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The Cilician Election and Church Unity Discussed in An Interview with Khachig Babikian, Esq.

BY HIRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

The following interview, conducted by the editor of Window Quarterly with Mr. Khachig Babikian, Chairman of the World General Assembly of the See of Cilicia, has been made available to a select few Armenian newspapers, including TAR Int'l.

LONDON, UK - As Antelias prepares for the election of a new Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia, on April 20, 1995, this writer conducted an interview with Attorney Khachig Babikian, Chairman of World General Assembly of the Great House of Cilicia and member of the Lebanese Parliament, discussing the details of the election and the issue of church unity.

Q. Mr. Babikian, could you briefly tell us about the election process of the Great House of Cilicia?

A. The Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia has its own By-Laws according to which the election of a new Catholicos is determined.

As soon as the pontifical throne becomes vacant, the most senior member of the Cilician Brotherhood becomes the temporary person-in-charge of the See. He then, within 48 hours, invites the body that elects the Locum Tenens of the See.

Q. Which body elects the Locum Tenens?

A. The Joint Religious and Political Councils of the Central Committee of the Cilician See -- the counterpart of the Supreme Ecclesiastical Council in Etchmiadzin -- the Executive members of the World General Assembly (Chairman and Secretary), and the Executive members of the Brotherhood of the Cilician See (Chairman and Secretary).

This body met on April 19, 1995 in Antelias, and elected Archbishop Ardayazt Tertrian as Locum Tenens.

Q. What is the next step?

A. According to our By-Laws, the Locum Tenens, in consultation with the above-mentioned body, determines the date of the pontifical election. The election will be held on June 28 and the consecration on July 2, 1995.

Q. How are the delegates selected?

A. According to our By-Laws, the delegates come from our dioceses and constitute the electoral body.

Q. What is the criterion?

A. First, there will be one delegate for every 5,000 faithful; those communities or dioceses which have less than 5,000 will have one delegate. Second, one third of the delegates will be clergy and two thirds will be laity. Third, among the clergy delegates, one third should be married priests and two thirds celibate clergy (vartabeds and bishops). These are the general principles, according to which, the Locum Tenens organizes the election.

Q. What are your thoughts about this election?

A. I believe that the upcoming pontifical election in Antelias will reach its fruitful conclusion. And considering the latest election in the Mother See and the endorsement of Catholicos Karekin I, see the opening of a new era of closer cooperation between the two Sees. Of course, a wide and closer cooperation had already started dur-

ing the tenure of His Holiness, Catholicos Vazken I, and I hope this process will be strengthened on the level of the clergy and the faithful of the Armenian Church.

Q. As you are aware, both in Armenia and the Diaspora, the election of Catholicos Karekin I was connected with the issue of church unity. How do you characterize the issue of unity between the two Sees?

A. Naturally, there were a lot of irresponsible and uneducated discussions on this issue. For example, some people were saying now that Catholicos Karekin has come to Etchmiadzin, why do you need to have an election for a second Catholicos in Antelias. Unfortunately, this is a very superficial and irresponsible approach to the issue. This proves one thing: that those who speak in these terms are completely ignorant of our national ecclesiastical history.

As you know, the Cilician See has existed for over 500 years. This See has had its mission in our national life. It has existed and continues to exist in the daily lives of the faithful. It has importance, particularly in the Arab world, and elsewhere. This See -- with its institutions and related bodies, with its Brotherhood, with its Theological Seminary -- has become an essential entity in Armenian life.

The two Sees have existed for a very long time. However in Armenia, the Soviet regime and Communist doctrine placed our Mother See in Etchmiadzin under numerous difficulties. And yes, let us be honest, during this period the Mother See was tempted to turn the Cilician See into a Communist tool. However, in 1956-57, we -- in Lebanon and throughout the Arab world -- resisted against this attempt. Perhaps many people have forgotten that in those days the threat of Communism in the Arab world was perceived differently. Communism was considered a deadly thing. We were extremely concerned and afraid that we would become a "Fifth Column" as they said in those days -- that is, new Communist agents. Of course this would have disturbed our good relations in the Arab world, as well as the good status that we enjoyed in our respective countries. It was because of these threats that there was an upheaval in 1956-57. I am sure you are aware of these events. The Cilician See wanted to emphasize its independence and its detachment from the Mother See. Of course, the struggle continued for years, but we always believed that the Mother See was under extreme pressures. Thus, our relationship was determined by these pressures. Having known these, and despite all kinds of complexities, we never severed our ties with the Mother See. We never severed our ties and continuously visited Armenia to preserve that relationship. We met with His Holiness the Catholicos regularly and assured him of our moral support as well as our understanding of the pressures put on him. History

should tell the coming generations about the pressures of Catholicos [Vazken I]. He was sensitive to these issues and knew well the weight that he had to carry.

In recent years, as the Communist yoke became lighter, His Holiness Vazken I became the one who encouraged and reignited a sense of deeper cooperation between the two Sees. As a result of this, a brotherly relationship existed between the two Catholicos. Of course the clergy understood the ramifications of this relationship but could not take any practical remedies to resolve the problems. Naturally, it will take some time to address -- now more seriously -- the divisions and misunderstandings that have taken place over the years. It is in this way that we see the two Sees as co-workers, strengthening each other.

The Armenian Church is one. We are one Church -- with our faith, doctrine and liturgy.

Of course, some people see one purpose in the election of Catholicos Karekin I: what will happen to the interrelationship of certain dioceses. First, let me say, that Catholicos Karekin I -- whom I've had the privilege of knowing for over 40 years -- as a clergyman and a faithful believer is fully committed to the Church. I know firsthand that in recent years as His Holiness Vazken I became increasingly ill, Catholicos Karekin's main concern was the state of the church in Armenia. He was concerned that Catholicos Vazken I's fading health coincided with a very critical time in our nation's history -- namely the collapse of the Communist regime in Armenia. The Church was becoming increasingly leaderless -- especially in view of the fact that many new religious movements and cults were coming to Armenia and the Armenian Church was lagging behind them. It was because of these new religious movements that the two Catholicos issued an encyclical, cautioning the people against these threats.

Catholicos Karekin knew well that the problem will not be solved with an encyclical. He knew well that only serious commitment to missionary work in Armenia and surrounding countries could resolve this problem. It is only then that the Mother See could satisfy the religious and moral needs of the people. This was the main reason that Catholicos Karekin consented to be a candidate in the election process for the Catholicosate of All Armenians. Naturally, the [state] authorities encouraged this and had the same concern for the church and the nation. They wanted to see someone like Catholicos Karekin in the Mother See -- someone who is dedicated, spotless and faithful.

I am sure that the authorities in Armenia considered the fact that Catholicos Karekin -- with his past, with his experience, and especially with his international relations -- was the most qualified

among the clergy, who would help ease the current and most difficult conditions in Armenia. I am sure His Holiness will enhance an international understanding of the importance of the Republic of Armenia, as an independent, free and Christian nation in the region. I believe this is the reason that Catholicos Karekin -- with his name, position and experience -- came to serve the Mother See of the Armenian Church.

Q. Would you say that -- with the election of two new Catholicos in Etchmiadzin and Antelias -- the relationship of the two Sees will go back to the pre-1956 status?

A. Absolutely. Definitely. There should be a very harmonious relationship between the Sees and I believe that is the harvest that we will reap from these historic events.

Q. In terms of the division in the church, the problem of two dioceses in the United States seems to be the most controversial issue and one of the main stumbling blocks of church unity. What will happen in the United States?

A. The issue of the dioceses -- as I said earlier -- is a side issue. It should not be connected with the election of the Catholicos. On the other hand, it is very natural that the Armenian nation might desire -- in view of international relations -- to present itself in a united way. This is a process which has already started. In the United States various bodies are engaged in dialogue and talks and are looking at ways of resolving the division.

From another perspective, I must say that since the division of

the two Sees, our nation has been very concerned and interested in church affairs -- perhaps more than at any time in our history. A virtuous competition emerged which surprisingly awakened both people's faith and attraction toward the church. In addition, it also gave rise to several cultural entities and programs. Of course, no matter how important, this is a secondary issue.

I am sure that the rapprochement and the dialogue will continue. One thing should be clear, it is not Catholicos or official church bodies that decide the desire of the people. It is the people who decide what is best for its ultimate interests. Naturally, there are certain issues that need to be considered in this respect.

In all this, I can add one thing. The election that took place in the Mother See and the new atmosphere that will emerge in our interrelationship will greatly contribute to many issues -- which might have seemed impossible in the past. I am sure that they will be possible, desirable and fruitful.

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