

Armenian Delegation Attends World Council of Churches Meeting in Canberra, Australia

Report by V. Rev. Father Haigazoun Najarian

The Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches convened in Canberra, Australia, February 7-20. The WCC convenes its full assembly every seven years; almost 1000 delegates and 3000 observers and counselors were invited to attend from the 310 member churches of the WCC. The Holy See of Etchmiadzin dispatched a delegation of ten clergy and lay people to the event.

The Delegation from Etchmiadzin was led by Archbishop Nerses Bozabalian, a member of the WCC Central Committee, from Armenia. The other members were Bishop Aghan Baliozian, from Australia; V. Rev. Fr. Vicken Aykazian, member of the Central Committee, Switzerland; V. Rev. Fr. Haigazoun Najarian, USA; Ms Nancy Basmajian, USA; Mrs Anoush Nakashian, Jerusalem; Prof. Hakob Papazian, Armenia; Mrs Karine Pashaian, Armenia; Miss Christine Sakaian, Australia; Prof Parguev Shabazian, Armenia. In addition, V. Rev. Fr. Nourhan Manougian, USA, attended in an advisory capacity.

The WCC regulations stipulate that the composition of each delegation include a certain percentage of women and young people (below the age of 25). The intention of the body is the general unity of Christian churches in the sense of their being in communion with one another. The composition includes nearly all of the mainline Protestant denominations, along with the various churches of the third world, and the Orthodox churches, including the Oriental Orthodox communion, of which the Armenian Church is a member.

The Roman Catholic church is not a member of the WCC; however, it sends observers and non-voting representatives to the Council meetings. There have been serious consultations in recent years to involve the Church of Rome more fully in WCC proceedings. For the first time this year, representatives of Chinese churches were included among the delegates at the WCC.

Representatives from other religions are also invited to observe.

TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

The general theme of the Canberra meeting was "Come Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation." The delegates met on the campus of Australian National University, where they were divided into four subsections, each of which would engage one of the sub-themes of the conference and submit a report at the General Assembly. The four sub-themes for discussion were:

I. GIVER OF LIFE - SUSTAIN YOUR CREATION: discourse focused upon God as the Creator, sustainer of the earth. Our hopes for any kind of renewal must likewise begin with Him.

II. SPIRIT OF TRUTH - SET US FREE: through His life and sacrifice, Christ has set us free; it is only in this realm of human liberation that man - in concert with the Holy Spirit - may be guided to the truth. That truth necessarily involves an understanding of human suffering which calls Christians to share the burdens of other people.

III. SPIRIT OF UNITY - RECONCILE YOUR PEOPLE: While diversity has always been an essential in the Christian tradition, we must not forget that Jesus Christ as God and Saviour is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and so calls all Christians to a full and unified communion.

IV: HOLY SPIRIT - TRANSFORM AND SANCTIFY US: God calls people to be transformed and sanctified. The ecumenical journey has been marked by significant points of growth along the way: churches have moved from a situation of confrontation and coexistence, through comparison and cooperation, to acknowledge their complementarity on the way to communion and visible unity.

ACTIVITIES OF THE DELEGATION FROM ETCHMIADZIN

Early on, the Armenian delegation drafted a paper on the situation in Karabagh, to submit to the Public Issues Committee. With the shadow of the Gulf War looming over the Assembly, the discussion in this Committee focused on response to the activity in the Persian Gulf region; questions about tensions in other areas - including the Baltic States and the Soviet Union - were subordinated to the above concerns. A draft report of the Committee did include a statement of support for the Armenian people of Karabagh, and appealed to the leaders of the Soviet Union to seek peaceful means to secure the human rights of same.

However, the report did not consider the two specific steps urged by the Armenian delegation, namely, the dispatch of a fact-finding team to the Autonomous Region of Karabagh, and the preparation of a booklet on the socio- and geo-political situation of the region. The delegation has resubmitted these proposals, and has taken steps to ensure that they will appear in the final version of the Committee's report.

As a representative church service of the Oriental Orthodox Churches, Archbishop Bozabalian celebrated the Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church on February 10. Fr. Najarian and Fr. Manougian served on the altar. A special Armenian choir - composed of faithful from the Armenian community of Sydney, Australia - traveled to Canberra to participate in the Liturgy. There are some 30,000 Armenians living in Australia today. Most reside in Sydney and Melbourne.

Thus, Armenians from four distant continents came together to worship in the ancient language and tradition that each had preserved, despite their geographical dislocation. The Service was attended by dignitaries from the Orthodox and Protestant Churches, who were deeply moved by the sublime beauty of the occasion. In addition to the morning and evening worship services the Armenian delegation was present at the Greek Orthodox Liturgy as well as at the opening and closing worship services.

ECUMENISM - A QUALIFIED GOOD

Besides splitting the four thematic subgroups, the various delegations divide up along regional lines, so that the Armenian delegates from the United States confer within their subgroup with American representatives of other churches. On the WCC rolls, Armenia itself is considered to be a part of Europe, so the delegates from Armenia conferred with their European counterparts; Armenian delegates took part in the Asian group and the Middle East group as well.

A typical day would begin with a worship service, discussion within the regional and thematic subsections, lectures and discussion on scripture, sessions of the plenary assembly, administrative details. Between the morning worship and the closing evening prayer service, twelve hours elapse. The organizers of the Council planned for the participants to explore the rich culture of Australia - not simply in its contemporary incarnation, but also its expression in the life and traditions of the continent's native aboriginal peoples. To this end, several programs on such themes were offered as part of the activities of the conference.

