

Tears for Elberon

By Nubar Dorian

The following article, dealing with a rather sensitive subject, is being published despite the Armenian Reporter's reluctance to risk inflaming a delicate situation, because it has been authored by a responsible and highly respected member of the Armenian community, Mr. Nubar Dorian. The views expressed by the author do not necessarily reflect those of the editors of this paper.

Such a pretty name - Elberon...the south Jersey shore town and the summer playground of a large number of Armenian-Americans living in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Elberon also counts among its year-round residents a group of decent, intelligent and mature Armenians who through the years managed to acquire a community center and form a Parish Council. In time they built a modest church, organized Armenian and Sunday schools, acquired the dedicated services of a full time priest and built an enviable reputation for promoting good fellowship and good works. One of the accomplishments they were justly proud of was their ability to have all Armenians of diverse backgrounds and political persuasions bury their differences, live harmoniously together in one community, and work within the framework of the one indivisible Armenian church.

All this is now gone! The little church has been closed, the church school padlocked and the priest sent home. Recrimination, hatred and rancor are rampant among the hearts and minds of the parishioners. Old sores and wounds have been laid bare and intolerance, bias, and fear have replaced love, understanding, and fellowship. All of these have combined to make the disunity of a once united community complete.

Unfortunately, a conspiracy of silence seems to have surrounded the convulsions of the community in Elberon. The demise of a church and community has occurred without headlines, without obituaries and without mourners, leaving this silence mysteriously unfair and unlike us. We herald the formation of a new parish with adequate zeal and fanfare. The building of a new church is greeted with proclamations, processions and pontifications. Even our most modest accomplishments receive banner headlines and are made the object of untold banquets, speeches, and pronouncements, but we say nothing or do nothing when a church closes its doors.

Let us even things up by at least shedding some tears for Elberon!

Let us first weep for the church-loving people of Elberon who are being victimized. They are being denied the spiritual comforts of the church they built. These are the very same people who do not consider the Armenian church a battleground for warring factions but a hallowed shelter to keep away the mundane, the ugly and all those in pursuit of personal gain, power or fame. They are the very innocent souls who still believe that machinations, conspiracies and power play within the framework of the church are sinful and criminal.

Let us shed a few tears for the moral and spiritual decay of an elected church leadership who, unlike their predecessors, permitted petty jealousies, biased attitudes, unfounded fears and intolerant behavior to set the stage and create the atmosphere for people - living, working and praying together a few months ago - to say to others, "You are not wanted in this church," "No Tashnags and their children allowed in this church." "Only AGBU members can belong to this church." Totally unmindful of the havoc and destruction they instigated, these "leaders," still defended in some high quarters, parade all over creation and continue to stimulate factionalism, destruction and partisanship. They indeed deserve our pity more than our tears.

Let us shed tears of sorrow, apprehension

and grief for the more than fifty children who have been exposed to this "church" environment. How inexcusable is the act of poisoning the hearts and minds of innocent, impressionable children! Instead of conveying heights of Armenian achievement, holiness and mystery, the words Etchmiadzin, Antelias, Vazken and Khoren bring to mind separation, division, hatred and scorn. Children who some time ago, with innocence and love, embraced each other every Sunday in church, now throw the epithets of "Tashnag," and "Ramgavar" at each other. Elders of Elberon, rejoice, while we weep for your children.

Let us not fail to shed tears for the priest of Elberon, and cry with him for the shattering of his dream of unifying his flock in one united church. Let us meditate with him on the raw futility of the hard work he put forth, the meaninglessness of the scores of sermons he prepared and delivered on tolerance, love, understanding and fellowship and the failure of the endless concern, prayer and caring he had for his people. Bitter must have been his disillusionment when he received unbelievable non-support from the Primate and Diocesan Council, even though the overwhelming majority of his people were with him all the way and entirely approved his wise stance and posture. Instead of receiving accolades for his efforts, he was rebuked, humiliated and put down by the decision-makers.

And let us not forget to shed real tears for the decision-makers and in particular for the pathetic and paranoid stand of the Diocesan Council regarding all issues surrounding Elberon. The majority of Armenians in Elberon agree that inept, unwise decisions of the Council were the cause of the community's convulsions. How unfortunate that, with few exceptions, members of our Diocesan Council are proving to be little men with hardly any convictions. They seem to have made ulterior motivations and personal gain and fame the only reason for having sought election to this high office. They indeed deserve our tears for they seem to vote according to the dictates of their prejudices and fears.

Let us also shed tears of concern for the indifference and apathy of our Diocesan Delegates - especially those from N.Y., N.J. and Pennsylvania. While a sister church in Elberon was collapsing, most of our delegates, who could have done something to help, did not even show interest, even though they knew a serious problem existed. Is their job, for which they fight bitterly every four years, to do nothing else but attend one meeting a year, listen to doctored and exaggerated reports, and abrogating all power, concern and work to the Diocesan Council, come home to play the big shot? Let us cry bitter tears, for our delegates betrayed Elberon.

And finally let us shed real hard tears and weep together as a community for through Elberon we permitted once again the voice of reason to be stilled and suspicion, hatred, fear and intolerance to hurt efforts at church unity in America. The events at Elberon gave credence and support to those who, in their resolve never to unite, continue to maintain that the American community is not ready for Church unity.

Elberon is not a pretty name any more.

Fort Lee, N.J.

Armenian
Reporter

March 4, 1976

VIEWS AND
OPINIONS

On "Elberons" and Our Confusion

By Professor V.L. Parsegian

We hear that a little church in Elberon, N.J., where Armenians of all persuasions have been worshipping in peace, has just been forced to close its doors. In a vehement article ("Tears for Elberon," The Armenian Reporter, March 3, 1976) Nubar Dorian declares "inept, unwise decisions" on the part of the Diocesan Council of the Armenian Church of America to be "...the cause of the community's convulsions." Since Mr. Dorian has headed the Unity Committee representation for that Council, his article becomes an act of self-sacrifice as well as of distress.

We know well that Council's violent and primitive reactions toward the "separated brethren," whether locally or involving the 60th Anniversary Observances of 1975. Those observances, for which I served as Diocesan chairman, included an Interfaith Conference on genocide which became a largely non-Armenian event involving five other national institutions. The conference not only honored our martyrs but gave promise of strong support for genocide concerns that had enormous values for our people.

Within this framework I could not deliberately exclude Archbishop Karekin Sarkissian as invitee to the conference, especially since he held high office with the World Council of Churches, which was one of the conference sponsors. Unfortunately, the large ethnic significances could not overcome the myopic view (they call it "principles") of that Council. The potential ethnic values were effectively renounced by them. It seems that our bishops and "leaders" are not trained either for communication to resolve conflicts, for forgiveness, or for placing ethnic interests above their own preferences and "principles."

But while deploring with Mr. Dorian the "ineptness" of that Council, let us not forget that its "prejudices and fears" are only pitiful reactions to equally destructive activity on the part of the opposing Prelacy Council. For while the Diocese of the Armenian Church is more influenced by the ADL (Ramgavar) political party than we would like, the Antelias-related church leaders deliberately reduced themselves to becoming an arm of the ARF (Tashnag) political party. Of course even that deed had much help from the attitudes fostered in the "Mother Church" which at the time (as now at Elberon) sought to exclude "Tashnags" from the church.

The vicious competition between the Diocese and the Prelacy smells to high heaven. It reduces our ethnic interests and ourselves to pawns, to be manipulated in support of the unholy confusion of

bishops and of political parties.

How is it that our clergy and lay leaders, whom we know individually to be honorable men of good intentions devoted to ethnic interests (and with only the normal degree of ego) become so narrow, uncompromising, and mutually distrustful within the framework of current church and political organizations? Presumably the situation has roots in the deportations and massacres that cut our numbers, scattered us to the four winds, and left our ancient land part under the Turkish flag and a remainder confined within the powerful grip of Soviet Communism. The scattered remnants have generally fared well. Soviet Armenia has also progressed remarkably, but the lands of Mt. Ararat remain a prize to the people whose leaders destroyed so much of us.

WHAT THE PARTIES SAY

What are the attitudes of the political parties against this tragic background? Rightly or wrongly, the "Ramgavar" party is regarded as uninspired and inclined to accept the situation for what it is except for demanding Turkish admission of guilt and possibly restoration of Turk-held lands. The "Tashnag" party is more daring, demanding also the independence of Soviet Armenia. Unfortunately they have not yet awakened to the world of today, and their approach is regarded by most Armenians as that of a "bull in a china shop."

We wish very much that the ARF might have had understanding equal to its emotions and vigor; to understand that in today's world total independence carries a heavy load as every newly independent nation has learned. Economic woes, and internal conflicts and bloodshed, have been their lot. For us the price in terms of internal strife; for the "Tashnags" have demonstrated how they can tear apart our church and people and falsely condemn kinsmen as communists.

The frenetic anti-communism of recent decades, CIA operations abroad, and greed for greater authority on the part of the Antelias See all played into their hands with the Church in the United States a special target for control. But does the ARF realize how hollow the victory has been? To begin with, they cannot depend on the church underlings to remain underlings. More important, it is clear that the sociopolitical goals they seek require the combined support of all the factions they have antagonized. This was demonstrated when so little public support became available for the 60th Observances.

Clearly the broad base of ethnic interest and

support can be had only through a united Church. Moreover, only through close ties with Holy Etchmiadzin can there be maintained sensitivity to sociopolitical issues as well as to the spiritual heritage of our people. As it stands I see the Diocese of the Armenian Church to be an organizational shell that is weak both in spirituality and in ethnic purpose. The appearance of dynamism in the Antelias-related factions (with even less spirituality) destined them for even greater frustrations along with the ARF.

Against this sad background, can we make April 24, 1976 a day for self-analysis to determine what changes are needed? The most significant change would be a decision on the part of the ARF to let the church factions unite without further influence on church leadership. If the ARF could also demonstrate maturity in its slogans and goals, its appeals could have the support to assure ethnic success.

Suppose that the ARF persists in its posture, what are the alternatives? The Diocese and the Prelacy could still choose their independence of the parties and unite. Should this also fail, our only choice would

be to reduce the local conflicts and Elberons as far as possible. For this we need to recover a sense of local strength and independence; to recognize that our church and political leaders need us, the public, much more than we need them.

Through communication and unity at the community level we could demonstrate the mutual regard and trust toward each other which our bishops and leaders find difficult to exercise. We could urge our delegates to national assemblies to demand reunion even if new leadership must be installed.

We may have to go further, to restrict or even sever relationships with the Diocese and the Prelacy until reunion is achieved and the influences of political parties reduced. Since under present conditions our ethnic hopes are doomed, about all that severance would do is to reduce the financial burdens and antagonistic postures that are imposed on us.

But should we continue to support the antagonism and division we, the general public and the local churches, would certainly be the more inept and foolish before the world.

N. Troy, N.Y.

Armenians Protest Pastor's Ouster

By MARCIA E. LEAHY
Press Staff Writer

LONG BRANCH — A delegation of 53 members of St. Mary's Armenian Apostolic Church plans to protest their pastor's forced resignation at the church's diocesan headquarters in New York on Sunday morning.

The Rev. Vertanes Kalayjian, pastor of the Eberon church since 1972, was asked by the diocese in December to resign from his post following a lengthy dispute between two factions in the congregation.

The following month, the diocese disbanded the Parish Council — the administrative body of the local church — and suspended services for six weeks. An interim council has since been created by the diocese, and worship services resumed two weeks ago, with priests from New York celebrating the Divine Liturgy.

"Part of the conflict relates to the general division in the church and part is the result of personal animosities," said Jack Antreassian, a representative of the Diocesan Council who has served as liaison between the parish and the diocese since the dispute reached a critical point a year ago.

"Some people didn't feel welcome in the church. The community kept dividing and olarizing, and it's been very difficult on everyone," he explained.

The "general division in the church" refers to the diocese of the Armenian church in America, which until 1933 was a unified group. At that time, several churches broke away for political reasons, and during the next 20 years, they were gradually joined by more parishes.

In the late 1950s, the break was finalized. The splinter group became the Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church, with the Holy See

(or center of authority) at Antelias, Lebanon. The main body continued to recognize the city of Etchmiadzin in Armenia, a republic of the USSR, as their Holy See.

The Prelacy is comprised of members of the Tashnag political party, a militantly anti-Soviet group which upheld the Holy See in Lebanon because Etchmiadzin is in the Soviet Union.

Members of the Diocese are in general members of the Ramgavar party, which has reluctantly accepted the fact that Etchmiadzin is in Russia and thus retained it as their Holy See, Father Kalayjian explained.

Both political factions, however, consider Catholicos Vasken of Etchmiadzin (the Armenian equivalent of the pope) as the supreme head of their church.

In the local church, the Ramgavars were the mainstay for many years, explained Michael Gorra, who is not a member of the church but who volunteered to assist the Tashnags and other supporters in organizing their effort. Gorra's wife is a church member.

Until Father Kalayjian was assigned to the parish, services were only held every other week during the summer. He became the church's first permanent priest in its 17-year history.

Father Kalayjian said he encouraged cooperation between the Ramgavars and the Tashnags, and for the first two years, the church grew and was basically harmonious. Then, in 1974, the pastor established a Saturday Armenian language school.

"That became a bone of contention," explained Antreassian. "There was a debate as to whether the school would be under the jurisdiction of the church. It was not closely affiliated with the church, and the Parish Council thought it should be."



FATHER KALAYJIAN

When the Parish Council elections were held in February of 1975, the anti-Tashnags gained control, according to Father Kalayjian. Those who supported the pastor complained to the Diocesan Council about the alleged "scare tactics" used during the campaign, but Primate Torkom Manoogian, the church's archbishop, declared the election legal.

During the following months, many of the Tashnags dropped out of active participation in the church.

"In the absence of these 'undesirable elements' the pastor became an easy target," according to a statement released by the Peaceful Demonstrations Committee, a group elected in late February to represent Father Kalayjian's supporters. The committee claims the Ramgavars refer to the Tashnags as an "undesirable element" brought in by the pastor.

A spokesman for the Ramgavars denied the allegations but declined further comment, maintaining that the Diocesan Council should be the sole authority in resolving the dispute.

During the summer, Antreassian, as Diocesan

Council representative, was called in to observe the situation. He attended several Parish Council meetings and reported his findings to the Diocesan Council and the primate.

Meanwhile, the Tashnags and other church members sent a petition bearing 150 signatures to the Diocese expressing full support of the pastor. According to Father Kalayjian, there are about 150 voting members and 100 non-voting communicants in the parish, which includes all of Monmouth and Ocean counties.

Antreassian said the primate is taking into consideration both the petition and findings of two other representatives of the Diocesan Council who were sent in late fall to interview the priest and some parishioners.

In December, Father Kalayjian complied with the primate's request that he resign. A month later, a delegation of 37 persons confronted the Diocesan Council with their objections to his removal, according to Gorra, who said the group has become frustrated by inaction on the part of the Diocesan Council and the primate.

"It's not a simple matter to move a man around like checkers on a checkerboard," Antreassian explained. "Often it takes awhile to assign a priest to a parish."

Until the matter is resolved, Father Kalayjian,

and his family are living on half of his normal salary. The Diocese offered to pay that amount when he resigned, since the parish would no longer be obligated to support him financially.

Antreassian said that agreement was made with the understanding the pastor would celebrate Divine Liturgy as a visiting priest to neighboring parishes in order to supplement his present salary.

He emphasized that Father Kalayjian's removal was not an indictment of him or his capabilities as a priest.

"The primate thought it best to remove the pastor, partly to protect him from all this ridiculous action that is going on," he added.

"This will be resolved, one way or another. We're trying desperately to unify the community, but whether we will or not I don't really know. It's a very difficult situation," Antreassian explained.

The Peaceful Demonstrations Committee is similarly unsure of what it will accomplish, but the members feel that their upcoming demonstration is justified.

"It is impossible to describe the spiritual and mental suffering of the pastor and his family," they explain. "No less was the anguish of all those parishioners who waited too long, waited in vain for some sensible, just, Christianlike solution from the Diocesan Council."

ASBURY PARK PRESS nts

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Fri., Mar. 12, 1976

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ice of Mary
er at 1 p.m.

Saturday. Mary Eunice is an actress who depicts the lives of religious women who were prominent in American history.

Bayshore Area Churches: The monthly hymn-sing will be held at 8:30 p.m. Sunday at the Leonardo Baptist Church, Middletown Township.

Contact Monmouth, Long Branch: A training session for the Crisis Intervention hotline, sponsored by Contact Monmouth, will be held at 7 p.m. every Tuesday at First Baptist

Honesty