

An Invitation to Rev Giragos Chopourian

Dear Brother in Christ,

Reading your article, "The Armenian Church and the Masses" (*The Armenian Reporter Int'l.*, May 29, p.2) has left an aftertaste, and I must confess it is not too pleasant. It surely reads like another salvo fired at the Mother Church in this undeclared "open season". A while ago we had to endure a similar attempt by the Armenian Catholics who, among others, consider Armenia an open field for proselytization. Between the Catholic purgatory and the Evangelical promise of salvation there may still be some hope for the Armenian Apostolic Church! So, Dr. Chopourian, please keep praying.

I do mean it seriously, Dr. Chopourian, even if there is a trace of sarcasm in the request, for which I beg God's forgiveness. But as you pray, please do not forget to add "Thy will be done." His will, not according to your agenda; not Catholic, not Protestant, but only Divine guidance is needed.

Admittedly, there is no priest or hierarch in the Armenian Church who is not painfully aware that the Church is going through one of the most challenging and painful periods in her history. That we shall come through, having met the challenge head on, and reclaim our people for Christ in the bosom of the Holy Mother Church, there is no question or doubt. That, along the way, we need and we can use all the help we can get, there is no question either. However, what the Armenian Church does not need is patronizing sermons and not too subtle nibblings that impugn her integrity and character, and attempts to undermine her mission. Yes, Dr. Chopourian, we need help, not preaching laced with put-downs and condescending would-be advice.

I am a parish priest, Dr. Chopourian, and I have worked hard to create and maintain good, brotherly relationships with our compatriots of different persuasions, religious or even political. When I first came to Washington DC, one of the first things I attempted to do, and I won't hesitate to claim credit for it, was to gather the local Armenian Evangelicals and

urge them to reorganize the Evangelical fellowship. I made both the church facilities and myself available for their worship-meetings. At the time they did not feel strong enough financially to call upon guest preachers from the New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, Armenian Evangelical/Presbyterian churches. They still don't feel strong enough, or maybe they have developed too strong a loyalty to local non-Armenian Protestant churches; hence, there is still no Armenian Evangelical Church here. But to their credit, or rather to the credit of a few dedicated leaders, they continue to organize and hold periodic worship-meetings here at St. Mary's hall or in the sanctuary, wherever they feel comfortable. I might add, too, that they have graciously invited me on a few occasions to deliver the sermon or share the pulpit with a guest preacher, by delivering the message in Armenian.

No, Dr. Chopourian, I did not relate to them my "personal experience of salvation" and yes, I did not call on them "to commit their lives to Christ" in the format that you are accustomed to or expect us, the Apostolic clergy to perform our duties. To add one more note to this story, I should say that there are quite a few of the Evangelical fellowship of Washington, DC who are active participants in the parish life of St. Mary's. On the other hand, there are more than a few from St. Mary's who attend and participate in the scheduled worship-meetings of the Fellowship, including myself, with or without personal invitation.

We have come a long way, Dr. Chopourian, and articles like yours, maybe unwittingly, drive a wedge into much that is accomplished on the way to hoped-for rapprochement.

Over the past decades there has been a lot of new, precious ground broken on the way to such a rapprochement. We owe these achievements to people such as Rev. A.A. Bedikian (Evangelical) and Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, both of blessed memory. We should build on their legacies instead of retreating into byzantine fingerprinting.

I sat in on a few of those "dialogues" in the Seventies, and if no concrete results were registered by those meetings, there was

however, no less precious a spirit of goodwill that was cultivated and nurtured. An interesting observation was made, during one of those meetings, by one of the participating Badvelees. He said to us, "Don't feel bad that we think or give the impression that we consider you 'not saved'. Take comfort that our brothers on our right, the more conservative Armenian Church of Brethren (Yeghpairagtzootiun) consider us just as 'unsaved'." So, where do we go from here? Whose yardstick shall we use? Or should we use any yardstick at all?

Dr. Chopourian, you say you were "baptized in the Armenian Apostolic Church... but the challenge to commitment to Christ came from another church source." My response is... there, but for the grace of God, go I. I could easily have been in your place if my parents, instead of sending me to the Seminary of Antelias, had somehow managed to enroll me at one of the Armenian Protestant or American Mission-sponsored high schools in the Middle East. The fate and the future course of the lives of many of my generation and the generations before and after mine were decided depending upon where one received his/her education. And economics was the deciding factor, not our or our parents' choice.

I am not aware of the particulars, but it is reasonable to assume that yours was decided by the same "roll of the dice" (pardon this use of an unchristian term) by attending one of those "free" American Mission sponsored educational institutions. The point is Dr. Chopourian, as the Executive Director of the AMAA you were too eager to parade the statistics that such a great percentage of the students enrolled in the Protestant institutions were from the Armenian Apostolic Church families. You knew, as we did, with or without direct proselytization, a percentage of those unsuspecting students eventually would find "the Armenian Evangelical approach" as you claim it for yourself. While we are at it, let us also acknowledge that, without the enrollment of a large number of Armenian Apostolic students, it would have been difficult to sustain a credible operation. The "sponsors" here in the U.S. needed numbers and the Apostolic Church members provided just that.

As recently as the early Seventies this same "numbers game" was played at one of the National Council of Churches' Middle East Mission Annual Meetings. We were, at that meeting, listening to a glowing report from the "Mission Field" in Turkey: "This many Turks enrolled, this many Turks received Christ, this many Turks...." I could barely wait for the lady to take a pause to catch her breath, when I interjected, "The Turks that you refer to, are they the Muslim Turks, or, by chance are they also known by their ethnic identification, such as Greeks, Assyrians, Armenians, who happen to come from centuries-old Christian traditions?" I don't remember who jumped in to save the situation for the poor soul, but I still remember the colors on her face changing rapidly in the space of a minute.

Dr. Chopourian, let us close these sad chapters. We are now facing a monumental task of rebuilding our nation and yes, also reclaiming our Christian heritage for the people in Armenia and elsewhere. In the spirit of ecumenism, the Armenian Church in Armenia is given a chance to start her own "Bible Society." The head of the Church of England makes a pilgrimage to Holy Etchmiadzin to express solidarity with the Armenian Church, to strengthen her spirit, to carry on her mission. The European church communities of different persuasion extend their help in these times of trials and tribulations. We realize that there is no free lunch, there will eventually be those who will "discover" these different "approaches" and be "saved" away from the bosom of the Mother Church. But, dear Lord, can't we be spared from our own, who barge in into this "open field" called Armenia?

The challenge, Dr. Chopourian, is not to save the souls away from the Armenian Apostolic Church which you and other well-meaning Evangelicals still call the "Mother Church", but to save them within the Church of Armenia. Patriarch Ormanian led a group of highly educated former Catholic clergy back to the bosom of the Mother Church. Thank God they did. And here is an invitation for you: do the same.

Prayerfully yours,
Rev. Vertanes Kalayjian