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Years In America

Let the life in the New World with all of its splendor & luster not lure you. Remember that you are expatriates in that land. Remember that some day the Lord God will take you out of that foreign land & lead you to your fatherland. Make an effort to live together. Help each other. Extend a consoling hand to a wretched brother, a fallen friend. Find a job for the poor and the new comer, help the sick, take care of orphans and the wretched, and provide them with food and education..."

Catholicos Khiriman 1898

HAS THE MESSAGE OF THE CHURCH CHANGED?

100 YEARS IN AMERICA

The Armenian Apostolic Church is celebrating the centennial of the establishment of the North American Diocese.

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN
Photos by HARRY KOUNDAKJIAN

With nearly 150 parishes and mission communities, 135 clergymen and several hundred full-time staff and an estimated cumulative budget of \$12 million, the Armenian Church is the oldest, largest, and arguably one of the most organized Armenian institution in North America.

Over the decades, unlike the gradual decline and demise of numerous organizations, the Armenian Church has shown a steady growth: starting with one church in 1891, it has grown on average by one church per year. Today, there are more functioning churches in North America than in the Republic of Armenia or anywhere else in the Diaspora.

The Formative Years

By the late 1800s, a sizeable Armenian community was in existence in America, mostly made of young students who had come to study in American universities and those who had escaped the massacres in the Ottoman Empire.

In 1880, upon the request of Armenians in Worcester, Massachusetts, the Reverend Hovsep Sarajian arrived from Turkish Armenia to tend to the pastoral needs of the growing Armenian community. He performed the first Armenian religious service in a rented hall in Worcester, on July 12, 1889.

Subsequently, through Sarajian's efforts and the support of the community, in 1891, the first Armenian Church in America was consecrated in the same town and named the Holy Savior.

Initially, the church community in the United States was under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and it was administered according to the Armenian National Constitution in force in the Ottoman Empire since 1863.

However, in view of the political developments in the Ottoman Empire and the growing hostilities toward Armenians there, Patriarch Malachia Ormanian of Constantinople (1896-1908) asked Catholicos Mgrdich I of All Armenians (Khrimian Hayrig) to take upon himself the spiritual care of the Armenians living in the Balkans, Europe and the Americas, since these regions were outside the bounds of the Ottoman Empire. Catholicos Mgrdich agreed and, on July 2, 1898, issued an encyclical establishing the Armenian Church in America as a separate diocese under the jurisdiction of Ejmiatsin.

Khrimian Hayrig's encyclical reflects the

concerns of the time. Addressing the budding community of "diligent merchants, hard-working artisans, farmers and tillers, virtuous ladies and faithful children," he admonished them with his well-known fatherly tone: "Let your honest way of life and your civilized demeanor gain respect for you in the eyes of the non-Armenians. Do not ever give cause to trouble and hatred. Be of one mind and of one will in the way you conduct your work and worship of God.... Love marriage and family, which constitute a morally clean life. Let the life in the New World with all of its splendor and luster not lure you. Remember that you are expatriates (*bandukht*) in that foreign land. Remember that some day, like Israel, the Lord God will take you out of that foreign land and lead you to your fatherland.... Make an effort to live together. Help each other. Extend a consoling hand to a wretched brother, a fallen friend. Find a job for the poor and the new comer, help the sick, take care of orphans and the wretched, and provide them with food and education...."

Like his contemporaries, Khrimian Hayrig did not anticipate the permanence of the Armenian community in North America.

In a 1901 report, Primate Sarajian informed the Catholicos about the various aspects of church and community life. There were seven parishes in the newly-established diocese with only four parish priest. In addition to Worcester, parishes were established in New York, Boston, Lawrence, Providence, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Fresno. Interestingly, Sarajian

mentions that the community could not pay the \$3000 debt for the Worcester church. This "huge burden" was relieved only when Sarajian traveled to Europe and raised the funds from wealthy Armenians in Europe.

In 1902, a Church Constitution, prepared by the diocesan convention in America, was approved by

(Center) Catholicos Vazgen I, then-Cilician Catholicos Karekin II and Archbishop Torkom Manoogian, Primate of the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church, in 1989 during a post-earthquake service in New York. 100th anniversary celebration at Ellis Island (top), and Karekin I with Cardinal O'Connor at the same celebration ceremony (bottom). St. Vartan's Cathedral in NY (opposite page).



Khrimian Hayrig. This marked the beginning of an organized and institutional community life in America. In the formative years, the community faced major financial challenges and internal political feuds. Under trying conditions, Primate Sarajian traveled unceasingly from coast to coast in search of scattered Armenians "in the New World" and planted the seeds of organized community life. In 1901 he wrote, "the majority of the Armenians [here] are ill prepared and lack a basic [national] self-awareness and do not possess even the most fundamental knowledge of Christian living."

