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DIOCESE OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH OF AMERICA, 630 SECOND AVENUE, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10016-4885 212 686-0710

June 20, 1990

The Honorable Mario M. Cuomo
Governor of the State of New York
Executive Chamber
State Capitol
Albany, New York 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo,

We were greatly disturbed to hear the recent news that the City of Niagara Falls is planning to confiscate and demolish St. Sarkis Armenian Church in order to use the land for a large development. The parishioners of the church have also complained that certain local politicians have made inappropriate implications that the Armenian Church is not a "real" church and have raised questions about the religion of the Armenian people.

Implications made against the most sacred institution of a people in order to disqualify them from keeping their sanctuary is against the Constitution of this country, which guarantees all citizens the right to worship as they choose. The Armenian nation was the first to adopt Christianity as her national religion in 301 A.D. The Armenian Church is one of the ancient Eastern Orthodox Churches, and a member of the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches. Nineteen centuries of history testify to the heroic struggle of the Armenian people to maintain their faith in Christ. It is a travesty that politicians in this country, where absolute freedom is guaranteed to all, should question whether St. Sarkis Armenian Church is a "true" church or not.

In the tradition of the Armenian Church, which goes back to very early Christian times, the site on which a church is erected is always consecrated and thus that land becomes holy. The church building itself is also consecrated and anointed with holy chrism, the symbol of the Holy Spirit. A church standing on consecrated ground is almost never abandoned. In the homeland of the Armenian people, only enemies hostile to the Christian faith have confiscated and demolished churches. In this country, Armenians

initially purchased for temporary use sanctuaries belonging to other denominations. Such buildings were later replaced with churches built on consecrated ground. St. Sarkis was from its inception built on consecrated ground.

As a resident of the Empire State, we are acquainted with your sense of justice and your love for the common people. We have always respected you as a great champion for human rights and as one who understands the plight of persecuted peoples. We would appreciate your intervention on behalf of our parishioners in Niagara Falls. If they lose their church, they will be deprived of a site they consider sacred and will probably be without a sanctuary, since the community in Niagara Falls is not affluent enough to rebuild.

Two generations have worked diligently to build the present church. These were people who were subjected to brutal treatment by the Turks, lost their families and worldly possessions, and who, after surviving the genocide of 1915, came to this country to start a new life. With their hard-earned mites they built their church. Destroying the sanctuary of such a people will not improve the development in downtown Niagara Falls. Instead, a church in the midst of a modern development will bring to a conglomerate a spiritual dimension.

May God inspire your leadership with wisdom and grace and may He guide us all to accomplishments in His name.

With prayers,

Fr. K. Barsamian

Fr. Khajag Barsamian
Primate