

# wind ow

view of the Armenian Church

Vol. I No. 1

January 1990

## View through a WINDOW of Love

Father Vazken Movsesian

*"Greater Love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life down for his friends"*  
(St. John 15:13)

During the first half of this century the question for the Armenian Church in America may have been how are we to keep the doors open? Today, with the doors open, the central question is, how do we bring people through those doors? This is a question which has haunted and frustrated many a worker of the Church. It is a question that is not reserved for the discussion of a few. As concerned laborers in the field, God's harvest is our intention. Our Lord teaches us, "...the laborer deserves his wages." The wages for the laborer in the Church is not material wealth, rather an inner satisfaction that the labor has not been in vain.

To serve the Church is an act of love. Because God loved us, we have a capacity to love. We translate that love from the emotional realm to that of activism — we serve.

The Church that Jesus Christ established, with Her unique message of love, hope, and life, entwined in mysticism continues to attract and captivate many. Those drawn to the Church, particularly

*continued on next page*

Patriarch Torkom Koushagian's Viewpoint

## The Problem of Improvement

*This is the condensed Introduction of Patriarch Torkom Koushagian in The Improvement of the Armenian Church, published in Jerusalem (1940). The book is a postmortem compilation of his editorials in Sion, the official organ of the Jerusalem Patriarchate. This particular editorial was published in the September 1937 issue of Sion. Archbishop Koushagian was patriarch of Jerusalem from 1931-1939. He is one of the most eminent and prolific church leaders of our times. D.H.T.*

The problem of Improvement\* (*բարեկարգութիւն*) which literally means *good order* is not only a contemporary problem, but it is a continuous one, and let it not sound too grandiose if we say, it is an *eternal* problem for us. It has existed always and it will not cease from existing. It is a natural desire for a people who has its Church as its conscious, to see that its spiritual and moral needs are in harmony and in accordance with its longings. And if it has not been possible to fulfill this, as it is thought to be, the reason is the life of the Nation (*ազգ*) throughout the centuries, faced with political and social turmoils and continuous dispersions.

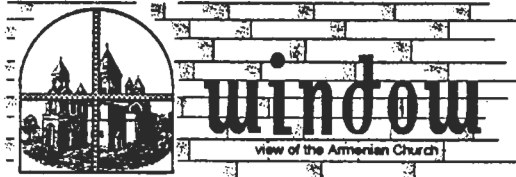
But before we reach that point, that is before saying whether indeed there is a dire need for Improvement in our church, we would like to emphasize the difference between two differentiated terms: Renewal (*վերանորոգութիւն*) and Improvement (*բարեկարգութիւն*). The first is the Armenian form of the French word *réforme*, which sometimes, perhaps more correctly so, is translated into Reconstruction (*վերակազմ*)

*please turn to page 7*

*VIEW THROUGH.... continued from page 1*

here in America, wake up in the face of harsh reality. Those alluring ideals are in need of real funding. And so, with love and devotion to the Church we work to fund and to move the Church in Her mission. The post-massacre Armenian Church in America has only recently been adjusting to financial stability. Nevertheless pressures from growing parishes, special needs of the fold, demands of a complex society require more and more of the Church. The greater the projects, the greater is the need for money. Thus a never ending cycle of projects and fund raisers becomes the fate of so many clergy, volunteers and workers of the Church.

The Holy Apostle tells us "love conquers all," and so we believe of difficulties in the Church. Thousands of ordained servants and volunteers, out of love for the Church deal with banquets, raffles, picnics, bingo, and sales to continue Her mission. With an "end justifying the means" logic we rationalize all types of activity so long as revenue for Christ's work is provided. All too often though, the line between the means and the end vanishes before our sight. We begin to believe Church projects as being God-ordained or God-validated. With a loss of a defined purpose, the degree of love for our Church begins to diminish rather than be heightened.



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At some point we have to say "enough." We are part of the Church for a purpose. Granted, her physical needs are essential but without some fresh air we are all susceptible to suffocation. At some point we have to open a *new window*, to remind, to refresh and to invigorate us.

Our object in beginning this publication is to deal with the end of our efforts. *WINDOW* is aimed at the

dedicated Armenian Church worker, ordained or not, to give a proportioned perception of the majestic Armenian Church. We publish *Window* in a spirit of love. Because of that love for the Church we are *compelled* to open this new window. With articles focused on current issues, we hope to point to the relevancy of an ancient Church in today's modern society.

