



The End of a JOURNEY

KAREKIN I

CATHOLICOS OF ALL ARMENIANS
1995-1999

CATHOLICOS OF CILICIA
1977-1995

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

In April 1995, Karekin I was elected the 131st Catholicos of All Armenians in Ejmiatsin by the National Ecclesiastical Assembly, arguably, the most pan-Armenian body representing almost nine million Armenians in the republic and 32 countries in the Diaspora. Unlike other elections in the last five hundred years, this one was the first in a free and independent Republic of Armenia. And for the first time in history, the Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia, in Lebanon, was elected Catholicos of All Armenians in Ejmiatsin.

An entire era had ended with the passing of the previous Catholicos, Vazken I,



Karekin I and his mother in Toronto, Canada

A FRIEND REMEMBERS

We have known Karekin Vehapar for many years as a friend, advisor, teacher, prelate and as Catholicos. His sermons have filled our hearts with joy and enriched our lives. During the last year of his illustrious life, we also had the privilege of serving him while he underwent prolonged medical treatment for an incurable disease in his most difficult days while he was suffering with relentless pain and discomfort, he took time out to comfort and pray for other patients.

A 19-year-old woman stricken with cancer was brought to his hospital room for an emotional prayer service, reminding us of an incident of biblical proportion.

At another time he knelt down beside a wheelchair-bound patient in the hospital corridor to pray and give his blessings.

Throughout the year-long ordeal, he never lost his sense of humor. At particular sad and gloomy moments, he would enlighten the atmosphere with one of his numerous diversionary jokes. Occasionally a song would do. His favorite song was a patriotic one dedicated to Khrimian Hayrig (elected Catholicos of All Armenians in 1892).

He amazed everyone by his work ethic. Returning from his daily medical treatments in downtown New York, he would always stop for five to six hours at the Diocesan offices to carry on his responsibilities as the head of the Armenian Church. By doing this, he was sacrificing his personal health and going contrary to medical advice given to him.

We also learned that his favorite place was the bookstore. All the bookstores in Manhattan and in New Jersey were visited. He spent hours in the history and religion sections, standing up, never accepting the comfort of a chair to sit on.

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Paterson, New Jersey

Dr. Mekhjian's thoughts (above) reflect the many friendships Catholicos Karekin established with community and international leaders around the world. His public speaking opportunities were not limited to church functions. During his days as prelate in Iran and the Eastern US, he was a regular April 24 speaker (top in Central Park, 1977, bottom left in Central Park in 1976) and spent much time with teachers, students and friends (including Hirav Hovnanian, bottom right).





whose 40-year tenure was marked by Soviet pressure and state control of the church. The nation anticipated the beginning of a new era under the leadership of Karekin I.

Upon his election, Karekin I had listed four priorities for Ejmiatsin: the organization of celebrations for the 1,700th anniversary of Christianity as the state religion of Armenia; the training of clergy and lay

workers for the religious revival of the Armenian nation; the reinterpretation of Armenia's national and religious identity; and ensuring the financial stability of the Holy See of Ejmiatsin.

His ultimate vision was the complete overhaul of the Church. "The reformation of the Armenian Church should be our goal, our target, our point of departure. That

reform should preserve an order that is alive, not an order that is just a structure. We need to reform the church in such a way that she will become an active and positive presence for the benefit of our nation."

The Catholicos had set himself a daunting task. However, in the few years before he fell ill to cancer of the throat, he set in motion multiple administrative and ecclesiastical processes to address the needs of the church as he had outlined them at his inaugural speech as Catholicos of All Armenians.

For example, after Armenia's independence, the Armenian Church faced one of the greatest challenges of its history: how to minister and "re-evangelize," as Karekin I described it, a population of three million Armenians with fewer than 150 clergymen? Toward this end, the Catholicos paid great attention to the seminary in Ejmiatsin where future priests are trained. Today the seminary has over 100 students, a record number for this century.

Catholicos Karekin was an unparalleled church leader at least in one very important respect. He ushered the Catholicosate of All Armenians in Ejmiatsin into a new post-Soviet era, albeit only for four years and left his mark on the Catholicosate of Cilicia in Lebanon, where during his 18-year tenure as Catholicos under the most difficult conditions of the Lebanese civil war, he turned the Cilician See into a vibrant religious center.

Challenges Facing the Church

Preparations for the election of a new Catholicos have already started and a new head of the Armenian Church will be elected within six months. However, in addition to the enormous project of celebrating the 1700th anniversary in 2001 and the ongoing "reformation" of the administrative apparatus of the Holy See, the new Catholicos will face several long-term challenges.

Mission

Catholicos Karekin I and virtually all hierarchs of the Armenian church have repeatedly stated that Armenia needs to be "re-evangelized," "re-Christianized" after seventy years of communism. And the effects of communist oppression of religion and the church remain all too tangible in Armenian society.



MARTIN SHAKIBZAD/ARMENPRESS

Above: Service at the St. Sarkis Cathedral in Yerevan, where high-ranking clergymen, government officials, and the people came to bid last farewell to Catholicos Karekin I's; Below: The funeral in Ejmiadsin

The Church, as a meaning-providing institution, has a significant role to play in the construction of a new order after decades of moral dislocation of society. The discussion of basic moral and ethical values and their relevance to the life of the people—collectively and individually—is one of the most basic tasks lay people expect from the church, beyond or in addition to the performance of rituals and religious services.

Religious tolerance

As a national institution, the Armenian Apostolic Church enjoys the full support of the Armenian state. While constitutionally, church and state are separated, the lines of demarcation are not yet clear. Since independence, the Church has been tempted to seek state patronage to advance her own interests, but this has complicated the state's position vis a vis other churches and religions in Armenia.

The emergence of foreign missionaries

and new religious movements—or sects as they are popularly known—in Armenia is a subject of constant debate. In recent years there have been reports of incidents of “persecution” of evangelical groups and new

a threat to “national unity,” and even to “national security.” Yet, how the Church is going to position itself in an emerging democratic society, where pluralism and freedom of conscience are guaranteed by the constitution, remains to be seen. The move from a parochial to a more ecumenical worldview is a challenge that the new Catholicos and the Armenian Church as a whole will have to address.

Unlike the past, the Armenian Church is no longer a surrogate state for the Armenian nation, and it has to come to terms with the new conditions and realities created in both Armenia and the Diaspora.



ROBERT MANASSIRIAN

religious movements and the Church at best has been silent about these incidents. In a homogeneous society such as Armenia, the presence and activities of non-indigenous religious groups can all too easily be seen as

1700th anniversary

Plans are already underway to organize events on both local and international levels to celebrate the Armenian Church's 1700th “birthday” and the nation's acceptance of Christianity as state religion. Catholicos

Karekin I called the anniversary celebration as a 'new Pentecost' for the Armenian nation. Will it be? While the population in Armenia is better informed about the anniversary, most of the Diaspora is barely informed. The historic, national and international significance of this most auspicious event is yet to be explained, grasped and made meaningful. On the national level, this event could become the catalyst for the much-desired "unity" of the nation, on the international level, it should create an interest and a window to Armenia. The challenge is to make this event much more than exhibits, conferences and localized pilgrimages, but an unprecedented national and international affair.

Diocesan Unity

Church disunity continues in the Diaspora despite the high hopes raised after Catholicos Karekin I's election. The church in the Diaspora, especially in the United States and Canada, has been divided for decades into two diocesan jurisdictions, one

affiliated with the Holy See of Ejmiatsin, the other with the See of Cilicia. Both Catholicos Vazken and Karekin attempted to resolve the diocesan unity issue, however, it has become obvious that the resolution of the problem is not a priority for the See of Cilicia. Given the developments of the last few years, it is unlikely that the current status quo will change in the foreseeable future. It remains to be seen how the new Catholicos in Ejmiatsin will deal with the problem.

