

PASTOR'S ANNUAL REPORT
JANUARY - DECEMBER 1998

Dear Members:

By the grace of God, we completed an unprecedented year, full of excitement, frustration, energy, prayer and finally, the glorious day of the consecration of our magnificent new church complex on December 6, 1998. The year started with our Christmas celebration in a Jewish Temple in New Rochelle, when we announced for the last time "next year in our church" and it ended with another Christmas celebration and children's pageant in our own new church. This is an occasion for super celebration and a reason to lift our eyes and arms upward and say one more time "Thank God Almighty. Praise the Lord."

The year was also marked by the community-wide celebration of the centenary of the Diocese of the Armenian Church in America. Significantly, ours became the centennial church, named after the patron saint of the Armenian Church, St. Gregory the Enlightener, whose 1700th. anniversary of establishing our church in the homeland we are preparing to celebrate two years from now.

1998 will remain in the annals of our parish history as a year of hope realized, plans completed, proposition fulfilled, hurdles surmounted and victory over skepticism. The faith, the determination and the generosity of our people once again have prevailed and added one more jewel of beautiful Armenian church architecture to thousands of such houses of worship which for centuries have served our people as a fortress of our faith, as a beacon of hope and source of love. Here is where we commemorate the feasts of our saints and we feast in the celebration of our loved ones. Here is also where our children come to learn and experience their Christian character and Armenian identity. We need to take good care of the church both tangible and intangible, and, by so doing, cultivate our spiritual life.

This year I will digress from my traditional reporting on my pastoral ministry in various categories (liturgical, spiritual, cultural, educational, administrative, organizational pastoral care, etc.); instead I will briefly give an overview of my involvement in the construction project, reflect on where we are as a church and state my goals and plans for the future growth of our parish.

Our parish activities in 1998 were somewhat reduced due to the limited space we contended with at St. Nersess Seminary. While worship services continued regularly, the constraints of the physical milieu affected the regular attendance. Even membership dropped a bit. Some regular functions were curtailed. The Sunday School suffered the most, primarily because of inadequate facilities. All of these are now changed and will continue to improve.

1998 became the busiest year in my life where, in addition to being involved in the regular daily administration of parish life in all its aspects, I participated fully in the design and management of all the liturgical articles and parts in the church. In this I had the benefit of the expert counsel of a representative of the Diocesan Arts and Architecture Committee. In this respect, the helpful study and recommendations of the Interior Committee, headed by Martha Gurahian, and particularly the participation of George Omartian and other committee members were considered with appreciation.

As Richard Papalian and Zaven Tachdjian went about capably coordinating and supervising the construction of the complex with architect Vatche Aslanian and Andron Construction Company attending to hundreds of details, as Mack Basil continued his difficult and challenging task of fundraising with fruitful results, convincing even the most reluctant donors to contribute, as Lionel Galstaun kept up methodically his efficient acknowledgments, as Elmas Davidian carried the load of bookkeeping not only of the fiscal accounts, but the huge amount of the fundraising accounts, as Gale Perzigian continued her cool and charming way of doing added secretarial and P.R. work, many parishioners, curious and concerned, followed the daily progress, sometimes slow, sometimes fast. I know that a lot of prayers were said, both at Parish Council meetings and by individuals, some of whom like George Davidian and others in addition to those mentioned above have spent sleepless nights, as if it were their own homes under construction, thinking and being frustrated with all the details that go with such undertakings.

To be sure we had our share of skeptics. Yet, the constant and steady reminders that "God will provide" echoed so often to so many that I am gratified to see many people joyfully realizing that indeed faith and prayer are great powerful virtues. The energy, the time and the talent expended culminated in the glorious day of the Consecration. It was our privilege to have His Holiness Karekin I, Catholicos of All Armenians grace us with his gracious presence on that day, as he also had blessed the toof stones from Armenia two years ago to serve as cornerstones of the new church.

At the present time, we are still feeling our way around and getting used to using the expanded facilities. Some people are overly concerned about the cost of maintaining the complex. Left to some parishioners, even some parish council members of the past, the project would have been only half completed. But, we kept saying "trust in the Lord. He will provide." And He did. And, He will provide again and again and always so long as our faith and trust in Him remains well grounded and we all give our fair share of time, talent, energy and assistance and not let only a few carry the load.

