

REMARKS: FR. MELKONIAN 20TH ANV.

MAY 19, 1996—HOLY TRINITY CHURCH, CHELTENHAM, PA

Reverend Clergy, Honored Guests and Friends:

Let me begin by thanking the pastor of the Holy Trinity Church, Fr. Haigazoun Melkonian, as well as the parish council and the organizing committee, which have made this afternoon so memorable.

As many of you already know, our Diocese is observing 1996 as "The Year of the Youth." This year has a special youth-oriented significance, because it marks the fiftieth anniversary of the ACYOA—that grand institution

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established by Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, of blessed memory, which has done so much to bring the light of Christ into the lives of our young people, and which has brought so many of our youth into the life of the Church. I would like to reflect briefly on the meaning of our Year of the Youth, to our Diocese as a whole, and to each of our local parishes.

I think everyone agrees that there are few things quite as important as encouraging our younger generation to participate in our Church. Through the ACYOA and the Diocesan Department of Youth Ministry, the Church tries to reach out to our youth, and welcome them into Christ's

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Armenian fold. Obviously, this is a vital ministry, and the Year of the Youth is a way of bringing the concerns, needs and abilities of our younger generation to the attention of the community as a whole.

But we cannot rest satisfied if, after devoting this year to our youth, we then move on to the next thing as if our young people no longer exist. Encouraging, guiding, and above all challenging our youth is a full-time occupation for the Church. Drawing them into full participation as decent women and men cannot be accomplished with one day's work: it is a constant and continuing project, to which every one of us is called.

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I think of the original generation of the ACYOA, whose members are now the leaders of our Church. Many of you here today probably had your first experience of service to the Church through your participation in the ACYOA; your friendships were probably forged at that time—and perhaps you even met your spouse through that organization. Although you may not have realized it at the time, your lives have been meaningfully and positively affected by your participation in the ACYOA and the Armenian Church. But if you're like most people, you probably would never have become involved

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if someone—a parent, a teacher, a priest—hadn't reached out to you, and invited you to participate.

This kind of humble, personal outreach often goes unnoticed in the daily activity of the community—but it is the kind of outreach that builds the life of the Church in the long run. We saw one manifestation of this outreach today, in the ordination of the thirs. Someone along the line must have reached out a hand to these boys and young men, and encouraged them to enter into the service of the Church. And they in turn have responded positively, by accepting the holy orders, by accepting responsibility, by accepting a concrete place in this parish.

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Someone along the line had faith in the future of our Church—and these young altar-servers are the reward for that faith.

Our faith in the future—our faith that the Church has something important to say to our children—is linked to our faith in the eternal power of God's love for mankind. Whenever any of us reaches out to a young soul, to encourage him or her to join one of the many vocations and organizations that make up the Church, we are giving expression to that humble but powerful faith.

Previous generations of our people had faith that their children would preserve and expand upon our heritage.

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As this parish so wonderfully shows, we have lived up to that faith. But we will not have fully lived up to the example of our founding generation unless we provide new challenges for our own younger generation, and offer them the God-pleasing opportunity to fulfill the legacy they have inherited, and to creatively build upon it. I think this, more than anything else, exemplifies the meaning of this Year of the Youth, and offers the most optimistic prospect for the years to come.

Needless to say, a community that is strong in faith will have a profound influence on its individual members. But once in a while, the faith of a single

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individual can have an equally profound effect on a whole community. Twenty years ago, a pious and intelligent young man made just such an act of faith, and dedicated his life to the pastorship of God's Armenian flock. In the ensuing two decades, Fr. Haigazoun Melkonian has touched the lives of many people, with his characteristic wisdom, humor and humanity. He is himself a product of the Church's outreach, having once been a member of the ACYOA, and perhaps this accounts for his special ability to reach out to others who are in need of his pastoral guidance, whether they are in distress,

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require counsel, or are simply curious about the teachings and tradition of the Armenian Church.

As he completes his twentieth year laboring in God's vinyard, Fr. Haigazoun's devotion to the priestly vocation is an inspiration to his parishioners, to his fellow brothers in Christ, and also to many of the young men who aspire to enter the holy orders. I am proud to be able to share this occasion with him and his loving parish, and offer my blessing and prayer that he will have many more fruitful years as a minister of our Lord.

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In this season of renewal, may God bless you all, and may He continue to inspire you to answer His call. Thank you.

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