

THE WITNESS OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH IN THE MIDDLE EAST

– SOME FACTS AND PERSPECTIVES –

The 1700 years of Armenian Christianity can be depicted as a *pilgrimage of faith*; indeed, a pilgrimage of faith that started with the preaching and martyrdom of the two apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, St. Thaddeus and St. Bartholomew and that was given an institutional manifestation through the intervention of St. Gregory the Illuminator in 301.

Discipleship and *martyrdom* have become the most significant features of this pilgrimage of faith that went through crucial periods of upheavals and vicissitudes. Having penetrated all aspects and spheres of Armenian life, the Christian faith has strongly impacted the course of nation's history. It has played a pivotal role in most of the domains and dimensions of national life. The close identification of church and nation had its concrete implications to the witness of the church. Hence, theological reflection and diakonal engagement, liturgical action and political involvement, spiritual inreach and missionary outreach have become, in their intimate and dynamic inter-connectedness, the salient marks of our Christian discipleship.

The Christian faith is an incarnational reality in our life. Theology is not merely a discourse about God; it is dialogue with God. Liturgy is not a memorial service; it is the living re-enactment of Christ-event. Spirituality is not confined to ecclesial domain; it has always embraced the totality of Armenian life. Our perceptions and perspectives, our actions and our way of life, simply the very texture of our being and the ethos of our history, have been transformed by Gospel values to the extent that discipleship has often been translated by martyria in life and even in death. All the major events and developments, the mysteries and achievements of Armenian history acquire their true meaning when they are seen in this perspective.

In my introductory remarks, I will not dwell on matters pertaining to the history of the Armenian Church. Nor will I give an extensive and elaborate treatment of the Armenian Christian witness that is so rich in depth, so multi-faceted in nature and so vast in scope. This Conference will wrestle, though succinctly, with the various aspects and dimensions of our pilgrimage of faith within the context of the Middle East. Although the scope of the theme and the time allotted for this Conference impose limitations, I am sure that the speakers will be able to spotlight a number of basic facts and will tackle major concerns and issues that are of decisive importance to grasp the particularity of the Armenian Christian witness in the Middle East. I will focus my reflections on the emerging realities and prospects, perspectives and challenges that we actually face in our Christian witness within the total spectrum of Christian presence and witness in this region.

The church is both a local and a global reality. For the Armenian Church, this is not merely an ecclesiological concept. It is a reality of existential nature. Born and formed as

a church *in* Armenia, the Armenian Church then became the church *of* Armenians *in* Cilicia and later *in* the diaspora. Today, the Armenian Church is present in nearly all parts of the globe; it is a global reality. This situation raises fundamental questions for the church: the inter-action between the local and the global is generating tensions and dilemmas; the growing contextualization of the church particularly in Western societies, to cope with the expectations of the younger generations, is opening the church to uncertain horizons; the growing exposure of the church to the secularist trends and forces of globalization is leading the church to new directions. If these developments and processes are not taken seriously at this juncture, they may jeopardize the identity, integrity and credibility of the Armenian Church. Today the great challenge before our church is how to maintain its specificity and make its vocation credible in its inter-action with the globalized world.

The context in which the witness of the Armenian Church will be treated in this Conference is the Middle East. Regarding the Middle East, it is important to remind ourselves of three points:

First, the Middle East displays a rich diversity of religions, races, cultures and traditions. The church of Christ, on both a larger or a smaller scale, is present here in all its expressions and ramifications. The churches have witnessed Christ under continuous persecutions, hardships and even massacres. Due to its distinct ethnic and cultural identity, the Armenian Church has a unique place in Middle Eastern Christianity.

Second, the Armenian presence in this region dates back to the time before Christ. The Armenians have emerged as organized communities after the 11th Century, with the creation of an Armenian independent state in Cilicia. In 1915-1916, more than two million Armenians, the survivors of the Genocide, took refuge in the countries of the Middle East. Almost one quarter of this number settled in the region and the rest migrated to Western countries. The years extending from 1915 to 1940 can be characterized as a period of recovery, and from 1945 to 1960 as a period of re-organization. The renaissance of the Armenian Communities in the Middle East began in the 1960's, particularly with the land-mark celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide in 1965.

Third, this part of the world has always been at the center of world attention. The clash and dialogue of religions, cultures, civilizations and races have marked the history of this region from the remotest period of human history. The churches, which are integral to the societies of the Middle East, are, in one way or another, affected by the developments that are taking place in the area. The rise of religio-centricity, the struggle for economic and social equality, Arab-Israeli conflict, the growing migration of Christians and other major problems have, in fact, direct repercussions to Christian witness. The churches must respond to these realities and concerns within the purview of their missionary calling.

Where is the Armenian Church at this point of the history of the Middle East? Our church must clearly redefine and re-articulate its vocation vis-à-vis the tremendous changes that are occurring in its own life and milieu. Our church has entered a new era of

what I like to call *self-awareness, self-discovery, and self-assessment*. Is this not also true of all the churches of the Middle East? What are the challenges and implications of this present predicament? I would like to identify a few areas and concerns of pivotal importance.

1) *Towards a deeper integration*. The Armenian Communities in the Middle East have different histories from each other, quite different processes of formation, and are located in different socio-economic, politico-religious and cultural contexts. Such as living as Armenian Church in Cyprus, in Iran, in Lebanon or in Kuwait are not the same. These distinct environments have produced distinct communities. However, it is highly significant to note that in all of these communities, the Armenians have been able to maintain their identity and safeguard their integrity. Furthermore, it must be noted that the strenuous efforts of the Armenians to remain different vis-à-vis their surrounding have often led them to a self-centered existence.

After the Genocide, survival was a major concern for our church and as such it became the driving force of its witness. This period is now over. Our communities are well established and organized in the region. We must drop our attitude of disengagement and disintegration and engage in critical openness. I firmly believe that the distinct identity of a church or a community is not preserved in a self-contained existence, but in creative dialogue with others. Therefore, the Armenian Church must gradually move towards dynamic and mutually enriching inter-action with its environment. Such a deliberate move, however, must not lead our people to situations in which assimilation may become a real danger. Our church and culture will undoubtedly remain a strong bulwark against this possibility.

2) *The migration of Christians from the Middle East*. This is an urgent matter. Political upheavals, unstable economic situation and the lack of a comprehensive and just peace have caused many Christians, including the faithful of my own church, to leave the region. The churches of the Middle East have repeatedly expressed their common concern about the migration. Christianity has become a creative and dominant force in the spiritual, cultural, economic and political spheres of life in the region, as well as in the promotion of human and moral values. This active Christian presence and creative witness is an intimate part of the history of the region.

The Armenian Church, which has contributed significantly to Christian witness and played an important part in the major developments in the region, can perform a particular role in strengthening the attachment of Christians to these lands. Such a role may become meaningful and efficacious especially in the area of ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue:

a) Church unity must become a top priority on the agenda of the churches. Being a minority in a predominantly Moslem milieu, the churches can no longer afford to live in isolation from each other. Sticking to theological and liturgical differences are no more an expression of identity; it causes stagnation and marginalization. The churches must manifest their fellowship and common calling more visibly and tangibly. They must also

deepen their ecumenical partnership with the churches outside the region. The ecumenical involvement of our churches, however, should not lead them to adopt patterns of thinking, ways of witnessing or models of fulfilling their vocation that are foreign to their ethos.

Ecumenical commitment has been one of the characteristic features of the Armenian Church. The ecumenical engagement of the Armenian Church, which started in the 12th century, through theological dialogue with the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, did not endanger its identity. Rather, it made our church become more aware of its own identity and of the imperative of Christian unity. Therefore, I believe that the Armenian Church, with its spirit of openness, rich ecumenical experience and firm commitment to ecumenical cause, can play a significant role in broadening and deepening ecumenical dialogue and collaboration among the churches.

b) Another important area where the Armenian Church may become an active player is Christian-Moslem dialogue. Dialogue is not a concept, but an integral and vital part of our daily life. It has been both a source of mutual enrichment and a cause of conflicts and crisis in the Middle East. The Armenian Church has a long experience of co-existence with Islam: in Armenia in the 8th and 9th Centuries, in Cilicia from the 11th to the 15th Centuries and in the Ottoman Empire from the 16th to the 20th Century. Our church has also engaged in dialogical inter-action with Islam in the Middle East including Iran. We have gained valuable experience in Christian-Moslem co-existence. This experience should be shared with the churches.

3) *The crucial importance of inner evangelism.* Evangelism has always been the heart of the Armenian Christian witness. Due to historical circumstances evangelism has been mainly carried out as the in-reach rather than the out-reach of the church. However, the evangelistic out-reach of the Armenian Church in Armenia's neighboring countries, Georgia, Albania and Cilicia, is a well-established historical fact.

Because of its own ethnic and cultural particularities as well as inter-faith sensitivities, the Armenian Church in the Middle East has conceived and implemented its evangelistic witness as the in-going of the church i.e. inner conversion, re-vitalization of Gospel values in the life of people. In view of increasing penetration of secular values and traditions and the growing impact of globalization, our church is called to give a new impetus to its evangelistic task. There exist "de-christianized" areas in our Christian life that need to be re-evangelized. Hence, the Armenian Church must develop new models and forms of evangelism. Its evangelism must be responsive to the new realities and concerns. What does it mean to live as Armenian Christian in the context of the Middle East? What are the imperatives, challenges and implications of being Christian in a Moslem environment? How can the church remain obedient to the Gospel and, at the same time, be responsive to the changing context of the Middle East?