For me it was indeed a challenge and a joy to find and work with qualified and competent artists and artisans who created and completed beautiful liturgical and utilitarian objects, vessels and parts for our church making worshipping in this house of prayers, a spiritual joy. Negotiating prices with these people has resulted in tremendous savings in each case. In addition to the artists, artisans and the Diocesan advisor, I have included members of the parish and parish council in various aspects of the development of the art works: the Khachkars, the etched glass windows, the paintings, the candle lighting votives, the baptismal font, the candle table, the pews, the railing, the sconces and ganteghs and the crown of it all - the cross on the dome, which along with other items, the artist, Michael Wolohojian's mother, Anita, had them flown from India absorbing the additional cost in order not to risk their delayed delivery.

Building a church is a once in a lifetime experience and privilege. The previous two churches I have served, in Worcester and Chicago, my assignments started at the end of the construction projects. Here, it has been my privilege to be involved from the very beginning to the end. It has been a beautiful learning experience I shall always cherish.

While the church was renamed Soorp Krikor Loosavoreech, we named the candle lighting "chapel" Soorp Hagop Ookhdakhoran, and we brought the consecrated painting of Asdvardzamayr from the St. James Church to the new altar of worship, thus maintaining continuity from our past into the present. The Parish Council also kept its commitment to the Gnkahayr of Soorp Hagop erecting a beautiful Khachkar at the entrance of the church dedicated to Mr. Suren D. Fesjian and his late wife Virginia, acknowledging their continued exemplary support.

We are now engaged in the process of realizing the adage "from building a church to becoming the church" as it has been repeatedly stated at the time of the construction and the consecration. It becomes necessary for us to remember this, because otherwise it would be easy to be so pre-occupied with the concern of raising funds to meet our added expenses that we might lose sight of the non-tangible spiritual and moral aims and ideals of this institution or become too tired to give due time and attention to such. This is why it is important for us to maintain a balance in our concerns and activities to care for the physical and to foster the spiritual.

A word needs to be said about our schools. Our children will continue to be the focus of my and your attention and care. That is why we built beautiful facilities to enhance the effectiveness of their teaching. In Sunday School, our children continue to learn the Bible, our Lord's life and teachings and the spiritual legacy of our church. In the Armenian School, they learn our ethnic language, music, dance and other aspects of our cultural heritage. Both schools function according to directives from our Diocesan Center and under my close supervision. Both schools have registered appreciable increase in the enrollment of their pupils. Both schools contribute enormously to the formation of the full Armenian Christian member of the future. Like all endeavors for the future, the effective running of both schools needs continued care and sacrifice now.

We commend the dedication of the staffs and the principals of both schools. Parents always express their appreciation through full cooperation by helping with functions that make the schools self-sufficient, thus saving the church enormous amounts of money for their operation. The Armenian school alone saves the church in excess of \$15,000 a year. Teachers and parents work together on various income producing programs and projects in order to become solvent and reduce our annual budget. We appreciate their extra efforts to help carry the budgeting burden of the church. Significantly, through the expansion of both schools, more and more parents have involved themselves in the life of the church and contribute to its growth.

We need now to concentrate our combined efforts on cultivating further the various aspects of the parish growth. To this end, I propose a 5 year program ("Hngamya blan") of study and activities in which representatives of various organizations can participate. By doing so, they will strengthen their own ranks and, at the same time, give impetus to the expansion of the mission of the church. We start this study and brainstorming first in Blue Ribbon Committees. I have six committees which will also serve as forums for ideas and implementation. They are: 1) Liturgical; 2) Cultural; 3) Christian education; 4) Youth; 5) Outreach and 6) Sports. I ask that you commit yourselves to any one or more of these projects and sign up either today or later. A meeting will be planned with all who wish to help for further clarification and implementation of these plans. Together we become one big constructive team, working hand in hand to make this parish even more dynamic to serve the Lord faithfully and meet the various needs of the community. I pray that the Lord will continue to be with us as we work together in a spirit of mutual love, respect and harmony for His glory and for our spiritual growth.

I close by thanking everyone for their share in offering their time, talent, energy and gifts for the glory of God. In the meantime, I pledge to continue my pastoral ministry with utilizing my priestly experience of exactly 25 years in renewed vigor and enthusiasm, serving the Lord and His people. May the Lord continue to grant us vision, courage and commitment. May His name be praised now and always. Amen.

Respectfully

Fr. Karekin Kasparian