



ԱՌԱՋՆՈՐԴՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ ՀԱՅՈՑ

DIOCESE OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH OF AMERICA, 630 SECOND AVENUE, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10016-4885 212 686-0710

June 20, 1990

The Honorable Mario M. Cuomo
Governor of the State of New York
Executive Chamber
State Capitol
Albany, New York 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo,

We were greatly disturbed to hear the recent news that the City of Niagara Falls is planning to confiscate and demolish St. Sarkis Armenian Church in order to use the land for a large development. The parishioners of the church have also complained that certain local politicians have made inappropriate implications that the Armenian Church is not a "real" church and have raised questions about the religion of the Armenian people.

Implications made against the most sacred institution of a people in order to disqualify them from keeping their sanctuary is against the Constitution of this country, which guarantees all citizens the right to worship as they choose. The Armenian nation was the first to adopt Christianity as her national religion in 301 A.D. The Armenian Church is one of the ancient Eastern Orthodox Churches, and a member of the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches. Nineteen centuries of history testify to the heroic struggle of the Armenian people to maintain their faith in Christ. It is a travesty that politicians in this country, where absolute freedom is guaranteed to all, should question whether St. Sarkis Armenian Church is a "true" church or not.

In the tradition of the Armenian Church, which goes back to very early Christian times, the site on which a church is erected is always consecrated and thus that land becomes holy. The church building itself is also consecrated and anointed with holy chrism, the symbol of the Holy Spirit. A church standing on consecrated ground is almost never abandoned. In the homeland of the Armenian people, only enemies hostile to the Christian faith have confiscated and demolished churches. In this country, Armenians

initially purchased for temporary use sanctuaries belonging to other denominations. Such buildings were later replaced with churches built on consecrated ground. St. Sarkis was from its inception built on consecrated ground.

As a resident of the Empire State, we are acquainted with your sense of justice and your love for the common people. We have always respected you as a great champion for human rights and as one who understands the plight of persecuted peoples. We would appreciate your intervention on behalf of our parishioners in Niagara Falls. If they lose their church, they will be deprived of a site they consider sacred and will probably be without a sanctuary, since the community in Niagara Falls is not affluent enough to rebuild.

Two generations have worked diligently to build the present church. These were people who were subjected to brutal treatment by the Turks, lost their families and worldly possessions, and who, after surviving the genocide of 1915, came to this country to start a new life. With their hard-earned mites they built their church. Destroying the sanctuary of such a people will not improve the development in downtown Niagara Falls. Instead, a church in the midst of a modern development will bring to a conglomerate a spiritual dimension.

May God inspire your leadership with wisdom and grace and may He guide us all to accomplishments in His name.

With prayers,



Fr. Khajag Barsamian
Primate

Editor
Niagara Falls Gazette
Niagara Falls, New York 14301

Dear Sir:

I am writing this letter to you from Nutley, New Jersey. Nutley is one of the many stops I have made on a long journey which someday, when I retire, will end in Niagara Falls, my home. I am also writing this letter to you about my church St. Sarkis Armenian Apostolic Church. My roots are embedded in this church, it seems, no matter where else I live and worship.

I was born and raised in Niagara Falls by immigrant Armenian parents. I was educated in the Niagara Falls school system, and after college I returned to work at both the Hooker and duPont plants on Buffalo Avenue, as a chemical engineer. With duPont, I eventually was assigned to the Wilmington, Delaware area and then I left for a teaching position at New Jersey Institute of Technology in Newark, New Jersey. All these past years, I never have left Niagara Falls emotionally and I have returned home six or seven times each year. I came to enjoy my family, my childhood friends, and our Armenian community. Now I learn that the city I love is going to destroy the church that I love, destroy my roots in my hometown, and destroy my bond through our church to an ancient history.

The first Armenian immigrants began to arrive in Niagara Falls about the turn of this century. Immigration was slow until the World War I period. Seventy-five years ago, on April 24, 1915, the government of Ottoman Turkey embarked upon the attempted genocide of the Armenian people. Villages were decimated, churches destroyed, and 1,500,000 people were massacred. It was to be the final solution to the Armenian question. Many of the survivors came to Niagara Falls and among them, my parents. The Armenian community in Niagara Falls grew and almost all of the immigrants settled in the East Falls Street area. They began to rebuild their lives, had new families again, built homes, and dreamed of an Armenian church. This dream began to become reality in the 1920's when ground was purchased at the corner of Ninth and East Falls Street. The exact year, I believe, was 1924.

Then came 1929, the Great Depression. These events shattered their dreams. Many, including my father, worked at the Aluminum Company of America plant which was located near the present site of the Howard Johnson's Hotel near the Falls. The plant closed and along with massive layoffs at other plants, many were out of work.

The economic struggle continued throughout the 1930's, but the dream of an Armenian church in Niagara Falls never died.

During the 1940's, the war brought prosperity to the factories in Niagara Falls. Many of the children of these immigrants served in the Armed Forces. The war ended and our soldiers returned.

New families were formed and the first grandchildren of the immigrants were born. Having found new security economically, the immigrants began to purchase new homes in the more affluent area one or two blocks north of East Falls Street. A few, fortunate enough to own automobiles, moved a bit farther away. With the new security and stability, the community began to vigorously develop the plans for our church and fulfill a long dream.

Finally, ground was broken in the early 1950's and the ground was blessed with our holy oil (holy muron). St. Sarkis was consecrated in September, 1953. The holy oil used in both consecrations represented continuity (a small fractional portion) to the Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholemew, the Apostles who christianized the Armenian people 2,000 years ago. Unfortunately, my father never saw his dream. He passed away in 1950, but we continued his dream, and I was elected to our first Parish Council.

It was during this period that the gorge collapsed on our old power plant in 1956 and essentially eliminated all 25 cycle power to the old factories. Rather than retool for 60 cycle power from the newly planned hydroelectric plant, many factories left Niagara Falls.

Simultaneously, urban renewal became important everywhere in downtown Niagara Falls. Many fine old buildings were destroyed but churches were not. They exist among the new buildings to this day.

Our Armenian people have witnessed the destruction of our churches by Persians, Arabs, Seljuk Turks, Mongols, and Ottoman Turks who have conquered our land over these past 2,000 years. It seems that we Armenians build, and others destroy what we have built.

St. Sarkis, in particular, and the Armenian Church, in general, represent more to us than a house of worship. They represent to us our homeland from which we were evicted over the

centuries, and finally by the Turks in 1915. They represent to us our history and above all, our christian history which placed us in the role of being the first nation in the world to accept Christianity as a state religion. This event occurred in 301 A.D.

Barbaric conquerors, through the history of mankind, have destroyed and pillaged. Who, however, would ever dream that our church, our roots, our history would be destroyed by intelligent people in Niagara Falls. Who, furthermore, would ever dream that the reason for this destruction is, for all things, the construction of a mall to house factory outlet stores.

Why, I ask, cannot our architects use imagination and incorporate this ancient history into the mall? Why must this history be destroyed? The churches were not destroyed in downtown Niagara Falls during urban renewal. Churches weren't destroyed in Newark, New Jersey, during urban renewal. In the Wall Street area, the old Trinity Church and cemetery together with a nearby tiny, lovely, old Greek Church stand among the towering skyscrapers. Why not destroy these churches? Were they not in the way? Was land not valuable where they stood? In Budapest, Hungary, the modern Budapest Hilton was built in a historic area and the architect, using imagination, built a modern hotel to blend with the architecture of an ancient church on the site.

Our people have suffered throughout history. Finally, in Niagara Falls after a long struggle, a dream of a church became a reality.

I do not believe that the citizens of Niagara Falls can accept the destruction of our church. Certainly the imagination of the planners, developers, and architects is not that limited that they cannot save these structures, representative of an ancient, persecuted people. Is our only alternative to place these same people and the government of the City of Niagara Falls alongside the Persians, Arabs, Seljuk Turks, Mongols, and Ottoman Turks who defeated us and then destroyed our homes and our churches. I pray not, because the end result would be the same for our people.

Sincerely yours,

Deran Hanesian
Professor of Chemical
Engineering and
Acting Deputy Director,
Center for Plastics Recycling
Research

DH/bc

Re: St Sarkis Church
Niagara Falls, N.Y.

Syracuse,

Enclosed is the letter
Derran wrote that was published
on the Editorial page in the
Niagara Falls Gazette. It gives
the history of the development
of our church.

The politicians in Niagara
Falls are implying that we are
not a "church" and question
our "religion". All other
churches in Niagara have been
spared and will not be razed.

We would like a
letter from Father Hajos and
wonder if he can also
get the World Council of
Churches to write ~~this~~^a letter
to someone like the Governor
& then copies to the Niag
Falls Mayor and to the
Gazette

Helen

P.S. Derran's letter is just
background information for you.