Reforms

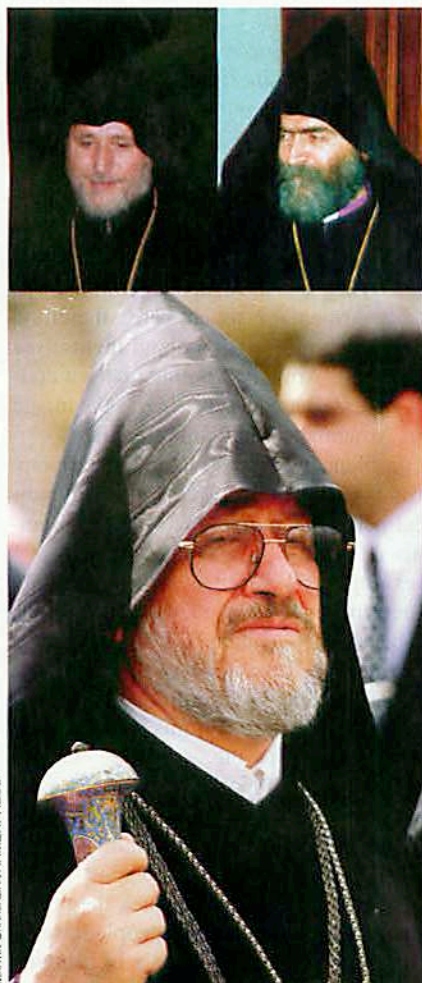
For decades, the liturgical, administrative and missionary "reform" or restructuring of the Armenian Church has been on the agenda of successive leaders of the church. After the Armenian state, the Armenian Church is the largest and, arguably, the most organized national institution with branches in virtually every country where Armenians live. However, the Church lacks a cohesive administrative apparatus, namely by-laws for the entire Armenian Church, which would

enhance its mission and administration around the world. In February of this year, a By-laws commission set up by Catholicos Karekin I presented a draft "Constitution of the Armenian Church" for further study which would eventually be approved by the National Ecclesiastical Assembly.

The length, language and methodology of performance of the church's liturgies are among the other long-debated issues in need of serious attention.

Finally, the most arduous and contentious issue in the Church is a common understanding of the Church's Christian and National Mission. What is the mission of the Church today and what will it be in the 21st century?

In April 1995, then president Levon Ter Petrossian addressing the National Ecclesiastical Assembly that elected Catholicos Karekin I said, "Today, we have the opportunity—without the demands of foreign forces—for the first time, to solve our problems ourselves." Will the new Catholicos and the Armenian Church face up to the challenge? ■



The Second and the Third Going for the First

Archbishop Nerses Bozabalian (below), the 62-year-old Chancellor of the Holy See of Ejmiatsin, has been elected Locum Tenens of the Catholicosate of All Armenians. His primary duty is to organize the National Ecclesiastical Assembly (NEA). Within six months the NEA—made of some 400 delegates representing the Armenian nation in Armenia, Karabakh and over 30 countries in the Diaspora—will convene in Ejmiatsin, Armenia, to elect a new Catholicos of All Armenians.

According to the rules, all the bishops of the Armenian Church are eligible candidates. Currently, there are 49 bishops and archbishop, the youngest being 36 years old and the oldest 91. However, not all of them will run on the day of the election. Since the demise of Catholicos Karekin I, two names have been mentioned as the most likely candidates for the position: Archbishop Karekin Nersissian (top left), the Vicar of the Ararat Diocese, and Archbishop Barkev Martirosian (top right), the Primate of the Artsakh Diocese.

