

ON THE RENEWAL OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

(Dialogue with the Youth– Number 10)

In the *Dialogue with the Youth – Number 7*, I succinctly discussed the renewal of the Armenian Church by spotlighting a few concerns. The renewal of the Armenian Church is so complex in nature and extensive in scope that it is not possible to deal with it properly within the framework of a pastoral letter. By raising questions pertaining to the renewal of the Armenian Church, I intend to remind ourselves the pivotal importance of renewal, and second, by sharing a few thoughts with our youth, I intend to challenging them to engage in this process through reflection and discussion.

We must bear in mind that the church is essentially a community of faith built on Jesus Christ. The church is not a reality out there, it does not exist outside of our lives, our thoughts and our concerns. We are the church, the people of God united in Christ and joined together with the bond of love and sustained by a common hope and vision. The prevailing misconception that the church is a mere institution needs to be corrected. The institutional expression of the church must not be confused with its nature, its essence must not be altered by its form. In the church, the divine and the human, the ecclesial and the societal, the eternal and the timely, the transcendent and the imminent embrace each other. However, the qualitative difference between the divine and the human dimensions need be clearly distinguished.

As we seek to renew the Armenian Church in a new world context, I believe that we must seriously consider the following:

1) **The Armenian Church is the people's church.** This reality is concretely articulated in all aspects and areas of the church's life and witness. The concept of 'national church' has different connotations in different socio-religious settings. In the Armenian Church it denotes the intimate interaction between church and people. Indeed, through its spiritual, educational, social and humanitarian programmes and activities the Armenian Church is so deeply involved in the daily life of the people that it is simply impossible to draw a line of demarcation between the church and the people. Our Church's living presence and transforming role permeate the entire life of the nation. They are a source of spiritual renewal, richness and strength both for the Church and the Nation. However, excessive emphasis on the national character of the Church may

expose it to the blunt intervention of state or political structures into the internal church affairs. Such behavior weakens the Church's strength, undermines its authority and jeopardizes its integrity.

2) **A Church with a multi-faceted mission.** In its mission our Church embraces most of the spheres, dimensions and manifestations of the community's life. In fact, not only has the Church invented the Armenian alphabet, it has also played a significant part in enriching the nation's culture. Not only has the Church defended the rights of its people for justice and freedom, it has also assumed a remarkable role in pursuing the Armenian cause. Not only has the Church emphasized the vital importance of social justice and humanitarian aid, it has also established welfare institutions, orphanages and hospitals. Not only has the Church promoted educational values, it has also established large networks of community schools. Our Church must preserve multi-dimensional character and comprehensive nature of its mission. But, in view of the growing and diversifying needs and challenges of our communities, the Church is called first, to review its traditional programmes and methodologies in order to make its witness more efficient and relevant, and second, to clearly spell out its priorities, laying a particular emphasis on the spiritual and moral aspects of its witness. .

3) **A participatory Church.** One of the characteristic features of our Church is the full participation of the people in the Church's total life. Men and women, disabled and youth, people from all walks of life without any discrimination contribute, in one way or another and on a larger or smaller scale, to the witness of the Church. The Armenian Church is not strictly a clerical church, it is open to the people. Laity takes an active part in almost all aspects of the Church's life and mission, including decision-making structures and processes, and often with a determining voice. The people-based and people-oriented character of the Church must be further enhanced. However, the nature and the limits of the participation of laity in church matters and structures be clearly defined. Otherwise, it may eventually weaken the Church's spiritual character, ecclesial integrity and prophetic vocation. The Armenian Church, both in Armenia and Diaspora, must be extremely careful to this potential danger at a period where secular interests and values are increasingly becoming dominant in the life of societies.

4) **The Church: identity marker.** Religion is a strong identity marker in many societies. In Christianity, the inter-relation of faith and culture is an area of profound

ecclesiological and sociological importance and implications. Due to ecclesiological self-understanding and historical circumstances, the Armenian Church has become a major player in nation-building. It has become a powerful promoter of national values and aspirations. Today, particularly in a diaspora situation, the community life *de facto* evolves around the church. With its cultural and educational role, and as a custodian of national values and traditions, the Church plays an instrumental part in forming, preserving and enhancing the Armenian identity. In globalized societies particularly in the West, in which all sorts of distinctions and specificities are increasingly disappearing, this unique role of the Church has undoubtedly become even more urgent and crucial.

It is vitally important therefore that well-defined criteria be established for the renewal of the Armenian Church, taking into account all these considerations. Abrupt decisions and arbitrary changes will create further confusion. Change is not always constructive; it could distort the identity of the church and endanger its integrity. What guidelines should be established to lead the church in its renewal efforts? To this effect and as a follow up to my previous dialogue with the youth, I would like to make a few observations:

a) *To blend tradition and modernity*. Generally people think that tradition and modernity are in conflict. In my view, they complement each other. For some, tradition means old, outdated, referring to the past and with no relevance to the present. This is a misconception of tradition. Tradition is always alive in the self-understanding and self-expression of a community. It is existentially articulated through the values, aspirations, and way of life of a community. For some, modernity means rejecting the old and turning to the new. Again, this is a misunderstanding. Modernity signifies the human effort to keep pace with the changing times and realities. We cannot build and sustain community without tradition. It is equally true that we cannot make a community credible, viable and an integral part of modern societies without opening its traditions and values to new conditions and challenges.

Hence, a critical and creative interaction between tradition and modernity is imperative. We must avoid extremes: we must neither blindly reject conservatism, nor uncritically embrace modernism. Through a critical dialogue, tradition and modernity must strengthen and challenge each other. We must develop new approaches and outlooks in dealing with our church traditions. We must keep the essence and specificity

of the ancient traditions, while make them more reliable and responsive to new concerns and expectations. Adapting the church to new times is a critical and arduous task that requires clear strategy, new methodology, and long-term planning.

b) ***To strengthen the relation between the local and the global.*** The church is both a local and a global reality. These dimensions of the church condition each other. Our Church lives in different local contexts; it is also a global church exposed to global changes and a multitude of problems and influences. Today, in many parts of the world, including Armenia, our Church displays a picture of distorted traditions, disconnected practices and disoriented perceptions almost in all spheres of its life. To respond to changing circumstances and expectations of the people, our dioceses and even parishes have, each in its own way, already engaged in 'reformation'. The continuation of these hasty changes may lead the church to even greater disintegration.

First and foremost, we must recognize that the growing trends towards localization on the one hand, and lack of serious attempt to establish a meaningful interaction between the global and the local on the other hand, may eventually endanger the very identity and the wholeness of our Church.

In the renewal process the basic traditions, teachings and practices of the Church must be maintained, namely those elements that ensure the continuity, unity and specificity of the Armenian Church. At the same time, our Church must have the courage to adapt its traditions to local conditions and needs.

c) ***To make the Church's interaction with its environment more dynamic and creative.*** The survival of a community or a structure in society is basically determined, besides its firm attachment to its values, traditions and dreams, by its openness and relevance. A self-centered and introverted community or structure cannot survive. Interaction and interdependence, interconnection and interpenetration, brought about by globalization, are salient marks of modern societies.

The Armenian Church cannot organize itself, reactivate its missionary outreach, and revitalize its community life as a self-centered and self-sufficient institution. It must engage in a meaningful dialogue with its environment. It must constantly grapple with issues and challenges facing the society in which it is called to give witness to the Gospel. Besides inter-church collaboration, inter-faith dialogue, which has become a

major feature of modern societies, cannot be ignored by the Armenian Church. Our Church cannot ignore also socio-ethical issues facing the modern societies. These factors and issues affect, in one way or another, the self-understanding and self-fulfillment of our Church.

These are only a few reflections that need to be further deepened and be given due consideration in the renewal of the Armenian Church (I have addressed some of the issues concerning the renewal of our Church in my book, *The Armenian Church Beyond the 1700th Anniversary*, 2002, Antelias).

Our Church is one of the ancient churches of the world Christendom. It must know how to remain young; it must not become a petrified institution but a church for the 21st Century. Our Church must be in tune with its time. Its theology must become more intelligible, its liturgy more attractive, its clergy more educated, its mission more evangelistic, its education more spiritual, its service more effective and its message more prophetic. It must reach the unreached and even the unreachable. This is not being a progressive or modern church, but a responsive church (In this context, you may read my new book, *For a Church Beyond its Walls*, 2007 Antelias).

Our Church is facing multiform problems and challenges related both to its internal life and to its relations with its environment. These problems and challenges may soon become intractable if we do not wrestle with them responsibly. Cosmetic approaches, provisional arrangements and superficial changes will never ensure the renewal of the Armenian Church. We must go beyond slogans and nice statements. We need new paradigms, a new vision, and a critical self-assessment. Renewal is crucial for the future of the Armenian Church; we must take it most seriously.

I consider the active participation of the youth in the renewal of the Armenian Church of paramount importance. With their fresh ideas, creative imagination, challenging views and critical approach, they will bring a new vitality to our Church. The growing involvement of the youth in the various functions of the Church is encouraging. In order to make the youth identify with their Church, the Church must have the vision to identify itself with the youth, with their concerns and perspectives, frustrations and expectations. Our Church must be a spiritual haven for its youth, where they can protect themselves from the powerful storms and tsunamis of new times.

The reports that I receive from the Youth Department of our Catholicosate, as well as from the youth activities of our Prelacies, are promising. We must build on what we have achieved thus far and look forward with renewed faith and vision.

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