Fr. Najarian participated in the fourth thematic group, focusing on the action of the Holy Spirit. He spoke to his group about current problems in Armenia, where various religious groups - many of them Christian denominations - have instigated aggressive programs of appropriating the Armenian population for their own sects. While the Holy See welcomes help from sister communities of Christians, it questions whether such wolfish tactics are in the best interest of the flock.

Fr. Najarian went on to suggest that such proselytizing is tantamount to a denial of the life and truth of the Armenian Apostolic Church - and thus opposed to the "weltanschauung" of the WCC, which is based upon a recognition of the cultural diversity within Christianity. His comments were taken to heart by the section, which discussed Fr. Najarian's concerns in their report to the assembly. In other subsections Armenian delegates raised their voices concerning the plight of the Armenians in Karabagh-Artzakh, as well as about the situation in Armenia.

While the movement toward ecumenism is considered by the Armenian Church to be a good, it is regarded as a qualified good. In the process of meeting with representatives of other denominations and even other religions, the Church - not just a particular church but the Church of Christ itself - must not succumb to a loosening of its historical and dogmatic integrity, as this will only lend flaccidity to its Holy Mission on this earth. Concerns about encroaching syncretism and a departure from the basic teachings of and about Christ were expressed by representatives of the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox delegations. These delegates - a group which includes the Armenian participants - have asked the WCC to reflect upon the seriousness with which they regard Jesus Christ as God and Saviour.

According to the Orthodox, the opening invocation of the assembly confused the animated spirits in Eastern religions with the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. In view of this and other theological differences the Orthodox churches proposed to have a Pan-Orthodox meeting which will discuss the role and the future of the Orthodox churches in the WCC. Archbishop Bozabalian suggested Holy Etchmiadzin as the host place for this meeting, something to be considered at a later stage.

Though the Gulf issue, syncretism, and feminism were issues where the churches found themselves divided, "Nonetheless," affirmed Fr. Najarian, "we believe that this kind of meeting might enrich the whole body of the church. The formula devised by St. Nerses Shrnohali in the 12th Century still can hold true for today's ecumenism: 'Unity in important issues; Freedom in secondary issues; Love among all.'"

ԵԿԵՂԵՑԻՆԵՐՈՒ ՄԻՈՒԹԵԱՆ ԵՐՈՒՍԱՂԷՄԻ ՄԷՋ:

Այս տարի, Պարսից Ծոցի մէջ ճարակած պատերազմիմ հետեւամըով, եկեղեցիներու Միութեամբ ամուսնով քառորդ դարէ ի վեր կատարուած արարողութիւնները տեղի ունեցան մուազ համդիսաւորութեամբ եւ մէկ քամիմ զամց առմունեցամ: Բիչ էիմ մաեւ մասմակցող եկեղեցիները: Երկուշաբթի, 21 Յունուարի երեկոյեամ, Ս. Յակոբեամց Մայր Տաճարիմ մէջ կարմ արարողութիւն մը կայացաւ, որու ընթացքիմ մեր սարկաւազները երգեցիմ « Ով Զարմամալի » Մկրտութեամ շարակամը եւ հակիրճ խօսքերով համդէս եկաւ Լուսարարապետ Գերշ. Տ. Դաւիթ Եպս. (սկիզբը) եւ Ամեմ. Ս. Պատրիարք Հայրը (աւարտիմ): Ներկաներէմ իւրաքանչիւրը իր լեզուով արտասամց Տերումակամ աղօթքը:

Կիրակի, 20 Յունուարիմ, Ամկլիքամներու Սէյմթ Ժօրմ եկեղեցւոյ մէջ բացուած աղօթաժողովներու շարքը շարումակունեցաւ Գշ. ԶԶ Յունուարիմ՝ Լուտերականներու եւ Դշ. ԶԶ Յունուարիմ Ֆրանչիսկեաններու Մայր Տաճարիմ մէջ: Հիմզշաբթի օր, ըստ սովորութեամ, Սիոմի վերջիմ ընթաց վերմատամ մէջ տեղի ունեցաւ Էքումեմակամ աղօթք: Զամց առմունեցամ Հապէշաց եւ Ռուսաց եկեղեցիներում մէջ կայամալիք հաւաքոյթները՝ տեղի հեռաւորութեամ, քաղաքակամ ամապահովութեամ եւ խիստ ամապաստ օդիմ պատճառմեւ: Վերջիմ հաւաքոյթը՝ Կիրակի, 27 Յունուարի երեկոյեամ կայացաւ Յոյմ-Կաթօլիկներու եկեղեցւոյ մէջ, ի մերկայութեամ Ասորոց եւ Հապէշաց Եպիսկոպոսներում եւ այլ հոգեւորականներու: Լութֆի Լահիամ Եպս. կուռ ճառով մը կոչ ըրաւ աշխարհի խաղաղութեամ եւ Բրիստոնէական միութեամ: Այդ առթիւ կարդացունեցաւ մաեւ Ն. Ս. Պապիմ մոյմ առաւօտ Ս. Պետրոսի հրապարակիմ վրայ ըրած խաղաղութեամ կոչիմ թարգմանութիւնը: