

An Open Letter to Rev. Giragos Chopourian, Ph.D.

Dear Rev. Chopourian,

I read with interest your article, "The Armenian Church and the Masses," in the May 29, 1993, issue of *The Armenian Reporter*. You praise David Sanosian for forsaking the Armenian Church and seeking a Protestant denomination. You state that you also, who had been baptized and brought up in the Armenian Church, found that "the challenge to commitment to Christ came from another church source". You further claim that you have personally heard many similar testimonies.

If your article were my only source of information on the Armenian Church, I would be inclined to believe that "prominent members" of the Armenian community seek change and reform and that they have recently made "numerous calls", while the hierarchy of the Church remained impervious to their demands. You insinuate that the Armenian Church is one of the churches that has not changed and reformed itself, and consequently it is an "archaic and ineffective" institution. By citing the testimony of H.F.B. Lynch, the renowned British geographer, and calling it "a sad commentary" you seem to favor deflecting (Lynch's word) the Armenians "from their own opinion" and precluding (Lynch's word) "them from working out their own salvation in their own way."

You are obviously very disenchanted with the national hierarchical and cultural characteristics of the Armenian Church and instead propose that the Church reform "her approach, train church leaders with personal experience of salvation, call weekly on the members of her congregation to commit their lives to Christ." What makes you so certain that the present-day leaders of the Armenian Church are without personal experience of salvation? Do you have the ability to read the hearts of men? Only God can do that.

As someone who has served in the Armenian Church in his youth, you should be aware that the offices of common prayer of the Armenian Church as well as the liturgy and the pulpit serve

only one purpose, namely to call the faithful daily to commit their lives to Christ. Your claim that the Church does not call on the faithful to commit themselves to Christ is unwarranted. Today the majority of our bishops and a large number of our priests are well-prepared to carry out their mission, having furthered their education in non-Armenian seminaries and institutions of higher learning. They are as skilled in the art of preaching the Gospel as the ministers in your own denomination.

You say that you cannot understand why the Armenian Church "insulates herself so tightly". What is your evidence for such a statement? The Armenian Church is a member of the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches, and maintains close ties with the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, while being in full communion with the Oriental Orthodox Churches. Only a few weeks ago, the Archbishop of Canterbury visited Holy Etchmiadzin and prayed with His Holiness Vazken I in the ancient cathedral, before the Table of Descent of the Only Begotten.

Like you, I was also baptized and raised in the Armenian Church, but unlike you, I felt no need to seek Christ outside of my ancestral tradition. This does not make me feel that I am better than you. The difference between you and me is that I do not doubt your sincerity when you say that you found Christ in the Armenian Evangelical approach. I, however, am not certain if you believe me when I say that I have found Christ in the Armenian tradition of Shnorhali and Narekatsi. This tradition which you insinuate to be archaic and ineffective is still the most effective vehicle through which I as an individual can reach God at all times.

Why? Why do you want to change the nature of the only channel which unites me with my Lord and replace it with a foreign tradition which will have no effect on me and thousands of others like me? I have no objection if you and certain others find your satisfaction in a different approach; but please, don't impose it on me nor on the majority of Armenians. Both you and I are sinners before God, and no matter what approach we take, we must resort to God's mercy and unite with Christ in order to be saved.

I agree with you that the sole purpose of the Church is to change people and save souls. Christianity, however, is not the kind of religion that encourages salvation through solitary existence. Even the desert fathers and the medieval monks lived in communities. The Armenian Church is Christ's Armenian fold, which has over the past nineteen centuries

successfully carried out her mission. Thanks to the efforts of the Church, the Armenian people is recognized as a Christian nation. The Church you criticize has given our nation her Christian identity. She has forged our culture. Had it been otherwise, your *Lousavorchagan* parents would not have named you Giragos (belonging to the Lord) nor would mine have given me a Christian name.

Despite your criticism, our Church's approach cannot be considered off course, since we are still a Christian nation and after seventy years of atheistic propaganda and persecution, our people in Armenia have once again embraced their ancestral faith. When our first President, Levon Der Petrossian, laid his hand on the oldest Armenian Bible in existence and received the paternal blessings of His Holiness Catholicos Vazken I of All Armenians, no one in or outside of Armenia raised any objection. These acts, Dr. Chopourian, were not formalities but humble outbursts of piety inspired by the Christian essence of our nationhood.

Just what is it that you wish to see changed in the Armenian Church? Should the Church abandon her sacraments and liturgy to please your denomination? We believe that these traditions in our church go back to Christ, to His Apostles and to the ancient Syriac and Capadocian fathers who are universally respected throughout Christendom. Our age has begun to see the value of liturgical practices and in this respect the Eastern Churches have a great deal to contribute to present-day Christianity. Do you want us to eliminate the hierarchy of the church? Christ Himself established the hierarchy in His Church by laying His hands on the Apostles. There is a hierarchy even in your denomination's tradition and you yourself seem to abide by it, as you use the title Reverend before your name. You also seem to endorse other kinds of hierarchy by indicating your academic title. Do you find the national character of our church un-Christian? The history I read in our sources from the fifth and ensuing centuries indicates that Christianity forged the national identity of our people. Instead of changing that

character, we should emphasize the fact that being an Armenian puts on one's shoulders the responsibility of becoming a member of Christ's community. Is this an un-Christian thing to do?

Please do not make any effort to change us from our way of seeking Christ. The West, including your denomination, has just discovered ecumenism, which was championed by our Holy Father St. Nerses Shnorhali in the twelfth century. Let us both follow his course. Respect my beliefs and allow me to respect yours.

Over the centuries the Armenian Church has changed and rejuvenated herself, not under pressure from outsiders but from within. The hierarchy of the Armenian Church has never isolated itself from the people. This aspect in church practice, which the Armenian Church shares with other Eastern Churches, was greatly admired by Martin Luther back in the sixteenth century. Our Catholicos and bishops will not be indifferent to the opinions of laymen who play an important role in the administration of the Church. If you are sincere in your desire to see the Armenian Church change, the place to do is from within the fold. The doors of our church are open before all.

In conclusion to these heart-felt remarks, let me bring to your attention a statement by Dr. Smpad Kaprielian, a great Armenian intellectual, who said in his work *The Past and the Future of Armenian Protestantism*, New York, 1899, p.49:

"If we thought that the Armenian (*Lousavorchagan*) Church needed reform, why didn't we reform her, since we claimed to be enlightened by the light of the missionaries? Why did we completely reject our old mother Church and adhered to a foreign denomination? The total rejection of the old national Church and the adoption of a foreign denomination does not mean reform.

"Is the attempt to throw an elderly mother into the water the best effort to cure her?"

Dr. Kaprielian was one of your own, a prominent member of the Armenian Protestant community in Turkey and later in the United States. As for myself, I shall stay in the strengthening and lifegiving fold of my ancestral Church, and remain, whether you approve of it or not,

Yours in Christ,
H. Mekhitarian