administrative organ by finding the genuine umbilical cord as its source of nourishment supplied by the Mother Church. In this way the youth would grow with spiritual ardor and would become the ever-renewing Church of the future.

If there is any domain in the field of our Church that needs to be reformed more than anything else, it is the equitable distribution of ecclesiastical authority between laymen and the religious hierarchy, namely, the deacons, celibate and married priests, and bishops. The Church, as Christ's congregation of believers, does not consist of fragmented units; it represents a whole that is based on the mystery of Christ's permanent presence in the Church and on the mystery of Holy Communion. Communion simply represents the essence of the Church, the mystery of the Lord's Word, Body and Blood.

God's Word, that is the Gospel, and the Holy Communion, are the real and supreme pledges of the presence of Christ in the Church and among His believers. It is before this mystical presence of Christ that the faithful gather together, forming thus the Church, or God's people, consisting of laymen and the clergy. These two groups are not separate entities or opposite poles in the Church; they are one people and one body of Christ, engaged in serving and administering God's word each in its own domain.

Each Christian individual baptized in the Holy Font and thus adopted by the Church of Christ, is called, by the authority spontaneously bestowed upon him, to the missions of the prophecy of Christ, the Priesthood and the Kingdom. In this sense, though the Armenian Church has been hierarchical by its apostolic origin, it has never been clericalist. Beginning as early as in the fifth century, the Armenian Church, due to historical events and the unique way in which its national-religious history has developed, it has created within its structure a particularly democratic system which, as a most beneficial gift, has been maintained up to the present time. In our national and ecclesiastical life, all the important decisions, whether on political, purely ecclesiastical or theological level, have been taken in unity and continuous cooperation of the people and the Church.

The democratic order of the Armenian Church, though it may seem complicated in practice, can be expressed in this one sentence: the people elect their spiritual leaders, from the highest to the lowest. For example, the Catholicos of All Armenians is elected by the National-Ecclesiastical Assembly; the Catholicos of the See of Cilicia by the National Delegates' Assembly; the Armenian Patriarch of Turkey by the General Delegates' Assembly; and Bishops are elected by the Diocesan Delegates' Assemblies, where in case they are not ordained, they are consecrated by the Catholicos. As for priests, they are elected by the parish either by ordination or consecration, and are confirmed by the diocesan primate. The only exception in this order is the process of election of the Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem. He is elected not by the people, but by the members of the Brotherhood of the Saint James Monastery.

We can thus see that in the administrative structure of the Church the laity is endowed with powers of responsibility; but

we cannot say the same in the spiritual domain where the layman has no authority to carry out evangelical and predatory activities within the apostolic field of the Church. Every Armenian Christian has the duty to proclaim the good news of the Gospel and to testify for the faith of Christ. It is obvious that there is a fundamental difference between spreading the good news and teaching. Each individual Christian is called upon to evangelize; but an intervention prescribed by the Church occurs only when doctrinal or confessional topics are to be taught, which certainly requires professional preparation and knowledge in the related fields.

Today, when the Church, spread around the world with its ramifications and denominations, is going through an acute crisis, when the Armenian churches strewn by the winds all across the Diaspora are seriously concerned about the increasing numbers of empty pews, and when in Armenia the pernicious activities of sectarian movements are threatening at the very foundations of existence of our nation, then it is high time that the Armenian Church should begin to revive its secular forces and allow them, apart from their administrative duties, to also assume urgent responsibilities in religious, ecclesiastical and apostolic missions. It is difficult indeed for the Church to be able to eliminate and repel the infiltrating dangers in a short period of time with a limited of number religious servants.

To be realistic, it should be noted that the lack of religious and church-related knowledge is so widespread and dominating among the laity that the individual is automatically deprived of any effective means of self-defense. He is like a person whose immune system is so weakened that the smallest germ can be dangerous or even fatal for his spiritual health.

As regards the equitable distribution of authority in the Church, it must be emphasized that in today's set up of the

hierarchical levels, the gap of authority between deacons, celibate and married priests and bishops is enormously large compared to what it was in the Church of the first centuries.

The hierarchy of the Church consists of three levels: deacons, priests, and bishops. The Catholicos, himself a bishop, celibate priests, monks, *vardapets*, are all priests. The basic foundation of all these levels is the priesthood, but not the specific areas of service from which naturally arise the rights and authorities of the respective clerical orders.

Compared to a priest, the bishop has special authority to anoint and lead an episcopal diocese, but still he is merely a priest like any other celibate monk or *vardapet*. Celibacy is not an advantage for priesthood; it has evolved as the result of hermitic life and monasticism introduced late in our Church. We know that up to the fifth century our catholicoses and bishops were married and the position of the catholicos was hereditary till the time of St. Sahak.

There cannot be a greater God-given authority or a mystery in the Church than the grace through which the bread and wine in the hands of the same married priest become body and blood on the altar during the Holy Divine Liturgy. Furthermore, in our Church the married priest is entrusted with the authority to anoint, confirm, and administer the sacrament of baptism and anointing of the sick.<sup>25</sup>

It is unfortunate that a married priest is still regarded in our Church just as a performer of rituals. He is considered a “second class citizen” in the Church, deprived of primatial and administrative authority.

Though it is true that in the dioceses of Europe, North

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<sup>25</sup> *Whereas the Latin Church reserves these functions only to the ministry of the Bishop, in case of need a priest is allowed to administer the sacrament of confirmation exceptionally with the special authorization of the Bishop.*

America, and Canada the status of married priests has somewhat improved, still there seems to be no indication as to promoting them in the hierarchic order or allowing them to move upward in responsible positions, in spite of the fact that many of them, due to their high education and administrative experience, are more capable to keep and lead their flock than a lot of celibate priests. Family experience is an undeniably wealthy resource to one who is ministering his flock; enabling more in-depth knowledge of family and community life.

We wish to share with you a passage from Archbishop Maghakia Ormanian (1841-1918), a former Patriarch of Armenians in Turkey (1896-1908) and the most noted figure in our Church history, from his authoritative work *The Church of Armenia*.<sup>26</sup>

*The offices of the archpriest, of vicar, and of member of the councils are the only ones within the reach of the married clergy. The married priest may conduct the duties of a vicariate in the event of a vacancy, but he is not allowed to be a candidate for the doctorate, nor for the dignity of the episcopate, unless he enters the ranks of the celibate clergy after widowerhood. Though this restriction has, in our time, acquired the force of law, it is altogether unsupported by the canonical weight or old-established authority. If we scrutinise the essence of this rule, we arrive at the conclusion that the episcopate is but the fulness of the priestly office, dedicated to the service of the people; and this is precisely the definition of the duties which devolve on the married clergy. Formerly the bishops were recruited from among the archpriests who then went under the title of kahanaiapet, that*

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<sup>26</sup> M. Ormanian, *The Church of Armenia*, English translation by G. Marcar Gregory, fourth English edition, published by the Canadian Diocese of the Armenian Church, Montreal, 2000, pp. 142-143.

*is to say, the chief among the priests of a diocese, in the same way as the Avagueretz (great priest or archpriest) was the chief of priests of a given church. There is nothing, therefore, to prevent the present custom, prevalent though it be, from being superceded by the usages of the primitive Church, and access to the high ecclesiastical dignities being thrown open to the married clergy. Such a course would be highly beneficial to the nation; for the married clergy would escape from a position of inferiority which is in no way justified, and which especially fetters them by their exclusion from the higher offices, which is now their lot. Under the existing conditions, individuals who are gifted with some education are, generally speaking, little inclined to embrace a laborious career, wherein they can find no satisfaction for mental aspirations and material benefits. We find, therefore, scarcely any but men of a simple rank in life and of mediocre capacity who aim at attaining the priesthood at the present time. It is for this reason that the priesthood in the East in these days is in a condition of inferiority; and it goes without saying that the faithful are the first to suffer from such a state of things. For a remedy, we are inclined to think that a return to the ancient canons for the recruitment of the episcopate would remove the evil. By enlarging the field for promotion, the cultured portion of the nation would no longer hesitate to enter the ranks of the married clergy. That would tend to raise them in the eyes of the faithful, and would enable them to fulfil their mission worthily, and in keeping with the requirements of the times.*

Archbishop Ormanian published his classical work *The Armenian Church* in 1911 in Constantinople. His views, par-



ticularly in regard to our ecclesiastical issues, are unquestionably authoritative. It is impossible to imagine any study on the Armenian Church without referring to Ormanian's works. Their importance was evident by the fact that among the publications that appeared on the occasion of the 1700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, *The Armenian Church* was published in both Armenian and English in a number of editions; also was published his monumental work, *Azgapatum* ("The History of the Armenian Nation") in two editions, one by Yerevan State University, under the direction of Archbishop Shahé Adjemian, the dean of the Faculty of Theology, and the other in Antilias, under the aegis of the Catholicos of the See of Cilicia. A question arises, however: Why no mention was made at all to such luminaries as Archbishop Ormanian, Catholicos Babgen Giuleserian, Patriarch Totgom Kushakian, and many others, who in their own time made forward-looking proposals on our topic under discussion? The reasons are many! Particularly the one that weighs the heaviest is the fact that the celibate clergy is not ready to share its authority in the Church with the married priests whom it considers inferior. Otherwise our Church will positively be opened to the public and many laymen who have a vocation will be encouraged to make a career in the spiritual field and raise families at the same time.<sup>27</sup> As to the deacons, it is painful to state that their presence in the administrative and social life of the Church goes unnoticed in general. The deacon is not just a "melodious" singer at the altar. His field of service used to be much larger than what we see today. It is not in vain that the Universal Church has admitted the diaconship as a hierarchical order. In fact, the deacon not only has the

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<sup>27</sup> On this topic we highly recommend our readers to refer to Rev. Dr. Zaven Arzoumanian, *Azgapatum* ("The History of the Armenian Nation"), Vol. IV, Book II, New York, 1997, pp. 117-121.

authority to read the Gospel from the pulpit, but also to preach or deliver a sermon. He not only has the full right to serve at the altar during the Holy Mass, but is also entitled, in case of need, to pray, bless, and to administer the Holy Communion, consecrated by the priest, to the believers, the sick, the bereaved, the travelers, and those who have made their confession. The deacon cannot perform sacraments or rites, but in the absence of a priest he is allowed to perform a burial service and bless the table.

### **C. HOW TO REFORM AND WHO WILL REFORM THE ARMENIAN CHURCH**

These two questions are closely interrelated and absolutely complement each other. Indeed, who will reform the Armenian Church throughout its large expanses in Armenia, Artsakh, and the Diaspora, and how will it be done? To which domain of the Church should the priority be given and which of the four Sees will assume the legal authority to undertake the reform? To what extent can the resolutions of reform be binding for all? Where will the procedure begin and where will its limits be?

Naturally a similar question arises as to who will reform the Church. It is obvious that all attention will be centered first on the highest authority in the Church, the person of the Catholicos and the power historically bestowed upon him. Nevertheless, no reform can be achieved by the wish or decision of an individual even if that individual is the highest authority of the Church; it can be implemented by the demand of the people. The demand must come before the conditions, because the conditions will serve as means to achieve the one and only

purpose which is the internal reform and reawakening of the Armenian Church.

This popular demand finds its whole expression in the National-Ecclesiastical Assembly which is also the supreme administrative body of the Church.

This supreme body which also has legislative power to take decisions on national and ecclesiastical matters, has had two meetings at Holy Etchmiadzin, one on April 4, 1995, and another on October 27, 1997. In the second one the Assembly had to confine its agenda to the election of His Holiness Karekin II as Catholicos of All Armenians, due to the assassinations committed in the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia. The first meeting, however, after electing His Holiness Karekin I as Catholicos, went a step further introducing a number of proposals<sup>28</sup> with the intention of studying them in preparation of the next meeting where actions were to be taken on the proposals. Here is a brief list of the proposals that interest us and are worth of mention:

1. To reform and modernize the rites of the Armenian Church.<sup>29</sup>
2. To solve in a positive way the question of the union of the Armenian Church.<sup>30</sup>
3. To establish a constitution and convene an assembly of bishops as soon as possible.<sup>31</sup>
4. To set an age limit for ruling catholicoses.<sup>32</sup>
5. To sanctify all the victims of the 1915 Genocide.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See Etchmiadzin Review, April 1995, pp. 41-46.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p.43.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p. 44.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

6. To introduce improvements in the career of celibate priests.<sup>34</sup>
7. To allow married priests to be elected diocesan primates.<sup>35</sup>
8. To allow married priests to become bishops.<sup>36</sup>
9. To allow deserving bachelors to become priests without taking vows of celibacy and with permission to marry in the future.<sup>37</sup>
10. Allowing women to be ordained deaconesses.<sup>38</sup>

This is a set of important proposals that were part of the suggestions presented to the National Ecclesiastical Assembly of 1995 which had the potential to become the founding elements of reform. Unfortunately nothing was materialized due to the untimely death of Catholicos Karekin I.

If we really want to make the message and the mission of our Church adaptable to the times and intelligible to the man of today and tomorrow, then the reform of the Armenian Church becomes an urgent necessity. A committee composed of capable clerical and lay representatives should be called into action to study the situation seriously and prepare a file to be presented to the next National-Ecclesiastical Assembly, provided that the Assembly also is formed by qualified delegates who are familiar with the history, theology, mission, tradition, canon law, ideology, the national character and the spirit of our Church, so that our “faith and preaching” may be fruitful.

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p.45.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

As we speak about reforming our Church, we cannot pass by without sincere admiration for the general reforms carried out in the Roman Catholic Church in the last decades. Who could have imagined that such a powerful Church, leaning on the supremacy of its See, clinging to the infallibility of the Pope and guided by doctrinal, legislative, and institutional positions, would convene on 11 October 1962 and 8 December 1965 the Vatican II Council under two consecutive popes, John XXIII and Paul VI? Based on 16 historic documents, the Council was to review the Church's position vis-à-vis the world, the Doctrine of Revelation, ecumenism, freedom of religion, and ritual reform.

This council had an epoch-making significance in the life of the Catholic Church by which the present was enriched with the past, not by the imperative of age-old views, but by the exigencies of the present. In this way the spiritual culture accumulated throughout the long centuries acquired a new quality, meaning, and applicability in the present context, due to the fact that communication was established between the old and the new, and the wide gulf between the huge mass of tradition and the immediate present were bridged with a golden arch. This wonderful miracle was materialized in the Catholic Church thanks to famed theologians who had made it the sole objective of their scientific mission to transfer the medieval theological thinking, particularly that of Thomas Aquinas, as well as the rich literary heritage of noted figures, to the present believer within the limits of his language and perception. The greatest merit of Vatican II was that by means of its reforms the Catholic Church could build a well-structured bridge through which, though heavily loaded with spiritual traditions, the old church could pass to meet the new church.

The Church, with all its spiritual culture created throughout the centuries, with its world view and religious philosophy, oral and written traditions, its special way of thinking, its mission and essence, its historical responsibilities assumed by divine law, and also with its particular leading position in human society, must absolutely take heed of the demands of the time, also of the changes and developments that occur in the social and cultural life. A Church that evolves and keeps pace with time, must be deeply concerned with the essential questions related to the salvation of the individual and the community.

As long as the Church, more than being an inanimate edifice, is a living community gathered before the Lord, and since “God is not the God of the dead, but of the living,”<sup>39</sup> then the Church, with its internal set up and external character, cannot just sit in human society as an archaic institution. On the contrary, Christianity was in its essence no more than a spiritual and moral movement launched against the petrified Jewish setting.

In order to reform the Church we need leaders like Mash-tots and St. Sahak, Agatangelos, Yeznik, David the Invincible, Yeghishé and Koriun, Shnorhali, Lambronatsi, Vorotnetsi and Tatevatsi, Gevorg IV and Khrimian Hayrik, the catholicosi Vazgen I and Karekin I.

The reform movement in the Armenian Church does not need traditionalist, intolerant and fanatic theorists who manifest animosity against natural developments, who constantly moan and complain, look for faults, and are pessimistic and self-conceited, whose unproductive conservatism leads our Church only to isolation.

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<sup>39</sup> *Matt. 22:32.*

On the contrary, the reformation of the Armenian Church requires activists from the ranks of both the clergy and the laity who believe in the reform movement in the first place, who have a dynamic individuality, who know how to strive and to inspire confidence, who are bold and realistic, have the courage to take decisions, and possess a certain charisma to lead the people.

The Armenian Church must be reformed. Do not let us come to the point where our children will be obliged to adopt the philosophy of Diogenes, one of the ancient Greek classical sages, who gave away all his possessions because he did not need any of them; he kept only his goblet to drink water. But one day when he was near a spring, he saw a young boy drinking water in the palm of his hand. At this sight, he threw his goblet away and said: “I don’t need you any more.”

Let me conclude my worries and humble proposals about the reform of the Armenian Church by quoting the thoughtful words pronounced by Catholicos Karekin I of blessed memory at the close of the National-Ecclesiastical Assembly in 1995:

*“The reform of the Armenian Church must be our objective, our focus, our target, whichever you like to call.”* According to an insightful thought expressed by Torgom Kushakian, a former Patriarch of Jerusalem, *“Reform means the proper conservation of that order which is life, not only an edifice; that is to say, to reform the Church in such a way that it may become a wonderful power, an active presence, a vital remedy for the needs of our people. May the following be the last words of my first speech: Let us work for the edification and reform of the Armenian Church and the Armenian people.”*<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. Etchmiadzin Review, April 1995, p. 64.

# THE NATIONAL AND RELIGIOUS UNPRESCRIPTIBLE VALUE OF THE ARMENIAN HOLY APOSTOLIC CHURCH<sup>(1)</sup>

*«For we know the Holy Gospel as our father  
and the Apostolic Church as our mother». (Yeghishé)*

## I. A GLORIOUS PAST

In just a short while, almost as short as the twinkling of an eye within the immense expanse of time, the twenty-first century will dawn upon us and the number 2001 will be registered in the annals of human history and culture. It will usher in a glorious memorial event for all Christians, but most specifically meaningful for us, the Armenian people, as the entire nation will celebrate with solemnity the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the declaration of Christianity as state religion in Armenia.

In fact, in the larger family of Christian peoples and on the subsoil of spiritual and cultural life in general, the Armenians were the first to open their soul widely to the light of the Gospel by a stringent government decree.

301 AD is the date of Armenia's conversion. The king

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*(1) Translated by Nourhan Ouzounian. Original publication - 2001, Geneva.*



Trdat (Tiridates) III accepted Christianity and was baptized by Gregory the Parthian, an eminent luminous figure in our history whom the Armenian people honored and beatified by granting him the title “Illuminator”.

No matter how many scientific theories may be advanced to dispute the accuracy of the date 301 AD, Armenia still remains the first nation to have recognized Christianity as the religion that emerged victorious from the ruins of paganism and to have adopted it wholeheartedly and statewide as well.

This fact should not give us, however, a cause for national boasting; on the contrary, it should be an important factor to make us realize and fully appreciate once again the spiritual and cultural mission in which the Armenian Church is permanently engaged.

The Church is the offspring of Christian faith and doctrine. But the Armenian Church is also the utmost spiritual and cultural product of the Armenian people. The Armenian Church was not created by chance; it was a historical necessity that was conditioned and shaped by converging political, spiritual, cultural and social exigencies.

This particular character of the Armenian Church already contains in itself the seed of her specific existential value that has manifested itself in the course of the long history of the nation, as in times of past tragedies, as well as at the present in the face of today’s trying challenges and tomorrow’s hopefully brighter future.

The thick mist that shrouds the history of the distant past prevents us from seeing clearly the national character of the pagan Armenian. He is usually pictured as one whose social and political posture lacks firmness and consistency. Compared to the surrounding conquering nations, he appears

to be lacking the notoriety of a fighting and dominant race, conditioned primarily by the unfavorable circumstances of his geographic milieu.

As described by our Father Historian, Movses Khorenatsi, “even though the Armenian people is a small flower garden, weak and few in number and conquered many times by dominant powers, it has nevertheless enriched the treasury of civilization and culture of mankind with authentic and valuable contributions of its own, which are indeed worth remembering.”

The few literary fragments that have reached us testify to the existence of a pagan oral literature of high taste. The absence of an authentic alphabet has prevented it from creating a distinct literature and written history which would have helped to form the bases of a national ideology. It is certain that in the pre-Christian era the Armenians have had politically and nationally successful periods, the highest point being the time of Tigran the Great (95-55 BC). These high points have been, however, so short-lived that they are hardly visible on the vast stage of world history.

It was Christianity that left a strong mark on our national character. It brought to the fore our national personality in a sudden and conscious awakening; it spurred us admirably to create letter and literature; it grafted the healthy seeds of our creative genius with intellectual vigor by means of numerous translations of monumental works of the Hellenistic and Semitic cultures; it enlarged our worldview in an unprecedented way by irrigating our barren field with a specific and productive philosophy of life. And at long last, it was this new orientation that like a fresh spring breath fertilized our imagination to create intellectual life and proper history. These are the basic factors of spiritual, cultural, political and social life,

which having fused together, forged the golden foundation of our national ideology.

In the fifth century, the Golden Age of our culture, was also born the Armenian national ideology after a long period of gestation. What was essentially missing till then, was fully supplied by conversion to Christianity. It was like a marvelous tree whose seeds were planted some 150 years earlier and vitalized by the light of the Gospel.

If the conversion of Armenia had only been confined to the religious sphere, if the Church had not become interwoven with her political and social setup, if, departing from her day-to-day ritual, she had not created in the turbulent crucible of her spiritual and cultural life the miraculous alphabet and made the Bible read in her native tongue, and, at long last, had she not forged a national ideology, then no political, religious and intellectual power would have been able to secure our existence against the disintegrating tyranny of Byzantine, Sasanid and, later, Arab domination.

This national ideology found its forceful and eloquent expression in the slogan of the Battle of Vardanank: “For Christ and for the Fatherland.”

It was this ideology that forged the steel shields of Vardan the Valiant and his glorious companions-in-arms who, with the massive participation of the religious and secular classes, marched forward to face martyrdom, “to crown the Church with the purple of their blood,” and thus imprinted on her the specific image of her national and democratic character.

The religious revival did not hamper the national revival, and this in turn did not prevent the Church from her spiritual mission among the people. On the contrary, the fusion of body and soul created a unique harmony of the highest level in the

life of the Armenian people. This fusion is so aptly described by Catholicos Karekin I of blessed memory: *“Our Church has been the soul of our people, and the people in turn has been her body. Without the first, the second cannot live, and without the second, the first cannot create. The Armenian people is born of the harmony of the two.”*

For us, the Armenian Church is not merely a worship hall; it is a most sacred national temple, a pantheon of history and culture as well, where all the complex vicissitudes of our centuries-old existence are focused. As the Armenian people sailed through calm or stormy weather in the course of endless ages, it has garnered in his national Church, as an impregnable storehouse, all the richness of its traditions and oriental culture, its philosophy, its own theology, its proper linguistic thought, its literature, chronicle, history, architecture, music and painting.

Even though we did not have the might of Persia, the greatness of Rome, the wealth of the Arabs nor the genius of the Greeks, nevertheless, we were the first to grasp the genuine spirit of Christianity and appreciate deeply the dignity of its morality to such an extent, that we readily submitted ourselves to the inexplicable logic of its saving and vitalizing mystery. We also held high the torch of Christian faith among the mostly violent peoples of other religions in Asia Minor by the shedding of the sacred blood of a myriad of our martyrs, thus paying the highest price for witnessing for Christianity.

Many storms of tyranny have gone through our land, the deadly winds of history have swept across our country and dark clouds have obscured the clear blue sky of Armenia. Nomadic tribes and raiding races have pierced our hearts with their arrows and spears and drenched our blood. They have ruined and devastated our land with a savage rage and streams

of blood and tear have flown through our valleys. In all these tragedies, it was the Church that like a compassionate mother has comforted her children embracing them in her arms and gathering together her scattered flock. To those of her children who have been driven to foreign lands by the violent storms, the Church has offered an oasis of comfort and has uplifted them spiritually by her solemn rites and prayers. At the same time the Church has become a strong spiritual and intellectual armor to protect the national identity of her children in the vast expanse of the Diaspora hungry for assimilation.

No social or political force can tie the Armenian in a permanent manner to his 1700-year-old glorious traditions, his land and national roots, as the Church has done with her sanctified language, the miraculous alphabet and inspiring prayers — all existential values which make together the golden monument of Armenian identity.

Our ancestors speak to our hearts through the Armenian Church. It is her ritual order that reveals to us the ranks of a myriad of our martyrs and saints. And as we commune with them with most sacred and vibrant feelings, our hope is rekindled by the light of their spiritual experiences, and our indomitable will is further fortified by the inspiration of their valiant deeds. And thus, renewed by their covenant of fidelity, we continue our course against the flow of life in our relentless struggle for survival.