The issues that challenge us today, we find, are issues that the Church has addressed throughout the centuries. Ecumenism, cults, abortion, sexuality, poverty, environment, communism, capitalism (even if not expressed in these terms) have demanded answers from the Church since early centuries.

The man of the 1990's is only slightly different from his predecessors. He looks for answers in his faith but now he is offered a broad range of alternatives. Consider the three major Judaic traditions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—and the handful of Eastern traditions — Buddhism, Hinduism, etc. Each of these religions/philosophies has it's own set of values, laws and it's own god (deified or not). Each has attractions and of course shortcomings. In a free society, man is at liberty to examine, explore and come to terms with his con-

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scientiousness and his god without consequence. Yet evangelism, cult movements, neo/quasi-religion such as the new age movement, coupled with man's desire to spiritually "find himself," all contribute heavily in the decision process. The Armenian Church in America has become a Church of choice. No longer does ethnicity determine religious affiliation.

The poet Vahan Tekeyan writes, "The Armenian Church is the birthplace of my soul...the mighty fortress of my forefathers' faith..." These words described the feelings of a generation forced out of their homeland, whose only sense of stability was the Church. Without lessening the poetic beauty of Tekeyan's words, we venture to say that the Armenian today finds no inconsistency in confessing the Church as a historic institution and another faith as the guardian and protector of his/her soul. Church leadership faces a new dilemma in addressing a generation which does not describe belonging to the Armenian Church as an accident of birth, rather as a matter of conscience choice, whatever the reasons for choice may be.

In turbulent waters, the Armenian Church in America struggles to beam Her light across foggy seas of religion. Her destiny in America largely relies on Her ability to be a viable option to ships adrift. Here She can be a lifesaver or sink like a weighted barge.

We offer a Window — to open, view and evaluate our efforts of love. Everyone who loves the Church, sacrifices for that Church and is surely concerned with Her destiny. Without opening a window, our concerns remain within. We offer Window: a view of the Armenian Church; a window made of glass, we may look through

and be looked at. In subsequent issues we will be addressing specific concerns of the Armenian Church in America. We invite you to participate with your comments and insights. Most of all, we invite you to view *with us the Armenian Church through this window.*



## I Was Hungry...

I was hungry  
and you told me to wait.

I was hungry  
and you set up a commission.

I was hungry  
and you said, "so were my ancestors."

I was hungry  
and you said "God helps those...."

I was hungry  
and you told me I shouldn't be.

I was hungry  
and you said "the poor are always with us."

I was hungry  
and you blamed the Congress.

I was hungry  
and you blamed it on the communists.

I was hungry  
and you circled the moon.

I was hungry  
and you told me Jesus saves.

I was hungry  
and you prayed with me.

I was hungry  
and you told me machines do that work now.

I was hungry  
and you had napalm bills to pay.

I was hungry  
and you said I don't speak Armenian.

I was hungry  
and you said I am not Armenian.

I was hungry  
and you said I ask too much.

I was hungry  
and you said "I have a meeting."

I was hungry  
and you said "I am too busy."

Lord, when did we see you hungry?

Matthew 25:44

# A Pious Minimalism

Deacon Hratch Tchilingirian

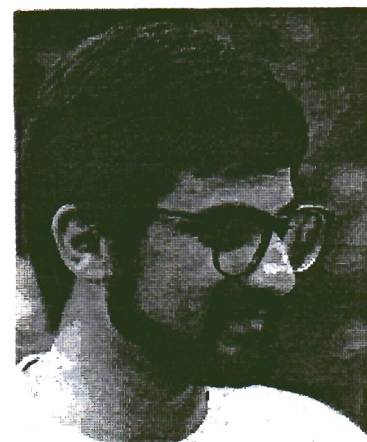
In trying to formulate the scope of the *Window*, we observed that it is *not* possible to have an Armenian publication which will deal with contemporary issues of the Church. It is not possible in view of the caliber of the innumerable publications of magazines and periodicals of other churches, namely, the Roman Catholic Church and main line Protestant churches. The list of such *professional* publications by other churches is very long and impressive. Publications that deal with moral, social, theological, political, economic, spiritual and any perceivable issue in modern life. It is not possible for us, the Armenian Church, to have such publications for many reasons. Namely, lack of resources, logistics, and most important, absence of necessary determinants of such an endeavor. It seems that presently, the functional parameters of the Church's mission is the *status quo* and to a certain degree its conventional paternalism.

