

ST. GREGORY THE ILLUMINATOR ARMENIAN CHURCH, BINGHAMTON
PASTOR'S REPORT 1984

With the help of God, we succeeded in concluding another productive year in the life of our parish. All the church bodies carried on their functions faithfully in pursuit of the wellbeing of our church. Only the Junior Youth Group remained inactive. Over the past two years, most of its members moved to other large cities for the purpose of acquiring higher education. Our parish was left with very few young people. In spite of this fact, it is not impossible to form a small Junior Youth Group if we mobilize all our resources and ensure the full cooperation of the parents.

We all realize the vital importance of Youth Group in our Parish. The future of any parish hinges on a well-organized Youth Group. With this idea in mind, I did my share to reactivate it by using my power of persuasion. Beyond the power of persuasion there is little I can do. Recently, Ani Nazarian as the representative of the A. C. O. A. central council, visited our parish and spoke to an audience composed of High School and College level students about the advantages of forming a Youth Group. Laura Dilimetin from SUNY pledged to do something about it in the near future.

As for me, I tried hard to live up to my pastoral duties and responsibilities which covered several major areas. First, the publication of the newsletter Sunrise. Four and a half years ago, when I assumed the pastorate of this parish, I found it necessary to replace the existing one page calendar flyer with a seven page newsletter. It was a bold undertaking so much so that some people did not expect it to last long. One member of the Parish Council suggested that I issue newsletter every two months to make it easier for me. Nevertheless, I went ahead with my plan counting on the monthly reports which would come from various church bodies concerning their social affairs.

Unfortunately, my calculation turned out wrong. As a result, the publication of the newsletter became a personal undertaking. It was easier for me to make a switch to the one page calendar flyer system but I preferred the hard way which required extra sacrifices. So I took upon myself full responsibility for the newsletter by producing enough material to fill seven pages, typing, laying it out, folding, stapling, addressographing two hundred copies. It was gratifying to receive letters of appreciation for the meaningful content of our newsletter. Some sister churches reprinted several articles from our newsletter. Recently, a family living in New Jersey requested me to send the newsletter to their new address in Tokyo, Japan since they were transferred there through the company they work with.

The second area of my activities included visitations. I am quite aware of the significance of visitations. They enable me to get well acquainted with parishioners and their concerns. I intended to visit all parishioners without making any distinction. Christmas and Easter are regarded as the most appropriate occasions to visit the parishioners. Therefore, I placed an announcement in our newsletter to this effect. Those who responded to the announcement, made it possible for me to visit them. I showed hesitation to visit people with heavy schedule or too overburdened with business for fear of taking their time. My college professor was right when he gave us the following useful advice, "Let people complain about you for visiting them rarely rather than very often." I paid regular visits to our senior citizens. They suffer from loneliness. They are not given the chance to see their children or relatives very often because of the hectic pace of modern life. They enjoy the company of the pastor because they have a lot of subjects to talk about. On the other hand, I gave priority to hospital visitations over others. Offering a prayer and a few words of encouragement make all the difference in lifting the spirits of the patients.

The third area of my activities was related to Armenian Weekly Language Classes. This year, for the first time, I established special classes for the children. I felt obligated to provide our children with an opportunity to learn their mother tongue. The learning of the Armenian language brings about a sense of belonging and national consciousness in our children. It helps them to become better Armenians. Otherwise, when they grow up, they will put the blame upon us. As a result, we will carry the burden of guilt feeling to the end. The thing which amazed me greatly was the positive attitude shown by the mothers of the children. After bringing their children, they attended the Armenian Classes with them. This good gesture encouraged the children to a large degree.

Apart from the Armenian Language Classes for children, I conducted special classes for adults. During the past four and a half years, a number of college students from SUNY greatly benefited from the Armenian Language Classes. Several of them took the Armenian Classes for credit. Because of joining the Armenian Classes very late, several students needed to take private lessons in order to do catching up. I made myself available for giving them private lessons without having any monetary expectations. From the beginning, I acted on the assumption that if I could be helpful even to only one single person, the efforts would be worthwhile. Christianity emphasizes the value of the individual. This is substantiated by the parable of the lost sheep. The shepherd left his ninety-nine sheep and went in search of the lost one.

The third area of my activities dealt with Cultural Gatherings. On the occasion of the National Feast Days, such as Holy Translators, St. Vartanantz, Martyrs' Day Mothers' Day, Fathers' Day, Christmas and Easter I carried out special programs. The programs were composed of songs, recitations, readings and short talks. Through them our people had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with national and religious figures. The spirit of their service enabled us to do the same thing in our community no matter how modest our contribution is. More importantly, we committed ourselves to set a good example to our children in this respect. In addition to this, the Cultural Gatherings enhanced the fellowship among the members of our community.

Fellowship is vital if we are to maintain our collective existence along with our traditions and cultural heritage. Unfortunately, some of us do not take time to be part of our fellowship once a month. As a result, they create a gap in our fellowship which is very difficult to fill because of our small number. One of the main advantages of the Cultural Gatherings is that some of our young people learned how to handle themselves in public appearances. I know two young girls who several years ago were too shy to appear before the public to do a recitation or reading. They felt extremely nervous. Nowadays, they do readings so articulately that we simply admire her. It is rightly said that practice makes perfect.

The fourth area of my activities covered Ecumenical relations. Our church represents one of the members of Southside Ecumenical Council. I made every effort to take part in the monthly meetings. I found these meetings mutually beneficial. They are interested in getting additional informations about the traditions and rites of our church. Recently, the minister of the Baptist Church on Conklin avenue recalled with great joy the memorable experience he had in our church listening to Armenian beautiful songs. He went on to say that the songs offered him a real spiritual enjoyment. Within the framework of the Christian Unity Month, I preached in the United Methodist Church in Vestal city. Following the church services, the Board members invited me to visit Sunday School classes where we engaged in interesting discussion regarding various Scriptural passages. One the occasion of Thanksgiving Day, we performed joint services at the St. Andrews Catholic Church.

Aside from these activities, I went out of my way to do voluntary manual work for our church. Since the death of our janitor John Joblonski, I vacuumed the church

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three times every month while the woman in charge vac~~u~~uumed it once a month. Many times I set up the tables prior to the monthly dinners. I did not do these things to prove my humility or to please the Parish Council. In doing so I intended to keep the church always clean, and secondly to save the church some money. Moreover, I went to Syracuse once a month to celebrate Divine Liturgy, travelling from a bus station to bus station regardless of weather condition, rainy or snowy. Each time I went to Syracuse I brought \$200 to the treasury. One day, when I asked a parishioner if he had paid his pledge, he responded to me jokingly, "Have you paid yours? I answered him that I have paid as much pledge as any other parishioner and even more. Whatever I did, I put into it the best of me as I preached a sermon, as I taught in the Armenian School, as I visited the patients. First and foremost, I myself wanted to be content with my work and then let the others be content with it. It was a pleasure to work with the members of the Parish Council. Our relationship rested on mutual respect, trust and understanding. In a spirit of cooperation, we discussed issues and did our best to solve them bearing in mind the highest interest of our church.

Very Rev. Fr. Sooren Chinchinian
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Pastor