

PRIMATE'S ADDRESS AT THE ANNUAL ASSEMBLY OF ACYOA  
WYNNEWOOD, PA, AUGUST 28, 1986

It is a great joy that we are commemorating the forty years of fruitful service of the Armenian Church Youth Organization of America.

It is appropriate on this wonderful occasion that we recall, with loving gratitude, one of the key people responsible for the formation of the ACYOA - Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, who worked so diligently to bring about the formation of the first Constitutional Assembly in January of 1946.

One of the main reasons for the success of the ACYOA over these many years has been the emphasis on the establishment of a strong parish base for the organization. It was not set apart from the structure, but was, and is, very much a part of the Church.

In addition to providing a variety of programs, including sports and entertainment that would be of interest to young men and women, the ACYOA undertook a great many projects that were of immediate value to the local parishes and to our church overall.

Perhaps most important of all, the ACYOA undertook the sponsorship of publishing a number of books and other documents that have helped to enhance the teachings of our Church. Many of these publications were utilized by the Department of Religious Education when it began operations.

The story of the growth of the ACYOA has not been without its thorny side as well. It would not be truthful to say that the forty years were filled only with success.

Twenty years ago, in the early and mid-1960s, the ACYOA was affected, as were so many other organizations and institutions in America, by the dramatic changes that swept through society - especially with respect to our youth. Young men and women everywhere, at every level of the economy and society, were "dropping out," or "turning off" - or, more unfortunately, "turning on" to one substance or another. There were new religions, new communes, new lifestyles. The ACYOA was touched, along with other parts of American society as well. For two years, the annual General Assembly Weekend was suspended - and things were not as they should have been.

Fortunately, there was still strength at the parish level. Much of the work of the national section was handled by the Diocese. Yet, two very valuable programs were inaugurated during this painful period - activities that still provide benefits to the participants as well as to the Church.

We are referring to the Armenian Studies Program which provides a means for members of the ACYOA to go back to their historic "home," where most have never been. That is to Armenia. They have a chance to experience, in a very meaningful way, the customs, the people, the language, the beauty - all that make our Armenian heritage so precious to us.

During this same period, about fifteen years ago, the National Sports Weekend began attracting nearly a thousand young people from all around the country to participate in a wide variety of sports competitions, entertainment and, in general, have a wonderful opportunity to meet young people of similar backgrounds and interests.

In addition to sponsoring sports competitions, the ACYOA continued to foster its educational contributions through such efforts as the development of audio-visual programs that help to explain the character of the Church liturgy and other important topics.

We are pleased to see how the ACYOA has continued to place emphasis on the development of leaders, recognizing leadership qualities early on: by conducting such leadership programs as the Sam Nersessian Awards which call attention to young people who exemplify the characteristics one would hope to find in a sincere Christian, devoted to his or her church and faith.

The scholarship programs, that send young people to attend courses at St. Nersess Seminary, offer another example of the kind of positive approach to developing leaders.

Perhaps the finest compliment that can be paid to the ACYOA on its 40th anniversary is the fact that so many of our American-born clergy and lay workers were members of the ACYOA in their early years. Of course, we can trace a very high percentage of marriages over the past 40 years to couples who first met while attending ACYOA events.

Because of these and many other facts, the ACYOA is so vital to the future of our Church. We are a relatively small ethnic group, yet we are not weak.

It is people who make the ACYOA work - people who contribute to the strength of our Church and the general welfare of the Armenian community in America. Those of you who are taking part in ACYOA now - who are here today - are

the leaders of today - and of tomorrow. The history of the last 40 years has proven this to be true.

The mantle of leadership brings with it not only justifiable acclaim - it also carries a great deal of responsibility. That is not something to be taken lightly. It means that you are in positions where you give direction - not by issuing orders, but by the example you set. Many individuals with whom you come in contact are affected by what you do - and what you don't do. You may not realize it, but you are role models for younger people. You must act accordingly.

You are responsible adult Christian men and women.

It is not easy to be a Christian these days, but we must remind ourselves - when was it ever so?

Ask your grandparents and other relatives who survived the Armenian genocide of 1915 - they know how hard it can be to maintain the Christian faith. For them and their contemporaries, it meant facing death - literally. For those of us enjoying the freedoms of this country, being a Christian means that we have to resist the temptations to do all those things that we know are contrary to our Christian Armenian beliefs - but which are deemed acceptable by the rest of society.

