

**Speech Delivered at St. David Church
in Boca Raton, Florida**

**45th Anniversary
of the ACYOA**

Dear ACYOA Members, Parishioners of St. David Church
and Faithful Children of the Armenian Church,

Today, as our country is in the midst of a brutal electronic war, we are celebrating the 45th anniversary of the birth of an organization devoted to fostering Christian love and Armenian spirit in the hearts of youth. In 1946, Bishop Tiran Nersoyan, now of blessed memory, summoned a group of young men and women on the premises of the Sts. Sahag and Mesrob Church in Providence to lay the foundations of this venerable organization.

The timing was crucial, as the majority of the young men had just returned from active service in the armed forces of their country. The war had taken its toll and the youth were still under the influence of tremendous pressures and psychological stress. The world was on the threshold of a new epoch. Mankind was faced with the enormous task of raising itself from the ashes of widespread destruction. The demoralizing aftereffects of war posed a threat to our communal and family life.

Our Church and especially our far-sighted Primate responded to this new threat by founding the ACYOA, which brought together our youth within the fold of the Church and the community, transmitted to them the Christian legacy of our ancient people and gave them the opportunity to change from an immigrant to an American community. The alternative would have been complete assimilation and loss of identity. The Church offered our youth a powerful vehicle to keep our Christian heritage alive so that the Armenian people would have a glittering share in the larger mosaic of peoples who compose the American society.

Thanks to the ACYOA, the Armenian youth met each other and thousands of new Armenian families were formed. Most of you are the products of unions between young men and women who were at one time or another active in the ACYOA. Almighty God was good to us and increased our numbers. In 45 years our parishes prospered and several new parishes came into existence. One century ago this year, Armenian immigrants, mostly factory workers, built their first church.

In 1946 we had about 30 parishes. Today that number has doubled, and a new Diocese has emerged in Canada. The majority of the men and women who are now serving in our parishes and in the Diocese as members of the Diocesan Council, as delegates of the Diocesan Assembly and as Parish Council members are former ACYOA members.

The Church's response to war, as you can see, gave positive results. This is due to the fact that as Christians we have faith in Christ, which makes us optimistic about life. This optimism gives us an infinite potential for growth and expansion. We are known as a people who build and prosper. This national characteristic derives from the Christian source of our faith.

Today, we are honoring a couple who symbolize the endeavor of an earlier generation to achieve good and who serve as role models for the youth. Mr. and Mrs. Edward and Helen Mardigian have been and still are at their advanced age great benefactors and active members of our community. A list of their contributions to Armenian Church and community causes could easily fill a volume.

They have been especially generous to the ACYOA. But we must realize that they have not been passive contributors. Both husband and wife have stood by the Church and the ACYOA and have been actively involved in our community life. Monetary contributions are meaningless if there is no spirit behind them. The Mardigians have again and again shown that they are good Armenian Christians. The proof of their commitment can be seen in the fabric of their family life and in the fact that their children also are deeply involved in Armenian life. They deserve our praise for their work.

The Mardigians and others like them invested a great deal of money, work and effort in our present-day young generation with the conviction that the torch of our Christian heritage would enlighten the successive generation of youth. As concerned parents and grandparents, they have in their turn provided for you a vehicle which could build in you a healthy attitude towards life. My father always wished for me spiritual fortitude. His traditional prayer is: Հոգիի առողջութիւն քեզի. You will find a salutary atmosphere in your Armenian Church and the ACYOA.

At a turbulent time such as this when the War in the Gulf region is spiritually disturbing us and could easily throw us into the claws of pessimism, we have an alternate route that could lead us to optimism and to Christ. Let us make the right choice and take that alternate route. Your parents' generation made the choice and did not regret it.

ADDRESS TO THE 1991 ACYOA ASSEMBLY BANQUET

Reverend Clergy, ACYOA Delegates, Athletes and Friends:

This annual ACYOA banquet—and the Assembly and Sports Competition which it concludes—embodies the full glorious scope and breadth of the experience of the Armenian heritage. The exuberance of youth balanced against the restraint of tradition; the fierce thrill of athletic competition balanced against the calm gentleness of mutual cooperation; the joy of reunion with seldom-seen friends balanced against the the melancholy of saying good-bye for another year. Hosting this event requires a great deal of finesse, no less than organization, cooperation and patience.

