



ARCHBISHOP HOVNAN DERDERIAN

**SPIRITUAL**  
*Reflections*

Burbank  
2015

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through the generous contribution of

**BERJ RICHARD SVAZLIAN**

In Loving Memory of his mother

**REBECCA SVAZLIAN**

*“Find rest, O my soul, in God alone;  
my hope comes from him.”*

Psalms 62.5

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## FOREWORD

The latest Diocesan publication is a chosen collection Archbishop Hovnan Derderian's sermons and messages delivered at various Diocesan functions and non-Diocesan events over the past two years. This volume is published on the auspicious occasion of the Primate's 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ordination and consecration into the priesthood and the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his elevation to the rank of bishop.

The year 2015 marked the Centennial Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide. In collaboration with The Most Reverend Jose Gomez, Archbishop of the largest Roman Catholic Archdiocese in the United States, the Primate was instrumental in organizing one of the largest ecumenical prayer services in recent years with over 3,000 guests in attendance. Archbishop Derderian's moving and inspirational address at the service captivated the congregation. It is my favorite in this collection as it reflects the Primate's deep spirituality.

In his messages to the delegates at the 87<sup>th</sup> and 88<sup>th</sup> Annual Diocesan Assemblies, the Primate shares his vision for the Western Diocese, highlighting the modern-day challenges and offering methodological steps to ensuring the continuity of the mission of Western Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church of North America. His Eminence also addresses such sensitive topics as the issue of Islamized Armenians, providing a comprehensive analysis of its causal effect and the pivotal role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in reinstating an alienated segment of a population in search of their ancestral

roots. In doing so, Archbishop Derderian suggests incorporating the teachings of Christ and putting our Christian Faith to practice.

Despite the wide range of topics, one thing is certain. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is the central figure in all of Archbishop Derderian's messages. I conclude with a quote from His Eminence. *"Be imitators of Christ and the Lord God will strengthen us all in our steps to bring changes to our society and joy and peace to the hearts of the people of the world."*

In Christ,

Sergey Arustamyan

## THE PATH OF LIGHT

For the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Motherland and the Diaspora, the year 2015 is historic and symbolic, indeed. The year is a cornerstone for our people as we prepare to commemorate the Centennial of the Armenian Genocide. However, the Centennial is also a testament to the Resurrection and the spiritual reawakening of the Armenian people. Most importantly, as a result of the vast achievements of the young generation of Armenians in the Republic of Armenia and the Diaspora, a path of light has opened before us.

In 2015, the sacred mission of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church will be centralized on paying homage to our holy martyrs and directing our young generation toward the path of light. The path of light is conditioned upon strengthening the identity of the Armenian Christian through fundamental missions including that of the Armenian Church, the Armenian School, national traditions, all prerequisites of the Armenian identity.

On the Diocesan level, the year 2015 shall be an enlightening one as we set sail for new horizons and direct our focus entirely on the Armenian youth. The reawakening of the youth determines our nation's path of light. It is our spiritual obligation to lead the youth toward God, toward a Christian lifestyle, toward Armenia, our Motherland, toward Holy Etchmiadzin, toward a life of which holds religious and moral values in reverence and above all toward a life of dignity and honor as exemplary citizens of the United States of America.

The Western Diocese and its Headquarters is the home for all Armenians residing on the West Coast of the United

States. Let our lives take meaning as we engage in God-pleasing endeavors. Let us live our lives glorifying the Almighty and in accordance with the divine will our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

On this occasion, we convey our sincere gratitude to “Atanian Art Center,” its founder Prof. Vladimir Atanian, the Art Center staff and especially, to our up and coming young artists whose beautiful artworks have decorated this year’s calendar.

May God’s divine blessings accompany you always.

## PUT ON THE NEW MAN

*“And that you put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.” (Ephesians 4:24)*

With the miraculous birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and with every New Year, the very fabric of our being is changed through the inscrutable mystery, which elevates the humanity to a new level of spirituality. This transformation is nothing else than a rebirth in Jesus Christ.

Righteousness and holiness are the attributes of God, the expression of His divinity. In the course of life, willingly or unwillingly, we sometimes estrange ourselves from God by rejecting His divine attributes. The more we further ourselves from God, the more we alienate ourselves from justice and truthfulness. Our egocentric endeavors bring devastating harm not only to us but also to our surroundings. Warfare, social injustice, religious and cultural intolerance, racial discrimination, extremism, and hatred in the world exist because we fail to put our trust in the Omnipotent God. The only way to defeat the adversary and overcome our ego is to *“put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.”* (Ephesians 4:24)

The message of New Year and Christmas are interestingly interwoven. With the turning of the last page of the calendar, we celebrate the new beginning in our lives and herald the good tidings, which bring hope, renewal, and light. As we rejoice the birth of a child, we similarly exult with happiness when we experience spiritual rebirth within us in the newness of life.

The year 2015 is very special for the Armenians around the globe, for we commemorate the centennial of the Armenian Genocide. As a nation, we bow our heads to the memory of the martyrs with reverence and honor, pledging to protect the religious and cultural heritage they have entrusted to us. It is an obliging commitment for the living generations to strive to excel in every aspect of life, prosper and thrive in the face of adversity to show the unbreakable resilience of our resurrected nation and its unequivocal faith in Jesus Christ. In doing so, we also pledge our love and loyalty to Motherland Armenia, and the Armenian Holy Apostolic Church – unshakable guarantors of our very existence.

And indeed, there is not a more practical way to realize this than to invest in our youth by empowering and equipping them with necessary tools to confront the challenges of today's society. With this idea in mind, we have dedicated the year 2015 to our youth. Through various projects and initiatives, we commit to instill in the hearts of our sons and daughters a strong sense of belonging and ownership so that they become visionary leaders of the future. As the Primate of the Western Diocese and a spiritual leader, we aim to guide our youth through Christ's path of righteousness, direct their steps towards the source of light, towards Holy Etchmiadzin – the birthplace of our souls.

In conclusion, we would like to wish you long and blessed years of life, good health, and continued success in all your God-pleasing endeavors. We pray and ask the Almighty to keep His watch over you and safeguard your boat so that you may sail to His safe harbors through the turbulent waters of life. May you have a happy New Year and a Merry Christmas!

“Christ is born and revealed! Blessed is the revelation of Christ!”

## AN ENCOUNTER WITH GOD, THE CREATOR

*“Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.*

*Jesus replied: “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’” (Luke 14:15-17)*

Beloved faithful in Christ,

The Nativity of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is an invitation to mankind to encounter God, the Creator. The parable of the wedding banquet in the Gospels is an image of the birth of Jesus in which we see the humility of the Son of God humbling Himself from heaven to earth. The positive response of the invited guest serves as the opportunity to be elevated to God through Christ. In other words, to adopt a new standard and quality of life which is nothing else but life shaped and lived in the Christian faith.

*“Christ is Born and revealed!  
Blessed is the Revelation of Christ!”*

Dear faithful Christian, once again we are called to greet and humble ourselves before the Nativity of Christ, so that with His Birth we may be reborn in our God-given life. To live with Christ means to adorn our lives with character and shape, making Him our own mission and purpose and to draw mankind closer to God.

The Nativity of Christ is the image of the humility of the Son of God who descends from heaven to earth, taking upon Himself human form and serving the world and all mankind.

The Nativity of Jesus is an invitation to each of us to emulate Christ's own example to become noble servants and to lead man to God, for that is the ultimate goal of the Christian life. To remain steadfast in this path means to live life with the spirit and awareness of our Christian faith, to live life in emulation of Christ as a servant, who leads us always to do God's will, to live a holy life making the Gospel our rudder in life, and to make ourselves the golden ring that connects man to God.

*"Christ is Born and revealed!  
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The invitation to greet and humble ourselves before the newborn Jesus is extended to each and everyone of us. How shall we respond as individual Christians, as a people, as a nation and a Church? Undoubtedly, our response shall be a favorable one and shall be expressed through our steadfast Christian faith and our readiness to celebrate the mystery of the Birth of Jesus as the foundation of our lives. If our active faith in the Birth of Jesus is not expressed in our daily life then we have failed in our response to the invitation. To respond to the invitation means to live a life of faith to the fullest with a sincere heart, a loving spirit, a forgiving and a merciful soul, in humility and selfless service, or simply by fulfilling the commandments of the Gospel of Christ. To celebrate the Birth of Jesus is to make the Infant Jesus the mirror of our spiritual life, and motivated by a sense of fear and ignominy to abandon all our hardened evil tendencies and habits that

do not reflect neither Christ nor the Christian faith. To celebrate the Birth of Christ today means to live a holy life that reflects the holiness of the Birth of the Infant Jesus. This is why Christ, pointing to children, said “to such belongs the kingdom of God.”

Beloved faithful, each celebration of the Feast of the Nativity of Christ is the beginning of a new spiritual journey. The Birth of Jesus is an invitation to a new life. The Birth of Jesus is the active presence of God in the life of the world so that we too may be reborn in our life and sanctify it. The Birth of Jesus is the invitation to man to make his life an active presence of God in the life of the world, in creativity. Therefore, let us respond to the invitation we have received through our good works of faith, through our service and sacrifice, so that we may uphold our God-given Motherland Armenia and the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, and embody in our Christian life the vision of our Armenian values.

*“Christ is Born and revealed!  
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## RIGHTEOUSNESS AND HOLINESS ARE THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

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## **“PUT ON THE NEW PERSON”**

This has been the message of St. Paul the Apostle addressed to the Ephesians, which I chose to be the message of Christmas for the faithful of the Western Diocese. The New Year becomes richer in our spirituality when we chose to put on the new person in Christ and make the commitment to live in God and walk the journey of our life with Christ.

The Miraculous Birth of Christ our Lord is the descent of the Son of God from Heaven on Earth to transform the life of the world. In the Incarnation of the Son of God we perceive the immensity of the love of God: *“For God so loved the world that He gave His Only Begotten, so that those who believe in Him may not perish but have eternal life.”* (John 3:16)

We live in a world where the renewal of the spirituality is vital to prevent the animosity amongst people to prevent war amongst people. The Birth of Christ our Lord deepens in our spirituality the necessity of living a life similar to the life of Christ. The celebration of Christmas becomes meaningful when only we chose to change the self. For change in the world is conditioned with the change of the self. The great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy shares with us an inspirational thought which empowers us to set a new journey in our God-given lives – *“Everyone thinks of changing the world but no one thinks of changing himself.”*

God graces us with the Birth of Christ. The New Year becomes a blessing for us as we make the commitment to walk with Christ. Let us fulfill our Christian duties and responsibilities, for the message of our Lord will always echo in the depths of our souls: *“Give the account of your stewardship”* This is a message which clearly indicates that the gift of life needs to be lived wisely and with a passionate heart to do the will of God.

## THE EYES OF ALL HOPE FOR YOU

*“The eyes of all hope for You, and You give them their food in due time” (Psalm 145: 15).*

These words of faith and hope in the Psalm express the sense of our entire being. They connect us with God and make us aware of our faith. They express a faithful person’s honest expectations and readiness to assume responsibilities.