Not long ago, in the horrifying years of the Genocide, when our fathers and mothers were plucked out of their ancestral homeland and barely escaped the claws of death, it wasn't with silver and gold that they set sail to the hospitable shores of the Diaspora from east to west. The only inviolable treasure they carried in their souls was what is called the Armenian Church. Her foundations are based not upon the earth, but in

the hearts of the Armenians as a sanctity, a mark of identity and collective consciousness.

Christianity is the religion of freedom. It raises the human being from the dust of the earth to the value of the image of God by means of the mystery of the Child Jesus and thus establishes the principle of equality among men. The feeling of enslavement is against the nature of the proud Armenian, for he knows real well that he is called to freedom through his Church. In this sense, for centuries the Church has been a source of inspiration for him that has sustained his ardent longing for independence and freedom. Almost all our national struggles that have shaken loose the foreign bondage, from the Vardanank to Sardarapat, were born and shaped in the bosom of the Church, emboldened by the call of “freedom to our enslaved brothers” as sung in the Holy Mass and led to the battlefield by her resounding bells.

After the fall of our last kingdom of Cilicia in 1375, it was the Armenian Church that with total commitment and sacrificing love, took upon herself the moral, social and political leadership of the nation in order to protect her grieved children against the voracious appetite of the aliens. She has guided the battered ship of the nation on the stormy seas of the centuries. All that the Armenian has as good and noble in himself, he has expressed it through the Church.

## **II. THE CHALLENGES OF THE MODERN WORLD**

It would be an anachronism, however, to be led by blind convictions and remain fettered in the emotional atmosphere, without turning our vision to the actual realities. It is futile to eulogize past glories when the path of the Church is thorny

today more than ever before. Times and mores have basically changed. A constantly increasing number of discoveries in science and industry have brought many new things to light, have changed and facilitated the human life. But on the other hand and parallel to all these unimaginable and beneficial achievements, many paralyzing contradictions and complexities have also been created in the social life and relationships of men. What was valued as good, beautiful and traditional in the past, is devalued now in the same proportion in a mad course that aims at corrupting all that is moral, sacred and virtuous in the human life. Only that has value now which can be monetized and is unequivocally tied to material gain.

Civilizations, cultures, worldviews, human societies, nations and peoples are all in turmoil today. The new has replaced the old. A tendency is shaping up now, particularly in the West, toward multiethnicity and multiculturalism that threatens to eventually form a melting pot wherein will be disintegrated all that is authentic, individual and possesses identity. And from this melting pot will emerge a new society and its idol, the new man; a man who is «liberated» from any identity of color, race, culture, religion and nationality.

Economy has become the religion of the contemporary man. Nowadays no political or social power can resist its charm. Henceforth the human being is considered to be the product of economic relations, not of religion, morality, culture, character, nor the product of a creative coexistence of humanity. It is the economy that is regarded as the only guarantee and security of the individual, society, nation and state.

All these imperatives of our times constitute a mighty challenge for our Church. In a human society that keeps changing fundamentally in many diverse ways, it is almost impossible to remain hooked to practices that are strictly prin-

cipléd, archaic and doctrinaire. The contents of the Church and of faith that are transmitted to the people in greater part by ritual and ceremonial activities have lost the magic power they had in the past and, consequently, cannot any more win the listeners into the ranks of believers whose numbers are decreasing day by day. The reason is that the Church is not able any more to communicate with her flock. We are reluctantly inclined to think that two opposite worlds are touching each other, the Church and the individual, without, however, being able to create from this contact a genuine affinity or a fruitful encounter. The Church is out of tune with the modern man.

This lack of communication manifests itself in a much more serious manner in the relationships between the Church and the youth who are the ones to form tomorrow's society. Today's young generation has embraced a different linguistic thinking, developed different value judgments, adopted other ways of thinking and accepted such aims for his personal and social life that are not necessarily compatible with what the Church offers. The moral code of contemporary youth, or its "Ten Commandments," is not exactly the same as the one the Church is trying to give.

Concepts such as "computer," "computer games," "internet," "e-mail," "cellular phone," "fashion," "pop music," "television," "teleshopping," "telemarketing," "video," "camera-scope," "publicity," "sex," "sports," "football," and many others have a much greater appeal and are more meaningful to the new generation than classical and religious terms, expressions, ideas and concepts, which do not convey any meaning related to their daily life. They are totally estranged from such concepts as "God the Father," "God the Son," "God the Holy Spirit," "Holy Trinity," "Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world," "Immaculate Conception," "Virgin Mary," "Mary, Mother of



God,” “Assumption,” “Transfiguration,” “Apostle,” “Bible,” “The Holy Gospel,” “Palm Sunday,” “Holy Week,” “The Mystery of Passion,” “The Mystery of Redemption,” “Resurrection,” “Ascension,” “Pentecost,” “Holy Communion,” “sin,” “sinfulness,” “Adam’s sin,” “the seven sins and the seven virtues,” “atonement,” “hell,” “Satan,” “Revelation,” “Second Advent,” “Last Judgment,” etc.

One of the main difficulties that the Church faces today due to the socially and politically secularized context in which she finds herself, is the trend of subjecting religion to individual interpretations or limiting it entirely by the boundaries of personal interests. Within the present social structure the Church does not represent any more the spiritual and moral necessity that used to be part of the collective consciousness around which the community life evolved. It seems that today religion belongs to the individual and not to the public. This is the watchword of the times. The Western civilization has since long seized from the Church the right to dictate to the society moral principles, the feeling of the conscience and religious behavior. Nowadays the individual decides his religious and doctrinal adherence and the State or the civic law gives him the full right to choose whether he wants to be an atheist, irreligious or to adopt any other principle.

This secularized mentality acts the most strongly in the field of education where religious instruction has no place at all in the curriculum and the pupil is free to decide whether or not he or she wants to participate in religion classes. And it is here that the Church faces a formidable obstacle, because tomorrow’s generation will be educated with an entirely secularized psychology and sciences that have no relevance to the Church or religion.

Even though it is not possible to have obligatory reli-

gious instruction in State-supported public schools, the Church, however, reserves the right, by virtue of the “freedom” enshrined in civic laws, to establish her own educational institutions under her direct supervision or by sponsoring private institutions where, in addition to secular subjects, some religious courses also can be taught.

This possibility may provide a balm to soothe the throbbing wound on the body of the Church, because by supplying spiritual and religious instruction, albeit in a small measure and to a small and specific segment of the society, the Church will still be able to impart spiritual and moral values and standards to the entire collectivity, just like the parable of the yeast in the Gospel, where a small amount of yeast worked through the entire dough.

The Armenian Church can make use of this possibility in Armenia where the Government, following the legal and constitutional provisions adopted by western countries, delays to pass legislation in support of the Armenian Church and religious education.

Much as we are inwardly convinced that our Church, bearing now the crown of a 1700-year-old glorious and apostolic legacy, “is not lacking in faith that needs to be filled nor is she so old that needs to be rejuvenated,” still it would be very naïve of us to think that the Church can eternally remain on the ideological and moral height of her past and retain her positive role and vitality as before, without renewing and refreshing her intrinsic forces.

### **III. THE NECESSITY OF REFORM**

It is obvious that the Church in the days of the Apostles and the Church of today are not and cannot be the same. An

institution, whether divine or human, that does not develop internally, does not have the flexibility and a forward-looking attitude to keep pace with the changes of time and life and is out of step with the society in which it lives, is doomed to isolation and death.

The reform of the Church is a most essential need. In fact, it harms the Church to cling to so-called traditional principles and adopt a conservative attitude against the natural flow of time. To curb advancement is a sign of weakness and impotence; it deadens the vitality of the Church and deprives her from fulfilling her apostolic mission which is none other than to make the life of man meaningful in the community by the presence of the Lord and to testify to His redeeming mystery.

The invasion of sects in Armenia in all their diverse forms, from Jehovah's Witnesses to the followers of Moon, was not accidental and it is even wrong to attribute this phenomenon only to the political and economic crisis of the country. It is also due to the inactivity of the Church and the ineffectiveness of the clergy.

The Church, with the ranks of the clergy and the wide participation of laymen, must effectuate her benevolent and compassionate authority in the human society in all domains of life.

Today's religion is not just intuitive; it is essentially practical and pastoral. "Pastoral" does not mean only to perform the ritual ceremonies to satisfy the conventional needs of the parishioners. It implies, by its intrinsic meaning, to keep the flock, to attend to it, to educate it, and to lead it to the end.

