

ADDRESS AT 1991 CHOIR ASSEMBLY BANQUET
CLEVELAND, OHIO

Reverend Clergy, Choir Assembly Delegates and Friends:

The Choir Assembly is one of the annual Church events which I most eagerly anticipate. The reason is obvious: I simply love the music and poetry of the Armenian Divine Liturgy, and I enjoy being among those who devote so much time and care to its preservation and celebration. When I attend these gatherings of our church choirs, I feel I am among kindred spirits.

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I ought to add that that feeling was fostered through the labors of our hosts for this weekend—the members of the Cleveland Armenian community. I salute the heroic efforts of the St. Krikor of Narek parish, its Parish Council, the Association of Armenian Church Choirs, and the organizing committee under the chairmanship of _____, all of which contributed to the splendid outcome of this event.

As I mentioned during my address to the Assembly, I returned recently from a trip to Armenia, where I participated in the ceremony of the blessing of the myron at Holy Etchmiadzin. I wish that you all could have joined me on this pilgrimage: as fellow altar-servers, you would

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have been particularly moved. The ceremony was beautiful, of course, and it was especially inspiring this year because it took place in the afterglow of the national referendum for the independence of Armenia.

As His Holiness Vasken I, Catholicos of All Armenians, bestowed his blessing on the holy myron which is used in all of the sacraments of our Church, I was overcome by the incredible spiritual and historical significance of the occasion. Vehapar referred to the holy oil as the “Myron of Independence,” and indeed, it was as if Armenia herself, and all of her children, were being baptized anew. His Holiness sends you his warmest greetings in these momentous times for our people, and asked me to convey to you his paternal love and blessings.

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Looking out on the remarkable events occurring all over the world—especially the incredible religious revival taking place in Armenia itself—I am convinced that we are living in a time when all the children of the Armenian Church are being called to sing out loudly and clearly their devotion to God, and to demonstrate that faith in their daily lives through love, charity and sacrifice.

And—as each choir member demonstrates afresh every Sunday—the most powerful expression of those sentiments resides in the ancient and sublime beauty of the Armenian Divine Liturgy. We frequently talk about the sacred music of the Armenian Church as part of our

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cultural and artistic heritage, but it is really so much more than that. The Liturgy is the expression of the very foundations of our faith: of the story of Christ, and of our theology. Ours is a living tradition, and it takes its vitality from the voice of our choirs.

Unlike other religious traditions, the Armenian Church has never hidden its theology away in books which are accessible only to a specialized sect of scholars. We sing our faith loudly and boldly during each badarak, reaching out to young and old, rich and poor, male and female, educated and uneducated alike, drawing all of our people into the web of the community of the Church, and into communion with Christ.

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The choirs of our Church have a vital role to play in that tradition of outreach, because it is through participation the choir that many people gain their first experience of altar service. Initiating our youth into the family of altar servers has been a frequent topic of discussion at these Assemblies—as it has in all the various groups within our Church. But the subject of youth in the Choir Association has a special importance today, because it is among their ranks that we are most likely to discover the priests of tomorrow.

As you are all aware, the Armenian Church is suffering from a terrible shortage of priests. Throughout North America alone, there are thirty churches that do not have

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priests. And the lack of priests is sorely felt in Armenia as well, where the basic work of evangelizing is being frustrated by simple lack of manpower.

There are many reasons for this shortage, but there is only one solution: we must encourage more of our young men to enter the seminary. And that means that the people of each parish must keep their eyes open for young men who show an interest in the offices of the church, and in service to God. I feel strongly that our church choirs are on the front line of this mission: you are our scouts in the field, seeking out the young men who may have the calling to devote their lives to the Church.

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Most of all, it is through your example of devotion that others will be encouraged to enter the seminaries. And by inspiring a new generation to enter the priesthood, perhaps we may fortify our own convictions and renew our own devotion to God.

The Choir Association has a unique insight into replenishing the ranks of the priesthood of the Armenian Church. This is an exciting time for our people, and an exciting time for our Church. I believe that our people are hungry as never before for the nourishment provided by the Mother Church. The Christian revival going on in Armenian communities throughout the world has produced conditions that have not been seen since the Golden Age of our Church.

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In order to seize this precious moment, the Armenian Church must call upon her best and brightest sons to take on the duties of her sacred priesthood, and to shoulder the yoke of God. God's burden is often heavy, but as you well know, there is nothing more fulfilling and rewarding than service to Him. May God bless you all, and may our holy church always ring with the beautiful sound of your voices.

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