*“The eyes of all hope for You.” Our minds and hearts look to You, O Lord, our God. This Holy Week will be sanctified in our spiritual life as the “Holy Week” of Your Only Begotten Son, who descended from heaven to earth to illuminate the entire world and to lift up humanity towards You, O Almighty God.*

*Our eyes look to You, O Lord, and our hope is in You, O Christ our Lord, because by walking with you in your path of light, the life of those who believe in You are transformed. Our eyes hope in You, O Lord, because you provide us spiritual nourishment abundantly as the “bread of life.”*

From Palm Sunday to Eastern Sunday, let us dedicate ourselves completely to God to be worthy to celebrate the Feast of the Resurrection. Let us vow to live with Christ and like Christ. The more we become in touch with our deeper soul through prayer and spiritual readings, the closer we become to God, the Creator of all. Even more, through our renewed life, we become the bearers of God’s love; and through heavenly wisdom granted to us, we prepare our souls as a place where God can reside.

As Christian believers we should live our lives by walking along Christ, so that our lives on this earth are illuminated and blessed. And if for even a moment we lose our pace with Christ, we stop being a spiritual channel in the life of society.

The journey of the Holy Week is nothing else but the way to God. The images from Christ's life presented to us during the Holy Week reveal the most significant lessons of life.

Palm Sunday, the triumphant entry of Christ into the Holy City of Jerusalem, represents an image of our soul. Even as spiritually we open our soul before Christ with *Hosannas* and received him as a king in our life, at times we fall down from this spiritual height into materialism, the world of materials, forgetting the Lord's command that "*It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh perfected nothing.*" (John 6:63)

The most essential stations of the Holy Week's spiritual journey are the services marking the Last Supper, the Washing of the Feet, the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ, which lead up to the celebration of Christ's magnificent Resurrection. By partaking in these events in Christ's life, our lives are renewed, illuminated and transformed. We reject the hardened, old person in us and become a new person in and through Christ.

The various aspects of Christ's life during the Holy Week have definite message and meaning for us. Christ shows us the greatest example of humility by washing the feet of his disciples. He becomes the ultimate sacrifice for the salvation of the world as seen in the Last Supper. Christ triumphs over death through his death and resurrection on Eastern Sunday.

Indeed, with the words of the Psalm, let our eyes look to the Lord for hope, because He gives us our food in due time.

## LIVE AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT

*“Live as children of light. For the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth.” (Ephesians 5:8-9)*

The mystery of the magnificent Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is the unrepeatable miracle of all times, before which humanity bowed and drew a new path of life in order to live with God and to become a co-servant with Christ. He came to this world to serve humanity, by bringing to us the Divine Light. Those who are guided by this Light fill their lives with “goodness, righteousness and truth.”

The Resurrection of Christ enflames in our soul the miraculous light of the knowledge of God, so that we may look at life given to us with a fresh perspective. Let us look at our multi-coloured, multi-dimensional, sometimes chaotic, but optimistic life as part of the limitless vision of God, as an inseparable part of the mosaic of God’s Creation.

The Resurrection of Christ becomes meaningful only if we experience it as a new spiritual dawn in our deep inner world. It becomes meaningful when it transfigures our spiritual life by rediscovering ourselves and reaffirms our Christian faith.

As Christians we should first and foremost remember, in the words of the Apostle, that “we are temples of God and God’s Spirit dwells in us through the Holy Font of baptism.” Therefore, we have to be mindful of committing sins and stay away from soul-destroying addictions. Let us adorn our souls with virtuous deeds, especially through goodness and charitable works, because charity is the biggest virtue sanctified in the Christian faith.

Through the inspiration of the meaning of the Resurrection, we shall love our Holy Mother Church, which, as Patriarch Mesrop Naroyan noted, “Gave us the truth of the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is the basis of the [Church’s] strength, vitality and authority.” The Armenian Church, dear faithful, is our most sacred and inalienable divine heritage, and the testimony of moral renewal which our ancestors have transmitted to us.

To celebrate Christ’s Resurrection means to become a living Church, with creative vitality.

The life-giving Resurrection of Christ is an invitation to young couples for a sacred mission: to have the vision to create, to give birth to the Armenian Family, where the spirit of Christianity and Divine wisdom will rule, and our national ethos and consciousness will be ever present; but most important, where there will be a sense of service and commitment to raise children with faith in God. It is not accidental that it is said that “child rearing, education starts from the crib.” This significant mission is complimented by the Armenian School, where the teachers, with the same sense of parental care and understanding, educate our children with love and dedication.

“Life is define in the home. It is where spouses bond, children are cared for by parents, family and relatives are consoled by each other. Love in these relationships assures the life of the family, leads to loyalty and legitimacy. Through love the family home becomes an abode of happiness; without love, it turns into a dungeon. Sustain your family love,” exhorts Patriarch Malachia Ormanian.

The Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is a source of boundless strength, especially for our youth, who face daily challenges of modern living. While they must succeed in their studies and careers, they must also be aware of their duties as citizens and keep the Armenian spirit vibrant in their lives. All these require serious sense of responsibility, as young people struggle against the current. While keeping their national-church character resilient, they ought to also overcome the challenges presented to them by life.

The celebration of Christ's life-giving Resurrection would be meaningless if we do not see it as part of our daily life. It would be like fading the light of the soul or taking off the armour of light which we put on at our baptism. Indeed, this is why the Apostle exhorts that in life "we must become children of light." The effects of the light of the Resurrection is goodness, justice and truth. We become the defenders of these virtues as children of light and as bearers of the Divine light. This is the calling of the Armenian: that we should live our lives "through attention, justice and worship."

Dear Armenian Christian, as we celebrate the Resurrection of Christ, we are undoubtedly illuminated by His light. With the power of this same light, we may chase the darkness away and fill each moment of our God-given life with that miracle. But, the light of Christ's Resurrection should not be contained in our life only. That light should shine abundantly, in words and deeds, as a mirror reflection to illuminate the lives of our brothers and sisters who have imprisoned themselves in the darkness. This should be inspired by divine love, national consciousness and universal human values. The meaning of Christ's Resurrection is in this understanding.

*"Christ is risen from the dead;  
Blessed is the Resurrection of Christ!"*

## HOLY EASTER IS THE CELEBRATION OF FAITH

*“Christ will give you light.”* (Ephesians 5:14)

Holy Easter is the celebration of faith. According to His promise, the Savior of the World was crucified and with His Victorious Resurrection granted us a New Life. The Christian Church celebrates Holy Easter with triumph and jubilation, for it is a day of spiritual renewal, the guarantor of our salvation as long as we reaffirm our faith in the mystery of the Resurrection.

Approximately two thousand years ago, humanity experienced an unprecedented miracle in the Resurrection of Christ, our Lord, when He paved the Way to a New Life.

To celebrate Easter is to enlighten our lives with Christ by re-evaluating ourselves through the messages emanating from the Gospel, to live with Him in a spiritual intimacy and in constant awareness that we are created according to His Godly image and likeness. In order to explain the essential need of the Holy Resurrection in the life of humanity, one of the enlightened fathers of our Church, Catholicos of All Armenians His Holiness Kevork VI elaborated “The world aged not by thought alone but also by corrupt morality. It did not lack knowledge or beautification - rather moral values, for the world was rotted exactly as it is today. The world lacked moral renaissance.”

When Christians celebrate Holy Easter, they renew and enlighten their lives. The 40 days of prayer, fasting, and self-examination that precede Holy Easter illuminate the path towards righteousness.

Let us live our lives inspired by Victorious Resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as was the case for our forefathers, especially the martyrs who sacrificed God's most precious gift of life so that we may continue to live our ancestral Christian Faith. Their message has become the legacy which we bear on our shoulders with great reverence and responsibility. The past one hundred years of Armenian history is a testimony of the resurrection of our people. The vast accomplishments of the Armenian people across the globe in the face of adversities ultimately symbolize the resurrection of our nation through the Resurrection of Christ, our Lord.

And again, to celebrate Holy Easter is to uphold the Armenian identity, to preserve our Christian character, and the values which we commonly hold in reverence. Most importantly, to celebrate Easter means for us to protect the sanctity of the Armenian family which is the guarantor of our perpetuity.

Finally, to celebrate Holy Easter means to love and respect each other without reservation, to unite under the blessed dome of the Armenian Holy Apostolic Church which contains the condensed history of the Armenian people. As we commemorate the Centennial of the Armenian Genocide and canonize our martyrs into the Sainthood, we call upon our people to reawaken within their hearts the ancestral Christian faith and continue to live with the mystery of the Holy Resurrection so that "*Christ, our Lord will give [us] light*".

Christ is risen from the Dead!  
Blessed is the Resurrection of Christ, our Lord!

## **APRIL 24 IS A SYMBOL OF VICTORY\***

This year, by the grace of God, the Armenian people throughout the world will commemorate the Centennial of the Armenian Genocide and will pay homage to the memory of the 1.5 million martyrs of the Armenian Genocide who perished at the merciless regime of the Ottoman Empire. At the Western Diocese, a series of commemorative events have been planned to honor the memory of our fallen martyrs.

We highly commend the outstanding organizational efforts of Archpriest Fr. Moushegh Tashjian, the Parish Council chaired by Tony Markarian, and the Centennial Commemoration Committee under the chairmanship of Dr. Levon Keshian.

By the grace of God, on March 8 we will celebrate the Divine Liturgy and deliver the homily at St. Mary Armenian Church in Costa Mesa. Following the service, with the participation of Fr. Tashjian, the Deacons and the Choir, we will consecrate the Holy Martyrs' Monument and will preside over the community-wide commemorative event. On this blessed occasion, we express our wholehearted gratitude to the Monument's benefactors and donors. May the Good Lord bless and protect them.

Let us commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian Genocide with the vision of our fallen ancestors. April 24<sup>th</sup> is no longer a day of mourning and sorrow. April 24<sup>th</sup> is a

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\* On the Genocide's Centennial Commemorative events at St. Mary Armenian Church in Costa Mesa.

symbol of victory for our resurrected nation. Orphans of martyrs have become parents and grandparents. As visionaries themselves, they have become architects of the independent Motherland and have continued to cherish the sanctity of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin. With the blood that they had shed, they have become the pillars of the New Armenia, the New Church and new horizons.

We, like our fallen ancestors, share the same dream of a resurrected Armenia and a more prosperous Armenian Holy Apostolic Church. We are the heirs of sacred values by which the future of our nation is conditioned. The legacy of our ancestors is enrooted in our hearts. Furthermore, the blood that they have shed is an invitation, a calling to lead a new life. Their undying spirit is the core of our spiritual sustenance in order that we may continue our fight to uphold justice, to share God's divine love, and to lead our lives in accordance with the teachings of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Let us unite in creating a victorious Armenia, a strong Armenian Apostolic Church and a reawakened nation led by young visionaries.

