

# A New Beginning

Catholicos Garegin II Faces the Task of Healing and Leading the Church

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

**T**he Armenian Apostolic Church elected the 132nd Catholicos of All Armenians on October 27. Archbishop Garegin Nersissian, Vicar of the Ararat Diocese, succeeded Catholicos Karekin I, who passed away in June after serving for only four years as the head of the 1700-year old Church.

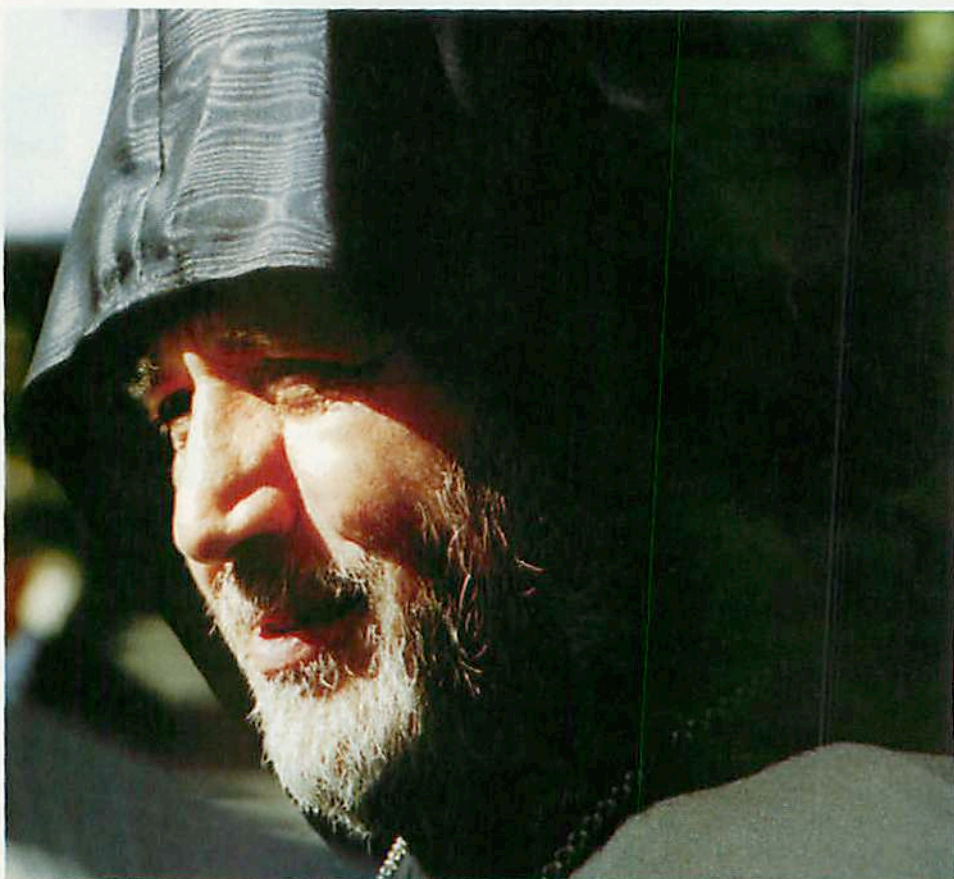
The National Ecclesiastical Assembly (NEA), the highest legislative body of the Armenian Church made of 455 delegates from Armenia, Karabakh and 43 countries in the Diaspora, officially convened in Holy Ejmiatsin, the Mother See of the Church in Armenia. One of the primary functions of the NEA is to elect a new Catholicos and discuss issues facing the church that serves millions of Armenians around the world.

Nersissian, who will be known as Catholicos Garegin II, received 263 votes against the 176 votes of the only other candidate on the ballot, Archbishop Nerses Bozabalian, the Locum Tenens of the Catholicosate.

On Wednesday, October 27, the jubilation over the election of the new Catholicos in the Cathedral of Holy Ejmiatsin lasted only a few minutes as Nersissian interrupted his acceptance speech to announce the murder of Armenia's Prime Minister and the shooting in the National Assembly building, which was reported to him as he was speaking. (See Cover Story).

The first duty of the Catholicos-elect was to preside over the funeral services of the slain government leaders on Sunday, October 31. Nersissian's own consecration was postponed to Thursday, November 4.

Born in Armenia, the 47-year-old Catholicos Garegin II entered the seminary of Ejmiatsin in 1965. In the early 1970s he was among the first native clergymen who were sent to Europe by Catholicos Vazgen I to study in European institutions of higher education. Garegin II studied theology in Austria and Germany and attended the Russian Orthodox



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Church's Theological Academy in Zagorsk, graduating in 1979. Upon his return to Armenia, he was appointed Vicar of the Ararat Diocese, which includes Yerevan and its environs and is the largest diocese in Armenia. In 1980, he was consecrated a bishop by Vazken I.

## Church-State Relations

The Catholicossal election was dominated with controversy over the Armenian government's alleged interference in the affairs of the church and the suitability of the candidates for the highest post in the Armenian Church.

The election process was clearly divided into two main camps: between supporters of Nersissian and the 67-year-old Archbishop Nerses Bozabalian. The earlier candidacies of

Archbishop Khajag Barsamian (Eastern US) and Archbishop Barkev Martirosian (Karabakh) were withdrawn.

In April 1995, the entire catholicossal election process revolved around 'church unity.' As Catholicos Karekin I had been the head of the Cilician See since 1977, it was thought that his ascension to the throne in Ejmiatsin would bring about 'unity.' This time around, unity was not even mentioned.

A month before the election, several high-ranking clergy including the Patriarchs of Jerusalem and Istanbul issued a Pastoral Appeal warning against what they called "the involvement by government officials" in the elections.

The Armenian government, including President Kocharian strongly denied any direct

pressure in the election of the new Catholicos, but claimed every right to displaying interest in this most important process.

While the signatories of the Appeal and a number of bishops were mustering support for Archbishop Bozabalian, the supporters of Archbishop Nersissian were indignant that the issue of "government interference" was being used as an excuse to discredit Nersissian's personality.

Responding to that charge, Patriarch Mesrob Mutafyan of Istanbul and All Turkey told AIM, "This is absolute nonsense." Mutafyan was the most vocal among the archbishops over the issue and had become deeply embroiled in the controversy, as other senior bishops remained publicly silent. "My objection is based on principle. I deeply believe in the separation of church and state," said Mutafyan. "I do not think the Church should behave like the government and I do not believe that the government should interfere in the affairs and ministries of the Church," he explained.

The defendants of the government position explained that it is impossible to influence the voting process as each delegate votes by secret ballot. However, others assert that the "influence" was exercised during the selection process. They point out that virtually all delegates from the Western Diaspora were elected by their respective dioceses, parishes or communities, but, the delegates from Armenia, Karabakh and the CIS countries were appointed by their respective primates or lay leaders. No community or parish elections were held.

On the opening day of the NEA, the president's absence was interpreted as an expression of the Armenian government's indignation at these charges. Levon Mkrtchian, Advisor to the Prime Minister on Religious Affairs, had been sent to deliver the the government's message.

As the government's point man for religious affairs, Mkrtchian explained the state's expectations from the Church. "We are interested in seeing a strong Mother See which will enjoy respect in society, will have irrefutable authority, will have strong clergy who will truly work with their flock. Only then can the church provide the moral assistance which is so needed by the population today," said Mkrtchian.

The new Catholicos told AIM that he would "pursue a policy whereby church-state relations are defined more concretely and clearly." He added, "It is obvious that after the declaration of independent statehood, as a church we did not have the chance to do this work."

Mkrtchian explained that the government has a similar desire. He said, "Together with the church we should develop a document, a concordat, where the duties and responsibili-

ties of our relationship are clarified. There are many European countries where such an arrangement already exists."

Another concern for the Church is the legal status of church properties in Armenia. Archbishop Vatche Hovsepian, Chairman of the Organizing Committee of the National Ecclesiastical Assembly and Primate of the US Western Diocese, explained, "We have many properties which were confiscated during the Soviet period. Some were given back, some were not; their legal status has to be clarified."

Several high-ranking bishops told AIM that they would also wish the Armenian Apostolic Church would be declared the official state Church. While affirming that other denominations could still exist and work in Armenia, they believe the Armenian Church should be the official Church, as in the case of the churches in England and Greece.

#### **Church Constitution**

The new Catholicos and the Armenian Church face other key issues, as well. Hovsepian, 69, chairs the Constitution Committee which presented a draft constitution for discussion and comment. He explained that his committee should complete its work by January.

An Ecclesiastical Representative Assembly will convene in July, 2000, made up of the 49 bishops of the Armenian Church and one lay delegate from each Diocese, to study the document, article by article, and present the final document to the new Catholicos for approval and implementation.

For decades, the Armenian Apostolic Church has lacked a clear, uniform constitution. "Any institution which does not have an internal constitution is prone to difficulties," says Hovsepian. "When you elect a head of an institution, but do not define his responsibilities and nature of authority, then you end up with a dictator. He will insist on his word and not accept any laws. We must have laws that define and determine the rights and authority of our church leaders."

#### **The College of Bishops**

Just as the NEA is the highest legislative body of the Church, the College of Bishops is the highest spiritual authority. For decades, successive Catholicos, due to political circumstances and personal leadership styles, have single-handedly dictated and administered the affairs of the Armenian Church, all along reducing the authority and ecclesiastical function of the College of Bishops to mere formality. At best, the College has been a "consultative" rather than an "authoritative" body.

"Today, the College of Bishops is virtually dysfunctional," says Bishop Sebul Chouldjian, 40, Primate of Gugark Diocese in Armenia. "It has to become an active, rule-instituting body," he adds.

One of the important functions of the College of Bishops is to clarify the church's position on dogmatic, theological, liturgical, social and moral issues and make deliberations on the "mission" of the church. Lay members of the Church, especially in North America, have complained for years that the Armenian Church has not expressed its "teaching" on such issues as abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment.

"The Armenian Church should clearly define its position on all issues pertaining to the life of society," says Bishop Chouldjian.

#### **Reforms**

"The church cannot continue to go on the basis of the modus operandi of the past," says Bishop Chouldjian. "The problem of reforms in the Armenian Church has reached its maturity. The rich soil for such a movement is ready and we shall not miss the opportunity.

"There are, of course, some bishops, especially the ones advanced in age, who are not enthusiastic about such prospects. Not because they are traditionalist, but because they do not wish to give up their functional 'immunity' on which they have operated for decades." Chouldjian believes that the issue of church reforms is above and beyond any one bishop's personal interest or way of thinking.

Both clergymen and lay members of the Armenian Church have pointed to a number of administrative, organizational and liturgical areas in need of serious attention.

The length and methodology of performance of the church's liturgies are among them.

Finally, the continuing diocesan division between the Sees of Ejmiatsin and Cilicia is still a painful and unresolved issue. In the last four years, instead of coming closer to a resolution, the prospects of diocesan unity in North America have been virtually reduced to zero. It remains to be seen whether under the leadership of the new Catholicos of All Armenians a new impetus will be given to the negotiations process which stopped in the middle of this year.

In 2001, the Armenian Church will be celebrating its 1700th anniversary and Catholicos Garefin II will usher the Church into the next millennium. "The church should go forward and not backwards," hopes Bishop Chouldjian. ■