The Armenian Church must constantly and responsibly address these issues in its evangelistic work. The youth and women in particular are posing questions to the church. They have expectations from the church. They need guidance from their church. The

church cannot remain silent and indifferent. It must become relevant and reliable in its evangelistic task. In fact, liturgical reform, initiation of youth ministries, re-establishment of women's order, re-activation of ladies guilds and youth associations, organization of popular lecture series and special seminars for women and youth on issues of common concern are vital if we are to bring a new dynamism and relevance to the evangelistic witness of the Armenian Church.

4) *Renewed efforts to re-organize Christian education.* Christian education, both formal and informal, remains for our church a matter of deep concern. More than ever it is a major instrument for Christian formation and an efficient means of Christian witness. Our church must make Christian education in all its aspects and domains a priority. Our methodologies must be revised, programs must be renewed and priorities must be redefined. We must promote a kind of Christian training that will enable the men and women, the children and youth and people from all walks of life to make the Gospel values integral to their daily life. We must provide the kind of education that helps Christians to find meaning in their lives and that brings quality and guidance to their life.

While attempting to develop new educational models and strategies, we cannot ignore the context in which our church is called to carry on its witness. In fact, religious and cultural pluralism and the clash of eastern and western values and traditions should be taken seriously. Therefore, we must revise our Christian education so that our faithful may engage their neighbors in a meaningful dialogue based on mutual love and respect.

Particular attention should be given to *family* and *school*. Family is the basis of a community. This is particularly true in the Armenian Church which has always considered the family as a "small church". Christian formation starts in the family. We must therefore uphold the sacredness of family and re-strengthen its unique role in promoting Christian values. For the Armenians the school is a sort of "extension" of the church because of the significant part it plays in the process of Christian formation. Due to restrictions imposed by many governments on the curriculum, the courses dealing with religion, ethics and education are getting increasingly marginalized and even neglected. We must address this acute concern properly. We must explore other means and ways to enable the school recover and rediscover its educational task as a partner with the church. In this context we cannot of course ignore the Sunday school, which continues to remain an important tool for Christian education.

5) *Diakonia: a major instrument of Christian witness.* Since its inception, the Armenian Church has given a special importance to diakonia. In fact, diakonia in all its aspects, dimensions and manifestations has become one of the most efficient ways of taking the Gospel to the people, and a concrete expression of church's identification with the people. It is significant to note that the Armenian Church has been described as a serving church. Diakonia has become a second name for the Armenian Church. Throughout the history of our people, the church has assumed a prophetic diakonia as a unifying factor, as community-builder and as the trustee of religious values and traditions and even of its national dreams.

In the context of the Middle East, the Armenian Church has achieved a great deal in the various areas of social diakonia. It has also been the avant-guard in the sphere of political diakonia, particularly in respect to the issues of justice, peace and human rights. I am sure that the speakers will make an objective assessment of the diakonal role of our church and will provide you with some concrete figures and facts in this respect. On this point, I want to share with you just a few concerns and perspectives: a) in view of the great changes in the norms and life-styles of Middle Eastern societies and growing shift of priority needs, it is time that we renew our theology, methodology and strategy of diakonia; b) it is necessary that diakonia go beyond its institutional expressions and limits and become people-oriented action embracing the whole of people and touching their daily life; c) we need to develop a broader vision of diakonia, one that may take the Christian witness beyond its Christian boundaries to share God's gifts and love with others, irrespective of religion and race.

To achieve such an ambitious goal, the Armenian Church must embark on a dynamic process of *renewal*. Our church can no more remain a mere vestige of ancient traditions and the custodian of spiritual values. In fact, critical self-assessment, realistic re-evaluation of its changing environment, and redefinition of its vocation are *sine qua non* conditions for a serious and comprehensive renewal. A church cannot survive without witness, and renewal is essential for an efficacious witness.

It is the committed people who will translate into life the church's God-given mandate. Hence, we need people, visionary young people, men and women, lay and ordained who will, with renewed hope and vision and sense of discipleship, lead the pilgrimage of faith of the Armenian Church in the pluralistic context of the globalized world and in the turmoil of the Middle East. To reach this point, we must invest in people, rather than on structures and programs.

In the past our church played a pivotal role in the *physical* survival of our people. In the present world, in which our people are constantly invaded by dehumanizing and de-Christianizing values and by the forces of globalization and secularization, the Armenian Church is called to lead its people with a forward-looking vision towards *spiritual* survival through a creative witness and the process of renewal. I believe that this is the greatest challenge of the 1700th anniversary of the baptism of the Armenian people.

ARAM I
CATHOLICOS OF CILICIA

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