

More priests, more scholars

While the legacy of communist oppression continues to hamper Armenia's seminaries, scholars have teamed up with the Church to offer a dynamic alternative to secular students, reports Hratch Tchilingirian



BOTH PHOTOS ARIKADI KOLYBALOV

When the Soviet Union collapsed and the Republic of Armenia declared independence in 1991, the Armenian Apostolic Church, Armenia's national church, faced one of the greatest challenges of its history: how to care for the religious needs of the three million Armenians in the country with fewer than 150 clergymen.

Vazgen 1, the late Catholicos of All Armenians, expressed his anxiety in a 1992 interview: 'We never anticipated that the freedom of religion that was granted [in Armenia] would create such a situation for which, certainly, we were not prepared.'

Responsibility for educating

qualified clergymen lies with the Patriarchal Seminary of the Catholicosate in Echmiadzin, Armenia. It was reopened in 1945 after decades of communist oppression, and has trained hundreds of clerics, many of whom continue to serve in the various regions of Armenia, the 'near abroad' (the former Soviet Union) and the international diaspora of the Church.

This was the Church's only seminary until new diocesan seminaries began opening in 1992. One, in the Ararat diocese (central Armenia) has 40 students, and another, in Shirak diocese (north-east Armenia) has 12. There are plans to

establish another seminary in Siunik diocese, in southern Armenia. A further seminary in Nagorno-Karabakh was opened in 1994, but courses have been suspended because all male citizens between the ages of 17 to 45 have been conscripted.

All diocesan students are expected to attend the Echmiadzin seminary for at least two years after completing a five-year course of study at their local seminary.

The new Catholicos, Karekin I, has put education and training of clergy among the top five priorities in his agenda. One of his first steps was to appoint a new dean for

Echmiadzin, a British – and US – trained clergyman who took up his post in September 1995.

The 1995-96 academic year of the Echmiadzin seminary began with 97 students, compared to 78 in 1994-95. The 30-member faculty includes 11 clergymen and 19 laymen, most of whom also teach at Yerevan State University, the Pedagogical Institute, or the Research Centre of Mashdots Manuscript Library.

But the effects of communist oppression remain all too tangible. Through the decades, the seminary curriculum has been greatly compromised. While subjects relating to Armenian church life and culture are emphasised and taught by highly qualified scholars, theology is taught at 'Sunday school' level.

There are three main reasons for this low standard of theology. Firstly, theological scholarship was officially discouraged during 70 years of communist rule. In these circumstances, it was practically impossible to train an indigenous body of theologians in Armenia. Clergy from Armenia were allowed to study abroad from the late 1970s. But this was too little, too late.

Secondly, since church life was restricted to liturgical and ritual practices, the standards of clergy education were determined only by the functional needs of the Church. As a result, the criteria for graduation from seminary were knowledge of the liturgical practices of the Armenian Church and some general knowledge of the Scriptures and church history.



Thirdly, the Church increasingly retreated into a 'cultural ministry', and came to see its primary role as

preserver of Armenian national identity. This did no favours for the Church's evangelical mission, which was compromised with each passing decade.

Besides the shortcomings of the seminaries' curriculum, they lack qualified teaching staff, text books for theological and Biblical subjects, adequate libraries and research resources, student accommodation, classrooms and other facilities which contribute to a healthy environment for study. There are plans to renovate and expand the facilities, but limited financial resources and personnel mean that the restructuring and improvement of clergy education in Armenia is going to be a long-term project.

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While clergy education is in a transitional period, along with practically all other aspects of life, other areas of theological education outside the official Church have fared better. Since 1994, two new theological institutions have been established in Armenia, whose aim is to train lay theologians and scholars in various church disciplines.

Gandzasar Theological Centre is based in Yerevan and comes under the auspices of the Karabakh diocese. Its origins go back to 1991, when a group of young scholars carried out a vigorous programme of theological research and publications and launched the *Gandzasar Theological Review*. Now one of Armenia's most respected scholarly publications, the bi-annual *Review* is the only theological journal in the country.

With a staff of 40 scholars, specialists and technical support personnel, the Centre prepares and publishes theological texts based on ancient manuscripts, and through its Gandzasar Press, it makes its research and studies available to the public in books, journals and

pamphlets. One of the Centre's most ambitious projects is to establish an Armenian Theological Library, which would make the entire body of Armenian Patristic literature available to readers in classical and modern Armenian, Russian, English and German.



During the 1994-95 academic year, the Centre sent three researchers to Germany to further their theological studies at Halle University. That number rose to five in 1995-96, and by 1996-97 ten students are expected to benefit from the scheme.

Meanwhile, Yerevan State University has established a faculty of theology for the first time in its 75-year history. Its opening ceremony was attended by religious and state functionaries, including Karekin I, the Vice-President of Armenia and the President of the National Assembly. Archbishop Shahe Ajemian, a Biblical scholar, has been appointed dean of the faculty, which employs seven professors. In its first year of operation, the faculty attracted 25 students, who have enrolled for a four-year course. Graduates are expected to teach at Armenian seminaries or obtain teaching positions within state schools, where religious education has been reintroduced into the national curriculum.

It is only four years since Armenia gained its independence. Church institutions continue to struggle with the handicaps imposed by their recent history. But the relative success of lay initiatives in theological education offers hope for a more dynamic and ambitious development of theological expertise in the country. ●