

The Spirit of Love

It might be said that on December 7 of last year our lives were changed, our priorities shuffled, our perspective disturbed or restored, depending on our values. A great tragedy had after all struck our people, killing 65,000, actually a conservative figure; maiming and injuring many more; leaving half a million homeless; a million suffering the trauma of shock, personal loss or displacement; and devastating the northern tier of a tiny country.

In one sense, however, it may not have caused a change at all; it may have served more as a reaffirmation of our Christian faith, a reawakening of our feelings of brotherhood.

What a better way is there to describe the response of our people here to the desperate needs of our people there?

The entire community rose, not as one perhaps, but even separately, concentrating its energies and resources on meeting this emergency. And the young people of our Church, sometimes on the periphery, sometimes at the forefront, became an integral part of this humanitarian effort, an inspiration to the rest of us; came of age, so to speak, as a leadership element of the community.

The ACYOA immersed itself in this work from the very first days following the earthquake. The three shipments of Diocesan medical supplies to Armenia would not have been possible without the vigor and dedication of our young people who packaged the material and loaded them onto the aircraft. The ACYOA arranged for and managed essential storage space at JFK Airport in New York, a base of operations that turned into a fledging relief center.

The culmination of ACYOA efforts came this past July with the construction of a one-family home in Stepanavan. It was the current project of the organization's Armenian Studies Program, and will stand as a heart-warming symbol of the devotion, will and determination of our young people. The project was far more complicated than might appear on the surface, but it was put together, largely through the efforts of Doug Tashjian and Kevork Hovnanian's company, effectively and efficiently. The ACYOA Earthquake Relief Team was assembled, 25 strong, who went to Stepanavan, built the home, and in the process created an environment of mutual trust and affection with the people of the city. They encountered difficulties, and we knew that they would; and they overcame them, as we were sure they would, to gain an experience it will not be easy to duplicate in a lifetime.

This particular structure is more than a home for a single family; it is the forerunner of the vast project the Diocese is undertaking, concerning which announcements have already been made. And the ACYOA served as advanced elements to ease the way for increased work and presence. We will no longer be strangers to the people in Stepanavan, thanks to the ACYOA, the work they did, and the spirit of love they communicated.

Although the earthquake continues to occupy much of our attention, work remains to be done here as well. If we do not strengthen ourselves, we will be less able to help others. Here programs have been presented to fortify our Christian faith, so inextricably linked to our heritage. Our seminars have elicited greater interest since the earthquake, as though the disaster served as a stern reminder of neglected values. A cultural weekend at the Diocesan complex offered young people instruction in religion, literature, history and music. Such programs help sustain a sense of identity, both as Armenians and as Christians.

The ACYOA must continue to work to keep its chapters active and productive, and to form new chapters in new Armenian communities. In April, for example, the Watertown mission went to the St. David Church in Boca Raton, in Florida, to establish a new ACYOA chapter, stressing the significant role of individual faith and involvement in the Church.

The Church remains our enduring inspiration. New religious impulses are being felt in Armenia. Even in Karabagh, where the troubles continue, seven churches are being reopened after having been shut down for more than half a century. In their extremely trying circumstances, they struggle to keep their faith with God. In the freedom our society assures us, can we do less?

Can you do less? You have long since proved your devotion to your Church, your people, your community, most recently with your splendid response to the disaster in Armenia. It is a devotion, we pray, that will lead to assuming responsible roles, as individuals and as an organization, in that ^{same} Church and in that ^{same} community, for the benefit and welfare of ~~that~~ ^{our} people.

May God bless you and continue to guide you in your service and fellowship.

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