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Use same letter

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Surpazan Hayr,

It has come to my attention, from a Diocese issued letter dated April 18, 1994, that a discussion was to take place at this year's Clergy Conference concerning the position of the Armenian Church on moral and social issues of our time. A copy of this document accompanied the letter and was sent to us in Ann Arbor.

That the Armenian church would release this document, "Exploring the Position of the Armenian Apostolic Church on the Moral and Social Issues of our Times", on Diocesan letter head complete with the Primate's name and send it out to every parish is an encouraging sign. It shows that our church would like to establish a moral basis for understanding the issues of our time. It is my understanding that Fr. Mesrob Semerjian was assigned the task by the Diocesan Clergy Conference and, the document is a precursor to a "comprehensive study ... not yet published".

It is true that we live during a time when there is a serious moral crisis. Our people, especially the young, are searching for meaning in life and are deeply concerned for America, Armenia, their families and the world around them. Only by instilling a high moral vision can the church ensure that its people are given the possibility to mature as free, intelligent, human beings capable of working with others to create a community and a nation with a strong moral fiber. Unfortunately the crisis has left so many of our people, again especially the young, adrift, often without hope, and conditioned to look for constant gratification.

Armenia was built on a vision of truth based in the church founded on Christ. The Armenian people posses the intelligence and will to meet the challenge of rededicating ourselves to fostering the truths upon which it is founded.

I regret though that this document falls far short of the high moral vision we would have hoped for. After taking pause to pray and reason together with regard to this document we have concluded that to educate our family and the Armenian people with some of the morals and values expressed in this document would be akin to educating with a relativistic value system not based on truth, abandoning them to moral confusion, personal insecurity and easy manipulation.

There are many issues in this document we are concerned with and would like to take this opportunity to bring them to your attention.

The first and most important value, upon which the majority of my comments in this letter will be concerned with is the respect for the dignity and worth of every person especially those in the womb. Armenians are a great people, blessed in so many ways after having survived our sorrow-filled history, past and present. But our best beauty and our richest blessing is found in each Armenian man, woman, and child. The ultimate test of our greatness is the way we treat every human being, especially the weakest and most defenseless. The best traditions we have presume respect for those who cannot defend themselves. If we want equal justice, true freedom and lasting peace, then the Armenian Church must defend life. All of what we are about wins meaning only to the extent that we openly state that we stand for the right to life and protect the human person.

The most significant problem with the subsection concerning abortion is the argument that the protection of unborn children, and ultimately the sacredness of human life, is dependent upon the marital status of the parents, conceptions "occurring in full accord with the will of God and His Divine plan."

The document does state that "from the very moment of conception the creative act of God is at work" and "therefore terminating a pregnancy would be actually violating and frustrating God's creative work, consequently a very serious sin." It also states that questions concerning viability and human recognition are "irrelevant", and that conception is a sacred event. But to subject the validity of the those statements to the question of whether ~~of~~ not they occurred in "the context of the Sacrament of Matrimony" and "in full accord with the will of God" frustrates any argument one would make in defending the unborn person.

If the truth we hold to in the Armenian Church is that life is sacred and begins at conception, then it would be folly to argue that there are exceptions. For example, within the setting of Sacred Matrimony: Is the life of the fetus sacred if it was conceived by an abusive or alcoholic spouse? Is it sacred when it came as the result of an adulterous relationship? Is it sacred when the married couple agrees that the act which resulted in the conception had no loving motivations? Is it sacred if it occurred as the result of failed birth control and the couple is certain that a this could not be God's will or plan with all the emotional and economic problems they are experiencing? Is it sacred when a genetically defective child is conceived? I submit to you that it is! Otherwise, just about anything, using this document's line of reasoning, can be rationalized as outside of God's will and outside his plan. Since all human relationships have an element of sin and/or ignorance any situation can be construed as such. Once again these are situations occurring within Holy Matrimony. Conceptions that occur outside of this institution are not protected at all: Rape, incest, children with defects and pregnancies that endanger the life of the mother are mentioned specifically in the document, but one would have to assume that all illegitimate conceptions (including engaged couples), artificial inseminations by the unwed (this is popular now within the homosexual community), and all scientifically engineered conceptions, are not protected.

The document goes on to argue that for "pregnancies which occur in violation of the will of God ... abortion might be permissible, indeed even required". What does this say about the dignity of man? What sort of value are you placing on the human person? How can the Armenian Church declare this the "Year of the Family" and then at the stroke of a pen declare

certain persons of the human community to be non-persons, soulless and disposable. What argument then will I use when a member of the church comes to me and says "My wife is pregnant, but the child has Down's Syndrome so we are going to abort it ... it will be to great a burden for us to bear ... it would be better to not bring such a child into the world their quality of life would be terrible", forgetting that these persons might be the great treasure of our humanity. If by testing we can now detect certain defects and "solve" the problem with abortion, will we then not eventually declare it an act against the public good to bring such a person into the world? **This document opens the way for exactly this!**

The only mechanism left for protecting the unborn, according to Fr. Semerjian, is that the abortion must be "carried out no later than the end of the sixth week of pregnancy" because there were some church fathers that taught that the soul is created after the fortieth day. This statement does nothing to clarify the situation and instead confuses it even more. Are we now to assume that life is not sacred at conception but only after the child receives its soul on the fortieth day (since that's when, according to St. Augustine, it arrives)? In addition, the very earliest a woman can know that she is pregnant is the end of the fourth week of pregnancy. Given a woman's cycle fluctuations, it's more common that the pregnancy would not be confirmed until the end of the fifth, sixth or even eighth week. In the case of conceptions occurring from incest or in very young girls, it's unlikely that the discovery would be made before the end of the first trimester (12th week). Even if the point made about when the person receives his soul was a valid or relevant point, the time frame offered is impractical at best and nearly impossible to achieve in most circumstances. Finally, in regard to testing for birth defects, the most progressive (and dangerous) tests being done today are not useful until after the ninth week, long after Fr. Semerjian's "deadline".

We also were troubled by some of the arguments presented in the subsections on family planning, homosexuality, masturbation, divorce, surrogate motherhood/artificial insemination and racism. Again, our objections are grounded in the belief that Fr. Semerjian, by allowing for exceptions to the rule and rationalizations of sinful behavior based on circumstances, presents moral truths as relative rather than absolute. Often, we feel he is basing his opinions on cultural norms rather than Biblical or theological standards. For example, the idea that black-Americans should realize that being brought to this country^{as slaves} "was the necessary precondition for their being able to rise from savagery" or that every Christian couple should plan to have three children.

Once again we would like to restate that the decision to broach these issues is an encouraging sign that we welcome. In no way do we want to see the effort squelched as a result of the concerns raised in this letter. We believe a comprehensive study should be published so that the Armenian Church is setting the standard for its people rather than the culture we live in *doing so*.

We would expect though that some sort of clarification, possibly even a public retraction, be sent out to the Armenian community so that this very official looking document is not construed as being the official position of the Armenian Church.

Your servants in Christ,

John & Michelle Kazanjian