The Church, with her hierarchic and ritual setup, must open herself up before all the segments of our society. The Church hierarchy can effectuate her authority in a positive

manner towards the congregation and human society in general only by way of service aimed directly at the daily life of men, including all its social, physical, moral and spiritual spheres.

In the face of a coercive economic globalization and the destructive activities of the sects, the greatest role of religion is called upon to play today in Armenia is to channel the ministry of the Church entirely towards alleviating all that distresses the daily life of her people: unemployment, poverty, illness, moral degradation, emigration, the uncertainty of tomorrow and, in particular, the widespread lack of confidence in the future of the country and the government in matters of politics and the education of the youth.

No matter how large allocations are made by the hierarchy from the material and moral resources of the Church for the preparing new generations of clergy, the Church will not achieve the expected beneficial results, unless she involves secular elements or laymen in her various spheres of activity empowering them with corresponding authority.

This authority or the power to represent the Church should be considered with due importance, so that the close tie of service between the Church and this lay person may also find its full spiritual and ideological expression in the Person of Christ and in the Mystery of Redemption established by Him.

In the fourth century, under Catholicos Nerses the Great, humanitarian and social work was one of the most important achievements of the Church. If the Church had not established, at that early age, charity organizations that functioned successfully, such as hospitals, shelters for old people and poor-houses, if she had not stretched her helping hand to those who had a marginal existence in the society, it would have been

very difficult for Christianity to spread its roots deep into the hearts and culture of the Armenian people and to flourish abundantly on pagan soil. The social ministry of the Church had such a strong impact on the population, that in just about a century later, the entire nation revolted and fought against the Sasanids who attempted to force them to change their religion, they even suffered martyrdom to preserve their Christian faith and identity.

The Church has in the depths of her being an unpolluted supply of faith that can gush forth any time from the clear source of the Holy Gospel and apostolic ministry. No matter how complex may our life appear today with its material conditioning, no matter how difficult and exacting may the challenges of the future be, the Church has the spiritual potential to recreate, with ever renewed vitality, the dynamism which would enable her to carry the heavy crosses of today and of coming days, in order to infuse the divine breath into human society for preserving spiritual and moral values, a clear conscience and a saintly conduct.

In fact, by virtue of the collective, conscious and willing ministry of her spiritual and lay workers, the Church can make her comforting presence and moral-spiritual authority indispensable where economic and political prosperity has regressed, the voice of the conscience has weakened in the hearts of men, and the thrust of faith, the ardor of love and the hope for the radiant dawn of tomorrow have faded.

Our Church is not a man-made institution. She has descended from the Only-Begotten, is constructed divinely and crowned with the blood of our martyrs and the numerous testimonies of faith of our saints; she is the altar of light. And this is the Church upon which falls the noble task of feeding her flock with that heavenly and spiritual nourishment flowing

through her veins by which is transformed today's impossible to tomorrow's reality, the unimaginable to a likelihood and the unbelievable to a certitude.

As our Church celebrates the achievements of her glorious past and goes forward to meet the challenges of the coming third millennium, she should be capable to undertake her ministry of service and, with indiscriminate and equal participation of her spiritual and secular forces, to relate herself closely to the daily life of men and women, offering to their heavily burdened souls the services of her revitalized vocation and renewed image as an anchor of identity, a guide to unity, a supreme spiritual value, a moral authority and a lighthouse to give direction in the obscurity of the future.

May the Armenian Holy Apostolic Church watch over her small flock from the height of her 1700 years of saintly and sacrificial existence, and as the Mother of Holiness, now loving, now chastising, may she gather her beloved children in her caring arms.

# AGONIZING WITH AND FOR THE ARMENIAN CHURCH<sup>(\*)</sup>

## I. INTRODUCTION

The subject of my essay might seem strange to many, as the word ‘agonize’ in Armenian is synonymous with ‘discomfort’, ‘suffering’, ‘anxiety’. Similarly, in ancient Armenian, the word ‘agonize’ has a negative connotation, usually referring to suffering, misery, wretchedness, lament, abjection, humiliation.

The religious-Biblical interpretation of the new concept, however, is different: agony is the ultimate pre-condition to create a new alternatives, new possibilities. When the agonizing mind and soul are confronted with a hail of ‘why’s, the path is paved for the one in agony to meet with God and have absolution. Job and Jesus set a good example; in both cases agony becomes meaningful in a magnificent theodicy.

Agony, however, is not only an individual experience, but also a collective, communal one. The people of Israel roamed the desert for forty years in search of the promised land, where they could freely worship God, and in freedom become complete both as men in the image of God, and community.

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<sup>(\*)</sup> *Translated by Hasmig Kurdian, reviewed by Nourhan Ouzounian. Original publication - 1994, Toronto.*

By the banks of the Euphrates, still in exile, they pledged their return to the homeland in anxiousness:

*“If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand wither!  
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not set, Jerusalem  
above my highest joy!”* (Psalm 137:5)

until Ezra, with the Laws and the Ark of Covenant in hand, led the repatriates into Jerusalem, to reconstruct Solomon’s Temple – the ultimate goal in the spiritual life of a nation.

In a state where life had become unbearable, and all aspirations seemed to have been lost forever, with no accessible routes, the man faced with the threat of inexistence, raised his pleas to God in agony,

*“In agony do we plead with thee, Lord”*

to finally attain the much sought-for freedom: a paradox that embodies both agony and salvation, death and resurrection, seeking and revelation. Thus, the word ‘agony’ receives a new meaning, depth and interpretation. ‘Agonizing’, hence, does not only become the final prerequisite for the creation of new alternatives, but a spiritual-moral necessity that will help create a new start, a rebirth from a state of stagnation, on condition that the intent is serious and the situations we are in are not considered as passing events.

As for the Church, it should be stated clearly that it is not ‘something’, but ‘someone’. Being all born in this Church, *we* constitute the living and breathing Church characterized by its Golden Age literature created by our ancestors, and the exquisite translation of the Bible. Though for many of us our belonging to it seems to be an a priori concept, we have not created it, but are merely the heirs of a national and religious tradition, a Church that is in a state of perpetual agony and testimony. This is why we agonize with the Armenian Church.



We agonize with the Church, for we *are* that Church. Through holy baptism we have not only become members of a community believing in Christ, but are called upon to the service of Christ's Prophecy, Priesthood and Kingdom.

We agonize with the Church for as long as it is an inseparable part of us, like the colour of our skin; for ours are all its pains and sufferings, its submissions and resentments, its ups and downs, torpor and explorations, and finally its aspirations to reform itself and start a new birth.

It is the entirety of this that gives meaning and depth to the concept of agonizing with the Armenian Church, because we believe in the continuity of its mission, its mysterious power to rise like a phoenix and bestow eternal life upon its believers.

## II. DEFINITION OF THE CHURCH

Let us study the Greek concept of 'ecclesia', which has usually been translated as 'church' or 'community' in Armenian. In the Greek translation of LXX, *Ecclesia* is interpreted as the House of Israel, gathered in front of the Lord, as God's chosen people. The expression is similar to the Hellenic concept of *Polis*; i. e., the gathering of a people. If the early Church called itself *Ecclesia*, adopting the Jewish idea of being a social entity chosen by God, it differed basically from the latter by the fact that *Ecclesia* was salvaged by the Mystery of Christ's Redemption and instead of the Laws, it believed in the Resurrected Lord.

Therefore, the Church, as *Ecclesia*, is the community gathered in front of the Lord, confirmed by the Mystery of Christ's Redemption (=Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension and being exalted by right hand of the Lord) that culminates in the Pentecost.

The host of disciples gathered around Christ do not con-

stitute the Church as we understand it, neither do the saints, who gain eternal redemption at Christ's Second Coming and God's Kingdom that will finally prevail. The Church is the reality existing between Christ's Glorification (being exalted at the right hand of the Lord) and His Second Coming. In other words, it is the 'Ecclesia' of those believing in Christ, moving toward salvation, enjoying the bountiful blessings of the Holy Spirit.

This proves that the Church has a beginning, undergoes a development and will finally reach a culminating perfection with the Second Coming of Christ. Since the Church is a living entity that is ever-changing with the development of time, it cannot but include in itself the seeds of progress and reform; otherwise, it would have died or stagnated long ago, as was the destiny of many a religion and religious community. Contrary to the eternal nature of Biblical truths, the Church today is not the same as was in Apostolic times and vice-versa. Changes in culture and mentalities, along with reforms in social life that come naturally with evolving times, have subsequently changed much in Church, as well as in Christianity and its doctrine, quite unknown in the early Church. For example, the arguments referring to Christ's nature in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, and later, the issue of the Holy Spirit emanating from the Father or the Son and Mariological dogmas in recent times, are but extraneous phenomena, necessitated by various social needs and historical developments over the centuries.