On April 23, on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians will officially preside over the canonization of the 1.5 million martyrs to the Sainthood. Indeed, our fallen brothers and sisters paid the ultimate sacrifice and lost their lives for their ancestral Christian Faith.

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ said, *"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die."* (John 11:25)

May the Almighty God bless and protect St. Mary Armenian Church of Costa Mesa and her faithful granting them long and healthy lives.

## REBIRTH OF A NATION

*“Blessed are they who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times!” (Psalm 106:3)*

Exactly 100 years ago, in the spring of 1915, a seven year-old girl from Marash, already orphaned from her father and deprived from nearly everything, was forced to march through the Syrian Desert only to witness famine, epidemic, torture, and death. Her mother and 17 other relatives succumbed to the hostilities of Turkish soldiers, and the scorching sun of the desert, and could not make it to the refugee camps in Syria. Worn out and soled, the seven year-old girl was dragging her feet on the burning sand without realizing where they were going. To her frequent inquiries about their final destination, her elderly grandfather would murmur saying, “We are going to Jerusalem.”

Barely alive, this girl hardly comprehended her grandfather’s words at the time. It was only years later that she understood the metaphor of “Jerusalem” being the final destination of 1.5 million innocent Armenian men, women, and children.

Witnessing Christ has certainly been the undying vision of our forefathers, the martyrs of the first genocide of the twentieth century. Since the adoption of Christianity as state religion in 301, the Armenian nation has always been sojourner with Christ, especially during the Genocide, following in the Lord’s footsteps from the garden of Gethsemane to Golgotha. And indeed, in the Passion of Christ one can discern the vignettes of the recent history of the Armenian people from deportation marches in the Syrian Desert to independent

Armenia, from tortures and depravation to prosperity, from being victims to becoming victors.

There is a sense of pride amidst our pain and sorrow; 100 years after the Armenian Genocide, we witness the rebirth of our nation through the mystery of the Resurrection of Christ. Ottoman Turkey tried to completely annihilate our people without realizing that the genome of the first Christian nation in the world has been inherently granted with the redemptive power of God, which revives the dead from ashes as Ezekiel describes in his prophecy – *“I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it.”* (Ezekiel 37:14)

The orphans and the survivors of the Genocide are our heroes. What you read in today’s booklet is only a fragment of their thoughts. The eye-witness accounts contain grievous pain and sufferings yet they are full of hope, faith, courage, and liveliness. In their eyes we see the martyrdom and the resurrection of our nation as well.

Distinguished religious and political leaders, we are grateful for your presence, for you have become God’s voice of justice in the face of apathy, hypocrisy, and falsification. We understand geopolitics and its prudent rules. But blessed are you for your courage and commitment to justice. You made the choice to fight against injustice so that crimes of this magnitude shall never happen again anywhere in this world. Instead of conforming yourselves to the dubious rules of *realpolitik*, you chose to confront the ills of today’s society. As His Holiness Pope Francis rightfully stated a few days ago in his speech delivered at St. Peter’s Basilica on the occasion of the Centennial Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide, *“It is*

*necessary, and indeed a duty, to honor the memory of the martyrs, for whenever memory fades, it means that evil allows wounds to fester. Concealing or denying evil is like allowing a wound to keep bleeding without bandaging it!"*

We convey our deepest gratitude to all of you, without exception for your cordial presence and kind participation. Our special thanks to The Most Reverend Jose Horacio Gomez for hosting this commemoration in the magnificent Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels. Among other dignitaries, we are humbled to have the Honorable Mayor of the City of Los Angeles Mr. Eric Garcetti who has been an advocate of the recognition of the Armenian Genocide and supporter of the just cause.

Your presence today is the reflection of your solidarity with the Armenian Church and nation. The authenticity of history and the historical facts cannot be hidden. Together we stand united and strong in our observance of the centennial commemoration of the Armenian Genocide.

Praying for the souls of the martyrs and saints is our moral obligation. For us, prayer is a spiritual strength and is a demand for justice. Standing together in prayer of remembrance is quite meaningful, for we renew our covenant with God to do justice and righteousness and protect these God-given values wherever they are endangered.

As loyal citizens of the United States of America, a country which holds human rights and democratic values as fundamental elements of the US Constitution, we honor the memory of the martyrs through our commitment and creative lives.

Tonight we depart from this Cathedral with a renewed spirit and promise that the martyrdom of the 1.5 million Christian Armenians will never be forgotten.

God bless us all and protect and guard the nations of the world from the evil of Genocide.

## **APRIL 24 AS ARMENIAN GENOCIDE REMEMBRANCE DAY<sup>†</sup>**

This is the year when Armenians around the world, be in Armenia and in the Diaspora commemorate the Centennial of the Armenian Genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Turks in 1915.

In a recent statement delivered on April 12<sup>th</sup>, the Catholic Pontiff His Holiness Pope Francis has sent the world the following message: “Concealing or denying evil is like allowing a wound to keep bleeding without bandaging it.”

Honorable Governor Herbert, your signing a proclamation declaring April 24, 2015 as “Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day” certainly honors the memory of the martyrs of the Armenian Genocide and renders respect to the members of the Armenian community, who as dedicated and loyal citizens of this great and freedom-loving nations of the United States of America have justified the vision of the martyrs of the Genocide and the founding fathers of this blessed country.

In as much this year’s Centennial of the Armenian Genocide reawakens within us the pain and suffering of our ancestors, we also celebrate the resurrection of our nation and the hundred years of accomplishments. Today, we also remember in our prayers all those who have suffered genocides, the Jewish people, and the people of Cambodia, Rwanda and Darfur. For our cause is against all genocides which disrupt the peace and prosperity of the people of God.

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<sup>†</sup> Utah's Governor Gary R. Herbert Signs Proclamation Declaring April 24 as Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day. Primate’s Message at the State Capitol, Salt Lake City, Utah, April 21, 2015.

## **HISTORICAL FACTS CAN NEVER BE SUPPRESSED‡**

In tonight's joint commemoration of the Armenian Genocide and the Jewish Holocaust, our communities make a clear statement that historical facts can never be suppressed. The world has witnessed the Armenian Genocide of 1915 by the Ottoman Turks and the Jewish Holocaust by the Nazi Germans. These acts of crime were premeditated and have been recognized as man's inhumanity for the people of God.

It is immoral to disregard the truth of historical facts, which have traumatized our ancestors and generations will everlastingly remember in their prayer and call on the children of the descendants of the survivors to honor the memory of the victims with reverence.

On August 22, 1939, in preparation for the impending invasion of Poland, Adolf Hitler stated to Reichmarshal Herman Goering and the commanding generals at Obersalzberg, "Our strength...who after all speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?" History certainly remembers and time will never be a healing factor to lessen the traumatic pain of our people, as the world repeats similar acts of crime in the lives of people whose existence is threatened.

Congressman Adam Schiff has been a courageous leader, who against all odds continues to speak the truth about the Armenian Genocide: "One hundred years ago, one and a half million Armenian men, women and children were deliberately

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‡ Primate's closing remarks AJC-DIOCESE Joint Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide and the Jewish Holocaust, March 22, 2015, at Nazareth and Sima Kalaydjian Hall.

murdered in the first genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – these facts are indisputable.”

Together we remember our victims. Together we honor and pay homage to the memory of our victims. Together we commit to prosper and prevent Genocides and Holocausts in the lives of the people of God.

Many of today’s world leaders deny the authenticity of the Armenian Genocide by the Ottoman Turks bargaining the truth of historical facts to secure the stability of the economy and political partnership.

A horrific crime denied for an entire century will never be forgotten. Our lifetime will be a lifetime to remember, honor the memory of our victims and be the carriers of their dreams and aspirations.

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” These are the challenging words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. which deepen in our spiritual identity a firm commitment the vision to live with the history, be the authors of history as the legacy of upcoming generations. Crime against humanity is a crime against God.

On behalf of the Western Diocese and the members of our community, we extend our gratitude to the American Jewish Committee for your solidarity. Respect for the Armenian Genocide implies respect for the victims of the Holocaust. And honor for the Holocaust equally implies respect for the victims of the Genocide.

Our distinguished speakers Dr. Stephen D. Smith and Dr. Richard G. Hovannissian unite us all in one voice to honor God's most precious gift of life.

The journey of history of our people has been turbulent. The journey together will be victorious and glorious.

## MUSEUM OF TOLERANCE<sup>§</sup>

William Faulkner, 19<sup>th</sup> century American writer and Nobel Prize laureate, makes the following assertion in one of his writings, *“The past is never dead, it is not even past.”* And indeed, nations without memory are doomed to be forgotten in the history of civilization.

The official opening of this exhibition in the City of Mexico, in this most fascinating museum of Tolerance is a historic momentum, which transforms the visual memory of nations – nations, who survived genocides and other crimes against humanity - into factual history.

We can admittedly say that this exhibition is one of the most powerful and effective ways for educating the public about genocides, especially the Armenian Genocide. It is through education that we are enlightened to comprehend the history of humanity since the Creation. It’s through faith, though, that we penetrate into the depth of history and see God’s mercy, justice, and righteousness incarnated in Jesus Christ, the Savior. Education emancipates us from ignorance, apathy, and negligence – the most dangerous ills of today’s society.

I am thankful to God for granting me the opportunity to visit this magnificent edifice a few weeks ago. The terrifying images and vignettes of genocide survivors bring back haunting memories, which continue to hurt our entirety. The Armenian Genocide, the Holocaust, the genocides in Cambodia,

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<sup>§</sup> Primate’s Speech, Armenian Genocide Exhibit Museum of Tolerance Mexico City, Mexico, April 16, 2015

Rwanda, and Darfur have shattered the lives of millions of people. Denialists can falsify the history, distort the reality and obliterate the human memory. However, crimes of this magnitude, crimes against humanity, cannot be wiped out from God's memory.

Therefore, we have an obligation to remember. As His Holiness Pope Francis stated in his address at St. Peter's Basilica on the occasion of the centennial commemoration of the Armenian Genocide, *"It is necessary, and indeed a duty, to honor the memory of the martyrs, for whenever memory fades, it means that evil allows wounds to fester. Concealing or denying evil is like allowing a wound to keep bleeding without bandaging it!"*

The exhibition organized at this Museum of Tolerance is the greatest respect in the context of the Centennial events of remembrance of the martyrs of the Armenian Genocide.

As the spiritual leader of the Armenians in the Western USA and Mexico, I am humbled to extend my words of gratitude to the organizers of this exhibition. My deep appreciation goes to the Board of Directors of the Museum of Tolerance for the immense support and solidarity they have shown. My words of gratitude go to Mrs. Sonia Arakelian and her colleagues for their relentless efforts in the organization of this exhibition.

Today, with this exhibition, we are creating a history out of visual memories. The history we create today, will shape our tomorrow where there is no room for hatred, discrimination, and animosity. The history we create together honors the martyrdom of the victims of the Armenian Genocide and all other genocides, and through their sacrifice reaffirms our Christian faith in the Resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

## THE ISLAMIZED ARMENIANS

Tonight's topic of discussion is the Islamized Armenians. The issue at stake is how we define the Armenian identity. Is our judgment solely based on the ethno-genetic consistency or should we dwell on self-identification when we talk about Armenian identity? Is religiosity part of the Armenian identity or should the confession of faith be viewed from the perspective of the freedom of conscience? Can our culture, folklore, and language define the Armenian identity? And finally, what is the common denominator in this equation of what we call the Armenian identity?

Those are the main questions that brought us together today for discussion, analysis, and study. By no means does our opinion tend to be prescriptive or separatist in any way. Our views are purely subjective and have only one goal – to embrace diversity and contextualize it with ethnic identification by allowing safe space for cultural and religious dialogue.

For the sake of truthfulness, let us also note that identity issues are not only specific to Armenians. Ethnic groups have always been challenged with identity issues, especially at times of crisis. Our country, the United States of America is faced with identity crisis, Russia, Israel, and the European countries cannot surpass identity issues that encounter them.

We firmly believe that the questions raised here should be meticulously studied and addressed without underestimating them, for the globalization makes the matters concerned more urgent and substantial.

For us, Armenians, the issue of our Islamized brothers and sisters is of a great importance, especially now when we commemorate the Centennial of the Armenian Genocide around the globe. Even denialist Turkey cannot silence its Kurdized and Islamized citizens of Armenian descent, many of whom live a time of spiritual reawakening as they scrutinize their ancestry. We personally know many young men and women, who discovered their Armenian roots and returned to the ancestral faith and tradition after fleeing from Turkey to Europe, the United States, and Canada.

I personally believe that it is incumbent on us to assist the ethnic Armenians who were hidden for a century but surfaced today and identify themselves as the direct descendants of the Genocide survivors. The return is not an easy task considering the decades of alienation of generations who were forbidden to profess their faith, speak their mother tongue, and observe their traditions. We have a similar situation in today's Armenia where, after the collapse of the atheist Soviet regime of 70 years, people struggle to reinstate themselves in the Christian faith and be integrated in the life of the Church. After all, Christianity is not about labels. Boastfully proclaiming that we are the first Christians does not mean anything if we don't practice our faith to the fullest.

Non-judgmental attitude, societal acceptance, Christian compassion, and allowing of self-identification are the basis through which we should discern the issue of Islamized or hidden Armenians.

As I speak now, the testimony of Jirair Suchiasian comes to my mind. Interviewed in 1984, this citizen of Australia recounts his story. *"If you would ask me who I am, I could not tell you, because I don't know what my real name is, I don't know*

*when I was born, and I don't know where I was born and who my parents were. Adopted by an Armenian family, I was given the name Jirair Suchiasian. Here I am in Australia now, my 5<sup>th</sup> country, and I still don't know my real name, when I was born, where I was born and who were my parents... I am somebody, but I am nobody."*

Jirair Suchiasian's testimony is the best example of identity crisis. To me, he is one of the many abandoned Armenians, who suffers the trauma of a loss, a great loss, which in his case, is his own identity. For our nation, especially for the Genocide survivors, the trauma of loss is manifested in multiple ways. The silent grieving continues to this date because there has not be closure in our grief, there has not be full acknowledgement – recognition of the Armenian Genocide.

From the perspective of Healing Theology, we have to *remember* our Islamized brothers and sisters in our loving embrace allowing them time for self-reconstruction and self-identification. Deprived from everything - from memory, identity, and name – the hidden Armenians are orphans, who eventually will be adopted by the Omnipotent God, who is the only secure attachment amidst all our losses.

## **“WHATEVER YOU DID... YOU DID FOR ME”**

*“Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” (Matthew 25:34-36)*

This letter is a call addressed to every individual who is truly concerned with the tragic and woeful events currently transpiring in Syria.

Only a few months ago, the Western Diocese of the Armenian Church of North America hosted our brother in Christ His Grace Bishop Armash Nalbandian, Primate of the Armenian Church Diocese of Damascus who gave chilling eyewitness accounts of the heartbreaking situation of Syria’s Armenian community. The Armenian population, once a flourishing community, is dwindling at an alarming rate. Armenians are struggling to survive. Schools, shops, religious and cultural institutions close their doors for precautionary measures and the throbbing heart of the community is ailing. Kessab, the last harbor of Armenians of ancient Cilicia, is completely depopulated. It goes without saying that the events that had transpired in Kessab were the pure expressions of the Turkish expansionist ideology which once again targets the Armenian community of the region. We sympathize with the losses of our innocent compatriots, grieve the irretrievable loss and offer our pastoral empathy to those who have been impacted by the calamities.

This inconsolable situation is also of concern to His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians, who has made it a priority to extend financial support to the Armenians in Syria, as well as those who have sought refuge in the Motherland. In September 2013, the Synod of Bishops made the humanitarian mission official by establishing a special charitable fund. Indeed, what a commendable and patriotic initiative which obliges each of us to participate and make a tangible difference in the lives of our fellow brothers and sisters. The Lord shall hear our prayers and soften the hearts of those who ignite wars through the divine love of the Prince of Peace, so that peace reigns over the ancient land and that brothers relinquish their swords. We rest assured that when the storm subsides, our community will rise once again, prosper, flourish and revive. Nevertheless, the “Charitable Fund” of the Armenian Apostolic Church will continue its noble mission of extending a helping hand to needy families in the Motherland and the Diaspora alike.

Through financial contributions, we have the opportunity to pledge our love and loyalty for our Motherland and the Armenian Apostolic Church in a practical manner. Beloved brothers and sisters, now is the due time to do so. The Gospel according to St. Matthew 25:40 states *“Truly, I say to you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”*

In our heartfelt prayer, we beseech the Lord to bestow the graces of the Holy Spirit upon our nation and to increase the spirit of empathy, charity and humanitarianism, so that we may become the feeding Hands of the Almighty in this world. And indeed, the Lord will reward the benevolent making them worthy of His heavenly kingdom.

## PLAN I HAVE FOR YOU

*“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11)*

Nothing can hinder the wave of change as it starts to sweep through our lives. Stereotypes, traditionalism, conservative mindset, or comfortability are simply unable to withstand the incredible power of the avalanche that brings renewal, freshness and new perspective. Where the Holy Spirit is present, there cannot be stagnation. When the Holy Spirit is working, everything is in motion. And, indeed, we have seen the Western Diocese of the Armenian Church in full action catalyzing the positive change in every facade of its ministry through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

If we cast a retrospective look at what we have collectively achieved during the past 11 years, we can admittedly claim that those were years of rejuvenation, revamping, restructuring and reorganization. The clergy education and training through our Stewardship Committee, pilgrimages, seminars, lectures, classes and various publications through the Christian Education Department, utilization of social media, websites, and TV through the Media Department, our Saturday and Sunday Schools, Abp. Vatche Hovsepian Summer Camp, ACYO, and CYMA through our Youth Department, expansion of parishes, construction of St. Leon Armenian Cathedral and other churches throughout the Diocese, our mission projects in Armenia, newly established social services through Datev Outreach, the Campus Ministry, etc. – those were the targets during this big change, which we have embraced with openness, eagerness and determination.

The change continues, however. In order to keep pace with that ongoing process, as church and community leaders, it is incumbent on us to evaluate our work without bias, review our programs and projects, extrapolate whatever was proved to be good and successful to our future endeavors and, of course, correct the mistakes we have made.

The Annual Diocesan Assembly offers that unique opportunity to convene as one big family, thank God for what we have attained, and in a renewed commitment, continue to work towards the God-established mission of the church with love, dedication, and faithfulness. It is important to be reminded that we are *not* here because we are the elite but because we are elected by the people who trust us. We are definitely not here to satisfy our egos or please each other. As elected delegates, first and foremost, you are here to bring the collective vision of your respective parishes to incorporate it with the mission of the Diocese. Our covenant is with God, who “has plans for us, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give us a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11) Therefore, in order to succeed, we must align *our* plans with God’s master plan by accepting His will with utmost humility and servitude.

In strategic planning and development, we cannot be short-sighted. God’s promise for hope and a bright future is not about transient small wins but permanent and bold trajectories that can lead to the desired destination. Our focus, therefore, for the next year should be solely on the Mission.

Analysis, strategy, methods, evaluation, and prognosis are the key elements of strategic planning that we need to consider on all levels of our ministry, administration, and operation. Having this in mind, with the Executive Director of the Western Diocese, we have started the extensive work, which is

going to be the beginning of a long process. We are delighted to inform you that, to this end, we have invited Dr. Hratch Tchilingirian (M.Div., M.P.A., Ph.D.) a professor at *Oxford University* and a senior consultant at *Cambridge Partners Ltd.* to share his wealth of experience and expertise in the field. The four day seminar in a small group setting helped us to clarify and articulate our mission statement. We revisited the substantive and functional definitions of our Christian ministry trying to find out ways of understanding and explaining today's world through the perspective of the ancient Armenian Orthodoxy, as well as how we can use that ancient orthodox value system in our daily life to surmount many ethical, socio-economic, and spiritual problems we encounter. It did not take long to realize that we have many unresolved problems. However, in order to bring fundamental and systemic change, we have to think about institutionalizing this venerable establishment in the truest sense of the word.

One of the sessions of the above mentioned seminar was entirely dedicated to SWOT Analysis, a study that helps to identify the internal strengths, weaknesses, as well as external opportunities and threats of an organization. We took pride in our strengths and rejoiced in every achievement we made. Those in attendance pointed out the glorious history and the rich heritage of the Western Diocese, which evokes trust and good "brand name". The development of internal infrastructure in general was another major accomplishment. As far as our strengths go, others mentioned the accessibility of our Diocese, the networking, well-established spiritual ministries, community outreach, and the human resources, i.e. the highly qualified staff.

Next, we discussed our weaknesses in a very candid manner, without closing our eyes to reality. Our main weaknesses were noticed in the areas of governance, parish-dio-cese relationship, and financial management. The dwindling number of church membership, sporadic attendance, lack of spiritual attachment, and the unorganized lay ministry were the main weaknesses discerned in the analysis.

No doubt that the demographic change, the influx of immigrants, today's geopolitics, the recovering economy, the developing social media, and the next generation of highly educated youth will bring with them wide opportunities to expand our ministry in the next few years. We thank God for the humbling prospects of service that He always gives us for preaching and teaching His Word for the salvation of our faithful.

With all these opportunities, however, we should not overlook the external threats that try to undermine the foundations of our ministry. The changing values of society, the secularization, the identity crisis, the losing of the Armenian language, sectarianism, the diminishing Armenian Diaspora in the Middle East are impendent threats that require immediate actions.

Realistically, we admit that it is an impossible task to tackle all these issues and problems at once. Through analysis and strategic planning, we triage them in order to be able to serve our faithful more efficiently and effectively. In other words, we prioritize and assign degrees of urgency.