From a broader perspective, the basic problem is a perceptual problem with two overlapping dimensions: *collective* and *individual*. Collectively Armenians perceive the Church to be the same as the Armenian Nation. The general trend in the Armenian Church in contemporary times has been the survival of Armenians as an ethnic entity. This trend evolved during the post-genocide formation of the Armenian Diaspora. One of the reasons that the Armenian Church plays a major role in the Diaspora community is that it serves as a means of acceptable societal identification and simultaneously as a means of maintaining ethnic self-identity. Even though the intra-ethnic dif-

ferences are many, one institution where common ground may be found is Armenian religion, *vis a vis* the church. Also Armenians "employ" the church as a strategy for reinforcing their existing ethnic-identity. The Armenian Church as a vital identity institution is at times used interchangeably with *ethnicity*, (just as it is the case with Jews and Judaism).

As a national institution, the Church is a bridge Armenians use to walk back and forth between two cultures—Armenian and American. Rather than assimilation or acculturating in the American culture, Armenians absorb aspects of the American culture without losing their own identity. The bridge is employed in order to obtain acceptability, but is never crossed with the intent of permanent residence on the other side. Instead, it is a catalyst to employ when necessitated by certain social situations, but a return is always made to the Armenian culture. It serves to gain acceptance while maintaining ethnic, Armenian distinctiveness.<sup>1</sup>

Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan further specifies this nationalistic tendency. He writes, that those who claim the Church is the same with our nation—and that the Armenian Church is the only protector and sponsor of our national identity—are misguided. Because, "that has never been the purpose of the Church's national character, it is only a partial quality, a consequence of the circumstances, and often an additional function which the Church has assumed due to the absence of a viable national institution . . . . Going a step further, the accented nationalism of our Church is the result of her failure, for various reasons.... One thing is clear that the Church is not a tool, as some nationalists want to make it, using the Church for their own partisan interests. Even some clergy think the same way, but they are not faithful to their true calling. The Church is the agent of the Gospel primarily and absolutely. And her virtue rests entirely on this





attribute."<sup>2</sup>

On the *individual* level, the core of the problem is socioeconomic variables—such as education, occupational achievements, social status and income—or the *embourgeoisement* of the Armenians, as Dr. R. Hrair Dekmejian applies the term. He writes, "since their arrival in the United States, the Armenians have joined the general American quest for upward *socio-economic mobility* (italics is mine), and they have succeeded in this quest on the whole more than most ethnic groups in America. This achievement of socioeconomic success has reinforced the inbred conservatism of the Armenians . . . . Thus, the upper and upper-middle class sectors of the community display a strong commitment to maintain their status of material wellbeing, as has been the case with other ethnic groups. These classes tend to oppose militancy and excessive manifestations of ethnic nationalism."<sup>3</sup>

To a certain extent, "opposing excessive manifestation of ethnic nationalism" is similar (if not the same) as opposing excessive manifestation of our Armenian Christian FAITH. The "commitment to material wellbeing" of Armenians is reflected also in the concern for the material wellbeing of the Church. In our quest to be the most financially secured church in the community, we forget that the Church is the Body of Christ, *ecclesia*, the gathering of people. What good is it to have a rich church without people? What good is it to have a big church which is full only when there are requiems (hokehankist)? We have come to a point where we pray more for the dead than worship with the living; Church means a building where Divine Liturgy is *performed* every Sunday of the year; Church community means simply baptisms, weddings, and funerals.

Finally, the problem is *organizational*. The administrative skills of Armenians have improved over the years and in many cases they have become very sophisticated, but this, for the price of losing the church's *apostolic* identity, i.e. Armenians' mission as messengers of Christ's Good News. (Though the word *apostolic* denotes the foundation of the Armenian Church by the two Apostles of Christ, it literally describes that which has "been sent" to accomplish a task; in Armenian the word is *arakel*).<sup>4</sup>

*Apostolic mission* is not simply a theological characterization, but rather a task that

Christ entrusted the Church and showed her with his own example. Christ healed, preached, comforted, loved and lived with the poor. He lived with the blind, the lame, the crippled, the lepers, the hungry, the miserable, the sinners, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the possessed, the persecuted, the captives. Christ lived with laborers and overburdened, the rabble, the crowds, the little ones, the least, the last and with the lost ones. Christ lived with all these people.