Less than three years after he was appointed Primate, Sarajian's frantic workload caught up with him.

Exhausted and burned out, he wrote to the Catholicos: "Though I'm only fifty years old, my constantly concerned and struggling life has made me weak... therefore, I ask you to relieve me of my duties... after I organize the election of a new Primate." Before he was allowed early retirement, Sarajian was forced to resign due to the on-going political bickering in the community.

In subsequent decades, the growing political discord in the Armenian community, especially starting in late 1920s, intertwined with the development of the Armenian Church in North America, culminated in the assassination of Archbishop Ghevont Tourian in New York City in December of 1933. On January 2nd, 1934, the *New York Times* reported:

"The murder of the Archbishop, said to have been committed by his political enemies, took place as he was celebrating mass in the Holy Cross Church. Members of the church said that differences had arisen because of his refusal to display the flag of the former Republic of Armenia, most of which country is now included under Soviet jurisdiction. The Archbishop held that the American flag was sufficient...."

This event had far reaching implications for the church in America. One of the most obvious symptoms of the intensifying political and administrative turmoil in the church was the establishment of a separate prelacy in the late 1950s under the jurisdiction of the Catholicosate of Cilicia.

Notwithstanding the polarization of the community, a most notable period in the history of the Church in America is between the

late 1930s and the early 1950s, under the leadership of two prominent primates, Archbishop Karekin Hovsepian (1939-44), who later became Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia, and Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan (1943-1953), later elected (but not confirmed) Patriarch of Jerusalem. The crowing project, conceived in 1942 by Hovsepian and vigorously pursued by Nersoyan, was the construction of the St. Vartan Cathedral and diocesan headquarters in New York City; the complex was finally consecrated in 1968.

During Nersoyan's decade-long tenure, the organizational infrastructure of the church was further solidified with the establishment of a revised Diocesan By-Laws, several nation-wide organizations such as the Armenian Church Youth Organization (ACYO) and the Association of Armenian Church Choirs, and the increase in the number of clergy. A prominent theologian and a savvy administrator, Nersoyan also founded the St. Nersess Armenian Seminary in 1969.

In the background of this rapid growth and development, first Hovsepian and later Nersoyan were actively engaged in efforts to resolve the "problem of unity," however, to no avail.

First Pontifical Visit

In May 1960, the first ever visit of the

Archbishop Khajag Barsamian releasing doves at St. Vartan's Cathedral on Easter Sunday, 1991. The late Soprano Lucine Zakarian, lower right, performed.



Catholicos of All Armenians to the Armenian community in America ushered a new milestone in the life of the church. In 1968, Catholicos Vazken I came again to consecrate the St. Vartan Cathedral, a quarter of a century after it was conceived and developed. This was followed by a first visit of the Catholicos of Cilicia, Khoren I, in 1969, to the communities under the jurisdiction of the Prelacy.

The two longest serving Primates in America, who have left their signature in the history of the dioceses, are Archbishop Torkom Manoogian, who served from 1966 until his election as Patriarch of Jerusalem in 1990, and Archbishop Vatche Hovsepian, who has been Primate of the Western Diocese since 1973. Under their leadership new churches were established and dozens of new priests, mostly American-born, were ordained. In 1969 the Armenian Church Endowment Fund (ACEF) was founded in the Eastern Diocese and, a few years later, in the Western Diocese. The over \$40 million Fund is the second largest in the Diaspora after AGBU. According to Suren Fesjian, chairman of ACEF and the driving force behind its growth, this year the fund distributed \$2.5 million to 65 beneficiaries. The Fund has over 800 donors and has grown on average \$2 million a year since 1980.

Over the decades, the church has contributed millions of dollars to Armenian chari-

KHRIMIAN HAYRIG AND EDISON
In January 1895, Catholicos Mgrdich I (Khrimian Hairik) sent a recorded Christmas message from Ejmiatsin to the Armenian community in America. At the end of his message, he said: "Give my regards to the great inventor Edison, whose miraculous invention made it possible to send you this live recording of my voice. Long live Edison and the memory of his invention."

table causes, especially after the 1988 earthquake in Armenia. One of the first such efforts goes back to 1899, when the church organized a fundraising drive for the victims of the famine in Van and sent about \$3000 to their compatriots. Today, regular diocesan aid projects to Armenia have been institutionalized through the establishment of self-governing entities such as the Fund for Armenian Relief (FAR) of the Eastern Diocese and the orphans sponsorship programs of both the Diocese and the Prelacy.

