

Archbishop Khajag Barsamian

Speech: 50th Anniversary Banquet—October 29, 1995
St. Gregory the Illuminator Church, Haverhill, Massachusetts

875 words

Reverend Clergy, honored guests, friends:

Towards the end of the Jamakirk, there is a prayer which seems especially fitting on this occasion. It appears in the office of the Hankstyan Jham, or Rest Service:

"O Lord our God...Have mercy upon those who build up Thy church, those who give thanks, those who give of their substance, those who serve and those who rest under the shadow of Thy holy church."

Before they went to bed each night, the Armenian priests and monks would recite these words, requesting from God a special blessing on those who "built up the church." They meant it in two senses: those who were responsible for the physical structure of the church, and also those who brought it to life—through service, sacrifice, and general activity in the community of fellow believers.

As I suggested, these thoughts have a special meaning for us today, as we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the St. Gregory the Illuminator Church. For what else are we recognizing this afternoon, but the foresight of those who originally built this church, and the dedication of those who have, over half-a-century, continued the noble effort of keeping the parish alive.

As might be expected over the course of a 50-year history, there have been many high-points, many times of joy and celebration, mixed with moments of sorrow and even disappointment. But through the highs and lows, this church has remained the anchor of the spiritual life of the local Armenian Christians. When any of you enter her doors for badarak or for a community function, it should be like coming home after a long day, to a warm and comfortable place, where you are surrounded by people you love, and where you can dedicate your efforts to a noble and worthy cause.

The St. Gregory parish stands apart from all the other places you know. The other landmarks of your lives—work, school, the political society, secular organizations—these are often the arena for competition and even division. But this church should be different—and at its best, over these past 50 years, it has been different. It was built to be a true sanctuary—a place of peace—where Armenian Christian families could come together, to be inspired by their distinctive tradition, and to dedicate their hearts to the glory of God.

We should not lose sight of the fact that we are celebrating 50 years, not of the St. Gregory building, but of the St. Gregory Church. It takes more than a building to make a church. It takes a community which has formed and grown together; which has a vital spark of life; which renders humble service to God. It is the dedication of the people, inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit, which makes a church—no matter where they may meet.

For this reason, it is important for every member of your community to participate in the life of this parish. As my quote from the Jamakirk suggested, you are all called to "build up your church, give thanks, give of your substance, serve and rest under the shadow God's holy church." Right now, of course, that means renewing the spirit of the founders of 50 years ago. But in general it means that every member should offer their full moral and material support, to make the St. Gregory parish a strong and vital House of the Lord.

In this regard, you are fortunate to have had five decades of honorable men and women in this community, who have laid a solid foundation for the future, and who continue to provide a worthy example for your actions today.

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the St. Gregory the Illuminator Church of Haverhill, I want to express my congratulations to Fr. Sahag Kaishian, who provides another kind of example to this parish. It is a wonderful thing for me to see a young man, born in America, ordained into the Armenian priesthood, and starting out in his ministry to his people and to God. Fr. Sahag is an example of the future of our community: of Armenian American young men, who have chosen to take up the ancient pastoral staff of God's Armenian flock. That promising example deserves the support and encouragement of us all, and my best wishes are with Fr. Sahag and his Yeretzgin as he continues his mission to this community.

My congratulations go to the Parish Council members, headed by a very dedicated lady, Mrs. Zarty Chilingirian; to the delegates; and especially to the 50th Anniversary Committee and its co-chairmen, Mr. Michael Der Boghosian and Mrs. Virginia Chobanian.

On this special occasion, I want to close with the following message: Love, respect and work with each other, for the continuation of the mission of the St. Gregory the Illuminator parish, in this wonderful Armenian Christian community of Haverhill. May the God of our ancestors always keep the people of this parish under his protective gaze. May He remember all those who built this church over the past 50 years, and may He continue to bestow His blessings upon the living children of this flock, whenever they gather to worship in His Name. Thank you.

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