Robert Michels, a German sociologist, commenting on the goals of organizations notes that, ". . . when an organization displaces its goals—that is, substitutes for its legitimate goal some other goal for which it was not created, for which resources were not allocated to it, and which is not known to serve," an organizational distortion occurs. Furthermore, "organizations are instruments; they are created to serve one or more specific goals. But in the process of forming them, of granting them resources, and of recruiting personnel, interest groups are formed which are frequently concerned more with preserving and building up the organization itself than in helping it to serve its initial purpose. These interest groups use the organizational goals as means to recruit funds, to obtain tax exemptions or status in the community, in short, as means to their own goals."<sup>5</sup>

Paradoxically, as it is characteristic of Armenians, we are starting a *new* publication because it is not possible to have such a publication. Perhaps this *objective* and approach best describes the current state of affairs. We answer a question by asking another one. For example, if one asks "how are you," the answer is "how about yourself?" Once we decide to deal

*Apostolic mission is not simply a theological characterization, but rather a task that Christ entrusted the Church and showed Her with his own example.*

with a question, we realize that there are many *dependent* questions that need to be answered before even we can consider the first one. Then, while we are trying to answer the related questions of an issue, we forget or lose sight of the initial question that we asked. Hence, *exploration* becomes or has become a viable substitute for *action*. Obviously, at times, the problems are overwhelming. They need long or short term solutions. Rather than finding concrete solutions, we get discouraged by their complication and the amount of work that is needed to unravel them. Rather than finding concrete solutions, (however small they may be), we appoint committees "to find the facts." Then the committees discover what were already known, but in a written form. Once the *report* is complete, we find out there are no *funds* to implement or materialize the solutions. What do we do? Shelve them!

The best way we could deal with our problems is to start somewhere, at a certain point. Our preoccupation with quantity of time has forced us not to seek qualitative solutions to our problems. At times we have come up with *good* solutions, but only to find out that eventually the problems will "haunt" us again. To better illustrate the dilemma, this is how the Catholic diocese in Brownsville, Texas, dealt with a given problem, which happens to be the case of Central American refugees. Bishop John Fitzpatrick explains:

"There was no great thought given. The people just came and we fed them. There was no question that these people were hungry. We didn't have to have a meeting; no committees were named; we didn't have to go to any other bodies to see what they thought. A lot of people from various parishes sent us food. Later I got a lot of help from the American bishops, who still send me funds. We have given out about one and one half million meals — rice and beans one day and beans and rice the next day, but it is better than nothing. . . . We are used to poor people, and we take care of them. There are maybe 100,000 illegals from Mexico . . . . some of them are new, but many have been here for years. Without the help of the Catholics of the United States we would not be able to keep going. We are kind of poor down here. We have had our hands full taking care of these people."

"I am nobody because I feed a few people. That is what we are supposed to be doing as

Christians. Some people want to make a big deal of it. They have a picture of me next to Romero [the assassinated Archbishop of San Salvador]. but I am no prophet. I am a nobody. I am not being humble. If somebody is hungry, you feed them. You don't expect a Congressional Medal for it and neither do I."

"I have been here 18 years. Time goes fast when you are having fun. I spent 10 years with the Cubans and five years with Italians in Buffalo. But I think I am better working with poor people than I am working with sophisticated people. I like it here. I like the people. They are very easy to work with, very appreciative. They are very cooperative."<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the solution in Brownsville, Texas seems very simplistic, nevertheless it is the "success story" of a given community faced with a given problem. The story proves, once again, that pastoral practicality is more important than politics and ideological gridlocks in solving problems. This does not mean in any way, that Armenians are not practical in resolving their problems. However, sometimes we need a *window* view of ourselves, because by removing ourselves from the picture we gain greater insight into what truly is there.

*exploration  
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<sup>1</sup>cf. Paul Rutledge, *The Role of Religion in Ethnic Self-Identity*, (University Press of America: New York 1985), pp.49-59.

