

Religion news

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Survival is key to Armenians, primate says

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Centuries of persecution and loss of political independence have shown that Armenians know how to survive — it's part of their blood, declared the newly elected primate of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America.

Bishop Khajag Barsamian, 39, will celebrate a Divine Liturgy at 10:30 a.m. Sunday during a pastoral visit to a small South Milwaukee parish that is another example of Armenian survival.

For the past six years, Holy Resurrection Armenian Apostolic Church, 909 Michigan Ave., has been without a full-time priest. Yet, the faith community has remained intact.

"Armenians are people who stick together," said Michael Hayalian, parish council chairman. "We hold strong and true to our heritage, ethnic background and our religious beliefs."

Barsamian's visit, the first by the primate of the diocese to the Milwaukee area in 15 to 20 years, is a "great inspiration" to the parish, Hayalian said.

"It's something this community needs," he added, acknowledging that it's been "hard to exist" without a full-time priest. Since their pastor left in 1985, the parish has had a priest from Racine celebrate the Divine Liturgy once or twice a month.

The parish may get a new pastor in the spring, Barsamian said in a telephone interview this week from

his New York City office, adding he was planning to discuss the issue with the parish council as part of his visit. He suggested that the priest could serve both Holy Resurrection and St. John Baptist Armenian Church in Greenfield, which also is without a pastor.

Holy Resurrection is one of four Armenian parishes in southeastern Wisconsin and the oldest in the state. Founded in 1924, the parish has about 60 members, the majority of which are of retirement age.

Among Barsamian's priorities is getting youths and young adults to become actively involved in parish life. That cannot be done without a solid religious education program, said Barsamian, former vicar general of the diocese and director of the ecumenical office.

With the increase of intermarriage, especially in the Midwest, church leaders are concerned about "keeping the family inside the Armenian Church despite some cultural difficulties," he said.

"There we have to work hard so people will feel at home," he added.

Thus, one of his goals is to make the church's Christian education department more effective at the local parish level.

The Armenian Church worldwide is faced with a severe clergy shortage, Barsamian said.

"We are trying to strengthen our seminaries and find more parishioners who would be willing to go to the seminary," he said.



Diocese of the Armenian Church of America photo

Bishop Khajag Barsamian, primate of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America, celebrates a Divine Liturgy.

In the Armenian Church, clergy may be married or celibate. However, only celibate priests may be elevated to the rank of bishop. Its religious beliefs, rites and sacraments are similar to the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. The church's supreme patriarch, called the Catholicos of All Armenians, resides in Etchmiadzin in Soviet Armenia.

As more Armenians come to the United States, demands for clergy are increasing, he said. Currently, there are 1 million Armenians in the US and Canada. In the US, there are 100 parishes with 70 priests to serve them. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the first Armenian Church in the US, founded in Worcester, Mass.

The clergy situation is particularly critical in Armenia, where Soviet reforms have led to unrestricted freedom for the church and a "tremendous revival of religious sentiment," according to Barsamian's report on a recent visit to the republic.

People of all ages and educational backgrounds are "hungry to know more about their faith and the church," he said.

Christianity is strongly rooted in the country's history. According to tradition, the Armenian Church was founded by the Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew. Church history says Armenia was the first nation in the world to declare Christianity as its state religion.

He said he saw a tremendous change in Armenia.

"People are very open now," he said. "They speak without hiding anything."

The bishop also visited Stepanavan, an area devastated by the 1988 earthquake. Funding from the Armenian Church of America is responsible for the construction of an Armenian-American village that will provide 400 houses, a school, shops and hospital.

The bishop expressed concern for Armenians caught up in the civil violence in the neighboring Soviet republic of Azerbaijan and for the large Armenian community in Iraq.

There has been no news from Armenians in Iraq since the outbreak of war, Barsamian said. The Armenian Church took a strong position against the war, as did many other denominations.

489 ready to join Catholic tradition

80 parishes involved in Rite of Election

The Milwaukee Archdiocese is in the midst of a priest shortage crisis but it is not in a crisis in terms of people "responding to the mission of Jesus" and wanting to enter the Catholic faith, according to an archdiocesan official.

"The spirit is very much alive in the church," said Peter Ghiloni, director of the archdiocesan Office for Prayer and Worship.

Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland will preside over two services Sunday afternoon at St. John's Cathedral, 812 N. Jackson St., where 489 people will be welcomed into the Roman Catholic tradition.

"That's why the church is in a dilemma. More and more people are saying they want to be part of the mission, and the church is struggling with who can be their leaders," said Ghiloni, who oversees the adult conversion program in the archdiocese.

Eighty parishes will be involved in the Rite of Election Sunday when the names of those entering the church will be presented to the archbishop. Of this group, there are 110 catechumens, those to be baptized into the faith, and 379 candidates who have already been baptized in another faith tradition.

It is the second year for the archbishop to preside over the rite, which is celebrated the first Sunday of Lent. Last year, there was one service where 551 names were enrolled with 72 parishes participating. Because of the large number of people involved, two services were scheduled this year at 2 and 5 p.m.

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is the process of conversion adopted a few years ago by the US Catholic bishops for bringing people into the Catholic faith. The steps leading to full membership in the church date back to the early days of Christianity.

The final stages of initiation coincide with the Lenten preparation for Easter, a time of "purification and enlightenment." They receive the

church has a sponsor from the parish involved in the candidate's instructions.

"The concept is we are all on a journey of faith together," said Judy Price, a member of the RCIA team at St. Alphonsus Catholic Church in Greenfield, which has one of the largest groups of people coming into the church this year.

"These new people bring from other Christian faith traditions a real gift to us... and we of the practicing faith community are being challenged by them to renew ourselves constantly," she said.

Yet, at a time when the Catholic population is growing in southeastern Wisconsin, the Milwaukee Archdiocese is facing one of the worst priest shortages in the country, according to a national survey by Richard Schoenherr, a University of Wisconsin — Madison sociologist.

Weakland, in a recent draft of a pastoral letter addressing the decreasing number of priests, said he would be willing to propose to the pope that married men be ordained priests.

The positive side of the issue is that "people are still responding to the invitation God has given them to be part of a faith community and they're choosing to come into the Catholic faith," said Father Robert Lotz, director of the archdiocesan Office for Adult and Family Ministry and a member of the archdiocesan RCIA team.

There also are more qualified lay people in parishes to provide for their needs, he said.

"The negative is more and more people coming into the church causes an energy drain on current clerics," he noted.

Hopefully, the situation will result in the institutional church accepting into the priesthood those people whom it presently "is unwilling to ordain," he said. The church does not ordain women or married men.

"There is not a shortage of vocations," he stressed. "The official



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