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Nevertheless, I must say that our hosts for this weekend—the members of the Hartford Armenian community—have made it all look quite effortless. I salute the heroic efforts of the St. George parish, its pastor the Reverend Fr. Yeprem Kelegian, the Parish Council, the ACYOA Central Council, the organizing committee under the chairmanship of Charles Shooshan, and the Sports Weekend Committee, all of which contributed to the splendid outcome of this event.

And let us not forget the athletes themselves, who whether in victory or defeat have comported themselves with sportsmanship and gallantry. All of you have made this ACYOA Assembly and Sports Weekend a source of fond memories for the future.

I believe that in the years to come, the good people of this Diocese will remember this particular weekend as something of a watershed event, for it marks the beginning of a new era in the Armenian Church's ministry to her younger generation. Earlier this week, your peers sitting as delegates at the ACYOA National Assembly enthusiastically endorsed a new plan for a Diocesan Department of Youth Ministry—a program which will incorporate the current youth-oriented services the Diocese provides, while at the same time broadening the scope and reach of our entire youth ministry.

You will be hearing more about this development in the weeks and months ahead. For now, let me simply say

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that the Department of Youth Ministry represents a major and long-term commitment on the part of this Diocese to its young generation; the discussion during the Assembly sessions generated a great deal of excitement, and my colleagues and I have been inundated with questions, comments and suggestions on this very subject.

During my remarks at the Assembly, I challenged the delegates to take an active role in the realization of this new ministry, and I repeat those sentiments tonight to all of you. When your grandparents came to this country, they were working with a blank slate: they had to imagine the entire shape of the Armenian community in America. Your parents consolidated and expanded those original

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efforts, and founded organizations of their own, such as the ACYOA.

But your generation has not yet had the opportunity to truly found an organization—to really be on the ground floor of decision-making and execution. The creation of the new Department of Youth Ministry is your golden opportunity to make a mark upon posterity.

I have nothing but admiration for the energy and boldness of your generation—of your achievements in school, in the marketplace and in a host of other activities. What I am asking tonight is that you take some of that drive and zeal and direct it into the construction of a lasting, relevant and successful youth ministry for the Armenian Church of America.

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This idea about new beginnings has been much on my mind of late, because 1991 marks the one hundredth anniversary of the consecration of the first Armenian Church in America: the Church of Our Saviour in Worcester, Massachusetts. Your sister parish in Worcester is even now preparing for the celebration which will take place in a very few weeks—on the weekend of September 21, to be exact—and everyone involved has naturally had cause to reflect upon those early Armenian settlers in the New World, and upon the tremendous progress which has ensued in the intervening century.

I try to remind myself each morning, as I look out upon the magnificent stone edifice of the St. Vartan Cathedral,

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that the Armenian Church in America began with a humble wooden structure constructed out of contributions of pennies and dimes—all that our immigrant Armenians could afford. Our forebears had so little in the way of material resources, only the most rudimentary education, and they had only a basic mastery of the language of their adoptive nation.

What they did have was a supreme love of their Church and heritage, which inspired them to ever greater heights. Let me say too that, after having spoken to many of you, and looking out upon you now, I can see that this sense of pious love and devotion has in no way been diminished with the passage of generations. It is reborn in each of

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you, and you enhance that love with all the refined qualities—education, cultural sophistication, prosperity—that your grandparents would have wished for themselves had circumstances not dictated otherwise.

In your generation, many of the dreams of those pioneers of 1891 have come true. That opens up all sorts of possibilities—but it is also a serious responsibility—a responsibility to utilize your hard-won patrimony for the good and prosperity of the Church and heritage your ancestors fought so desperately to preserve.

