

ST. GREGORY THE ILLUMINATOR ARMENIAN CHURCH, BINGHAMTON
PASTOR'S REPORT 1985

With the help of God and the support of our people we succeeded in concluding another fruitful year in the life of our parish. Like other small parishes, our parish tried hard to make ends meet and continue its growth spiritually. This would not have been possible without the invaluable services of a handful of volunteers who many times sacrificed their comfort and set aside their household responsibilities for the sake of the parish. They made their helpful presence felt everywhere, as in worship, during monthly gatherings and in the kitchen. Some of them carried a double load willingly. I firmly believe that they represent the lifeline of our parish and as such deserve our deep appreciation and admiration. But it is not enough to show appreciation for them. Others have obligation to join the ranks of the volunteers in lending them a helping hand. If we go on taking them for granted we will be doing a great disservice to our parish.

In view of this, I devoted special efforts to recruit new volunteers not only from our immediate area but also in the neighboring towns. I contacted those who are in the habit of standing on the sidelines taking a passive attitude. I strongly urged them to cease acting like outsiders and become active volunteers in our parish. I pointed out to them that within our parish exist many tasks to be performed by people who will put to use their own individual gifts and skills. I stressed the fact that there is no easy or painless way of teaching a Sunday school class, of serving on a church board, of voluntarily assuming the burdens of the parish. The volunteers could be subject to criticism, disappointment and failure. But in the long run, they have a sense of sheer joy which arises from the satisfaction of having faithfully served their parish.

My efforts in recruiting volunteers produced a considerable amount of success. To give you one example: five years ago, a person who did not set her foot in the church, nowadays she is teaching in the Sunday School. This became possible because of my initiative and encouragement. It is important to bear in mind that in recruiting new volunteers time represents a decisive factor. Those who had turned away from the church for personal reasons must have been approached at the proper time. Once they established themselves in other churches or lost the habit of attending the activities of their own parish, it becomes almost impossible to bring them back. The proverb rightly says, "Strike the iron while it is hot."

I set a good example to our volunteers by doing voluntary work. Years ago, I decided to establish Armenian Weekly Language Classes both for adults and children. I looked for a person well versed in the Armenian language who would be willing to take charge of the adult classes so that I could occupy myself with teaching the children. When I failed to find someone, I took upon myself full responsibilities for both classes. At the beginning, the children were somewhat reluctant to attend the classes. They looked upon the Armenian classes as something extra added to their already crowded public school curriculum. But as they progressed, they showed interest and enthusiasm. As far as the adult classes are concerned, surprisingly the students came from American families only.

For the fifth successive year, I issued the newsletter Sunrise without interruption or without combining two issues together for convenience. I acted as editor, reporter and typist at the same time. Moreover, I undertook the manual work of folding, stapling, addressographing and sorting out about two hundred and twenty five copies. Once in a while, at my request I received reports from Michael and Ursula Findikyan as well as Adrienne Kachadourian. A number of clergymen including Fr. George Arakelian, Fr. Karekin Kasparian and Fr. Vertanes Kalaydjian took time to compliment me for the informative and enlightening content of the newsletter Sunrise stating that it is the best among all the newsletters.

But I am too humble to accept that statement. I believe that our newsletter ranks among the bests. Fr. Karekin went so far as to say that he keeps all the issues of Sunrise for future references.

I delivered sermons regularly on all the Sundays of the year regardless of the hot weather in summer and the size of the attendance. Preaching forms an important part of the Divine Liturgy since it is the interpretation of the word of God. As you know, on Sundays the Divine Liturgy remains the same more or less, and the only thing which changes is the content of the sermon. The preparation of a meaningful sermon requires time and effort. It does not come by easy. It is possible to get away with it by choosing short cuts or quick fixes. In that case, the preacher makes a fool of himself and cannot be helpful to the congregation. The congregation is capable of differentiating meaningful sermons from superficial sermons. Superficial sermons may be compared to hamburgers while meaningful sermons are like steaks. The congregation does not get as much nourishment from a hamburger as from steak. I tried to serve spiritual steak every Sunday.

Hospital visitations took precedence over all my duties because of their urgent nature. Whenever someone from our parish became hospitalized, I rushed to the hospital to lift his spirits by means of encouraging words and prayers. I made a special effort to visit them more than once. I considered it my duty to visit any hospitalized Armenian regardless of his denomination or persuasion. Our church having national character feels obligation to all Armenians, and in return they have obligation to us. Apart from hospital visitations, I made regular visits to some of our senior citizens. They feel lonely and despaired. They look for people who can keep them company from time to time. During my visits, I assured them repeatedly that they could count on me in the event they needed transportation means to go to supermarket or to attend church services.

I maintained and further strengthened the friendly relations with other sister churches. Frequent contact with sister churches proved mutually beneficial. We learn new things about them and they show interest in knowing about us. The new experience which we gain through our contacts enables us to approach religious issues from a different standpoint. With this firm conviction, I took part in the activities of the Southside Ecumenical Council. I invited them to hold one monthly meeting in our church building. I joined them in the Thanksgiving celebration which was held in St. Andrews Catholic Church. On the occasion of the feast of Epiphany, our church played host to Southside sister churches. The guest clergymen actively participated in the church services. The reception which followed church services provided our parishioners a beautiful opportunity to socialize with the members of the sister churches.

As the faithful servant of God, I looked upon the members of the congregation as my brothers and sisters. I did not try to please all of them because I knew that I could not be everything to everybody. But I did my best to please God. I took things the way they came; good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant. I learned how to take the bitter with the sweet. On completion of every task, I wanted to utter the significant words of the steward in the parable of the Gospel of St. Luke, "I am an unworthy servant, I have only done what was my duty."

I thank the members of the Parish Council for their cooperation. My special thanks go to our people who placed confidence in me and gave me the opportunity to serve to the best of my ability. May the Good Lord guide you in all your thoughts and in all your deeds and may his abundant blessings remain with each one of you throughout the days of your lives.

Very Rev. Fr. Sooren Chinchinian
Pastor

Very Rev. Fr. Sooren Chinchinian