

# Collaboration First Unity Later, Maybe

Two New Catholicoses in One Year

**T**he Catholicossal election that was held in Ejmiatsin, April 3-5 of this year, was an event of many historical firsts. The National Ecclesiastical Assembly (NEA), the highest legislative body of the Armenian Church, convened for the first time in 40 years. The election took place for the first time in a free and independent Armenian Republic. For the first time in history, the Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia was elected Catholicos of All Armenians.

Four hundred Armenians from five continents, speaking different languages with various cultural idiosyncracies, deliberated for almost 10 hours, and on the third ballot, Catholicos Karekin II of Cilicia was elected the 131st Catholicos of All Armenians.

However, the entire process of his nomination and eventual election was eclipsed by the issue of church unity. Many had thought that with the election of Catholicos Karekin, there would come a de facto unity in the Armenian Church. But that did not happen.

Contrary to popular perception, church unity does not mean the merger of the two Sees (Ejmiatsin and Cilicia) into one See. In the wake of the election, Khachig Babikian, Chairman of the World National Church Assembly of the Cilician See, told this writer in an interview in Beirut, that "there was a lot of irresponsible and uneducated discussion on this issue. For example, some people were saying now that Catholicos Karekin has come to Ejmiatsin, why do you need to have an election for a second Catholicos in Antelias. Unfortunately, this is a very superficial and irresponsible approach. This See—with its institutions and related bodies, with its Brotherhood, with its Theological Seminary—has become an essential entity in Armenian life."

In practical terms, at best, church unity will mean the resolution of the diocesan divisions in North America, Iran and Greece—the first being the most controversial. High ranking officials both in



Catholicos Karekin I (left) with the newly appointed Catholicos Aram I of the Holy See of Cilicia

Ejmiatsin and Antelias believe that, with the election of Karekin I as Catholicos of All Armenians, the modus operandi of the Armenian Church will change and in time, the issue of diocesan divisions will be resolved.

## First Six Months

The newly-elected Catholicos has a full agenda for the immediate future. To carry out his work, however, his first task must be to recruit a team of able staff and modernize the dilapidated administrative machinery of the Catholicosate.

His second, and one for which he is most suited, is to re-connect with the people. His first trip outside Ejmiatsin was to the earthquake-stricken region of northern Armenia, where he brought a message of hope and caring to a still homeless and jobless population. This was followed by an official visit to Karabakh, the first by an Armenian Catholicos in decades.

Karekin I's first official trip outside Armenia was to Moscow, where together with the religious head of the Azerbaijanis, he participated in talks on the spiritual welfare of the people in the war-torn region.

However, the most watched trip of all was the return of Karekin I to Antelias, on the inevitable occasion of the election of his successor to the throne of the Cilician See.

This election, too, which took place on June 28, had some historical firsts. For

the first time in the history of the church, the Catholicos of All Armenians presided over the ordination and consecration of the new Catholicos, in the presence of the respective patriarchs of Constantinople and Jerusalem.

As expected, the election of Archbishop Aram Keshishian, 48, of Lebanon, as Catholicos of Cilicia, was carefully orchestrated by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaksutiun (ARF) which has had a Cilician See since the mid 1950s.

Aram I of Cilicia, is like Karekin I, active in ecumenical circles and is currently Moderator of the World Council of Churches—his term expires in 1998.

While the personal differences and sometimes open feud between Karekin I and then Archbishop Aram are a matter of public knowledge, church unity was a prevalent theme in all of Catholicos Aram I's public comments. "He stressed the need to promote the unity of the church, through collaboration with the Holy See of Ejmiatsin," affirmed Catholicos Karekin I.

It remains to be seen whether such discussion will trickle down to the rank and file clergy and members. For now, the prospects are not very bright. It is expected that the status quo of the Armenian Church will continue in the next few years, with only some cosmetic changes.

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