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BELLEVILLE ILLINOIS BANQUET SPEECH

Dear Parishioners,

This occasion marks my first visit to the Soorp Shoghagat Church, and so my first opportunity to speak to you as assembled parishioners. I consider it a joyous event whenever our people gather together to break bread as Armenians and as fellow servants of Christ.

Traditionally, the act of sharing a meal is a sign of harmony and peace between people: one thinks of the biblical exhortations to break bread with our rivals, or the historic meeting of European and Native American cultures which is commemorated in the United States as

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Thanksgiving. As Armenians—and especially as Christian Armenians—coming together in this spirit of goodwill is the first step in preserving our religious and national identity. The common purpose that brings us here is our Church and our heritage.

These two pillars of the Armenian identity have always been inseparable, and shall remain so. Our Christian faith is distinguished by our particular tradition—our heroic art, our sublime music, and our majestic language which through our liturgy gives such noble expression to the word of God. These are the beautiful images through which the Almighty spoke to our ancestors, and it remains the precious inheritance of each and every generation of the Armenian people.

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As Armenians, we know that this legacy has been tested in the brutal and merciless crucible of this world. We also know that having been tested, we have endured, and clung ever more tenaciously to our sacred heritage. I regard this as the noblest characteristic of our national identity—like Job in the Old Testament, the Armenian people have been afflicted in a hostile world, but, as a people, we have never forsaken our devotion to God, nor to His holy Church.

In the Liturgy today we came together in the sanctuary of the Church to observe the Feast of the Assumption of St. Mary. While the theology of this particular episode is abstruse and complex, this Feast is indelibly etched in the

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hearts and minds of Armenians throughout the generations as the Sunday of the Blessing of the Grapes. No doubt many of your grandparents refused to eat grapes until after their consecration on Assumption Sunday. The reasons for this have gotten lost in the bustle of twentieth century life, but it is really quite profound. In the agricultural society of the Middle Ages, the farmers would begin their harvest in mid-August. They had worked extremely hard for an entire year to reap this reward, and you would think that they would be eager to taste the delicate sweetness of their labors. Instead, before ^agrape ever touched human lips, the firstfruits of the harvest were brought to the sanctuary, as

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an expression of the gratitude of the entire society for another year's growth, another year's survival. Through the blessing of the grapes, our ancestors were recognizing the often quiet and subtle way that God blesses our daily lives.

As denizens of a sophisticated industrial society, we must not forget the wisdom of our agricultural forebears. We must remember that whatever we earn—whatever successes we achieve in life—we only do so at God's pleasure, and we rightfully owe Him credit and tribute for our accomplishments. In this way, our every act is rendered sacred, the mundane actions of daily life take on new meaning.

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Armenians around the world are on the verge of a renaissance. In individual parishes across this nation, and at the level of our Diocese, to say nothing of the remarkable developments in Armenia itself, our people are distinguishing themselves in every conceivable field of endeavor. We must endorse all of these projects through our participation and our moral and financial support. Most of all, we must remember that we accomplish nothing without the blessing of God. It is His blessing which ultimately defines true victory, just as it was His supreme sacrifice on the cross which has made our affliction endurable.

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18 August 1991

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