

The Role of the Cilician See in the Third Millennium

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Այսօր հաւաքուած ենք ողջունելու Մեծի Տանն Կիլիկոյ նուիրապետական եւ դարաւոր Աթոռի Գահակալը: Իրօք Կիլիկիոյ Կաթողիկոսութեան պատմութիւնը, յատկապէս 1902էն՝ Սահակ Բ. Կաթողիկոսի գահակալութենէն սկսեալ շողախուած է Հայ ժողովուրդի տառապեալ եւ պանծալի յետ ցեղասպանութեան շրջանի սիւրբ պատմութեան հետ:

Անցնող գրեթէ 70 տարիներուն ընթացքին Կիլիկիոյ Կաթողիկոսութեան պատմութիւնը հրաշքի համազօր երեւոյթ մը է մեր ազգային հաւաքական կեանքին մէջ -- գոյատեւման վճռկամութեան գերագոյն ազդակ մը՝ թէ ինչպէս ցեղասպանութեան մոխիրներուն մէջէն կարելի է վերահաստատել, ուժեղացնել եւ կերտել ազգային նոր տեսիլք մը եւ ծառայութեան ու նուիրաբերութեան նոր առաքելութիւն մը:

Սահակ Խապեան Հայրապետի որոկումով Կիլիկիոյ Աթոռի «Վշտակիր» կեանքը եւ փորձառութիւնը վերածուեցաւ վերապրումի եւ ազգային կրօնական կեանքի նոր զարթօնքի շրջանի մը՝ յանձինս Կաթողիկոսութեան նուիրեալ գահակալներուն ու անոնց աննկուն ջանքերուն, նուիրումին ու ազգանուէր ծառայութեան: Պատահական չէ որ Կիլիկիոյ Աթոռը Անթիլիասի մէջ հաստատուելէն ետք Սիւրբ Իրականութեան մէջ ունեցաւ իր որոշադրիչ թերը՝ տալով չորս կաթողիկոսներ, հարիւրաւոր առաջնորդներ, մտաւորականներ, գրողներ դաստիարակներ, եւ Սիւրբ Կեանքը հարստացնող բազմաթիւ ծառայողներ ու միջոցարումներ:

Այսօր՝ ՆՍՕՏՏ Արամ Կաթողիկոսի անձին մէջ կ'ողջունենք նաեւ Կիլիկիոյ Կաթողիկոսութեան դարաւոր եւ մօտակայ ազգային եկեղեցական պատմութեան մէջ արձանագրած սխրագործութիւնները եւ նուաճումները:

Tonight, in the person of His Holiness Catholicos Aram, we also greet the 700 years of service of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia. Since the year 1293, when the headquarters of the Armenian Church was established in Sis, the capital of the Cilician kingdom, the life of the Catholicosate of Cilicia has been intimately intertwined with the suffering, struggles, virtual demise and resurrection of the Armenian nation.

Standing at the threshold of the 21st century and in awe of the memory and fruits of 700 years of service of a national institution, we ask ourselves: What is the role of the Catholicosate of Cilicia in the Third Millennium? Indeed, I would rephrase the question and ask: What should be the role of the Armenian Church in the next millennium – in the next 1000 years.

While this might seem to be a colossal question, let us remember that the next millennium is only THREE years away. I believe, we, collectively – that is, the

church hierarchy, lay leadership, and the people, in short the entire Church, the Ecclesia, have an enormous opportunity to shape the future our Church, if we take courageous, wise and realistic steps.

To help us in this vision and endeavor, I would like to share with you some of the key concepts of His Holiness Catholicos Aram's theological and pastoral discourse. As a prolific writer, His Holiness has generously contributed to the process of reformulating a theological and pastoral vision for the church, not only the Armenian Church, but the entire Church of Christ, especially in the context of the ecumenical movement.

In 1994, during an interview with me in Antelias (later published in *Window Quarterly*), His Holiness clearly explained:

We need to redefine, we need to reorganize and reorient the role, witness and mission of the Armenian Church today.

Any theoretical, conceptual evaluation of the present role of the Armenian Church could lead us to misinterpretations and misunderstandings. The church is an existential reality. The church is a part of life.

In view of the fact that today we have an independent Armenia and an organized political power in the Diaspora, the role of the Armenian Church should become less and less political and more spiritual.

It is time that the church reassumes her ecclesiastical, churchly, spiritual, evenagelistic, missionary role in the life of the Armenian nation.

The church has to become a church.*

As for the mission of the Church, four foundational and complimentary concepts constitute His Holiness's missiological vision:

- 1) **Christian education** – that is, the proclamation of the Good News (*keryma*), the Gospel, and education of the entire faithful of the church, from childhood to adulthood. Through Christian education, the church teaches, articulates and proclaims the essential values and teachings of Christ. Christian education is not an intellectual exercise only, but the beginning of discipleship of the faithful.

- 2) **Service** (diakonia) – the very essence of the church, the *raison d'être* of the church is its service to all of humanity. Christian faith must be lived and practiced, must become an existential reality, through service (diakonia), that is, through charity, compassion, understanding and acts of love.
- 3) **Fellowship** (koinonia) –that is, participation in the life of the church – the body of Christ – the outpouring of oneself into a community of shared faith, belief and mission.
- 4) **Outreach** – Christian education, service and fellowship set the parameters of the church's outreach. Without outreach, the church community becomes an inward, self-serving entity. The church's outreach is mandated by its "apostolic mission". Just as the apostles were sent to preach the Gospel to "all nations of the world", so is the church called to reach out within and without her immediate community. As His Holiness profoundly states: "Eucharist (the Badarak) without outreach is just a memorial service; and mission without a eucharistic dimension and vision lacks any ecclesial nature."**

Finally, His Holiness explains how all these processes come together in the concepts of

5. Unity and renewal. In my humble view, these two concepts are the definitive conceptual framework and indeed the *modus operandi* of His Holiness's pastoral vision, both in the Armenian Church and in the larger ecumenical movement. In one of his fascinating books, entitled *Orthodox Perspective On Mission* (1992), His Holiness wrote:

"The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Unity.... The church as a community of faith is sustained by the 'unity of the Spirit (Ephesians 4:3) and is called to grow in this unity and translate it into mission in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Without unity and renewal in the Spirit, a "community of faith" cannot be sustained. Without unity, the mission of the church is compromised.

Indeed, closer to home, the problem of the "unity of the Armenian Church" is the most burning issue in our national life. No matter how politically correct we try to be, no matter how sensitive we are about this issue, we cannot just simply relegate our collective and individual responsibility to others or to time.

The grueling question for the entire Armenian Church – the hierarchy, lay leaders and the faithful – is whether the Armenian Church could realistically face the challenges of the 21st century in particular and the third millennium in general without unity and renewal.

Once again, I turn to the words of His Holiness as our guide. Speaking in the context of the church in the Middle East, His Holiness challengingly said:

“We so urgently and desperately need the Spirit of unity.... We have always and most acutely expressed our strong commitment towards unity. We have taken some important steps along these lines. The people at the grass roots are tired of hearing nice slogans about unity. They expect something concrete to be changed in their life, in the relationships of the churches. Unless unity is given some kind of visibility and concreteness on local parish level, it will remain a merely theological matter unrelated to the actual life of the people.”***

This is so true in the life of our church communities today. His Holiness's prophetic statement is a challenge to all of us. I believe, the people, as His Holiness observes, are ready for unity. What we lack is a realistic and concrete mechanism that takes us beyond mere discourse on unity. The community and the flock look to their shepherds to show the way. The shepherds of the church are the architects of unity and the people are the builders of unity.

We should not confuse the past with the future. Indeed, we cannot change the past, but we can shape the future. It is only through such process that we can look forward to a vision of a role for the Armenian Church in the third millenium.

*“The Witness of the Armenian Church. A conversation with Archbishop Aram Keshishian” (by Hratch Tchilingirian) *Window Quarterly* Vol. 4, No. 3, 1994.

**Archbishop Aram Keshishian *Orthodox Perspective On Mission* (Oxford, Regnum Books, 1992), p. 27.

****ibid.*, p. 61.