

Armenians And A Peace Center In Jerusalem

By D.H. Tchilingirian

How absurd a notion it is to consider having a Peace Center in one of the most war-torn regions of the world. Such has been the response I have often received when pursuing the dreams of the Dormition Abbey, a century old Benedictine Monastery in Jerusalem. However, the more shocking idea seems to be participation of Armenians in this endeavor. While there is foundation for skepticism, the most appropriate answer to such a view seems to be - how is it possible that there not be a Center for Peace in the city of Jerusalem, capital of three monotheistic religions - the City of Peace.

Possibly, my own personal involvement and commitment to this effort may further explain the uniqueness of the Benedictines' work in the region. After all, why would an Armenian part of this Peace Center be built by the Dormition Abbey?

More than eight years ago I met Father Immanuel Jacobs, then Prior of the Dormition Abbey and today the President of the American Friends Organization. Having a close relationship with the Abbey as a student, friend and "brother," I observed the

daily practice and commitment of prayer and work by the almost century-old Benedictine community in the Middle East. I was inspired by the Dormitions' strong religious convictions - yet their attitude of openness, non-coersiveness and hospitality. Fully recognizing the sensitivities of Christians, Moslems and Jews, the Abbey is appreciated as a safe haven without feeling any pressure to alter one's faith or conviction.

During the years I have also observed the work of the Dormition Abbey in assisting refugees in Lebanon, in interceding on behalf of the Armenian community, in assisting local Arabs, Jews and Christians (individuals and institutions) in times of great need. Their work with the handicapped has been an inspiration to Arabs and Jews in Israel and to Christians and Moslems on the West Bank.

The Armenian compound and the Dormition Abbey are neighbors, sharing adjacent walls atop Mount Zion in Jerusalem. This physical proximity has

led to the development of intense and warm relationship between the Benedictines and the Armenian students, seminarians and religious leadership. Over the years, this bond has manifested itself in numerous ways, such as:

The Dormition Abbey has often communicated the concerns of the Armenian community to Israeli officials and has mediated and facilitated solutions to problematic or sensitive issues.

Numerous student from the Armenian Seminary have used the resources of the Dormition Abbey, its library and dormitories. Especially, during the recent turmoil and precarious events within the Armenian Patriarchate, Dormition Abbey was the only Christian community that morally and spiritually supported the Armenians living in the monastery, by opening their doors to their "Armenian friends."

Though rarely publicized, the Benedictine community has used its officers to intercede on behalf of Armenians who seek freedom or refuge. (Since publicity on such interventions would be harmful, the Dormition Abbey would not disclose such work to the general public).

The Benedictines perceive their Armenian neighbors to be a vital and

integral part of Jerusalem. They share their resources with their Christian brothers and sisters due to the Benedictines' firm commitment to ecumenical and interfaith dialogue.

In light of all these, the Dormition Abbey aspires to involve the American Armenian community in the building of the American Study Center for Peace and Interfaith Dialogue. Already, encouraging developments have taken place: the Honorable Set Momjian is the National Campaign Chairman of the Peace Center; the Honorable Mrs. Julia Tashjian, secretary of State of Connecticut, has been actively involved in facilitating the efforts of the Center; Mr. Alex Manoogian, Life President of AGBU, has expressed interest in the project; and Deacon Hrach Tchilingirian of St. Nersess Seminary, has been involved with the project of the Peace Center for over three years.

A Peace Center in Jerusalem is timely and will be a valuable place for Middle East peace and interfaith dialogue. The participation of Armenians is significant, because of their important presence in the Holy Land. This could be a turning point and a significant step for Armenians towards presenting Armenian issues on an international level. Issues such as the Armenians in the Middle East and the problems they are faced with, Armenian refugees in the Middle East, etc. Also, the Peace Center may serve as a forum to organize seminars on the Armenian Genocide and its related problems on an international level.