<sup>2</sup>Nersoyan [Abp. T.], "Nationalism or Gospel?" trans. Fr. Arshen Alvazian, *Armenian Reporter*, October 5, 1989.

<sup>3</sup>"The Armenian Perspective," *Journal of Armenian Studies*, Vol. III, Nos. 1&2, 1986-87, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup>For further discussion on the terminology see Thomas Hopko, *Doctrine*, (DRE: Orthodox Church in America, 1984), pp.126-8.

<sup>5</sup>Amital Etzioni, *Modern Organization*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), 1964, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup>"People Came: We Fed Them," *Maryknoll*, November 1989, pp. 19-21.





Koushagian, continued from page 1

Մուրիմ). This European word has been used amongst us to connote "protestantism," in view of the fact, that its founders, having been dissatisfied with [Roman] Catholic Christianity, and its centuries-old doctrinal and liturgical renovations, had supposedly wanted a return to the primitive Church faith and to the simplicity of its worship. As for the word բարեկարգութիւն (baregarkootune), it is an authentic Armenian word, which means "the well preservation of the existing order" (եղած կարգիւ բարոջ պահպանումը); almost a synonym for the word discipline (կարգապահութիւն). . . . .

All that we had and still have, as a discipline or order (կարգուկանոն) of religious and ecclesial life: worship, liturgy, custom, tradition, hymn, ceremony, rites, rules, etc. are dispensed, so reasonably, from the wisdom of our forefathers. In fact, they are good orders in their totality. The more we know them in their inner connection with each other, the more we will be fascinated on their spirit that gave them birth and preserved them. That spirit, in its depth, is a Christian and National spirit at the same time; a spirit that has consecrated our religious literature and the prayers and worship of our Church; a spirit that as the renowned armenologist Pollantian affirms . . . is the most capturing and treasured one among the small Eastern Churches. Furthermore, that spirit has so shaped our worship, liturgy and art, has so harmoniously molded and cemented mystical religious experience and the serious understanding of life . . . that those who visit us cannot resist expressing their admiration and impressions. This is the same spirit that has inspired our church canons and national laws, through which our people has been able to preserve its hierarchical system and the morality of its religious-national life, despite the unending problems caused by political turmoil.

Whatever our forefathers have given us, as a system, as a form and as a life, with so much love and wisdom, have only been good, beneficial and beautiful. And now whatever we have from them, it is possible to say, that it is all the same, except those things that have been added incidentally and things that have been dropped accidentally; nevertheless, without corrupting their whole character.

It is our deepest conviction, that for us, *Improvement* should mean our diligence to preserve what we have in their good condition: the part of the whole in itself, and the whole in its unity; preserving them pure and strong, so that it is possible to realize, through them, their

intended goal, which is the improvement of the Nation's (ազգիւն) spiritual life.

There are two things which are essential for this: to have clergy who are conscience of their calling and are prepared for their careers, and then, to have a people who are receptive to a spiritual culture. Without the fulfillment of these two, it is impossible to have *Improvement*. This is why, together with others, we think that the most important elements of *Improvement* are the clergy and the people. And the means to preserve the dignity of their responsibility is the education of the clergy and the religious discipline of the people. . . . .

We need to be healed, through nourishment and vigor, and that is *Improvement* the way we understand it; and not *reform* (վերանորոգութիւն), which would be like having a surgery. If there is swelling caused by the weakness of the body, it is wiser to run to nourishment than the knife. And the best condition for nourishment is the education of the clergy and the religious discipline of the people.

Translated by Deacon Hratch Tchilingirian from: Յ. Քորզոմ Չատրխաչ Գուշակեան, *Բարեկարգութիւն Հայաստանեայց Եկեղեցւոյ* Երուսաղէմ 1940, էջ 7-10

\*We have translated բարեկարգութիւն as *improvement* rather than *reform*, because contextually, the first better expresses the intent of Koushagian's thesis.

Dear Friend:  
We trust you have enjoyed this premiere issue of WINDOW view of the Armenian Church. Your comments and participation are always appreciated. Please let us know what you think. Thank you for opening a new WINDOW view of the Armenian Church.  
-The Group

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*Open a new WINDOW...*

