

THE HISTORY OF THE ELBERON  
COMMUNITY PROBLEM

(Statement on the occasion of March 14, 1976 peaceful demonstration held in front of the Diocesan office - 630 Second Avenue, New York)

The Good Old Days

Prior to 1972, St. Mary Church services were conducted during the summer on alternate Sundays and with a limited social and religious activities. In September of 1972, His Eminence Archbishop T. Manogian, Primate, assigned St. Mary's Armenian Church communities' first Pastor, Rev. Fr. Vertanes Kalayjian. In an atmosphere of enthusiasm and fellowship the organization of the community was launched. The enlightened attitude of many parishioners and the progressive leadership throughout 1972-1974 brought about a dream into reality, making it possible for Armenians of diverse political persuasions to come together under one roof, the spiritual home of all Armenians - The Church.

The community showed real progress in the area of mutual love and respect towards each other. The AGBU came into life and the youthful Armenian Cultural Association was organized and the community showed real signs of life and vitality. Within the Parish the youth was organized bringing many teenagers closer to the church, and with the leadership and encouragement of Rev. Kalayjian and Yeretzgin, the cultural and social activities flourished and the community showed real appreciation and excitement towards these high quality activities which brought about an increased awareness of Armenian heritage, with an increased participation from over 370 Armenian families living within St. Mary's community. The enthusiasm was so real, the sister Armenian communities were looking upon St. Mary of Elberon as a model American-Armenian community with great potential.

Elberon's St. Mary was on an enviable course of progress and growth.

Gathering of the Clouds

In mid-1974 the Armenian Mesrobian School of St. Mary became a reality. It brought together nearly 40 children of the community. Instead of full acceptance by all members, the school was chosen by some distorted minds to become a political football.

The school, they said, was being used to bring in an undesirable element into the community.

By late 1974 the accusations were more explicit. Slogans like "The Tashnags are taking over the church", "Der Hary (The Pastor) is selling the church to the Tashnags" became a battlecry for these poor souls who still think they live in the 1930s.

Early 1975 at the Parish election these scare tactics paid off handsomely. The young and progressive element was kicked out of the administration of the church. Innocent participants to this "cleanup" realized the extent of the damages but it was too late to reverse the course of destruction. Ironically, the election was legal and it had to be approved by the Primate. And so it was.

The axe of vindictiveness did not stop there.

- The Armenian School Committee was dissolved without cause.
- The harassment of the new members continued.
- New membership applications were subjected to the most repugnant inquisitions.
- The younger element of the Parish was shut out of all possible participation.
- One segment of the community was completely ignored and cooperation was denied to them.
- Discrimination and personal as well as wholesale insults continued unabated.

All of the above caused the healthy element to suspend its participation in the church life temporarily. In the absence of these "undesirable elements" the Pastor was made an easy target. Gossip, slander, character assassination were rampant. It is impossible to describe the spiritual and mental suffering of the Pastor and his family. No less was the anguish of all those parishioners who waited too long, waited in vain for some sensible, just, Christianlike solution from the Diocesan Council.

The Problem

The problem is the Diocesan Council! They chose not to act. And when they did, it was too late. The action they took was haphazard, contradictory, undecisive, biased and unfair!

Fact—As early as November of 1974 the Primate knew as he put it "who the real 'troublemakers' were".

Fact—As early as May–June 1975 the Diocesan Council knew who the real troublemakers were.

Fact—As early as August 1975 the representative "fact-finders" of the Diocesan Council knew definitely who the troublemakers were.

But decisions were nowhere in sight!

Fact—The Diocesan Council chose not even to discuss the plight of the Armenian School. Since then (November 1975) the Armenian School has been forced to leave the church and the parents are using a non-Armenian church facility for Saturday classes. St. Mary of Elberon, once proud of her Sunday and Armenian Schools, has nothing left to be proud of. Both schools have folded.

Fact—The Diocesan Council ignored more than 150 signatures of the members of this community and forced a resignation of the Pastor.

Fact—In a seeming gesture of evenhandedness, the Diocesan Council removed the 1975 Parish Council in December 1975, only to restore the "troublemakers" back into office in January 1976.

#### What Do We Want?

We respectfully request from the Primate and the Diocesan Council:

- A. To reinstate the Pastor Rev. Vertanes Kalayjian back to his office and exonerate with full privileges and prerogatives he enjoyed previously.
- B. To issue a strong statement that the Diocesan Council does not share and approve the scare tactics and the slogans that were used to distort the affairs of this community.
- C. In the near future, to hold general elections with all communicant members of this community participating to choose its church leadership, including its Pastor.

#### Who Are We?

We are the concerned members of the St. Mary Armenian Apostolic Church Community from Monmouth and Ocean Counties, New Jersey.

Respectfully submitted by Peaceful Demonstrations Committee.