

PATRIARCH'S MESSAGE IN WASHINGTON, DC: "PRAY FOR JERUSALEM AND BETHLEHEM"

Washington, DC His Beatitude Torkom II the Patriarch of Jerusalem gave a one-day whirlwind of a visit to the Nation's Capital. His youthful and energetic demeanor all along his visit gave no indication of his health concerns for which His Beatitude had come to the US, to consult with the medical specialists.

Accompanied with His Grace, the Diocesan Legate and the Ecumenical Officer Bishop Viken Aykazian and his personal secretary and staff-bearer Very Rev. I. Minasyan, His Beatitude met with the representatives of the Armenian Assembly and the Armenian National Institute (ANI), visited the site of the proposed Genocide Museum and called-upon the Chairman of the Congressional Armenian Caucus the Honorable congressman Frank Pallone (D., NJ).

The same evening, St. Mary's parish gave a warm welcome to our beloved former primate with a "Hrashapar" traditional service followed with a banquet.

The MC for the evening was St. Mary's Diocesan Delegate Dean Shahinian, Esq., who conducted the evening's program with his usual masterful fashion and with dignity fit for the occasion.

In attendance were representatives of the Armenian Embassy: the Consul General the Hon. Tigran Seyranian, the Military Attaché Col. Armen Sarkisian, the Representative of Artzakh—Republic of Nagorno Karabagh—the Hon. Vardan Bardseghian with their respective spouses. His Excellency the Ambassador Dr. Arman Kirakossian, because of a prior commitment, was out of town. In attendance was also the immediate prior US Ambassador to Armenia His Excellency Michael Lemmon who greeted His Beatitude warmly and gave an inspiring account of his experience in Armenia highlighting the positive characteristics of the Armenian people. He dwelt affectionately on his family's wondrous experiences specially of his seven years old son who eagerly wanted to go back and visit his friends he had made in Armenia.

Mr. Dean Shahinian, a legal council to the Senate Banking Committee Chairman the Hon. Senator Paul Sarchanes (D. MD), read a special message from the Senator, a friend of the Armenians, welcoming His Beatitude to the Nation's Capital. The message in part said: "I congratulate you on your leadership of the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which has an important role in the Holy Land. The Armenian Church is one of the three major guardians of the Christian Holy Places in the Holy Land... I also welcome you back to the United States, where you served as the Primate of the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of America, for over two decades. As Primate, you consecrated St. Vartan Cathedral, the first Armenian cathedral in the United States, and nurtured the St. Nersess Seminary. During this tenure, you appointed Rev. Vertanes Kalayjian as Pastor of St. Mary's, a decision that has benefited and enriched the metropolitan Armenian-American community. I extend my best wishes for an enjoyable evening and a fruitful visit in the United States."

The Chairman of the Parish Council Mr. Souny Kodjanian offered a heartfelt welcome and emphasized two aspects of His Beatitude's visit. First, he said, on a personal level we are happy to see our beloved former primate and enjoy a reunion of a sort, and, second, to mark the historic nature of this visit, because this was the first time a Patriarch of Jerusalem brings his blessings from the Holy Land to the St. Mary's parish.

The musical portion of the program included a masterful performance by a young talented pianist Arshak Sirunian, who gave an impressive interpretation of Arno Babajanian's Capriccio.

The highlight of the evening was the performance of **St. Mary's Narek Bell Choir** directed by master percussionist Mr. Leon Khoja-Eynatyan. The audience was spell-bound as they played a few American spirituals, Komitas and portions of Holy Badarak. Led by Ambassador Lemmon, a standing ovation expressed everybody's enjoyment and appreciation with an unbridled enthusiasm.

The Rev. Fr. Vertanes Kalayjian, the pastor of the parish, first surprised His Beatitude and the audience alike by playing a recording of Shahan Berberian's "Loosavorchi Ganteghu" (The Enlightener's Lamp) an inspiring song composed with Hovhannes Tumanian's poem-lyrics. The singer-interpreter was none other than His Beatitude himself. It is well known to many that this particular song is his signature performance and the audience loved it. Fr. Kalayjian then took the microphone and in addition to the chairman's acknowledgement of the seven past Parish Council Chairmen's presence acknowledged also the three Shnorhali Medal recipients: Col. George Juskalian, Dr. Edward Onanian and Dr. Charles Kumkumian. He also acknowledged the pioneering members of the Legate's Council who set the pace and the organization that has become indispensable Diocesan Outreach in the Nation's Capital. Those present from the original group were: Mr. Casey Kazanjian, Chairman, Col. George Juskalian, Mrs. Mary Simonian Perkins, Ms. Gloria Kassabian and Mrs. Grace Shahinian. Under the leadership of then Primate Archbishop Torkom Manoogian, His Beatitude and the late Diocesan Legate Abp. P. Varjabedian, the Legate's Council indeed performed a vital role in developing a necessary presence in the Nation's Capital.

"And now," Fr. Kalayjian continued, "We have a young and energetic Legate, His Grace Bishop Viken Aykazian who also is the Diocesan officer for Ecumenical relations and in a relatively short time has made his impact felt in the affairs of Diocesan Ecumenical Outreach." He then invited His Grace to introduce the guest of honor His Beatitude the Patriarch.

His Grace eloquently expressed his admiration of many faceted talents of His Beatitude and underlined his own and his generation of clergy's indebtedness to him "who together with his contemporaries, the late Patriarch elect Tiran Nersoyan, the late Patriarch of Istanbul Shnorhik Kalustian had a great impact on us all," he concluded. With a standing ovation His Beatitude was invited to deliver his message.