Based on what we have shared with you, for 2014-2015 we are going to concentrate all of our efforts on the following four major areas:

a. **Repairing and revitalizing the Parish-Diocese relationship in general.** We strive to do this predominantly through special educational seminars, leadership courses, mutual visitations/pilgrimages and partnerships.

b. **Organizing the lay ministry.** Regionally and locally, we are going to form various small groups of devoted individuals. After proper training and instruction, the groups will be commissioned to conduct Bible Study courses, visit and pray for the sick, comfort the bereaved, extend a helping hand to the poor, support the brokenhearted, foster Christian fellowship and be the ambassadors of the church.

c. **Instituting a monastic system within the Diocese.** We have seen that many orthodox and non-orthodox denominations in the United States greatly benefit from their monasteries, which not only serve as spiritual sources but also as retreat centers for the faithful, shelter for the homeless and safe haven for the abused. This is a major project that we have dreamt for a long time. Although it may take years to realize, we are determined to start it.

d. **Restructuring our youth ministries.** We have tried different programs and projects throughout the years. Some of them were extremely successful and others were less effective. The sad fact is that we lose some of our fine young men and women as they leave for college. To this end, we have already started the Campus Ministry, which aims at connecting the Armenian students in major colleges and universities in California. This initiative needs to expand but more importantly, it needs to adopt a new approach. Our Youth and Campus Ministries should be able to assist our children, especially the students in a very practical manner. How effective is it to talk about faith, church and spirituality

with students who are already under tremendous stress because of huge student loans, increasing responsibilities and uncertainty about the future? In addition to the spiritual nourishment, we have to provide our youth with scholarship opportunities, connections, networking, access to land dream jobs and excel in their carriers, thus becoming part of their success. This is exactly how we can bring our youth to church, teach the Word of God and help them to grow spiritually.

Dear delegates, our intent is not to overwhelm you with excessive information and technicalities. Rather, we would like to guide you in this new path and walk with you hand in hand, so that together, in collaboration and in the spirit of Christian fellowship, we can attain a brighter future and have hope as promised by God. We are partners in the mission of the church through the covenant of our baptism. Therefore, we have to fulfill our mission with faith, love and renewed spirit.

Last but not least, allow us to extend our gratitude to His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians for his unrelenting support, and encouragement in every step we make for the betterment of our church and the welfare of our people. May the Almighty God grant him good health so that he can continue to guide his flock with divine wisdom and righteousness.

We thank our brothers in Christ, the dedicated clergymen of the Western Diocese, the Diocesan Council under the leadership of the Honorable Judge Adrienne Krikorian, the Diocesan staff headed by the Executive Director Harout Markarian, Diocesan Assembly Chair Bob Barsam, Assembly Officers, Parish Council and Ladies Society of the host parish under the leadership of Rev. Fr. Nareg A.K. Matarian, and you

all present today. We pray for you and your families, asking the Good Lord to protect you from the snares of the adversary under His invincible cross. May He shower you with the graces of the Holy Spirit so that you can shine your faith and Christian virtues everywhere you go for His unfading glory.

## RECLAIMING THE GRASSROOTS MISSION OF THE CHURCH

*“According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it.” (1 Corinthians 3:10)*

Praise be to the Lord, the Almighty for granting us this unique opportunity to tend His flock and serve His Holy Church with wisdom, sacrifice, and meekness of heart. We thank the Lord for the gifts of the Spirit that He has adorned us with in such a graceful manner so that we can shine our God-given talents in every aspect of the Church ministry.

Over the years, primates, pastors, and lay leaders have been called to contribute to the growth of this Diocese. Today, we humbly and thankfully build upon their work and lay foundation for the future generations. However, Paul, the Apostle charges us with a prime responsibility to ensure that our work is right and the foundation we lay is unshakable. In his first letter to the Corinthians, in Chapter 3, verses 12 through 14, Paul clearly attests that, *“if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is.”*

Today, 100 years after the Armenian Genocide, as the descendants of the martyred saints, we are bound with a moral obligation to seriously take heed how we build and what we build on their legacy. Here, at the Western Diocese, this is of strategic importance for us. As we mentioned in our

message last year, when we talk about the mission of the Church and its future, we should not count on small wins; rather we must strive to leave lasting and bold trajectories that would endure the test of time.

Continuing on the mission of the Church, this year we would like to focus on parish and community building. It goes without saying that the Diocese is strong with its parishes, for the latter is the basic unit of the Church.

As we were preparing this message, we came across a valuable research prepared by Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute in Berkeley, which examines the realities of orthodox parish life in the Western United States. Alexei Krindatch, the research coordinator, diligently compiled the “ten simple answers to ten not too easy questions” received from 247 parishes, which reveal quite noteworthy information to us. Although, the Armenian Church did not participate in the survey, from sociological point of view, the findings can be extrapolated and interpreted in our own context, because we share innumerable similarities with other ethnic orthodox churches in the Western United States.

1. Despite the fact that our local parishes are mostly ethnically homogenous and mixed marriages constitute less than 7%, our faithful are culturally divided into small groups, not to say clans. The truth, to which you can all attest, is that first generation *Barsgahyes, Hayastantzis, Bolsetzis, Bakutzis, Beiruttzis, Haleptzis, Iraqahyes* and others find it difficult to intermingle at many levels. On the other hand, the second generation of immigrants is more proactive in engaging themselves in cultural dialogue, at least from the linguistic point of view.

2. Youth involvement is another major issue that orthodox churches face in the United States due, in part, to lack of interest in organized religion, general apathy, and impiety.

3. According to the same survey, financial or economic stability is another serious problem in local parishes, which ties the hands of the clergy and the laity as well. Conveying the basic principles of stewardship and creating fund-raising systems is especially difficult when there is ambiguity in the vision of the church.

4. The fourth problem indicated in the survey, and which I personally believe should be the number one, is the lack of relevant message delivered every Sunday from the Holy Altar by the clergy.

We would like to reiterate the words of Saint Paul, who instructs us *“to take heed how we build and what we build.”* We have a shared responsibility to empower each other and strengthen our local parishes, thus fortifying the foundations of this Diocese.

The above mentioned problems need immediate attention. Coming to the first issue of clan mentality, we have to enhance cultural dialogue among our church members teaching them to embrace diversity - dwelling on values we hold commonly - instead of focusing on insignificant differences. In another instance, the Apostle urges us to bear one another's burdens to fulfill the law of Christ (**Galatians 6:2**). Furthermore, Paul commands to *“admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, and be patient with them all.”* (1 Thessalonians 5:14)

And indeed, cohesiveness, mutual respect, and acceptance can transform pockets of powers into a mega-power, which can revamp, rejuvenate and revitalize the life of the church.

To attract the youth, first and foremost, we have to work on the theological language of the Church, not compromising the apostolic teachings but adapting them to the level of their understanding. Our youth goes through difficult times. The competition in schools and the ensuing peer pressure, the rivalry in career and economic insecurity, the temptations of life and social injustice distance our youth from the church only to bury them in the increasing problems of everyday life. The youth needs guidance and understanding, but above all, practical help. We don't get tired of repeating this. In addition to the spiritual nourishment, we have to provide our youth with scholarship opportunities, connections, networking, access to land dream jobs, thus becoming part of their success.

The financial or economic state of a parish is also important because it directly affects the entire ministry and its volume. In order to attain self-sufficiency, pastors and lay leaders must teach the congregation the basic principles of stewardship, its biblical background, and the theology of giving. Creating various fund-raising systems, utilizing church property effectively, and investing the financial resources wisely can give parishes financial freedom. We are fortunate to have among our faithful professional financial advisors, investment bankers, CEOs, and other executive administrators. We are grateful for their valuable time and counsel. However, throughout the years, we have come to conclude that parishes thrive not so much by virtue of professional skills but thanks to the faith, dedication, and zealotry of the faithful. We have seen great CEOs failing in parish life

because their administration, although sound from the business point of you, lacked the spiritual content. It has been proven over the years that parishes fail when individuals subordinate the sovereignty of God and emerge in the councils with an ambition to govern from the grounds of power and authority. Please, bear in mind that we are all equal in the eyes of God, who values humility, servitude, and sacrifice.

Prior to the sermon, you have heard your clergy saying *“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”* This simple affirmation means that whatever your priest speaks comes from the Holy Trinity and not from himself. The message he delivers is not his but is the message of God, and therefore the message of the Church. We have discussed this numerous times during the clergy conferences that the Sunday sermons must be biblically based, Christ-centered, theologically sound, culturally diverse, and most importantly, relevant to today’s realities. A message that does not offer spiritual guidance and consolation is merely a pre-tentious rhetoric.

In the beginning of my speech, I did not hesitate to say that this is the number one problem to me personally. As a church, we have to reclaim our theological vocation, for theology is not university discipline only but also the compilation of our convictions. Churches flourish when their members are passionately committed to their faith. Statistical projections indicate that without strong, shared Christian convictions, churches inevitably fail.

In our sermons, we should not be afraid to express the theological stance of the Church regarding certain issues. Our faithful and, especially the youth, look for definite answers.

Ambiguity, uncertainty about God and about issues pertaining to His church create this lukewarmness, which harms the reputation of the church and the spiritual life of the faithful. Our task as Christians is not to adapt ourselves to what is going on in the society around us but to be faithful to Christ. Our task as Christians is to be true disciples and to constitute ourselves as true communities.

Through renewal and transformation, we can thrive as a Church. Through shared responsibility and convictions, we can prosper locally and strengthen the foundations of our Diocese. We are partners in the mission of the church through the covenant of our baptism. Therefore, we have to fulfill our mission with faith, love and renewed spirit.

Time and again, we have stated that the year 2015 is a year of resurrection. In the above mentioned proposals, we see the true essence of resurrection realized in the life of the church. With this message, we extend to you an invitation to collectively partake in the resurrection of our church so that we can beseech the intercession of our 1.5 million martyred saints who sacrificed their lives for the same belief.

Last but not least, allow us to extend our gratitude to His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians for his unrelenting support, and encouragement in every step we make for the betterment of our church and the welfare of our people. May the Almighty God grant him good health so that he can continue to guide his flock with divine wisdom and righteousness.

We thank our brothers in Christ, the dedicated clergymen of the Western Diocese, the Diocesan Council under the

leadership of Mr. Antranik Zorayan, the Diocesan staff headed by the Executive Director Mr. Harout Markarian, Mr. Bob Barsam, Chair of the Diocesan Assembly, the Assembly Officers, the Central Council of Ladies Society under the leadership of Mrs. Lena Simonian, and you all present today. We pray for you and your families, asking the Good Lord to protect you from the snares of the adversary under His invincible cross. May He shower you with the graces of the Holy Spirit so that you can shine your faith and Christian virtues everywhere you go for His unfading glory.