Often the biggest challenge for today's Christian is to say "No!" - when faced with a chance to do something we know to be wrong - while the rest of the world says it is all right. That is where your leadership must come in - through your actions as Christian Armenians.

Will this always be easy? Of course not, but who said that good things can be achieved without some effort? Your role, as leaders, will be even more demanding, since it will be up to you to provide the example, to show the way.

We had the benefit of a commentary from one of the young men who served as a summer Task Force Intern at the Diocesan Headquarters last month.

Very accurately, he pointed out that it would be correct to call you "leaders of today", recognizing that in your present roles you are functioning in leadership capacities already.

The question, however, that will always remain with us, is: "Where are we going from here?"

What lies ahead for the ACYOA? Next year, next decade, next century.

The year 2001, the start of another century, will be upon us in less than 15 years. It is not too soon to think about where the ACYOA can be - should be - at that time.

How is the ACYOA going to become even more meaningful for those who participate? How will you make it attractive to those who are not taking part, but should be participants?

Undoubtedly, each of you knows someone - several individuals, perhaps - who should be seated here today. We are talking about people you know,

who have the background and the talents to be valuable additions to ACYOA leadership. How can you reach out to these people - in a persuasive, positive way - to bring them into the organization?

These are the kinds of questions you must address - along with many others - if you are to fulfill your responsibilities as leaders.

As many of you may recall, last year we mentioned some new programs that we hoped to see initiated in the Diocese that will complement the goals of the ACYOA. It is gratifying to see that these are moving ahead.

Plans are moving ahead for "International Youth Fellowship Week" that will bring to our Diocese young men and women from other parts of the world to spend some more time with our young people. While this will begin on a modest basis, with individuals from other Dioceses in California and Canada, we look forward to seeing young men and women from abroad joining this kind of Assembly, as our own representatives visit other parts of the world on behalf of the ACYOA.

The Campus Ministry program, we spoke about in the Diocesan Assembly in May, we hope will get under way in the near future.

A group of ladies wrote to us and told us they wanted somehow to serve the church and its people. They were concerned about our children, most particularly our young people in colleges, away from home and family. Their idea is beautiful in its motivation - to contact every parish in our Diocese and compile the names of college students who are at school in different cities. By circulating this information, they hope that

families in the cities, where these students live, will invite them into their homes, share with them meals and comfort and fellowship. In this way, these Armenian ladies hope to reinforce the family values with which these Armenian young people have been raised. Along the way, they may prevent the drift and alienation which may only be the result of loneliness. Whatever the obstacles, we know that our Armenian ladies are willing to meet the challenge. One of the reasons we are so sure is the recollection of similar gestures made during World War II when Armenian families everywhere in Europe sought out and welcomed Armenian soldiers from many countries into their homes. Their many kindnesses have not been forgotten to this day, and this stretching out of the community's hand to its own, in both a real and a symbolic way, is something that we, in the Diocese, should emulate.

We mentioned the just-completed "Summer Intern" program. This was the first time the Diocese has undertaken such an operation - and it was gratifying and successful. Four young people, all members of the ACYOA, came to work at our headquarters in New York City. They were assigned to specific tasks in the administration of the Diocese.

They met with Diocesan officials and the Primate daily, at meals and in services, as well as in work assignments. Having the benefit of face-to-face communication, especially on a continuing basis, with the young people of our Church, can only be helpful to the clergy and the Diocesan staff.

You can be sure that this program will be continued - and expanded - in the coming years. It gave the interns a unique opportunity to see how their Diocesan Headquarters operates.

There is something else that can be gained through that internship program. It is the concern for the future: but based on a knowledge of the past.

To plan properly for the years to come, we must study the past. Despite some people's opinions to the contrary, all that has gone before, should not be forgotten. There is much to admire, much to build on, in the annals of the ACYOA. You should examine these past forty years carefully, to determine those elements that have brought about the success we celebrate now. Utilize the best of what has taken place and create the new structure for the future.

We have called you leaders of today - and so you are. Act as leaders, as Christian Armenian men and women. You know that God will be with you, and bless you.