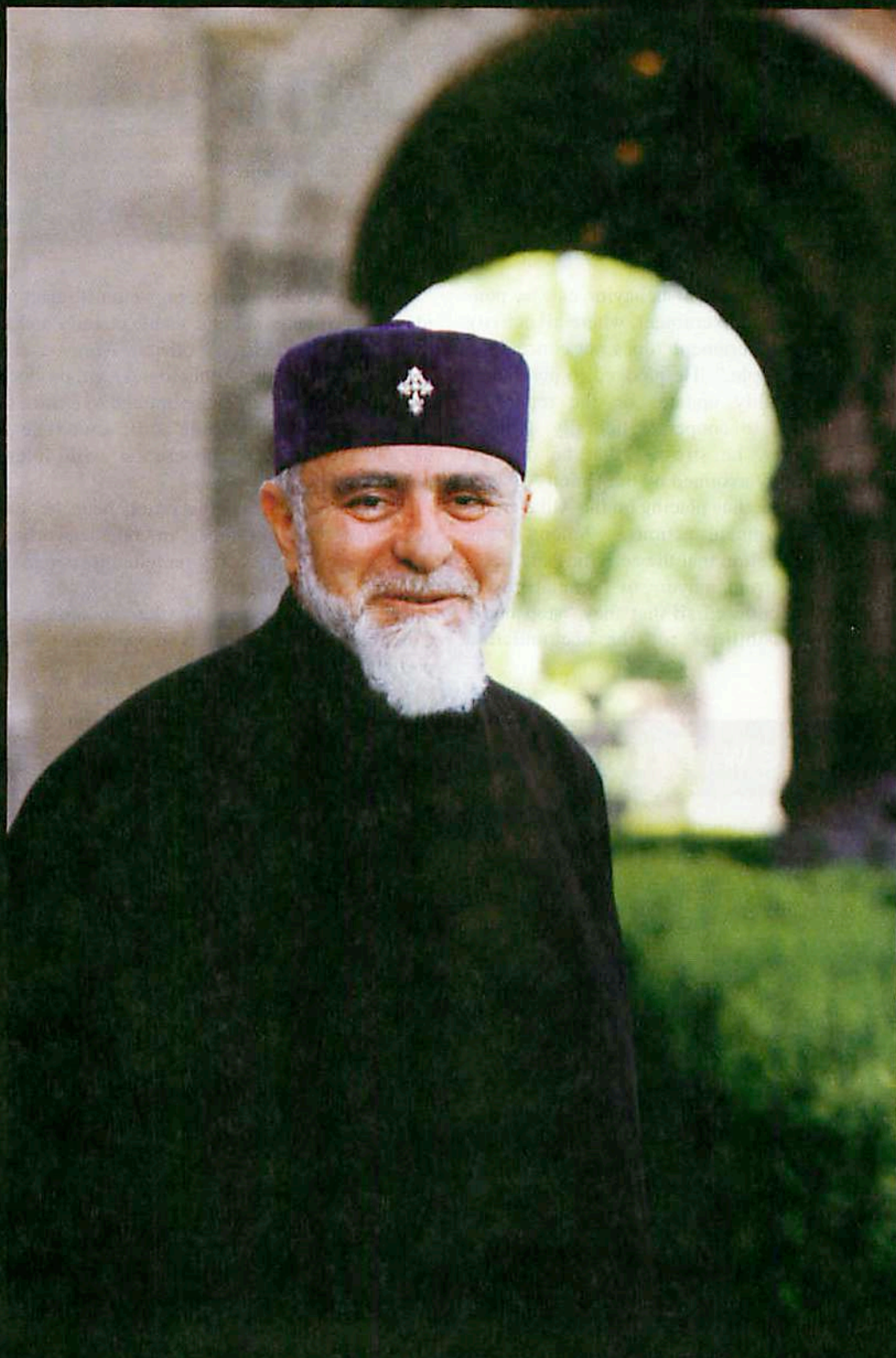
During the last catholicossal election in April 1995, Archbishops Nersissian received the second highest number of votes (156) and Archbishop Martirosian received the third highest number of votes (61). Catholicos Karekin I received 184 votes.

Last December, Archbishop Nersissian, 47, was appointed Vicar General of the Catholicosate of All Armenians by Karekin I when the latter was undergoing medical treatment in New York. Born in Armenia, Nersissian was ordained a priest in 1972 and became one of the youngest bishops of the Armenian Church in 1983 when he was appointed Vicar of the Ararat Diocese, the largest in Armenia. Karabakh native Archbishop Martirosian, 45, was ordained a priest in 1985 and was appointed primate of the Karabakh Diocese in 1988 by Catholicos Vazken I.

Both clergymen are well known for their service and leadership under the most trying times both in Armenia and Karabakh.

There will be other candidates as well. In the next few months, the nation will watch the unfolding of the election process, which will culminate at the National Ecclesiastical Assembly in Ejmiatsin to choose the new Catholicos of All Armenians.

MARTIN SHARAZIAN/ARMENPRESS



ZAVEN KHACHIKIAN

HIS HOLINESS KAREKIN I SARKISSIAN
1932 Kessab — 1999 Ejmiatsin