## ELLIS ISLAND MEDAL\*\*

Dear Friends,

Elbert Hubbard, a 19<sup>th</sup> century distinguished American writer and philosopher, reflecting on deeds of good faith and God-given opportunities, admittedly says, *“The highest reward that God gives us for good work is the ability to do better work.”*

And indeed, it is with this thought in mind, that we have convened here tonight to celebrate the innumerable achievements and important milestones the Armenian American community has collectively attained in North America.

During the past three decades, many prominent individuals have been awarded the Ellis Island Medal of Honor in recognition of their extraordinary accomplishments and invaluable contributions for the wellbeing of this great Nation and commonweal in general, through arduous work, partnership, and perseverance.

Here, I would like to share the words of wisdom of the late poet and human rights activist Maya Angelou, *“One must know not just how to accept a gift, but with what grace to share it.”*

This quote comes to reaffirm my assertion that the Ellis Island Medal is the symbolization of our collective vision, and belongs to every individual in the Armenian community who shares that vision and partakes in its realization.

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\*\* June 17, 2014, Taglyan Cultural Center.

Life becomes meaningful and purpose-driven only when we offer ourselves for the wellbeing of other people. To me personally, this idea is fully expressed in my pastoral ministry. Serving the flock of God to the best of my ability enriches my soul enormously. The Christian spirit of servitude is truly compelling. Therefore, I beseech you to pray for me tonight as I renew my calling and commitment to serve God and the faithful of the church with humility, compassion, and empathy.

Dear friends, I am humbled by your very presence tonight, which empowers and grants me a renewed spirit to aspire to carry on the legacy of our forefathers having them as a source of emulation in our lives. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and especially after the Genocide, our ancestors have immigrated to this blessed country to re-build their lives. In the face of all kinds of adversaries, the first generation was soon integrated into the American society adding its distinct flavor to the diversity. Our forefathers taught their offspring to love this embracing country - the Land of Opportunities - strengthen its foundations, serve loyally, and assume ownership.

I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to you all for your kind and generous support that you have shown in different ways throughout the years. But most of all, I would like to thank you for the gift of trust that you have given to me to lead you in the paths of righteousness and justice. Please, be assured that your gift of love and unwavering trust is the greatest reward, which I will always cherish in my heart.

## RESPONDING TO GOD'S CALL

We are delighted today to welcome you to our Annual Stewardship Luncheon. It has been a noble tradition at our Diocese, to come together annually and thank our generous benefactors and supporters for their continuous support and commitment. As we express our gratitude, we also rejoice as a living Church, to witness the growth of this new generation of priests and priesthood-candidates, who have sacrificed their lives to serve God and His flock.

We have said many times, that priesthood is not only about education or preparation. Without God's calling, it is merely a profession that bears no fruit. Priesthood is entirely about hearing and eagerly responding to the call. From my own experience, I can attest that it is an arduous and a challenging moment in life.

In order to understand the unfathomable awe and the weight of responsibilities one can feel before yielding to God's call, it's worthwhile to refer to the Gospel according to Luke 5:1-11 and to ponder.

Unlike Sts. Matthew and Mark, St. Luke gives a more detailed account on how Simon Peter reacted to Jesus' call to follow Him. Here is the scenario. Jesus was teaching the Word of God by the Lake of Galilee. People had started to gather and very soon there was a multitude of people surrounding him pressing to the extent that Jesus decided to get into one of the fishing boats and teach the crowd from there. The event is a clear indication of the big issue of the spiritual demand and supply, i.e. one preacher for the multitude. Jesus needed helpers. Simon, a simple fisherman, was with Jesus in the

same boat and he was observing. It must have been shocking for him to see this. However, Simon's biggest shock or astonishment occurred when Jesus helped him to catch innumerable number of fish. He knelt before Jesus, and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!"

Dear benefactors of the Stewardship program, no matter how long the journey is towards priesthood, each and every candidate feels the same fear. It goes without saying that it takes a sacrificial spirit as well as tremendous faith, dedication and humility to surrender to God and become His anointed servant.

Yet, we have an obligation to encourage these young men in every possible way. Jesus did not leave Simon alone in his fears. Rather, He empowered him by saying, "Do not be afraid. From now on you be fishers of men." In this sense, the Stewardship program is a unique apostolic mission - in its own way - aimed to support our young priests and priesthood-candidates in getting better equipped with the tools and resources needed for today's multi-dimensional pastoral ministry.

We all agree that we need competent priests, and that "the harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few" (Matt. 9:37). Therefore, let us all become the voice of our Lord and encourage these promising young men. Let us stand with them and by them in the same boat during this spiritual voyage on which they have embarked. We are all stewards, we are all apostles, and we are all invited to serve God in our unique capacities.

I convey my wholehearted gratitude to Mr. and Mrs. Gerald and Patricia Turpanjian, Mr. and Mrs. Armen and Nora Hampar and Mr. and Mrs. Greg and Seta Tcherkoyan, Grand-

Benefactors of the Stewardship Program. Your enduring ancestral Christian faith is most evident through your noble deed. Your firm belief in the Stewardship mission attests to your unwavering Christian spirit.

Our special thanks to Dr. Vahram Biricik and the members of the Stewardship Committee for your relentless dedication. Your humble service is commendable and much appreciated.

I pray that in this New Year the Good Lord grants us health and vigor to continue our God-pleasing mission for His glory, for the prosperity of our Church and the for the well-being of our people. Amen.

## WE ARE THE LIVING IMAGES OF CHRIST

*“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” (2 Cor. 3:17-18)*

In the image of God, we continually restore the image of our souls. The longer we gaze at the divine image of God, the more radiant the Creator's image becomes within us. The words of the Church Fathers, namely that “The priest is an icon of Christ” are not in vain. We wish to add to those lasting words by saying that each individual who remains loyal to his Christian calling may become the living image of Christ.

We offer our reflections on the days leading up to the Ordination and Consecration of Deacon Sarkis Alanjian into the Sacred Order of the Priesthood. Our message is primarily directed to the Deacon and to all those who have chosen to walk the same path.

The Priesthood is holy and the life of the priest is led to sanctity through his service. Indeed, those who courageously answer the call of the Almighty undoubtedly illuminate and mold souls. Those who spread the Word of God unequivocally transform the souls into the divine abode of the Almighty. Therefore, let the prayers of Deacon Alanjian, the grace of God, the strength of his faith guide him as he steps into the Priesthood. May he become an evangelist of the Word of God, console and enlighten the souls of the faithful and help to build communities.

We convey our heartfelt wishes to Deacon Sarkis, to his family and the clergy of the Western Diocese. With his humble heart and his educational progress, he is truly worthy of the honorable title.

May the Almighty God preserve the Armenian Church and her servants. On this historic occasion, as we prepare for the ordination and consecration at the newly-constructed Cathedral, we convey our genuine words of gratitude to the Godfather of the ordinate Dr. Vahram Biricik and to his lovely wife Polina. For thirteen years, he has led the dedicated members of the Stewardship Committee in the noble mission of educating and preparing young clergymen. May the Good Lord reward him abundantly and his colleagues who have served with enduring affection and unrelenting dedication.

## **THE DIVINE AND HEAVENLY GRACE NOW CALLS**

On a number of occasions, we have reflected on the significance of the Sacred Order of the Priesthood and with each time we have knelt before the Almighty God praising Him for the gift of young Priests who have answered God's call with humility and grace to dedicate their lives to serving the flock of Christ and the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church.

The Priesthood is a divine call graced upon us by the All Merciful God. Indeed, blessed are those who have been called to serve in the vineyard of God and have graciously adhered to the calling of the Almighty, for their lives take new meaning as they enter into a new covenant with God and humble themselves before the flock of Christ.

Dear Deacon Mkrtych, as many of the Diocesan Priests have done, you also began your journey in the Armenian Apostolic Church at a very young age. Years after completing your pastoral education and inspired with divine gifts radiating from the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, you are now prepared to be Ordained and Consecrated as a Priest. We rest assured that as an ordained priest, you along with your Yeretzgin Tatevik will inspire your community through your dedicated service and will enrich the life of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

On the joyous occasion of your Ordination and Consecration, we congratulate and extend our heartfelt wishes to You and Tatevik, Your parents, Your beloved Godfather Mr. and Mrs. Antranik and Virginia Zorayan, the Diocesan clergy and the faithful. We commend the exceptional service of the

Stewardship Committee under the steadfast leadership of Dr. Vahram Biricik. Your dedication is most valued and appreciated.

May the Almighty God bless and protect the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church along with her clergy and faithful.

## **“MAKING JESUS KNOWN”**

*“I believe that in our time God is calling the Church to once more be the center of a new mission. I believe God is calling us to lead the new evangelization of our world. To make a new world of faith.”*

My dear and beloved brothers and sisters in Christ,

These are the words of the Most Rev. Jose H. Gomez, Archbishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles who brings to us all a spirit of renewal to the faithful of the Christian Church.

“Making Jesus Known” is the vision of Abp. Gomez, who continuously calls on the faithful to make Christ the way of their lives.

In these changing and challenging times when political and economic hardships suppress morality and justice, the exemplary life of our brother in Christ brings to us all a new vigor and vision to make the Church the center of our faith life.

Tonight, we welcome the Most Reverend Jose Gomez to St. Leon Armenian Cathedral and to the Headquarters of the Western Diocese of the Armenian Church of North America.

Our close collaboration with Archbishop Gomez was established during “One Light,” a special interfaith ceremonial event in 2011 on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Since then, our paths have crossed many times and each meeting has brought us closer to one another and thus, closer to God.

Archbishop Gomez is an accomplished high-ranking leader of the Catholic Church. As you look at his biography provided to you, you then realize that the journey of his life has been most enriching and uplifting for the faithful.

He was ordained by the late Cardinal Franz Konig, Archbishop Emeritus of Vienna, a most distinguished theologian whom I have known personally during my early years of priesthood.

He has acquired his doctorate in Theology in 1980 from the University of Navarre in Spain and since 2011 he has taken upon himself the spiritual leadership of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

We are joyful for your gracious visit to St. Leon Armenian Cathedral to be the Guest of Honor at our annual Ecumenical Prayer Service, which we dedicate year after year to the memory of Levon Paronyan, the late father of the Grand Benefactor of this Cathedral Dr. Aramais Paronyan.

Dear Archbishop Gomez,

In a recent pastoral letter, you have called on the faithful to be more vigilant in making “Jesus known.” You have inspired us all with the following words: *“I believe that in our time God is calling the Church to once more be the center of a new mission. I believe God is calling us to lead the new evangelization of our world. To make a new world of faith.”*

I now have the pleasure to invite Archbishop Gomez to receive as a gift, an icon depicting the Nativity of Jesus and then invite my Brother in Christ to deliver his homily.

## THE CHURCH: TOWARDS A COMMON VISION

I extend my warmest greetings to all participants of the joint conference organized by the North American Academy of Ecumenists and the Southern California Ecumenical Council's Faith and Order Commission. By the grace of Almighty God, you have gathered at the Headquarters of the Armenian Apostolic Church of the Western Diocese to be in a fellowship that aims to see the church's start toward a common mission.