Advocacy for the human rights of the Armenian nation is another "traditional" area of involvement of the Armenian Church in America. Starting back in 1903, when the newly-created Diocese protested and campaigned against the order of the Tsarist Russian government to confiscate the treasures and properties of Holy Ejmiatsin, to the more recent cause of the people of Karabakh, the church has played a significant role in mobilizing human and financial resources for major national issues.

"When the unthinkable happened to Armenians elsewhere, the American Diocese was here—a haven in a harsh world—to receive our people, to console their hearts, and nourish their souls," said Archbishop Khajag Barsamian, Primate of the Eastern Diocese. Reflecting on the centennial anniversary, Barsamian explained, "Ultimately, our network of Armenian churches provided the stage upon which succeeding generations of Armenian-Americans could contribute to their heritage as well as to society-at-large. And now, as Americans, we stand poised to contribute our expertise and resources to a rejuvenated Armenia. As this century draws to a close, the prospects for our people, here at home and back in the homeland, have never looked brighter."

Challenges

For all its progress and success, the Church in America has not been free of criticism. It is often said that the Armenian Church is the "guardian of the Armenian nation." Indeed, a reading of the history of the church in America confirms the significant role the church played in preserving Armenian culture and identity.

However, this has been a double-edged sword. On one hand, the church is revered for its "national mission," on the other hand, it is criticized for it, especially by second and third generation Armenian-Americans.

Beatrice Trapasso of Houston, Texas, reflects the sentiments of a significant number of second generation Armenian-Americans: "Raised in a New England parish, I grew disillusioned with the Armenian Church at a young age with the emphasis on culture and language preservation. Like many, I hear much about being Armenian and little about being a Christian. My faith has developed largely within small alternative Catholic communities that emphasize social justice, lay participation, and equality between the sexes within the framework of weekly Eucharistic liturgies."

Professor Hagop Nersoyan of Ohio argues that "in the Armenian experience the border dividing the church from the nation has become grey to the point of invisibility." Indeed, finding a balance between its "national" and "Christian" mission continues to be a hotly debated issue in the church.

Washington-based lawyer Dean Shahinian said, "The challenge is to present insights about God, the church and life with practical applications in a way that motivates us to live what we believe." Many complain that the church has negated its mission to "preach the Gospel."

A 1994 survey of public announcements of 18 parishes in the east coast, within a three month period, showed that 81% of the organized events were dinners and bazaars, 16% cultural events, and 2.5% educational programs.

"For centuries the church, especially in the Diaspora, has played the role of a 'surrogate state' for the Armenian nation," said Archbishop Hovnan Derderian, Primate of the Canadian Diocese. "Now that Armenia is independent, the church must concentrate on its evangelistic mission. Our parishioners live in highly advanced societies and the church is called to provide spiritual comfort and meaning in a world where there is growing tension between expansion, globalization, and con-



St. Vartan Cathedral with anniversary celebration posters lining the walls.

traction of moral values," explained Derderian.

While the church leadership contemplates its role and mission in the next century, a decades-old wound remains open in the life of the Armenian-American community: the administrative schism of the church in America.

The archbishops of both the Diocese and the Prelacy had hoped that the crowning feature of the centennial celebrations will be the establishment of unity between the two factions of the church. However, this was far from happening. The developments of the last few years give little reason to believe that "church unity" in America will be achieved in the foreseeable future (see AIM April-May 1998).

One hundred years ago Khrimian Hairik wrote, "I pray that all disagreements, quarrels and factions disappear from your midst and that the spirit of God's peace and gentleness prevail." At the close of the century, political and administrative divisions in the church continue to mar the church's image in the community, especially among the youth.

The Next 100 Years

The celebration of one hundred years of service, growth and success is a major milestone in the history of the Armenian Church in America.

While reflecting on the past, many new challenges face the church in the coming

years. What will be the mission of the church in the lives of third and fourth generation Armenian-Americans? How would the church balance its "national" and "Christian" mission in the post-independence era of Diaspora life? What would be the role of the Armenian Church in the "global," ever pluralistic societies in North America?

Professor Nersoyan, author of a book on Armenian Church history, sees a larger role for the church in the next century. He explains, "Churches and people that have been persecuted and maligned for long periods of time tend to center themselves on themselves. They tend to raise ramparts around themselves and around the things that define them, in an instinctive effort aimed at self-preservation. But the time has come for the Armenian Church to look upon itself as a church for the world. It is primarily a missionary to its own people, but it is also a missionary to the world through means of its own."

Like a century-old tree, with deep roots and strong branches, the Armenian Church in America has been planted, nurtured and protected by generations of Armenians, as a monument of their past and as a living witness to their labor of love.

KAREKIN I AND THE INTERNET

Want to correspond directly
with the Patriarch?
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