

P. O. BOX 172

MONMOUTH BEACH, N. J. 07750

September 29, 1976

TO: Parish Council Members, Diocesan Delegates, and Clergymen.

All Parishes in the Diocese of the Armenian Church of
North America.

Dear Fellow Church Member:

We are a body organized to protect constitutional democracy in the Armenian Church. We believe that the true power conferred upon the church rests ultimately with the people of the church.

The article we have enclosed entitled " The Elberon Experiment - Dictatorship or Democracy within the Armenian Church" gives a history of the conflict we have faced in Elberon, New Jersey as we have struggled against the rule of autocratic men who have abandoned our age-old emphasis on the rule of law.

We urge you to read this article, because you are the people in whom all power resides. It is only through you that the laws of our church can be defended. You alone can implement the changes that we recommend in the person of your Diocesan delegates and through your concerted action.

Respectfully yours,

The Executive Council for the
Action Committee For The Protection
Of Rights Of Members Of The
Armenian Church, Inc.

ACTION COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION OF RIGHTS OF MEMBERS OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH INCORPORATED

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THE ELBERON EXPERIMENT

Dictatorship OR DEMOCRACY

within the

ARMENIAN CHURCH

Dated: September 29, 1976

A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION

We are the Action Committee For The Protection Of The Rights Of Members Of The Armenian Church, an organization formed by certain communicants of St. Mary's Armenian Church in Elberon, New Jersey who have been bonafide members from four to twenty-one years.

We wish to acquaint you with our organization, with our cause, and with our aims, because we believe that what began in Elberon, New Jersey as a local conflict has now escalated into a problem of national significance. We believe that what began as an encroachment upon our local freedom has now become a threat to your freedom. We come to you then not merely as suppliants seeking your attention and help, but as heralds proclaiming to you that your own freedom is at stake. What we suffer, dear brothers, is not alien to your interests. What we suffer is a harbinger of your own suffering.

Therefore, we beg you to hear us out, for what we say pertains to you as well. What we say is not merely the sputterings of a small faction in a small church, but rather a voice crying out to you from a church violated by an enemy who will take courage from indifference to reach out his hand even to you who feel secure because you are not small.

Some of you may have heard that our conflict has something to do with a priest named Der Hayr Vertanes Kalayjian or with an alleged invasion by Tashnags. Neither problem is the real issue; the real issue is an abuse of church authority by our Primate. He has acted not as the elected representative of a free church but as a tyrant who feels he can suspend or impose at will the by-laws formulated by all of us for the protection of our rights.

Before we set forth our cause, a little history and description of our conflict in Elberon is necessary. Today, there are three factions at Elberon representing three major points of view. The first faction is one that is neither Tashnag nor sympathetic to the Tashnag movement, but one committed to the re-instatement of Der Hayr Vertanes Kalayjian. These people are in pragmatic union

with the second faction whose members are Tashnag or sympathetic to the Tashnag movement. These two factions have a pragmatic association: the former has only one objective, namely, the reinstatement of Der Hayr Vertanes Kalayjian; but it has accepted the concept of unity with the Tashnags or Tashnag sympathizers as an effective lever for gaining its objective. The second faction has one overriding desire, namely, the presence of Tashnag and Tashnag sympathizers in our Church as an organized group on an equal footing with the rest of us. Their professed concern is a parliamentary concept in which the various political beliefs of the Armenian community are represented in the person of adherents or sympathizers on an equal footing in the governing and educational organizations of our Church. Their concern also, is that organizations representing their point of view find welcome in our church as equals with organizations representing our traditional position.

This second faction, this political faction, is the most powerful and the best organized of the three having ties as it does with groups outside the church. As a secondary concern, and as a point of pragmatic unity with the first faction this group too, has supported the claims of Der Hayr Kalayjian.

The third faction which the Action Committee hopes to represent is composed of non-Tashnags who do not sympathize with the Tashnag movement and who are opposed to the reinstatement of Der Hayr Kalayjian.

In the beginning of our disputes there were only two factions: those for the pastor and those opposed to him. The Tashnag faction entered in the fray at the invitation of the Der Hayr under the pretext of seeking unity, a unity opposed to everything we believe.

The role of our Primate in the conflict is not entirely clear. It appears that in an effort at grass roots unity with the Tashnag Anteliasagan Church Elberon has been selected as a model experiment for such unity. Rather than achieve unity at the top where dual and rival positions of power might be threatened, an experiment at unity has been foisted upon one of the smallest parishes of our Church.

At the height of the fray over the pastor, the Primate suspended his pastorate and also dissolved the lawful and duly elected parish council for no reason other than the Primate's conviction that the parish council "could not control the situation", a situation created by a cadre of militant supporters of Der Hayr who had the audacity to picket the Cathedral in New York.

This dissolution of the parish council, which had been elected in 1975, has no precedent in our church. It was done solely on the Primate's own authority and apart from the by-laws of our church. The will of the parish assembly that elected the council was set aside by a mere fiat of the Primate.

Having violated our freedom in this manner, the Primate then appointed an interim parish council including some men who had not even been members of our parish. This parish council was not recognized by the older members. As a compromise the Primate authorized the combining of the new interim parish council with the original elected parish council.

In the meantime, the Tashnag oriented faction encouraged by the Primate's apparent support grew ever more militant. Finally, as the ultimate repression of freedom in our parish our Primate on his own authority suspended the six months voting membership rule in the by-laws in preparation for a new election for a new parish council six or seven months before the time appointed by our church rules. In April 1976, the Primate and Diocesan Council directed that a parish election be held in June 1976 for all parish council positions. They also requested the resignation of the diocesan delegate whom the parish had elected in 1975.

The Primate and Diocesan Council directed that voting eligibility was to be conferred on any individual who paid \$15.00 dues and who signed a membership card by May 1976. The by-law requirement of a six month membership status for voting eligibility was waived. No examinations of the new membership applications was made to determine if, indeed, they were baptized communicant members of any Armenian Lousavortchagan Church or currently voting members of any other church. The Tashnag oriented faction in concert with the faction supporting the Der Hayr engaged in a vigorous campaign to enlist as many voting members as possible before the election, thus stuffing the voting membership rolls with members favoring their views. The May 1976 membership roll rose to 192 from the February 1975 roll of 117.

In their unscrupulous zeal to overcome us, they brought in (and in some cases paid for the membership dues of) persons who had never been members of our church. Some, in fact, of the new members were current members of the Seventh Day Adventist Church who also happened to be active in the Armenian Cultural Association, an organization created by the same persons who were stuffing our membership. Some others were current members of the Roman Catholic Church and other odar churches.

In protest against this burlesque of an election, Mr. Barkave Elian, Esq., the Chairman of the original parish council sent a letter of protest. This protest was not accorded discussion at the Diocesan Assembly. Instead, the Elberon problem was tabled rather than debated on the orders of the Primate.

Feeling as we did that the resultant election would be a farce, those in support of the protest chose not to vote or run for office though asked to do so, for in so voting or running we would have given some semblance of lawfulness to the illegal election imposed upon us by an act of episcopal tyranny.

As a result of our boycott of the election and the ineligibility of the new members to assume office, only half the slate required by the by-laws could be empaneled, thus rendering the election "no election". The people, therefore, were given no choice, and the present parish council was chosen by default.

On June 13, 1976, the election took place resulting in a take over of our church by Tashnag oriented persons who, within the space of a few weeks brought in the Armenian Relief Society- a Tashnag affiliated organization- for yard sales at our church in order to raise funds not for the church, but for themselves. The church as we see it now, is a clubhouse for people who put politics above faith. They attend as groups. They do not come so much to worship as to serve the interests of their party. Much has been made of the fact that legal title to our Church remains in the hands of the denomination, but we feel that is an empty fact if the church property regardless of title is used by groups alien to our tradition. We no longer feel welcome in our own patrimony. It bewilders us that we who support Etchmiadzin are second-class members of the church, while schismatics enjoy control and full use of the church.

We say these hard things not because we oppose the reconciliation of all Armenian Christians in one church, but because we feel that deceit, divided loyalties, the precedence of party over church, and the use of worldly tactics are not the means to this desired end. We have just terms for reconciliation here in Elberon, and these must be accepted before unity can take place. These terms can be expressed in the form of general principles and in concrete proposals designed to implement the principles.

The general principles that we wish to implement in our church are as follows:

1. Tashnags and Tashnag sympathizers are welcome in our church as individuals, but not as a party. The individual Tashnag in our church has the right to believe every Tashnag principle, except the one that refuses submission to our Catholicos as the supreme administrative as well as spiritual head of our church. It is not acceptable to us for anyone to accept the spiritual headship of our Catholicos while rejecting his administrative headship. If a Tashnag accepts the full headship of our Catholicos, including his rightful precedence over the patriarch at Antelias, he is welcome in our church as an individual. In summation, we will not tolerate the presence of Tashnags or any other political groups as organizations or associations within the church.
2. Our church must maintain absolute neutrality in political matters. By every means available we must maintain our church as a purely religious body free of all political loyalties and ties. Caesaropapism, the rule of the church by King or by a political group, has been the great curse of all the Eastern Churches; but it is something which we Americans blessed by freedom can remove forever from the church. No secular power or belief has the right to any influence in Christ's church.
3. That measure of local autonomy, consistent with our history as a free church, which our Primate has taken from us must be restored to us. We believe in a church polity of shared authority. We believe that the primate has limits to his authority and that those limits are in our by-laws.
4. We believe that a clearly prescribed procedure for the call or rejection of a priest should be written into our by-laws, a procedure that gives the last word to the local parish as to acceptance or rejection of a priest.

5. We insist on legal safeguards against unfair elections in which our by-laws are suspended simply at the will of the Primate or the Diocesan Council thus leading to the stuffing of voting membership rolls with unworthy members and also to other irregularities.

6. We aim at the creation of an independent body in our national church that is competent to act in judicial review of the executive actions of our Primate and Diocesan Council. As a court of appeal for local parishes this body can check and balance any pretensions to imperial power on the part of our Primate or Diocesan Council.

7. We seek revisions of our by-laws that will effect a greater accountability to the people by all officers of the church whether lay or clerical. Christ taught us in the washing of His disciples' feet at the Last Supper that authority among Christians is not for lordship over others but for service to their needs. When a churchman whether lay or clerical begins to lord it over his brothers he has become a pagan in practice. Jesus said that the heathen love to lord it over each other, "...but ye shall not be so", Luke 22:24.

This then, brings us to our appeal. The Primate and Diocesan Council have directed that another election be held in January, 1977, for a new parish council for St. Mary's Armenian Church in Elberon. That council will be the fifth parish council in the space of two years! In that period, we shall have had: the original lawful council, freely elected by the parish assembly in 1975 (whose term has not yet expired), an interim council appointed by the Primate, a combined council, the illegal council elected this last June, and the council to be elected in January next!

By then the new "members" of our church will be fully qualified - on paper- to assume office. Something must be done before January to assure justice for us and safety for yourselves. The same Primate and Diocesan Council that exercised tyranny over us is also ready in due time to exercise tyranny over you. We want you to understand that we are not simply an ad hoc group organized for a particular local problem, but an on-going fellowship organized to serve the interests of all Armenians in the Etchmiadzagan church.

You know now what our cause is, and you also know some of our aims both for ourselves locally and for the whole church nationally. Now we appeal to you. You, brothers, are the people! You brothers are the church! All power inheres in you. We urge you to remember this fact of popular power we have learned from our American experience as Armenian-Americans. Our brothers newly arrived from the Middle East have not yet experienced the liberation we have found in America. It is our privilege to share this liberty of the individual conscience with our brothers, a liberty originally enjoyed by the Armenian church before the long dark age of Turkish conquest, followed by a diaspora largely in the repressive Arab nations. Rather than experience a regression through the new immigration from the Arab nations let us liberate our brothers who have come to us with the liberty wherewith we have been set free.

We invite you to share with us any grievances you yourselves may have in relation to the hierarchy, any problems you face in preserving your freedom. We have set forth our aims and our general principles, but we need concrete proposals to implement these principles. Write to us. Comfort us with your wisdom. Share with us your concrete proposals. Join with us. Save us and in saving us you will save yourselves too. Before the election scheduled for us in January let the Primate and the Diocesan Council know your sentiments. Later when it is time for the Diocesan Assembly, we invite you in the person of your diocesan delegates to demand and get open and thorough debate of the Elberon problem. You are not a mere echo of the hierarchy. If you love freedom at all, if you have learned anything at all of freedom, you will not leave the affairs of the church or the government of the church in the hands of the hierarchy, but you will insist on the traditional Armenian way of active sharing of power and authority in the church with the hierarchy. You will succeed in realizing your inherent power, in redressing the wrongs in our church, and in disciplining a Primate who has forgotten that the mandate to rule he has received is from Christ through Christ's people.

Finally, we urge you to remember and ponder the glorious words of St. Paul in the New Testament, words which need to be applied to a Primate who has forgotten that the authority even of an archbishop is conditioned by The Lord who taught that all authority in the church is one of service rather than autonomous lordship. St. Paul says in his Epistle to the Galatians 5:1 "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage."