



DIOCESE OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH OF AMERICA  
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Archbishop Khajag Barsamian, Primate



**Primate's Message**

On the occasion of the 23rd anniversary of the ACYOA Sports Weekend, I extend my warm greetings to all ACYOA members and especially to General Assembly Delegates and sports participants.

I congratulate the General Assembly and Sports Weekend committee of St. James Armenian Church, Watertown, MA for a well planned and exciting weekend and I commend all of you for coming from your homes to New England to participate in the General Assembly, sporting events, worship, learning and fellowship.

The ACYOA has for many years been a glowing star in the life of the Armenian Church. In recent years, the organization has lost some of its momentum and we must endeavor to recover the original fervor of the ACYOA. The youth of our Diocese understands the importance of the Church in their lives and the need to work together for the good of our Church, our community and our nation. It is important that each parish have an energetic group of young adults to serve who participate fully in the life of the Church.

With this in mind, we have developed a plan of revitalization and re-establishment for our chapters - "Project Growth". I am confident that the chapters, delegates, Reverend Clergy and ACYOA members will embrace this project with excitement, enthusiasm and vigor.

The goal of "Project Growth" is to insure that each parish has a strong young adult group which will become a vital arm of the parish. It is only with a sound chapter base that our ACYOA can thrive and grow. The ACYOA is not simply building leaders for tomorrow, but building leaders for today.

May God bless you and instill his light in your hearts to remain ever faithful in your service to Him, your Church and each other so that we may continue to walk in the light of the Lord together.

With prayers,

*Archbishop Khajag Barsamian*

Archbishop Khajag Barsamian  
Primate

New York City  
August 1993

## Archbishop Khajag Barsamian

Address: ACYOA Annual Assembly—September 2-3, 1993  
Watertown, Massachusetts

1800 words

Reverend Clergy, ACYOA delegates, honored guests, and friends:

It is a pleasure to address the ACYOA National Assembly as it convenes in Watertown. This small New England town is a very special place for American-Armenians, because it is one of the very few remaining "Armenian neighborhoods" in this country.

Watertown is still a place where many Armenians live within walking distance of one another—where a person's "Armenianness" is not something he or she expresses only on Sundays, but every day. Being a citizen of American society and being an Armenian are not separate occupations here, but are much more closely tied together than elsewhere.

For that reason, Watertown is very similar to the original settlements of Armenians in this country. It reminds us of a way of life from our past which was, I think, wholesome and good. For many of us, it is not a way of life which we can easily return to, but it is something we should keep in mind whenever we think about what it means to be Armenian in America, and whenever we gather together—like we are today—to discuss our present and plan for our future.

I mention these things because they illustrate the continuity of life in the Armenian Church. Our past, our present and our future—the children, young adults, families and elders which make up our parishes—are not separate entities, but are inter-dependent parts of a single web of life: the life of dedication to God. No single segment of the family of the Church is responsible for the health of the Church: that responsibility falls on every sub-group, every individual.

It is especially important that you as ACYOA leaders and members understand this. All of you have a stake in the Church—not just in what the Church will become tomorrow, but in what it is today. The way in which this expresses itself through the activities of local ACYOA chapters, through the programs of the Diocesan Youth Ministry department, and through national ACYOA objectives like Project Growth, will all be subjects of discussions during the next Assembly sessions. I would like to address myself to a more pastoral aspect of how our younger generation should understand its role in the Church. The whole group of issues can be viewed through the ideas of "discipleship" and "apostleship."

These two words are often used interchangeably, but they have two distinct meanings. Being a disciple means to submit oneself to a discipline, or to the master who teaches it. To be an apostle means to be a kind of messenger, who travels outwards and forwards from the immediate community to spread the word to others who have never heard it.

As Christians, the words have special meaning for us. Two thousand years ago, within Jesus's circle of followers, the terms "disciple" and "apostle" were brought together in a unique way. In Christ's teaching, submitting to the discipline of a master was inseparable from spreading that message to others. And so it should be for us today: we are all gathered here as disciples or followers of Jesus Christ, and as devoted members of His Church.

At the same time, as Christians we are not allowed to sit content in the cozy warmth of our immediate circle of friends and family. Christ has laid a great responsibility on every man and woman who chooses to follow Him: the responsibility to spread the message—the "Good News" of the Holy Gospel—to other people, and to bring those others into the fold of the Church. In our everyday lives, we are asked to marry the duties of a disciple to the mission of an apostle; we are called to devote ourselves humbly to God by devoting ourselves energetically to the welfare of others.

This is the mission that I, as a clergyman, am called to perform. But it is not just clergy who are called in this way: each one of the children of the Church is called by Christ to take up this mission, and His call is especially strong towards young people, who have so much energy and vitality, so much enthusiasm and such a bright, unclouded vision of what people can accomplish in the world. I do not need to remind you that Jesus Christ was not much older than any of you when He first began His mission; small wonder, then, that He should rely on your strong, young hearts and minds in the execution of His mission today.

It is a broad mission, with a great deal of room for individual expression. For some, it means helping people directly, working among the poor, the sick and infirm. For others, it means speaking out bravely when injustice raises its head. The Christian mission may involve traveling to places like Armenia, to help our brothers and sisters who hunger for nourishment of their bodies as well as their souls. But it also involves working right here at home, in our own churches, our own communities, our own families, to bring the light of the Gospel to those who live among us.

We should always hold before us the fact that the authority of the Armenian Church comes through the apostles themselves—through Apostolic succession. At the simplest level, of course, this means that our tradition was founded by the original apostles of Christ—in our case, the saints Thaddeus and Bartholomew. But I prefer to think that this distinction has more to do

with our destiny than with our origins: for us, apostolic succession must mean not only that we began with the apostles, but also that we as a Church carry the work of the apostles into the present day.

Now, the apostles themselves did not sit still in Jerusalem—they went out into the remote corners of the world. But they only went out after receiving the Holy Spirit. They evangelized from a state of spiritual strength. And this should be an example and a lesson for us: we cannot do God's work if our own souls and hearts are empty. The Church of Christ began to grow whenever and wherever the early Christians shared their inner strength—the strength of the Holy Spirit—with the weak and helpless people of the world.

Looking at the Armenian Church in America at the end of the 20th century, this theme of growth is an idea which we must really take seriously. The growth I am speaking about must occur both within ourselves and within our communities overall. It is a growth of the inner person, as the Holy Spirit takes hold of our hearts and minds and perfects our fallen natures. But it is also a growth in the sheer numbers of the faithful, in which more and more people are brought into the daily life of the Church, so that the life-giving truth of the Gospel may be received by an ever-increasing "family" of worship, heritage and faith.

I have made this same appeal on other occasions, to other groups within our Church. But I would like to enlist the aid of you and your peers in this project above all else. My conviction is that young men and women like yourselves must be full participants—even active leaders—in the daily life of the parish in order for this growth of the spirit and the Church to take place. Some of this is happening, on a small scale, in many of our communities, where people in their twenties and thirties have become parish council members and chairs. But it is still a small movement at the edge of the Church: what is called for is a great effort at the very center of parish life.

In this regard, the ACYOA Central Council and the Department of Youth ministry have embarked on "Project Growth": an effort to strengthen the ACYOA at the level of the local chapters. I just said that Project Growth is an effort to strengthen the ACYOA, but I should correct myself and say that it is an effort to strengthen the Church as a whole, because when any part of the Church gains strength, the whole becomes stronger as well. I want to urge each of you to make Project Growth a vital part of your mission. Indeed, I would like to see it be the prototype for re-invigorating the entire Armenian Church, the example which sets the tone for the generations which came before you, and those which will come after you.

I am confident that such an effort of evangelism is within the capability of you and your peers. I have had many wonderful experiences over the past year, traveling to various cities and meeting with young people in a series of

Youth Forums organized by the Department of Youth Ministry. During those occasions, I have been able to speak with many of you in informal circumstances about the things which are important to you, and I have been impressed with the depth of your concern, and touched by the depth of your devotion to God. Don't let anyone ever tell you that you are too young to act on those convictions, or that you should wait for some future moment to become leaders in the Church. I am telling you that the time for you to act is now, the moment to show leadership is today. Project Growth is an excellent first step—and a relatively simple first step—in a process that will make the Armenian Church a strong, living force in our modern world.

In closing, I would like to remind you that our responsibility to the Church serves a higher purpose. We care for the prosperity of the Armenian Church, not because it belongs to us, but because it belongs to God. If we see a clever movie, hear a beautiful piece of music, or read a good book, we do not hesitate to recommend it to others, even drag them along to experience it if they show reluctance. But the truth of Jesus Christ is greater than all these things. The beauty of the Christian life, as expressed through the Armenian Church over the course of many centuries, is a touching lesson in all that makes human life worth living. In this era when many people despair for their own lives and for the future of the world, it is our duty to tell others about this way of life, to introduce them to it, to usher them into its embrace. The Godly life is the highest good for human beings, and the duty we owe to the Church is ultimately the duty to share with others the power and joy of the life dedicated to God.

Thankyou.

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Archbishop Khajag Barsamian

Speech: ACYOA Sports Weekend Banquet—September 5, 1993  
Watertown, MA

1262 words

Reverend Clergy, Honored Guests, Friends:

Let me begin by congratulating the St. James chapter of the ACYOA for the splendid job it did in making the 1993 Assembly and Sports Weekend such a success. Fr. Dajad, the committee chairs \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_, the committee members and the entire Watertown community deserve our thanks and appreciation.

This past summer, America bore witness to an extraordinary event which illuminated the ongoing conflict in our society: the conflict between religious faith and secular culture. The visit of Pope John Paul II to Denver, Colorado, was a triumph of the former in every respect, which demonstrated that millions of people—not only Roman Catholics, nor even believing Christians—respond with joy to uncompromising affirmations of morality. John Paul's statements to the young people of this country were like a breath of fresh air compared to the destructive smog of the modern secular culture, which is unable to offer any standards for how we ought to live, or any guidelines for achieving true human happiness.

Watching the Denver gathering on television, I was struck by two things. First, I was impressed by how young the crowd was. Of course, through my experiences with young Armenian Christians in this country and in our homeland, I have never had any doubts of the depth of faith in the hearts of young people like yourselves. But what was amazing to me was that I had never seen the faith of young people portrayed on television. Here were tens of thousands of young Christians—a small fraction of the millions of youthful believers world-wide—engaged in an enthusiastic and wholesome expression of their devotion to Christ. And yet television has completely ignored this population, and insists upon portraying young people as irreverent, promiscuous, rebellious, and uninterested in participating in traditional religious institutions. Apparently, according to the opinion of television, young people like yourselves don't even exist.

The second thing which struck me was the way that the news people seemed completely confused and even embarrassed by such a show of faith. None of the reporters covering the event showed even the slightest understanding of the history, doctrine and internal logic of Christianity. Whenever they tried to speak about the church, they spoke as if the doctrines of Christianity were "opinions" or "viewpoints"—the sort of changeable thing which one measures through political opinion polls—rather than fully developed teachings which are rooted in the life and words of Jesus Christ.

It was amusing to me to see every news-program interview the same five or six "spokespeople" to expose the supposed disagreement among American Catholics when it comes to issues like birth control, abortion, or priestly celibacy. But the bigger story—which all the reporters missed—was not about the divisions among Roman Catholics, nor even among all Christians, but rather about the incredible spiritual conviction which unites all men and women devoted to God, and which sets them apart from the secular culture at large.

Naturally, as a clergyman in the Armenian Church, I certainly do not recognize the authority of Pope John Paul in ecclesiastical matters. And yet, I feel—indeed, we all should feel—a great sense of solidarity with what he stands for, and what all churches stand for: namely, the active, vital presence of Jesus Christ in this world. At the individual level, that presence is felt in our hearts in our quiet moments of prayer, and whenever we come together to worship in His name. At the level of society, the presence of Christ is felt when believing Christians take their moral responsibility seriously, and use their faith to participate in the society fully and without hesitation.

Now, there are those who will try to tell you that there is no place for Christian values in the public arena; that those of us who believe in God and in His eternal justice should simply shut our mouths when it comes to discussing the policies of a society with a separation of church and state. That statement is simply a lie. We are a part of society, and whatever affects it affects us as well. I will go even further to say that when the voices of godly people fall silent, then politics quickly loses its moral dimension, and society itself is cast adrift on a sea of moral confusion and decay.

There is no better example of this than what has happened to the American family in the past generation. Anyone with common sense and a little real-life experience can see that the family is the fundamental unit of society, and its health is directly related to the health of that society. Now of course, not all families are perfect, but it is equally clear that no other institution exists which can do the things the family does so effectively: namely, generate children, educate them and make them decent, social beings, and provide a support system in times of distress. We Armenians have a special insight into the fact that, when terrible things happen, the family—as distinct from the individual or the state—is the human institution which can best weather the storm.

One would think that no one would doubt that a society has an interest in preserving and strengthening the family; but amazingly, if we try to talk today about simple things like "family values," or even try to offer a common-sense definition of the family as a married father and mother and their children, we are met with a storm of protest from the secular culture, who claim that we are being narrow-minded or bigoted. Of course, the result of a generation of secular experiments to condemn and destroy the basic family structure has

produced nothing more than record rates of divorce, child neglect, and violence.

Today, society seems to concern itself with superficial issues—such as whether the military should enlist homosexuals, or whether a character on TV can be a role model as an unwed mother. But these things only distract us from the roots of our problems as a society: the disintegration of the family. Address this problem, and the rest will fall into place. The secular society, however, seems to have no interest in doing so, and is hostile to any attempt by religious segments of society to seize upon the issue. As Christians, it is up to us to lead the way on this and other concerns.

What specific actions should we follow? The answer will come from our consciences, inspired by serious and honest meditation on the meaning of Christ's mission to the world. Certain things, however, are clear: the sanctity of life, the dignity of human beings which comes from our creation in the image of God, the sacredness of marriage and the family as the place in which children can be protected and raised, and ultimately, the belief in a better world—beyond this one, beyond death—which gives value to this life, and lends us hope for living in our moments of despair.

These are the building blocks of all we hold dear; they are things which cannot be compromised. Sadly, in our society today, these beliefs are under attack. We as Christians—especially as Armenian Christians, who during the Genocide experienced the cruelty of a society unhinged from its moral roots—we may not be neutral in this argument. Like such great men and women in our history as Santoukht and Vartan, we are called to take a stand. And like those great Armenians, we must take our stand with Christ. Thank you.

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## **Archbishop Khajag Barsamian**

**Speech: ACYOA Central Council Retreat—October 30, 1993  
St. Nersess Seminary, New Rochelle, New York**

**2000 words**

I would like to begin by talking about a passage in the gospels, which I think is especially fitting for this gathering and for this moment in the Armenian Church in general. The passage is known as "the story of the Upper Room," and it records the most dramatic moment in the lives of the early Christians: the day that the risen and living Christ actually returned to his apostles. While the episode appears in all four gospels, I would like to concentrate on the way St. Luke tells the story, in the 24th chapter, verses 36 and following.

The scene opens with the apostles gathered together, talking about an earlier sighting of the resurrected Jesus. Elsewhere, we are told that, after Jesus's execution, the apostles had hidden away in the upper room of a house, frightened, confused and broken-hearted. Now, three days later, they were hearing reports that the tomb was empty, and that others among the faithful had been visited by their master.

Suddenly, Jesus himself appears among them, and greets them in a very simple and humble way: "Peace be with you," he says. This was probably the same greeting the apostles had heard Jesus use countless times before. Imagine what it might be like if a friend who you thought was dead walked up to you and said, "Hello. What's new?" as if nothing at all had happened.

The apostles respond like we would: they are terrified. "This can't be our master," they think, "it must be a ghost." They forget everything that Jesus had previously taught them about his death and resurrection. Jesus sees the look of fear on their faces, and understands the doubt in their hearts. And he reassures them in the clearest way possible that he is really a living and breathing being: "Look at my hands and feet, and see who I am!" he says. "Touch me and see for yourselves; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."

Jesus's words are like splashing cold water on the apostles: all the rumors and fears and doubts that had troubled them are dispelled, to be replaced by clarity of mind about the identity of Jesus, and the reality of his return. We might say that this clarity of mind is the first step to the clarity of purpose which the apostles ultimately demonstrate in the formation of the Church. I will return to this idea of "clarity" momentarily.

But let's get back to the story. The apostles are so filled with joy that they hardly believe any of this is happening. Then Jesus makes a very strange remark—a remark that's so simple and mundane that one can easily overlook it. He asks, "Do you have anything to eat here?" The apostles

produce a broiled fish and a honeycomb, and Jesus takes these and eats in front of them, while the apostles look on.

It is hard to understand exactly what Jesus's purpose is here. It is not enough to simply say that Jesus was hungry, because he has just returned from the dead, and we run into tricky theological territory when we try to explain that the risen Christ was still subject to the appetites and limitations of mortal human beings. But I think the least we can say here is that in asking for and eating food, Jesus shows that even after his resurrection, he is not aloof from normal human concerns, including the physical needs of the body.

Christianity is not a purely spiritual religion, which is only concerned with other-worldly things; it is deeply concerned about life in this world as well. During his ministry, Jesus offered to the poor and outcast not only hope for a better world tomorrow, but also strength for living today. Naturally, taking nourishment is the basic way that bodies recover their strength, and Jesus's teaching always drew the symbolic parallel between food for the body and the "spiritual food" which comes from God and strengthens the soul of man. By eating at this point in his return, perhaps Jesus is showing how we need to be aware of the weakness of the body, and to act to strengthen it. The apostolic mission begins from a state of strength, in both body and soul. I will return to this theme later on, as well.

After finishing his meal, Jesus reminds the apostles that his resurrection is the fulfillment of what was written in the law and the prophets; things have happened exactly as Jesus said they would. St. Luke goes on to write that "Jesus went on to open their understanding, so that the apostles might understand the Scriptures." Jesus begins by a quick review of current events: the Scriptures say that Christ must suffer, and that he will rise from the dead three days later. This much has already happened.

But the Scriptures also say that all people of all nations must be told in Christ's name to turn to God for forgiveness. This has not yet been done: and this is the work Jesus instructs his apostles to complete, beginning in Jerusalem, and moving outward to the whole world. Jesus tells the apostles that he will send them the Holy Spirit, as God promised; the apostles must remain in Jerusalem until they receive this power.

So along with clarity and strength, here is a third component of the apostolic mission: inspiration by the Holy Spirit. We know that the apostles did indeed receive the Holy Spirit, on the day called Pentecost, and that they immediately began preaching the Good News about Christ's resurrection and human salvation. The Holy Spirit is a great power—a source of strength and confidence all by itself. When people encounter it, they become so full of inspiration that they have to share their joy with others. The apostles went from being frightened and confused fugitives hiding in the upper room, to being bold, confident, self-sacrificing soldiers for Christ.

I should add that the power of the Holy Spirit did not end with the original apostles: our own history is full of accounts of pious Armenian Christians who accomplished incredible tasks and endured terrible sufferings with such inspiration from God. And these things continue to this day, in Armenia, in Karabagh, and I believe right here, among Armenians in the United States.

The three qualities I have emphasized in this meditation—clarity, strength and inspiration—are the hallmarks of Christian apostleship. Ideally, of course, every member of the Church would be this kind of active, bold apostle for Christ. But one of the lessons of Christianity is that we do not currently live in an ideal world; in this world, the goal of apostleship is often accomplished through the hard work of a very few voices. Perhaps this is why Christ himself began his mission by sending out only a few apostles. These inspired others to take on the mantle of apostleship, and those in turn inspired still others, creating a chain of evangelism which has moved across space and time.

The purpose of this retreat is to enlist all of you as links in this great chain. In one sense, you will be links at the very beginning of the chain, because as ACYOA Central Council members, I would like you to go out especially to young people—to those who may not have had any experience in the life of Christ and his Church.

I don't think there is any more important task for the Church than to bring its younger generation into the fold. But we can't even begin to talk about an Armenian Christian youth movement if there are no people who are ready and willing to do the actual work. And if the desire to do that work does not come from the ranks of the youth themselves—from their leadership, as represented by people like you—then I am afraid that the entire project might slip through the cracks and be lost.

And so during this weekend, we have retreated to this symbolic "upper room," to take stock of ourselves and the work that needs to be done. Like the original apostles, you will need the clarity, strength and inspiration to carry out your own apostleship.

First, we need to have clarity about what the Church is about: Where does its authority come from? What is its mission—its role in an individual's life? How does an organization like the ACYOA fit into all this? If you feel that there are issues which the Church ought to address, I want you to be open about it, so that we may be clear on where we stand.

Second, we must have strength. We need strength of character, so that we can assume the burden of being examples of Christian conduct to other people. We need strength of soul, to be humble before God, and generous in our dealings with other people, whether they are weaker or stronger than we are. And we need strength of body, to labor in the vineyard, so to speak, to travel

to different parishes, and to take on the essential but sometimes thankless jobs which keep the church alive and vital.

Finally, we must pray for inspiration—and not just for ourselves, but for all our people. It is one of the ironies of our time that in this world of material abundance and technical wonder, the soul of man seems more empty and hungry than ever before. "Feed my lambs," said Jesus in the days before he ascended to his Father, and that command was meant for all of us. But before we go out, we must be ready and confident; you need inspiration, so you can inspire others. In this sense, I hope that this retreat will serve as a prototype, to inspire each of you to do similar things at the regional level of our Diocese.

I know there are some today who believe that the Armenian Church is a dead and empty vessel. I am sure that, two thousand years ago, the original apostles believed that the Christian movement was also dead, as they huddled in fear in that upper room. But they were wrong: it was just the beginning of a tradition which literally re-defined what it meant to be alive. And the Armenian Church has been—and is now—a part of that living and life-giving tradition.

Those original apostles had just endured the worst crisis of their lives: the execution of their teacher and friend. As Armenians, we are just emerging from a crisis of our own, which has lasted nearly a century: it included the Genocide, which destroyed a whole generation of our people; Armenia's Soviet period, which crippled the activity of the Church at its source; and the internal division of the Church in this country. But in spite of all this, we have endured. Now is the time for the Armenian Church to move forward again, using the Holy Spirit and all the gifts of our heritage to guide and inspire us.

This is a time of great possibilities. For people of your generation, there is much work to do; but we should view this as an exciting prospect, and a great privilege to serve God and His Church. Like the world-changing events of two thousand years ago, something new and exciting can emerge from this retreat in our symbolic upper room. With clarity, strength and inspiration, I have little doubt that such people as yourselves can start that chain of apostleship which will bring the light of Christ into the hearts and souls of the young people of this Diocese. Thank you.

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