For four decades, I have been actively involved in ecumenical life, mostly in the United Kingdom during my academic years at the University of Oxford, later as pastor and spiritual leader of the Armenian Church in Canada, and presently in the United States, at the Western Diocese. I continue to cherish the same ecumenical spirit with the same conviction and the vision that it is only through mutual understanding, respectable dialogue, and true Christian love that churches can grow as one body.

*The Church: Towards a Common Vision* has been a relevant topic in all ages. As we learn the history of the world and Christianity, we see that throughout the centuries the church has been challenged not only to fulfill and realize a common vision but also to address layers of new issues that threaten the foundations of Christianity.

In the deeply spiritual, extremely moving, and tremendously challenging seventeenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John, we discover the true essence of our common vision, which is the unity of Christ's body, the Church. In his prayer, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ says, "*I pray also for*

*those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (Jn. 17:20-21, N.I.V.)*

Indeed, Christianity is not merely a philosophy. Christianity is a way of life, which became the calling and the vocation of the Fathers of the Church, who gave their lives as martyrs with the vision and understanding that the incarnation of Christ has paved the way for us all collectively to find our way to the heavenly Father. Christ came to this world to change lives. He transfigured in order that we may transfigure our spirituality, to become not just believers but also doers.

Thus, we cannot separate preaching from practice. Preaching the Word of God should be deeply rooted in our daily actions and reflected in our relationship with our faithful people, through our unconditional love, care, and compassion for our brothers and sisters. It is not permissible for a Christian to say, “I can pray for you, but not with you.”

I urge all of us to be more united in our efforts to fight against all challenges that describe the Christian faith as a dysfunctional religion. It is important to seek the reasons as to why the Christian religion is being uprooted in the communities in which we live. Personal witnessing is important in our communal life of faith. If we are not able to make our lives the reflection of Christ’s love, if we are not able to create a Christian community, if we are not able to pursue Christian morals, if we are not able to become the torchbearers of our forbearers’ faith and be the witnesses of Christ’s life—then Christianity becomes solely a movement, and the community is deprived of a strong sense of commitment.

Christian unity is achieved when we walk with Christ and become partakers in his sufferings and, ultimately, in his blessed Resurrection. Those who live with Christ and in Christ can certainly be the uniting spiritual strength and the force to expedite the unity of the Christian church.

Thus, let us *“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as [we] were called to one hope . . .; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”* (Eph. 4:3-6, N.I.V.)

## BE OPENED

*"Be opened". And his ears were opened, his tongue was released and he spoke plainly." (Mark 7:34-35)*

What we read in this story needs to be reflected in our spiritual life. Each prayer that we offer, each Badarak which is celebrated brings us all closer to God and enables us to listen to the command of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ: "Be opened." Our ears are opened to listen to the word of God, our tongue is released to speak the Word of God and we are able to speak plainly.

By nature, the human person is weak and needs to be led by God. We ought to be the vessel of God's love and wisdom. What we see in the world today, and more specifically in countries where people are deprived of peace and prosperity, clearly indicates the fact that God's presence is not felt deeply and the love of God is uprooted from the hearts of people. Through the story of the healing of the deaf, Christ our Lord awakens within our spirituality the necessity to live with God, to walk with God and to fulfill God's will in our daily life.

Thus, we not only live in peace, but above all, we become architects of peace. The message of the story is clear: we are deaf unless we listen to the Word of God and our tongue speaks the Word of God. For us, as Christians, it is a privilege to bear in our hearts the Word of God and apply it in action with the people of God.

## LIVING STONES<sup>††</sup>

*“Like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 2:5)*

With great spiritual joy, we extend our blessings to Rev. Fr. Datev Harutyunian, Pastor, to the members of the Parish Council, the Ladies Society, the Choir, the Diocesan Delegates, the auxiliary bodies and as well as to the entire faithful on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of St. Andrew Armenian Church in Cupertino.

For five decades, the vital parish of the Western Diocese has served as the spiritual shelter of the faithful of the Santa Clara Valley and has helped our people to preserve their ancestral Christian Faith through the spiritual guidance and leadership of former Pastors. The faithful of the St. Andrew parish have remained loyal in carrying out the noble mission of the Western Diocese and have most vividly expressed their love reassuring their affection for the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin.

Under the pastoral care and guidance of Rev. Fr. Datev Harutyunian, St. Andrew Armenian Apostolic Church tends to the spiritual and educational development of the young Armenian-American generation. Yearly cultural events strengthen their identity and the parish’s exceptional Sunday School program enlightens our youth with the Gospel of Christ, our Lord.

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<sup>††</sup> Primate’s message on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of St. Andrew Armenian Church in Cupertino.

On this auspicious occasion, we join the faithful of St. Andrew in congratulating Father Datev, who will receive the title “Archpriest” by His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians. We commend and highly value his dedication and selfless service to his parish. The Vicar of the Northern California Region has done an outstanding job in strengthening the ties between the regional parishes and the Diocesan Headquarters. Congratulations, Father Datev!

We are also pleased to recognize the enduring commitment of Mrs. Nairi Stepanian and Mrs. Sossie Magdessian who will be honored with St. Nerses Shnorhali Medals, a distinguished honor conferred upon faithful of resolute service by the Catholicos of All Armenians. We commend your honorable service to St. Andrew Armenian Church and the Western Diocese alike.

Once again, we wholeheartedly congratulate you on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Andrew Armenian Church in Cupertino and pray to the Lord to fill all parishioners with the wisdom of the Holy Spirit in order that under the pastoral guidance of Fr. Datev, they may continue their spiritual and educational mission.

## 100<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF LADIES' SOCIETY

Dear Ladies of St. Mary Armenian Apostolic Church in Yettem, California.

Today's centenary celebrations of the establishment of the Ladies' Society is a milestone in the life of this church, the community and the Diocese.

The centenary celebrations of the Ladies' Society enriches our spirituality with the history and the sacrificial life of the ladies who for one hundred years laid the foundations of the Church, educated generations with the love of God and the teachings of Christ, our Lord and empowered them with the vision and the mission of the Church as the stronghold of our existence.

Dearest ladies, this milestone becomes more meaningful when we offer our prayers for the departed souls of the founders and for all those who, although no longer with us have impacted our spirituality. They were your mothers and grandmothers who lived with the Christian spirit and have also given from their heart to the sacred mission of the Church. Today, we extend our deepest gratitude to those who continue to work hard and diligently for the continuity of the mission of the Church. I would like to share with you a statement by St. Francis of Assisi who clearly indicates that sacrificial life and giving is a virtue "For it is giving that we receive." Certainly, you have reflected the spirit of giving as a virtue in the mission with which you have been entrusted.

Truly, you have not only shown that spirit, but have also inspired many to embrace the spirit of giving, which mirrors

the life of Christ. The centenary celebrations of the Ladies Society of St. Mary Armenian Church empowers us all to reawaken within us the vision to implement in our God-given lives the messages of Christ, our Lord and to live a Christ-like life. Thus the centenary celebrations become more meaningful if we are able to improve our Christian way of life and renew our commitment to serve the Lord and the community.

## THE LIVING BREAD

*“I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.”*(John 6:50-51)

The living bread to which Christ refers is His teaching, the journey of His life and the sacrificial life on the cross for the salvation of our souls. During the day, the bread that we consume is a necessity for our physical bodies. However, let us bear in mind that we also need to nourish our souls. The nourishment of the soul is the Word of God, the bread which came down from heaven, embodied in the life of Christ, our Lord.

As Christ speaks of Himself as the bread from Heaven, He literally speaks about the life He lived. We are called to follow Him, and make the messages of the Gospel the bread of life, which illuminates our soul and mind.

The more we listen to the Word of God, the closer we are to God. Therefore, let us always live and walk with Christ. Amen.

## 15<sup>th</sup> Annual ABMDR Gala

*“Without us, God has no eyes; without us, God has no ears; without us, God has no arms or hands. God relies on us.”*

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

I chose these words because they truly reflect the utmost dedication and sacrifice of a team whose passion of heart and vision of life is to serve humanity.

The Armenian Bone Marrow Donor Registry led by Dr. Frieda Jordan, has been and continues to be a blessing in the life of our community where we all see the dire need of leadership, sacrifice and sharing of the divine gifts amongst people.

The Armenian Bone Marrow Donor Registry is a divine mission. Those who become shareholders in this mission are those who become the Holy Hands of God.

This mission calls on us all to better understand the value of the gift of love and the measure of respect that one can render to it. Many years ago, almost a decade ago, Archbishop Desmond Tutu traveled to Rome. In the Church of Saint Egidio in Rome, home of extraordinary community of laypeople devoted to working for the poor, he saw an old crucifix that portrays Christ without arms. When he asked about its importance to the community, he was told that it shows how God relies on us to do God’s work in the world.

To respond to the above thought or interpretation, I would add the following. Certainly God does not rely on us. God graces upon us the privilege to become partners in the creation. The key word therefore is privilege. Humanity is

privileged to do God's work in the world. The more engaged we become in God's work in the world, the richer we are spiritually. Those who focus their faith life on God and the life of Christ certainly chose to live a purpose driven life and show greater appreciation for the gift of life.

What I see in this story is the divinity of Christ our Lord who embraces us all in His person. This humbling crucifix where Christ has no arms challenges us to reawaken within our spirituality to share our wisdom, talents and sacrificial life with the people of God.

I chose this image to share with you tonight with the thought and perception and understanding that Dr. Jordan and her team have been the arms of Christ.

I am humbled for the acknowledgement extended to me but the true reward to me personally would be saving one's life. A smile of a child, the touch of a human being is immeasurable. This is the kind of work which has been the aim and the purpose of the Armenian Bone Marrow Donor Registry.

Once again, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

## **A LIFE OF FAITH – A LIFE OF SACRIFICE**

The ultimate goal of the Church is to lead the people to “A life of faith – a life of sacrifice.”

The Ladies Societies across the Western Diocese need to focus more on the spiritual aspects of the community life. The more we distance ourselves to responding to the challenges of the times, the weaker we become as an institution. We ought to take the torch and reorganize ourselves and focus on the real issues of our communities which include the Christian education of our families, the youth, the poor, the humanitarian missions and the rest.

The Western Diocese and the faithful have to refocus on her mission and lead every act with prayer. We need to regain our Christian identity.

“Our Lord asks all men to come out to meet Him, to become saints...rich or poor, wise or less so, all of us have to foster in our hearts a humble disposition that will allow us to listen to the word of God.”

“A life of faith is a life of sacrifice. Our Christian vocation does not take us away from our place in the world, but it requires us to cast aside anything that would get in the way of God's will.”

Thus, the ultimate mission of every Christian is to meet Christ, listen to the Word of God and apply it in our everyday life.