"I really have no good news to bring to you tonight," His Beatitude began his emotion filled message. "The pain of loss, uncertainty, unemployment, violence, turmoil and fear are the prevailing horrors that we are experiencing daily... It is indeed a tragedy that bloodshed and horror should prevail in the Holy Land, the Land of Peace, of Shalom (Hebrew) and of Salam (Arabic) and Khaghaghootiun (Armenian).

"How is life for us there? Difficult, Tense and Unpredictable," he summed up. "But, in one respect", he continued, "it is no different than it has been for the past 1600 years, ever since the Armenian Patriarchate was established in 638. Preserving and protecting the Holy Sites of Christ's life has always been a daunting challenge for the Brotherhood of Sts. James'. As Armenians, we share the privilege, along with the Greek Orthodox and Catholic Franciscan Order, of the joint custody over these holy sites: the Holy Sepulcher (the tomb of Christ), the Church of the Holy Nativity and many others.

“While it is a great blessing and privilege to be the custodians of these holy sites, it is also, and has always been throughout the centuries, an arduous and solemn duty which the Brotherhood has vowed to fulfill even at a high cost of our lives. For sixteen centuries this has been a part of daily living of Armenians as well as for the other ancient churches in the Holy Land.

“But only recently the world at large took notice of it. The stand-off at the Church of Holy Nativity in many ways dramatized our situation as Christian minority. Even when the world around us is erupting in violence, caught between warring parties, we are obliged by our solemn oath to remain at our posts.

“The stand-off at the Church of Nativity is now over, thank God. But the greater conflict remains, continues. How will it end? Who would prevail? Only God knows.

“We are concerned about the younger generation – the youth of all backgrounds – they are the ones who will inherit and live with the consequences of the decisions and actions we may commit ourselves to today. Right now, the crisis is devouring this younger generation – Jewish, Muslim and Christian alike... As we think of our children, we should be reminded that we are all children of the same greater God. All of us, as leaders and religious communities, are directed, instructed and yes, commanded to speak in the name of the same Lord, and to love our neighbor and each other, as the children of the same God of the Universe.

“And indeed, it is in this spirit of love that we have been requesting and pleading with the heads of states, the leaders of nations, the conscientious faithful of all children of Jehovah, the God of Israel, the children of compassionate and merciful Allah, Rahman-ul-Rahim of Koran and all of the God the Father, the Creator of Heaven and earth, as He has revealed Himself in the Holy Book of the Old and New Testaments, to join in prayer and in action, to alleviate the suffering of the people of the Holy Land.

“Whether Palestinians or Israelis, Christians, Jews or Muslims, we need to lend our support to establish permanent security and lasting peace for generations to come...

“The September 11, 2001 unimaginable terrorist and suicidal attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania provided additional proof for the need to find a just, comprehensive and permanent solution for one of the longest and most heated conflicts in the world. That is indeed the inhumanity of man to man.

“We, Christians, believe that God the Father has revealed Himself in the person of Jesus Christ, the Emmanuel, that is “God with us”, and that the incarnation of Jesus Christ to us means to appreciate the mystery of His inexhaustible love, to respond to His teachings, and to worship Him with unflinching integrity. Also to know Him, and to participate in the incarnation of His love, to reach out to the least of our brothers and sisters, and to struggle for truth.

“The irony is that even He suffered persecution, hunger and thirst. He was nailed on the cross and given up for dead. Yet despite the treatment that the world meted out to Him, He taught us about forgiveness and loved us all, Jews and gentiles, affirming the belief that all human beings are born in the image and likeness of God.

“And the inhumanity of man to man would have been vanished, if everyone of us individually, and all communities collectively, with the leaders of the nations, heeded to the heavenly voice, that speaks through the wise men of the children of the Heavenly Father.

“One such wise man would incessantly remind us that before taking any drastic action, remember and let your conscience repeat that:

“To do Evil to Evil is beast-like;
To do Evil to Good is devil-like;
To do Good to Good is human-like;
To do Good to Evil is God-like.”

“And how fitting it is to remind ourselves, as Christians, the Petition for a Life of Contentment, as uttered by a saintly soul, Francis of Assisi:

Lord make me a channel of Thy peace...

“In this kind of spirit God-like love and goodness that will reassure us that hope is not a lost commodity, but a Christian and human duty, and that we should be thankful and feel overjoyed for the little (or the plentiful) that life has bestowed upon us all, as individuals, families, communities and nations.

“Let us pray that the Lord may expedite establishing permanent peace, security, trust and prosperity, for all freedom loving peoples to live in harmony. And restore the moral and social order of civilized society, which has been subjected to such a horrific violence.

Pray for Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Pray for us all indeed.”

With this overriding universal message as his central theme, His Beatitude did not go through the litany of damages sustained and the needs of the Patriarchate. Such needs are real and is incumbent on us as Armenians to be sensitive and be forthcoming with our financial help.

The evening came to a close as His Beatitude accompanied with Ambassador Lemmon cut the welcoming cake which simply said: “Paree yegak”. After his benediction, many came to His Beatitude to receive his blessings.

Despite the late hour, His Beatitude paid a brief visit to the Armenian Embassy where he was welcomed by the assembled Embassy personnel. A brief telephone conversation with the Ambassador capped the evening which came to an end after midnight, with a prayer and blessing for the Armenian people, the Armenian Embassy and its personnel.

F.V.K.