The Creed of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries is not, naturally, the same as that of the Apostolic era. The Nicene Creed than is perused during Mass, has a much more intricate composition than the one used in the early church and which is often quoted in the Acts of the Apostles: *"Jesus of Nazareth, who was betrayed, crucified and died on the cross, and whom the Lord raised from among the dead."*

Progress and reform are vital necessities in the Church,

which, by adapting to the contemporary mentality and spirit, will be able to survive and thrive for the sake of the redemption of man, as long as it does not deviate from its basic principles and sacred traditions.

The Church, according to a well-known Latin saying, is called *Ecclesia semper reformanda*; that is, a Church changing with the times and consequently making a major redeeming contribution in the life of the society.

As far as ecclesiastical traditions are concerned, the same principles of change and reform are applied. Traditions must serve special purposes and be evaluated as such. Thus, the progress of a Church is inevitably hampered when certain values and traditions, juxtaposed to the spirit and the demands of a certain age, are considered sacrosanct, and become accepted as unencroachable.

Historical proof, however, presents a more moderate approach even in the most traditional of the Eastern Churches, mainly the Armenian Church. For example,

a) Until the 13<sup>th</sup> century, vegetarian diet was the accepted practice during fasting periods.<sup>1</sup> Whereas after the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and probably following the Latin practice, fish was also permitted.

b) Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was an accepted tradition in the Armenian Church, to set the Easter dates according to the Eassyan five-hundred-year cycle, while the Greeks followed Irion the Byzantine's calendar. According to the latter, in each five-hundred-year cycle, every 95 years, there appear four differences in the two calendars, and accordingly, the Greeks

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<sup>1</sup> *Fr. Essai Nshetsi, Ar Ter Madteos (To Father Mathew), Jerakagh, 1861, p. 208. "It is a must to keep all fasts with out fish and wine, as it is in a Christian law." Hagopian Vazken, Armenian Book of Canons, A, Canons of Hovhannes Mandakouni, p. 493-497; Canons of the Holy Synod of Garin (Erzroum). "During Lent don't mix soft food in oil, or wine or fish, but use only bread and salt." Op. cit. II, p. 253.*

would celebrate Easter on April 6, while the Armenians on the 13<sup>th</sup>. These differences are usually known as ‘*dzerazadig*’,<sup>2</sup> and whenever they coincided, they gave rise to serious confrontations between Greek and Armenians, especially in areas where the two communities abounded. After a struggle of twelve long centuries, finally, in 1824, the Armenian Church condescended to the Greek Orthodox, by accepting Irion the Byzantine's calendar, which had once even been anathematized by our church Fathers: “*Forgive us and don't let us accept Irion's chronology that misleads the godly books, or accept his deceiving calendar and be subjected to the anathema of the Fathers.*”<sup>3</sup>

c) One of the ritual traditions in our Church is to administer Holy Communion to the mouth of the believer. St. Grigor Tatevatsi anathematizes those who follow the Latin practice of administering Communion on the hand, or, according to the western practice, do not dip it in the wine in the Grail.<sup>4</sup>

The Armenian Church believes that the one accepting the sublime Communion felt so humble that he did not consider himself worthy of even touching it by hand.

Nowadays the case is completely different: in Canada, as well as in many North American Armenian parishes, the new practice is gaining ground, as a precautionary measure to avoid contagious diseases. The believer accepts the Communion on his hand, then himself takes it to his mouth. Indeed, a new custom, that naturally is a deviation from the spirit of the Armenian Church.

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<sup>2</sup> *Fr. Abel, Controversy Regarding the Date Discrepancy in Celebrating Easter, Azgayin Madenataran, CCXXXVIII, Vienna, 1993, p. 144-164.*

<sup>3</sup> *Anania Shirakounvo Mnatsord Banits, I Zadikn Diarn (On the Feast of the Easter of the Lord), Ed. A. B., St. Petersburg, 1877, p. 22; Abrahamian A., The Works of Hovhannes Imastaser, Erevan, 1965.*

<sup>4</sup> *Grigor Tatevatsi, Girk Hartsnants, Constantinople, 1729, p. 553, 597-600.*

d) Another point to consider is the tradition specifying that the priest can bless *only one* consecrated bread – neshkhar – and offer Mass *only once* a day or in a given Church.<sup>5</sup> However, we are faced with a new reality today: because of the scarcity in the number of clergy, very often the same clergyman is obliged to offer more than one Mass a day in one or more parishes, by the permission or order of the diocesan primate.

e) One of the oldest traditions in the Armenian Church is the use of the ancient language – Grabar – which is officially the language of the rituals and ceremonies within the Church. However, Grabar being obsolete, cannot be grasped by the believer, if the latter truly intends to follow a particular ritual or ceremony. Language is a means by which ideas are communicated and shared; but in our Church, we have noticed, that during ceremonies, especially sacraments, the believer, in spite of the enormous effort he puts forth to concentrate, cannot be part of the ceremony, as he does not understand its context.

The obvious danger or disadvantage in such a case is that the ritual cannot fully serve its purpose, which is to gradually prepare the believer to have communion with Christ. Unfortunately, it is rare to see the latter happen in our churches, regardless of how devout the believer may be.

The motivating force that led Mashtots to invent the Armenian alphabet in the 5<sup>th</sup> century was to curb the widespread use of Greek or Syriac in church ceremonies: languages the common people could not understand, and consequently could not commune with the spiritual atmosphere created in the Church.

Apparently, we need another Mashtots to transcribe the

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<sup>5</sup> *Loc. cit.*

Grabar into modern Armenian, to revitalize that missing communication between the texts and the listeners. Another alternative would be to teach Grabar in our schools, in order to insure a minimum level of understanding of the language, that will be sufficient for the believer to follow and actively participate in the church ceremonies.

We would like to mention here, that both in Antelias and Istanbul, modern Armenian is extensively used in the recently published ritual texts (called Mashtots); while in many North American and Canadian churches, the practice of reading the Scriptures and the Epistles in modern Armenian has become widespread – something that would have been considered sacrilegious only a few decades ago.

The above arguments prove that traditions, regardless of devout feelings and aesthetics, are subject to change with the times, on condition that they do not contravene their original essence and spirit.

### **III. THE COMMUNION OF THE CHURCH**

The Church, defined as a gathering of believers in Christ, is an integral unit, a union, that is based on Communion – the essence of the Church. It is the Communion of the Lord's Word, the Mystery of His Body and Blood. «*For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*» (I Corinth. 11:26)

The Word of the Lord, the Book and the Mystery of the Holy Communion constitute the ultimate pledge of Christ's existence within the Church and among His believers. It is there that the congregation gathers and creates the Church, or God's people, with its clergy and laymen. The latter are not separate and juxtaposed entities in what we call the Church, but *one* people and *one* Body of Christ, who are called upon to

spread and serve the Word of God. St. Paul the Apostle, in the First Letter to the Corinthians, referring to ‘the mysterious body of Christ,’ says, “*For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so is it with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit, [...] Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*” (I Corinth. 12:12-13,27.)

The clergyman is the servant of the people in the service of the Word of God, and not the other way around; and the people, likewise through Baptism, are called upon to the service of Christ's Prophecy, Priesthood and Kingdom.

The Armenian Church has always been hierarchical, but never theocratic. As far back as the 5<sup>th</sup> century, within the natural socio-ecclesiastic development, it has created a unique democracy that still holds strong in our days. That democracy, however intricate it may seem to be as an applicable concept, may be summarized in the practice of the people electing all their spiritual leaders. For example, the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Armenians is elected by the National Ecclesiastical Assembly, the bishop is elected by the Diocesan Assembly and confirmed by the Catholicos, while the Pastor is elected by the parish and confirmed by the diocesan bishop.

Thus, we see that the lay enjoy much appreciated privileges within the administrative structure of the Church, but not within the spiritual sphere. Unfortunately, the layman has not been delegated a task to partake in the apostolic duty of exercising missionary activities within his community. The reason may be the lack of ecclesiastic and religious knowledge that has naturally pushed the layman into a weak position.