## THE COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON AND THE VENUES FOR THE REUNION OF THE CHURCH

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,  
Distinguished guests,

Allow me to extend my sincere gratitude to the officers of the Huffington Ecumenical Institute and the members of the Board of LMU (Loyola Marymount University) for facilitating tonight's fellowship and conference, which aims to bring the churches closer. It is most fitting to share with you all the inspirational words from the common declaration by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI and His All Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew:

*"We give thanks to the Author of all that is good, who allows us once again, in prayer and in dialogue, to express the joy we feel as brothers and to renew our commitment to move towards full communion...May our meeting be a sign and an encouragement for us to share the same sentiments and the same attitudes of fraternity, cooperation and communion in charity and truth."*

We live in an age where Christological issues should be addressed through theological dialogues. The purpose of these dialogues is one, to bring all Christians together and encourage them to be in full communion. What we have learned from the history of Christianity is that often theological arguments were subjected to political influences as well as schools of theological thought. A perfect example to this would be when at the time of Council of Ephesus 431 Emperor Theodosius II was the one who gave the final verdict to the matter discussed at the Council. In fact, the Emperor initially ignored

the outcome of the Council of Ephesus and arrested both Cyril and Nestorius. Along with the above we also would like to remind the audience as to how the 28<sup>th</sup> canon of Chalcedon (***“The bishop of New Rome shall enjoy the same honor as the bishop of the Old Rome, on account of the removal of the Empire”***), has been rejected by Pope Leo deepening the conflict between the Roman See and the See of Constantinople. From then onwards political interference in religious discipline has become an ordinary aspect in the life of Christianity. We all agree that State and Church should be separate. However, history has proven that the reality is different then what we expect to see.

The Incarnation of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is the major mystery that has ever taken place in the history of mankind. Generations have researched (*Christian and non-Christian alike*) this mystery through reasoning or beliefs, yet they have failed in their deliberations. Indeed, it is only in accordance with the Holy Apostolic tradition of the Church that we can find the true responses to our questions.

This was the original concept of the early Church and the same thought remains irrevocable in both our respective Churches. Therefore, we are so delighted to address our speech to those who realize the fundamental importance of the Holy Apostolic Tradition in the life of the Church.

Thus, we would like to focus on the Holy Apostolic Tradition of the Church trying to retrieve the true teaching of its genuine Christological doctrines.

Here are the few questions which one needs to ask.

**Who did the disciples think Jesus Christ is?**

True man and True God who is indeed One: **“One Lord, one faith, one baptism...”** (Eph. 4:6) They had never divided or differentiated Christ’s Divine and Human natures therefore for them Christ **“The Son of Man”** was no other then the same Incarnate God who descended from heaven: **“No one has ascended into heaven but He who is descended from Heaven, the Son of Man who is in heaven.”** (John 3:13) Moreover, Christ was the one who was from the beginning, whom they had heard, whom they had seen with their own eyes, whom they had looked upon, and whom they had touched, Christ was no other then the Word of God (1 John 1:1). That is why without defining His Human and Divine natures the Apostles could say that the Church was purchased with the Blood of God (Acts 20:28) or insist that the one who was crucified was not a man, but **“The Lord of Glory”** Himself (1 Cor. 2:8).

The Disciples of Christ our Lord knew that the divine truth which was commissioned to them by Christ had to be preserved without any alteration or revision, (in fact they were facing some Challenges of Heretics themselves) therefore they handed down the tradition of the Church to their successors with the strict order: **“But even if we or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than that what we have preached to you let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.”** (Gal. 1:8-9)

Did the Apostolic Fathers to whom the true doctrine was commissioned keep Holy Tradition untouched in particular the notion of the unity of Christ? Yes they did. For instance, St. Clement of Rome who lived in the first century (probably died in 99 AD) in his Epistle addressed to the Corinthians used

the expression: ***“The sufferings of God”*** (Ad. Cor., Chapt. 2). Another Apostolic Father St. Ignatius of Antioch (35-110 AD) in his letter addressed to Ephesians said: ***“For our God, Jesus the Christ was born in the womb of Mary”*** (Ad. Eph., Chapt. 8). In another epistle addressed to Polycarp St. Ignatius stated: ***“Consider, the one who is above the time, the invisible one, was seen, and the one who was not capable to suffer, suffered for our sake.”*** (Ad. Polycarp, Capt. 3). Before we proceed, we would like to bring to your attention that both the apostolic fathers apply human sufferings to God, since it is important when we start to observe the teachings of Nestorius and to some extent to the Tome of Leo.

By moving along the chain of the Apostolic Tradition of the Church we would like to shed light on the Christological thought of Athanasius of Alexandria (293-373 AD) and quote his statement addressed to Apolinarius; ***“One is the Nature of God the Logos Incarnate.”*** This statement later has become a pedestal for the Christological theology of his luminous inheritor Cyril of Alexandria and successively for the Christological doctrine of the Armenian Apostolic Church, but above all a challenge to the dualistic doctrine of Antioch.

A short introduction is necessary as we look into the conflict. The representatives of Antiochene School such as Nestorius and Cyripto-Nestorian Theodoret of Cyrus have always deduced the distinction between the Word of God who was born from God the Father and the man Christ who was considered as a descendant of Abraham and the son of Virgin Mary. Thus, bearing this conception in their minds they tended to see two separate natures in Christ and proclaimed that the three year old boy cannot be called God. Furthermore, they challenged the Apostolic Tradition, which we already witnessed in the writings of St. Ignatius of Antioch,

saying that St. Mary cannot be called Theotokos (God-Bearer) she should rather be called Chrisostokos (Christ-Bearer). The above mentioned doctrine was completely alien to the Holy Apostolic Tradition of the Universal Church that is why the supporters of this doctrine were called by Cyril of Alexandria **“innovators of faith”** (One the Unity of Christ, p. 88).

It is important to state that both our Churches accept Cyril’s Christology as the genuine reflection of the Apostolic Tradition and as a strong upholder for both our Christological doctrinal stand. However, we have different interpretations on the matter of the Chalcedonian definition of faith. The Armenian Apostolic Church believes that Chalcedon’s definition does not reflect the true nature of Cyril’s Christology, as the Eastern Orthodox Church believes that it does.

Hence, let us examine the basic aspects of Cyril’s Christology as reflected in his writings.

Being a true successor of the Holy Apostolic Tradition, Cyril had always confessed in Jesus Christ a mysterious union of divine and human natures and with this truth in mind he wrote his epistle addressed to Nestorius proclaiming: ***“We believe that after they united (the divine and human natures) the nature of the Son is one, as though the division was already eliminated, and yet this nature of the Son is that of one who has become incarnate and human.”*** (Migne P.G., vol. 77, p. 192)

In his other book *“Five tomes against Nestorius”* he reveals his doctrine even more clearly saying: ***“Thus, He is to be understood as the one, only one, because the nature is to be understood as a single, whole after the Union. That is something which we can similarly conceive of with regards to***

***ourselves; for human being is truly one, although he is composed of dissimilar things, i.e. soul and body.” (Migne P.G., vol 76, p. 60)***

These basic conceptions were summarized in his famous twelve anathemas which are extremely important for this matter. We would only like to quote the fourth anathema of Cyril and the anti-anathema of Nestorius, in order to reveal the dramatic distinction of their doctrines. The fourth anathema of Cyril states: ***“If anyone shall divide between two persons or substances those expressions which are contained in the Evangelical and Apostolic writings, which have been said concerning Christ by the Saints, or by Himself, and shall apply some to Him as to a man separate from the Word of God, and shall apply others to the only Word of God the Father, on the ground that they are fit to be applied to God; let him be anathema.”***

Nestorius replies: ***“If any one assigns the expressions of the Gospels and Apostolic letters, which refer to two natures of Christ to one only of those natures, and even ascribes suffering to the divine Word, both in the flesh and in the Godhead, let him be anathema.”***

The distinction is more than obvious. In fact these two anathemas will help us to understand the core problem with Chalcedon.

Our Church fathers suspected an association with the Tome of Leo and subsequently the Chalcedonian definition of faith with Nestorianism or rather Crypto Nestorianism of Theodoret of Cyrus. They were not given convincing clarifications explaining the notion of the Tome in distinguishing between the dignities of Christ; ***“To hunger to thirst, to be***

***weary and to sleep is evidently human. But to satisfy five thousand men with five loaves and give to the Samaritan woman that living water..., to walk on the surface on the sea with feet that sink not, and by rebuking the storm to bring down the 'uplifted waves' is unquestionably divine. It does not belong to the same nature... to hang on the wood and to take all elements tremble after daylight had been turned into night; or to be transfixed with nails, and to open the gates of paradise to the faith of the robber..."***

Nonetheless, our aim is not getting in every detail of the issue but to evidence the facts. The fact of the matter is that Cyrilan term "One Nature" was substituted by Leo's "Two Natures".

Can we maintain the unity between the two Churches?  
What are the grounds?

1) Both churches have anathematized Nestorius and Eytiches.

2) Both Churches have embraced the Cyrilan formula  
***"One is the Nature of God the Logos Incarnate."***

3) Both Churches can exercise their freedom without any direct political influences.

4) It is acknowledged by both Churches that the formula "of two natures" is authored by Cyril of Alexandria. Therefore this formula itself becomes a fertile ground for the unity of the Churches.

5) Both Churches ought to implement all the necessary tools and means to facilitate cordial and fruitful dialogue.

## Conclusion

Early Church history and subsequent councils have all pointed the way to the truth of the kingdom. For the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Council of Nicea remains to be the highest point in the hierarchy of Councils, for its definitions have been generally held to be normative for all subsequent Councils. The Council of Nicea remains to be the only council which sets the strong grounds for the unity of the Church, because of the truly universal acceptance which it commanded in all places and in all subsequent centuries.

As we previously learned the Armenian Apostolic Church's theological stand on the nature of "true God and true man" is based on the theology of St. Cyril of Alexandria; **"One is the nature of God the Logos Incarnate."** This has also been reflected clearly in the writings of the Church Fathers. In truth both our Churches believe in one and the same Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who is true God and true Man united. This exceptional union which we call Incarnation was made without separation, without confusion and without alteration. We only differ in the interpretations of that mysterious union, ("of two natures" or "in two natures") something that Cyril himself would call absolutely ineffable and incomprehensible for our minds. Any further attempt to deepen our discussions to grasp this mystery may lead us into temptation and confusion depriving us from exercising our faith in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

The Christian faith is a gift from God. This gift empowers us to embrace the fellowship of all Christians and sets the noble goal of unity in the life of Christianity. The same gift of God impels us to share our love for all nations and religions. The spirit of ecumenism should take a dwelling in our hearts.

We all need to learn from the past history, and avoid mistakes, which might harm the ever expected full unity of all churches. Indeed, we ought to bear in our minds the words of the Apostle Paul; ***“Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandment, “You shall not commit adultery”, “You shall not murder”, “You shall not steal”, “You shall not bear false witness”, “You shall not covet”, and if there is any other commandment are all summed up in this saying, namely, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*** (Romans 13:8-9)