It puzzles me when I read of how many young people in America seem to be crippled with apathy, aimlessness, boredom and self-pity. I do not know how other commu-

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nities respond to this problem, but I hope and pray that the young men and women raised in the sanctuary of the Armenian Church are immunized from this disease of the soul.

Today and in the years to come, there is vital and noble work to be accomplished, work which will require all of your expertise, ingenuity and courage. Do not be put off by the seeming magnitude of these enterprises; the same blood that allowed your grandparents to stare into the face of death and desolation, and still survive, flows through your veins today. There are no obstacles which we as a people cannot overcome, and your generation will play the pivotal role in the resistance against those obstacles.

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Having said this, I would like to ask you to help your Church to resolve the single issue which for the past fifty-eight years has stood in the way of so much progress, and which has cast a black shadow over even the successes we have attained. I am speaking, of course, about the shameful division which exists within the Armenian Church. The disunity of the Church has begotten many senseless and tragic results—and none so sad as the fact that disunity has driven many of your peers away from the embrace of their ancestral Church. And yet, I firmly believe that if the unity issue is to be resolved, it will depend precisely upon the activity and charity of your generation.

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Thanks to the incredible political developments going on in Armenia herself, the external political reasons for our division have been virtually eliminated. But still we seem no closer to full unity. Why is this?

I am convinced that the answer has much to do with human frailty. The cluster of issues and events which surround the problem of Church division remains a sore spot with many of our parishioners even today. Some of your grandparents were present during the origins of the schism, and even for your parents the wounds are too close to the surface for the pain to be completely dissipated.

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But finally your generation has come of age—a generation which is distant enough from the original causes of the split to work out a charitable reconciliation. It reminds me of a comment made during the height of the Soviet *coup d'état* by a Russian journalist, when he was asked how to account for the fact that—perhaps for the first time—the people were not intimidated by the brutal might of the Soviet military.

He replied that during the course of the past few years of relative freedom, a new generation of Russians had emerged, who had tasted liberty, and had only heard tales about the brutalities of the Communist regime, and so were not impressed with the show of force in Red Square

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and elsewhere. Their distance from the sorrowful past—indeed their innocence—gave these young Russians the fortitude to stand up for their dreams of freedom.

It has been no different in the streets of Yerevan, where your contemporaries are playing a decisive role in determining the fate of our homeland. And I know that, in a similar way, the young Armenians in America can contribute to the resolution of the unity issue.

In some profound sense, our hopes for a single united Armenian Church reside with you: you must go to your parishes and persuade your fellow Armenian Christians to pursue this course, to set aside our grievances, to rise above our individual self-interests and

to reunite in the name of the One, Holy and Loving God Whom we worship.

I ask you to take on this task from the vantage of a leader guiding his flock; but also from the vantage of a comrade and fellow traveler. You see, we are in a similar predicament, you and I. After many years of schooling, the men and women of your age group are poised on the brink of taking on the burden of leadership in the Church and in society at large. Likewise, after a long journey of service to some of the great princes of the Armenian Church, I too have assumed a burden of leadership in our community.

As you can see, I am sympathetic with this status, with the aspirations which inspire you, as well as the apprehensions which trouble you. Indeed, I must confess that I have a special personal interest in the current and future health of your generation. It is that you are the people who will be working with me over the next few years, and who ultimately will inherit this Diocese and all its institutions. While I am not sure where my ministry will take me in the future, I do know that I love this Diocese and its people; it is my honor to play some small role in helping it attain its shining potential.

Of course, that will demand arduous work from all of our faithful—clergy and laymen, young and old alike. I am not afraid to admit that the many projects that lie on the horizon present an intimidating prospect. But I always rediscover courage and conviction when I return the eternal truth of our religion, a truth which has been preserved in the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus Christ.

All we really know about Christ's life on earth is an afternoon when He was thirteen, and three years during His young manhood. In that brief time, at that tender age, He changed the world. By comparison, our task is almost trivially small, and yet His accomplishment in the face of adversity two thousand years ago holds out hope

to all of us who follow Him today. Christ was victorious over the worst this world had to offer. With His help, we too shall humbly join Him in victory.

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