Spreading the Word of God and bearing witness to Christ's life is the sacred duty of every individual Christian. Any Christian can preach, but in order to indoctrinate or

instruct doctrinal matters concerning the Church, it is a prerequisite that the person have the necessary professional preparation. Thus, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when the Latin missionaries or the Unitor brethren were spreading teachings contrary to the ritual and theological traditions of the Armenian Church, and against whom mainly the universities of Aprakouni, Tatev and Geladzor were waging a counter-offensive, St. Grigor Tatevatsi was confirming preaching as a special authority, the practice of which was bestowed only upon those who were ordained as *vardapets* or *dzayragouyn vardapets*.

Since the number of clergy who have a calling has decreased drastically in our century and has become a cause of worry for all Christian Churches, it is necessary that the laymen be involved not only in the administrative operation of the Armenian Church, but also in the religious, ecclesiastical, as well as the missionary work. Besides, many clergymen, for various reasons, have a very limited scope of activity involving duties and services that they naturally must have performed as part of their calling and rank:

a) The hierarchy of the Church comprises the three ranks of Deacon, Priest, and Bishop. Catholicos, bishop or *vardapet* are all priests. The essential factor is Priesthood rather than the specific areas of service that naturally give rise to the specific rights and authority, in accordance with the corresponding clerical rank.

Unlike the priest, the bishop has the authority to ordain and lead a diocesan state known as ‘*potestas ordinis*’ and ‘*potestas jurisdictionis*’ in Latin. However, the bishop himself is only a priest as is the celibate *vardapet*. Celibacy, which is not an advantage in priesthood, was extraneous to the Armenian Church, a natural consequence of monastic life. Up to the 5<sup>th</sup> century, our catholicoses and bishops were married, and the rank of the catholicos was hereditary, until the times of



St. Sahak Partev, who died without a male heir<sup>6</sup>. This has been sadly recorded in our classical literature. Historians have lamented the fall of the Arshakouni dynasty and the natural cessation of the hereditary nature of the See of the Catholicos, established by St. Gregory The Illuminator<sup>7</sup>.

The married priest had been pushed into a marginal position, and used to be recognized as one to perform rituals, lacking administrative abilities; in other words, a second class citizen in our Church. The three Patriarchs – Dourian, Koushakian and Ormanian – have reflected upon this problem in their articles and essays concerning Church reform, and have suggested the elevation of the married priest even to the rank of *vardapet*.

Archbishop Malakia Ormanian, in «*The Armenian Church*»,<sup>8</sup> says,

*Many offices should be open to married priests, such as arch-priest, vicar general, leadership and membership in other assemblies or councils, where all clergy are elected. They can fill the office of the Primate temporarily, but cannot be elevated to the ranks of vardapet or bishop, unless, after being widowed, they join the rank of the celibate clergy. Although that limited state has*

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<sup>6</sup> Lazar Parbetsi, *The History of Armenians*, Erevan, 1982, p. 64-66, 84. “A multitude of troublesome thoughts bothered me, making me plead with God to bless me with a son, as my ancestors, who were married to bear children.” “Because he did not have a son, but a daughter who was married to Hamazasp from the House of Mamikon, the Armenian general, and bore him three sons: St. Vardan, St. Hmayak and the blessed Hamazaspian.”

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 76. “...While the cold azure chair you see on the left side of the stage symbolizes the fall of the priestly and royal thrones. The muslin mantle that you saw folded and placed on the vessel symbolizes priesthood, and the golden globe that was next to mantle symbolizes the kingdom. Since no one was wearing the mantle and no one had the globe in his hand, then hark and verily understand, that soon the kingdom of the House of Arshakouni and the priesthood from the House of the venerable Catholicos Grigor will be silent.”

<sup>8</sup> Archbishop Malakia Ormanian, *The Armenian Church*, Constantinople, 1911.

*become generalized, it is neither an old law nor a canonical necessity. If we study the state of bishop closely, we will see that it comprises the totality of the duties of priesthood and the services we call 'hok hokvots'. Moreover, it is the fulfillment of the special duties of priesthood. In olden times, bishops were chosen from among arch-priests and were thus called 'archbishop' or 'kahanayabed', which means the head priest in a diocese, just as the arch-priest or 'avakerets' is the head priest of a given church. There is no legal impediment to the newly introduced and widespread practice to give in to the old ecclesiastic laws and allow the married clergy to be elevated to the highest ranks of priesthood. In such a case the nation as a whole would benefit, since the married clergy would no more be in an unjustifiably abject state that is the result of circumstantial deprivations. Consequently, those who have been educated, usually avoid embracing a way of life that is full of difficulties, where moral aspirations cannot be fulfilled and the financial benefits are minimal. Hence, only individuals with mediocre abilities, with no high ambitions, aspire to priesthood. This is why the married clergy live in an abject state in the East, and in the long run the believers become the only losers. To find a cure to this situation, we think the old canons of the church should be revised. When the opportunities for advancement are offered to priests, undoubtedly, educated laymen would find no difficulty to join the ranks of married priesthood, adding prestige to the position; moreover, priests would fully accomplish the obligations and duties of their calling, having reached a standard of education compatible with their environment.<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 170-171.

*Diocesan hierarchical positions are exclusive to the celibate clergy both as permanent and temporary duties. However, not only celibate, but also widowed priests may join those ranks. The rank of bishop also is exclusive to the celibate class of the clergy. The right to wear the hood and carry the staff is not bestowed upon the married priest. Although the Church has not set any canonical restrictions for married priests, who have received the required education, to obtain the authority to preach by being elevated to the level of vardapet and be given the staff.<sup>10</sup>*

It is true that married priests enjoy a fairer state in the North American and Canadian dioceses, there still has not been a raise in rank, although many among them have attained higher levels of education and have more administrative abilities than many of the celibate clergy.

We believe that it is essential to cultivate among laymen the importance of the concept that for all clergy **to be priest** is and should be a priority: priests, who, through their exemplary life and families, have a more difficult mission in their clerical duties to bear witness to Christ's life than the celibate clergy.

b) Let us turn to the issue of deacons. It is unfortunate that deacons have not been duly acknowledged in the administrative structure of our Church. The deacon, today, is no more than a singer or altar accessory; whereas his scope used to be much wider in the Church. It is not without reason that the universal Church has included deacons in its hierarchical structure. Thus, the deacon does not only have the authority to 'sing' the Holy Book from the altar, but also to preach. He is not only authorized to carry the Holy Altar, but **whenever absolutely necessary**, to pray, bless, administer Holy Communion to the believers, the ailing, the bereaved, the trav-

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<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 173.

ellers and those who have made their confession. Moreover, the deacon can also perform sacred functions like a funeral rite or the blessing of the table, but not a sacrament.

We deem it necessary to state here that the 17<sup>th</sup> canon of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea and its abridged repetition in the 18<sup>th</sup> canon of the Second Council of Nicaea have given rise to a certain confusion as far as the concept of the deacon administering Holy Communion already consecrated by the priest is concerned.

*The Nicene Council was informed, that in various locations deacons were performing baptism. This seemed contrary to the Apostolic canons and the whole Council, those who have no authority to offer Mass, how dare they administer the body of Christ? Only those who do offer Mass can do so; whereas the deacon's authority is to take it to the Altar, lower it carefully, and serve the bishop. Also, they should not receive Holy Communion along with the priests, because the canons do not permit to do so.*<sup>11</sup>

The brief re-phrasing of the same is read in the 16<sup>th</sup> item of the canons of the Second Nicene Council: *"The deacon cannot administer Communion, neither can he sit among the clergy."*<sup>12</sup>

I have always wondered how the Latin Church, so firmly established on ecclesiastic rights, according to the 1983 CIC's 910<sup>th</sup> article,<sup>13</sup> allows the deacon, along with the bishop and the priest, to administer the Holy Communion to the people, as if thus ignoring the decision of the Holy Fathers in the Nicene Council.

However, the dilemma is clarified as we go back to the

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<sup>11</sup> *Hagopian Vazken*, Armenian Book of Canons, I Erevan, 1964, p. 129.

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, II. Erevan, 1971, p. 75.

