

**BEING DIFFERENT IS
GOD'S GIFT AND CALL**
(Dialogue with the youth– Number 6)

It has been a consistent truth that when individuals and communities have blindly affirmed their 'difference', they have generated religious, national and cultural tensions. This exclusive behaviour has more times than not led to alienation. We should avoid this sort of exclusive and alienating behaviour. In fact, acknowledging diversity is an important aspect of Christianity.

Diversity is manifest in God's nature as Trinity and is an essential part of His revelation and work. For Christians, therefore, diversity is a profoundly important concept.

1) **Diversity is God's Gift.** God created for us a world of diversity. God-given diversity is sustained by coherence and interaction, wholeness and integrity. Diversity, which is a dominant feature of the human race, has produced identities and roots.

2) **Diversity is God's Call.** God called people to be the steward of His creation, to be His 'co-worker'. What a distinct privilege, indeed. We are called to witness the richness of diversity and preserve and enhance it for the fulfilment of God's design for humanity and creation.

Today we are living in multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious societies. As Armenian Christians how should we respond to God's call to preserve and protect diversity? The direction we should take to deal responsibly with pluralism in the context of our Christian self-understanding and vocation is clear, we must:

a) *Affirm our identity.* Roots shape identity, ensure continuity, safeguard integrity and give security. Because identity is not only a social necessity but also a vital dimension of human existence and self-understanding, in order to occupy a specific place in human society, we must remain faithful to our identity. In order to give substance and meaning to our life, we must attach ourselves firmly to those values, traditions and beliefs that constitute our specific identity.

b) *Respect the other's identity.* While we should remain faithful to our identity, we must respect the other's identity. Affirming our identity does not mean becoming its prisoner. The other is not our enemy; he or she is our neighbour, our fellow human being. Hence, we do not have the right, under any circumstances, to impose our values and reject those of the other. Mutual respect and mutual acceptance must determine the way we treat each other.

c) *Understand ourselves in relation to the other.* The globalised and interdependent world of today compels us to broaden our sense of identity. I am because you are, and you are because I am; we are, indeed, interconnected. Self-centred and self-contained identity breed intolerance. When we recognize the values of the other, we gain strength and become responsive to the challenges of our times.

d) *Work towards deepening common values.* Living together with others as a community means that our values and perspectives, our traditions and beliefs are in harmony with the other. Living together may produce harmonious community in one place; yet, in other place, it may engender fragmentation. Therefore, we must commit

ourselves to a dialogue of values; we must also deepen the core values rooted in our belief systems, in our cultures and our common humanity.

e) *Learn to live as a community of diversities.* God not only created us to be different, He also called us to live together peacefully with our differences. This is precisely the Christian understanding of community which implies diversity. When diversities creatively interact, then community is built; when diversities collide, then community is destroyed. Societies cannot progress without diversities. And the community is enriched and strengthened by reconciled diversities.*

In our 'global village', we have become global citizens; we have become interdependent. We are no longer strangers; we are neighbours. We share many things with our fellow human beings. We have commonalities, but we also have differences. Because God created us different, we must respect the other's right to be different. Rejecting the other as an expression of our faithfulness to our values and identity will polarize us and lead to violence. By rejecting the other, we deny his or her humanity. Rejection creates exclusiveness and exclusiveness fragments the community. Our differences must interact, not collide; they must lead us to dialogue, not isolation. We must transform living together into a source of mutual responsibility and accountability.

The Armenian people have a long and rich experience of living together with others. Interaction with our environment has fostered our resolve to preserve our identity. It has also helped us to broaden our perspectives, enhance our knowledge and enrich our experience. Indeed, the very fact that a church of apostolic origin, the Armenian Church, and an ancient people, the Armenian people, have survived the upheavals and vicissitudes of history is an eloquent testimony to the courage, openness and commitment to live as community in the midst of diversities. The same vision should guide us today. The youth have a pivotal role to play in this respect.

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* I have elaborated some of these thoughts in my new book, *For a Church beyond its walls*, which is under publication.