

50TH ANNIVERSARY OF CHELTENHAM CHURCH

Dear Parishioners,

It gives me great pleasure to join you in celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Holy Trinity Armenian Church. The Armenian community of Philadelphia is an old and strong one, which has contributed a rich legacy to the experience of Armenians in America. The Holy Trinity parish in particular, through its activities and achievements and through the deeds of its sons and daughters, has left a profound impression on the life of our Diocese.

I suppose that the history of the Holy Trinity Church most readily divides into two periods of roughly equal

length, corresponding to the two buildings which this congregation has called home. I can only imagine how heartbreaking it was in 1964, when the church on Marshal Street burned to the ground. But in the best spirit of our people, the Holy Trinity parishioners were not deterred by this setback; indeed, the destruction of the original building only galvanized your efforts to construct a new edifice—this time employing the magnificent architectural style of the Armenian Churches of the middle ages.

Your experiences in North Philadelphia serve to remind us why the Church fathers chose the image of the phoenix as the historic symbol of the Armenian Church. They understood that, even though the temples and

bodies of our people may be consumed by flame, the spirit of the Armenians would arise from the ashes, and rebuild anew.

Of course, over the past fifty years, the joyful times have far outweighed the sorrowful episodes. We witnessed one such happy occasion yesterday, when your pastor, the Very Reverend Father Haigazoun Melkonian, was conferred with the rank of Dzayrakooyñ Vartabed. As I explained during yesterday's ceremony, the title of Dzayrakooyñ Vartabed is the highest academic degree of the Church—essentially recognizing the recipient as a teacher of the first rank. It is an honor which Fr. Haigazoun richly deserves. It is the hallmark of the finest teachers

that they can express the deepest sentiments and profoundest ideas through a few carefully chosen words, thus clarifying us in our confusion, illuminating us in our ignorance, and consoling us in our sorrow. The Armenian Church is fortunate to have such men take on the heavy mantle of the priesthood, and this congregation is fortunate to have him as its pastor.

Anniversaries like this one serve as natural reference points in the life of our community. for example, looking over some old photographs from the early days of this church, it made me smile to see the face of a young vartabed named Torkom Manoogian, serving in a pastoral capacity for the first time since his arrival in the United

States in 1946. Having worked with Archbishop Torkom during his tenure as Primate of this Diocese, I know that this church and its people have always held a special place in his heart. His experiences in this community substantially shaped the course of his ministry. You may be pleased to know that your love and devotion to this church have had repercussions all the way over in Jerusalem.

From the vantage of this 50th Anniversary, you can look back on the accomplishments of a half century with pride—and perhaps with a little sadness as we remember those who are no longer with us to share in these joyous occasions, but who worked so hard and served so dili-

gently and sacrificed so heroically to bring us to this point. Their spirits will reside in this sanctuary—and in your hearts—as long as there are people who remember them, and carry on the work to which they devoted so much energy and love.

But anniversaries also compel us to look forward, to plan for the adventures and challenges that lie ahead. Having come so far already, what should be the priorities and objectives of the Holy Trinity Church in the coming fifty years?

I think that this is an important question for the entire Armenian Church to consider. Of course, above all, our mission as a Church is to save souls, and it is truly our

mission—we all must take part in it, because we are the Church. Without this mission, everything would be meaningless and hollow, including our traditions and heritage. After all, our Armenian identity is grounded on the teachings and life of our Lord.

Next there is the the task of fostering in ourselves and our offspring Christian moral values. Although these values arose two thousand years ago, in a remote place far removed from our sophisticated and technological society, they remain as true and eternal today as they have ever been. One only needs to look at the deteriorating society around us to see how necessary it is to revive the courageous moral outlook of the Church, and to

understand how crucial it is for each of us to daily walk in the path of love, righteousness and faith.

That path is one that our Armenian forebears have cherished for centuries. And in honor of their memories, we also have an obligation to preserve and promote—and add to—the heritage they forged. We are all guardians and teachers of the Armenian spirit and the Armenian traditions. Those traditions are numerous: the Armenian language, literature, music, cuisine and culture in general. But I am convinced that all of these individual items come together under one great idea: the idea of the Armenian family.

The Armenian family is the cornerstone of our Church. It is a tremendous source of strength, and a shining objective for all of our work and training. Its essence is best expressed in the words which Christ spoke to his disciples at the Last Supper: "Love one another."

Loving one another—even in spite of our differences of habit and opinion—is of course basic experience of family life—as everyone who has been a part of a family knows. The Armenian Church is no different in this regard: as we gather together for worship and fellowship, we are all members of the single, vast family of the Church. And Christ's advice to love each other must apply here in Church, of all places. What greater legacy can we offer

our descendants? Within our individual lives, and within the Church, we can have no nobler occupation than to instill in our children that sense of belonging to the family of Armenians and Christians whose highest bond is their simple love for one another.

In this modern world, alas, that job a can often be difficult. But the great lesson of the history of the Armenian Church is the ability to overcome difficult situations. That is a lesson of which the Holy Trinity parishioners have had some experience. I am certain that the Holy Spirit Who guided your parents will also inspire you, and propel you to succeed in your mission, and to be victorious over whatever obstacles stand in your way.

• • You have a young, educated and energetic pastor to assist you. May God bless you all, and may He be your guide and guardian.

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