<sup>13</sup> *Minister ordinarius sacrae communionis est Episcopus, presbyter et diaconus'* = CIC, 1983, p. 412.

original Greek recording of the Council, where a completely different perspective may be noticed:

*"The Holy Council has heard that in certain places and cities, deacons administer Holy Communion to priests – a practice which is contrary to both canons and traditions. Those who themselves do not have the right to offer Mass, give Christ's body as communion to those who have the authority to offer Mass. It is also heard, that certain deacons receive the Communion before bishops. It is indispensable that all this stop, and deacons not transgress their limits, fully realizing that the bishop's servant-deacon is less than the priest. Therefore, they must receive Holy Communion, according to the set order, only after the priest [...]. It cannot be permitted that deacons be seated among priests, that is totally contrary to the laws. If anyone, after these arrangements, refuses to obey, let him be deprived of the rank of deacon."*<sup>14</sup>

This translation clarifies a point that the argument does not regard limiting the deacon's authority to administer Holy Communion to laymen, but only to the priest or the bishop.

Based on this elucidation, the order recorded in the law becomes clear as to why the deacon, according to the accepted hierarchy, receives Communion not before the bishop and

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<sup>14</sup> Carl Joseph von Hefele, *Konzilsgeschichte, Bd. I. Freiburg, 1873, p. 423.*

<sup>1</sup>Ἦλθεν εἰς τὴν ἁγίαν καὶ μεγάλην σύνοδον, ὅτι ἐν τισὶ τόποις καὶ πόλεσιν τοῖς πρεσβυτέροις τὴν εὐχαριστίαν οἱ διάκονοι δι-θάσσιν, ὅπερ οὕτε ὁ κληρὸς οὐτε ἡ συνήθεια παρέδωκε, τοὺς ἱερούσιον μὴ ἔχοντας προσφέρειν τοῖς προσφύροισι· διδοῦναι τὸ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ· κίχτιον δὲ γυνωρίσθη, ὅτι ἦδη τινὲς τῶν ἁκαθῶν καὶ πρὸ τῶν ἐπισκόπων τῆς εὐχαριστίας ἄπτονται· αὐτὰ μὲν οὖν ἔπαυται περιηρήσθη· καὶ ἐμμενέτωσαν οἱ διάκονοι τοῖς ἰδίους μέτροις, εἰδότες ὅτι τοῦ μὲν ἐπισκόπου ὑπηρεταὶ εἰσὶ, τῶν δὲ πρεσβυτέρων ἐλάττους τυγχάνουσι· λαμβανέτωσαν δὲ κατὰ τὴν τάξιν τὴν εὐχαριστίαν μετὰ τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους, ἢ τοῦ ἐπισκόπου διδόντος αὐτοῖς ἢ τοῦ πρεσβυτέρου· ἀλλὰ μὴδὲ καθῆσθαι ἐν μέσῳ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων ἐξέστω τοῖς διακόνοις· παρὰ κληρὸν γὰρ καὶ κληρὸν τάξις ἐστὶ τὸ γινόμενον· εἰ δὲ τις μὴ θέλοι πειθαρχεῖν καὶ μετὰ τούτους τοὺς ὅρους, κεκαύσθη τῆς δια-κονίας.

the priest but after them, and why he may not be seated among priests.

Apparently, the position of the deacons had not been clarified in the order of the Church hierarchy, and some influential deacons, abusing their position, were creating confusion, and consequently the Church Fathers in the first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century had to establish disciplinary laws to curb the further abuse.

After comparing the early Armenian version with the original Greek, we have seen that the former has not been a true translation; on the contrary, it has missed the essence of the law and has given rise to later distortions.

Our Church Fathers, in later times, having naturally realized the flaws in the Armenian translation, could not encourage the deacons' services to the Church, unless in cases of exigencies, like visiting the sick by the bishop's permission, etc.

c) Having discussed the case of the deacons, we cannot but consider that of the **deaconesses**,<sup>15</sup> that is a current important issue, closely associated with the vitality of our Church.

Beginning with the 11<sup>th</sup> century, a laudable tradition, that of deaconesses, took root and spread across Armenian Cilicia, that reached its peak in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Sunik during the days of Catholicos Movses III, Tatevatsi. The practice has truly reflected the Armenian religious and monastic life.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike other churches, the Armenian Church has justifiably bestowed the rank of the deaconess to the dedicated nuns, probably to meet the needs of earlier convents, but later on to encourage much appreciated humanitarian services, like looking after orphans, the ailing and the poor.

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<sup>15</sup> *Fr. Abel, The Deaconess in the Armenian Church, N. Y., 1991.*

*Fr. Abel Oghlukian, The Deaconess in the Armenian Church, trans. S. Peter Cowe, N.Y., 1994.*

<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit., p. 23-47.*

Consequently, convents were established in different regions of Armenia as well as the diaspora, like the Holy Virgin convent in Halitsor, Shenher, Shorat and Noradoun, St. Catherine's convent in New Julfa, the St. Stephen convent in Tbilisi, as well as the St. Kalfayan convent in Istanbul. Unfortunately, this much-appraised tradition has been forgotten. There are, however, modest efforts to revitalize it in the Birds' Nest Orphanage – Tertchnots Bouyn – in Lebanon, by the efforts of the recently-established Gayanyants order, under the auspices of the See of Cilicia. If only these attempts would spark a rebirth of the tradition in the Church in the Diaspora.

The deaconess has much to accomplish now than ever before. At the time of the earthquake in Armenia, in 1988, and within the framework of humanitarian aid, Mother Theresa remarked with astonishment that there was no woman, having been allowed the **authorization** to put into practice her Christian love and devotion by helping the ailing and the bereaved among her compatriots. Of course, the reference is to the deaconess **officially ordained** by the Church, whose mission is to offer Christian service. The Armenian woman is deprived of this conscious service, which is established in the Church and fulfilled for Christ. Her potentialities, unfortunately, are stifled by the limited scope of activity expected from her, like sewing and the kitchen. It is necessary that a tradition started by a tolerant Apostolic Armenian Church be re-established, at least partially.

Regarding the case of deaconesses, one of the renowned Fathers of our Church, Mkhitar Gosh, in a 1184 publication of *Datastanakirk* – Judicial Manual –<sup>17</sup> says,

Do not consider this new and unprecedented, as we learn it from the tradition of the apostles; for it says, ‘I entrust you

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<sup>17</sup> *Torossian Kh.*, Mkhitar Gosh's *Girk Datastani*, Erevan, 1975.

our sister [...] who is a **servant** [=deaconess] of the Church.’<sup>18</sup>

d) The Bishops' Synod is the most important unit in the administrative and clerical structure of the Armenian Church after the National Ecclesiastical Assembly, which is usually convened by the Catholicos of All Armenians **only when exigencies arise**, to either resolve national-ecclesiastical issues, take special measures, or, when a vacancy is created, to ensure the election of a new Catholicos. Besides exigencies, it is also unpractical to bring together such an assembly; consequently, the Bishop's Synod naturally becomes an authoritative and executive body of the aforementioned Council; in other words, the head of the Church, as well as its leading force in diocesan and ecclesiastical matters. It is the Bishop's Synod that transforms the Church into *Ecclesia semper reformanda*, responding to the changing needs of society, resulting from social and cultural developments. Doing so, the Synod creates a perpetually progressive Church, concerned with the salvation of the individual and the community.

It has to be emphasized here, that the National Ecclesiastical Assembly is unique to the Armenian Church, a natural consequence of its democratic spirit and historical structure.

The Bishops' Synod, thus, both as an authoritative and executive body, cannot be considered a subordinate unit in the administrative structure of the Church, as it is founded not on human, but an exclusive ‘Divine right’.

To resolve matters that concern social, moral, ecclesiastical and reformational issues, there is no need to wait for the National Ecclesiastical Assembly to meet, since a Bishops' Synod is already in existence and its assembly by no means debilitates or damages the democratic principles of the Armenian Church.

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<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 136-137.



Alas, the Bishops' Synod has not met<sup>19</sup> in the past 25 years<sup>20</sup> to take resolute decisions on some vital ecclesiastic and social matters, such as abortion, cremation, euthanasia, etc. Ignoring current concerns does not mean that they do not exist.

The existence of such and similar concerns makes us agonize with the Church and for the Church, believing that through our devout love for our Church and the agony, we shall witness the dawn of reforms, as well as the spiritual and cultural renaissance of our nation.

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<sup>19</sup> *The last Bishops' Synod was convened in 1969, in Holy Etchmiadzin.*

<sup>20</sup> *We are aware that the political conditions both in Armenia and Diaspora have hindered the convocation of the Bishops' Synod. Simultaneously, the breach in the Holy Sees has not been conducive to bring together all the bishops of the Armenian Church, to take feasible resolution.*