

Saint Gregory The Illuminator Armenian Apostolic Church



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96th DIOCESAN ASSEMBLY

The 96th Diocesan Assembly was held at St. Vartan Cathedral in New York City, from May 7-9. Attending as delegate from Saint Gregory were Alice Bogdasarian, Dr. Garabed Fattal, Deacon George, and Hagop Injajigian, observer.

During the four days, there were five business sessions and a trip to Ellis Island for a memorial service.

There were over 140 delegates in attendance representing parishes throughout the Diocese. The focus of this year's assembly was different than in previous years. While we did discuss numerous issues affecting the Diocese, there was an emphasis on the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Diocese. Many topics that were normally discussed at the assembly were covered at regional assemblies held earlier in the year.

The highlight of the assembly was the message delivered by His Holiness Karekin I, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians. His Holiness is a very dynamic and inspirational speaker. His message had two major themes. The first was to get involved. We should do whatever we can to help build a strong church community and not just stand by and point out what is wrong. His second theme was to help the motherland of Armenia.

As a new nation, Armenia needs our help and we have an obligation to do whatever we can to help Armenia grow and prosper.

At the first session on Thursday, there was a report given by the Auditing Committee.

The Primate, His Eminence Archbishop Khajag Barsamian, addressed the assembly and gave his annual "State of the Diocese" message. His focus was on the 100th anniversary of the Diocese and on the achievements of the Diocese during his first eight years as Primate. Areas of achievement which the Primate mentioned included the growth to the current number of 66 communities in the Diocese, including 43 parishes and 23 mission parishes. The Department of Mission and Outreach was created to help support the mission parishes. Another achievement which also supports the growth of parishes in the Diocese is that 12 clergymen have been ordained in the last six years. Other areas of achievement mentioned included the Department of Youth Ministry, the Fund for Armenia Relief (FAR) and the Children of Armenia Sponsorship Program (CASP). The renovation of St. Vartan Cathedral is also an accomplishment for which we should be proud.

A major challenge which we still face is the financial strength of the Diocese. We need to do more to be able to continue to work for the church. The Centennial Endowment Fund, established on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Diocese, has already raised \$5,000,000 in pledges.

The major disappointment has been the inability to bring about a unified church in our Diocese. This is something that must not continue. There is no better way to honor this centennial year than to dededicate our minds, hearts, and souls to the goal of working for our church and the virtues for which it stands.

On Friday, elections were held for the Primate, Board of Trustees, Nominating Committee, Proposals Committee, and Auditing Committee. Our Primate, His Eminence Khajag Barsamian was elected to a third four-year term. There were also reports from the Proposals Committee, Diocesan Council, Unity Committee, Treasurer's Report, and the presentation of the 1999 budget. We heard messages from the Primate of Canada and South America and on Saturday, we received the report of the Clergy Conference.

As I have done the past ten years, I would like to highlight the topics that I feel are important.

Again this year, the Unity Committee report was a focal point of the assembly. The committee reported that while there have been communications between the two committees during the past year, there have been no meetings between the two committees. Also, there has been no communication of any kind since December 1997. Based on this and the fact that an article was written by the chairman of the Prelacy Unity Committee in the Armenian Reporter International on 12/13/97 Stating that unity was not apparent in the foreseeable future, our Unity Committee propped the adoption of a resolution. After a heated and emotional debate for over 1-1/2 hours on Friday evening, the assembly passed the following resolution: "The Diocese through its Unity Committee move forward to complete the unity process when the Prelacy is prepared to proceed in implementing the 1982 Unity Guidelines." For all intent and purpose negotiations for unity have been broken off. We will wait for the Prelacy to contact the Diocese.

A second topic which dominated discussion was that of the Department of Youth Ministry. This department has merged with the Department of Religious Education on an interim basis. There was concern this department has been floundering and there has been no clear direction over the past few years. The delegates made their feelings clear that they want an emphasis placed on programs for the youth.

There was much discussion during the Diocesan Council and Financial Report. A main issue continues to be delinquent parish dues and the timeliness of payments. Due to late payment, the Diocese has to borrow money for cash flow purposes. As of December 31, 1997, dues owed was \$143,429.

The Diocese ended the year with a surplus of \$47,461 vs a projected deficit of \$54,175. While this is encouraging, the surplus was due more to reducing expenditures than increased revenues. The Diocese paid back \$122,411 of the debt to the Armenian Church Endowment Fund (ACEF) and restricted funds during 1997. Considering that the Diocese is projecting a balance budget for 1998 and 1999, there is still no realistic plan to pay back the \$3,492,000 that is still owed to the ACEF unless revenues increase substantially.

The CASP program provided 60-80% of the assistance to four orphanages, including a major proportion of winter fuel. In addition, CASP now sponsors 1,600 children and has 1,000 sponsors. Over 2,000 children have received a one-time assistance through a bequest to CASP.

The ACEF now has over \$40,000,000 in assets. Assets rose by \$3,300,000 during 1997. The ACEF returned 12.5% in 1997 and distributions were \$2,500,000.

FAR continues to do well. This year the Department of Social Services was put under the control of FAR. During 1997, FAR continued its food program, medical programs, development projects, agricultural projects, social projects, and educational and cultural programs. In 1997, FAR received \$8,500,000 in income and has \$8,200,000 in disbursements. Administrative costs remain low at 4%

The St. Nerses Seminary currently has eight students, seven of which are committed to the Eastern Diocese.

The Proposals Committee presented two proposed changes to the bylaws; however, neither passed. Four proposals were submitted and three passed. The first authorized the Diocese to pay the clergy longevity stipends. The second concerned the format for panel discussions at future assemblies. The third dissolved the current Clergy Stipends Committee and replaced it with a Clergy Relations Committee.

Two separate proposals passed under new business. The first was to take an inventory of all artifacts, religious items, vestments, artwork, and other valuable property of the Diocese. The second requires two signatures of any expenditure of over \$1,000 of restricted funds.

Several special events were held in celebration of the Diocesan 100th Anniversary.

On Thursday evening May 7, the Centennial Concert, "Spinning Straw Into Gold" was held at Town Hall. It showcased the diversity of creative talent Armenians have contributed to our American culture in areas ranging from the theatre, opera, and the concert stage to jazz and folk music.

Saturday May 9, a special "pilgrimage" was made to Ellis Island in connection with the Centennial Celebrations, headed by His Holiness Karekin I, Catholicos of All Armenians. Present were seven Armenian bishops, civic leaders, clergy and over 2,000 attendants, despite the howling winds and heavy rains. The celebration took place under a huge tent on the lawn in the rear of the historic site.

Special greetings were given by New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, New York City Council Speaker Peter Vallone, Armenian's Ambassador Movses Abelian. The main address was

delivered by His Holiness Catholicos Karekin I. He said "our ancestors who passed through Ellis Island, had lost their freedom, but they found liberty here. We must rise to honor those who came here and went to heaven," then asked the crowd to stand and pray with him."

Musical program was presented by Armenian children from three parishes.

The Primate Archbishop Barsamian also participated in the Centennial Celebration.

Many surviving Armenians who entered the United States through Ellis Island personally received blessings and certificates of honor from His Holiness. Many others were remembered through a special memorial prayer.

In conclusion, this assembly provided us with the opportunity to reflect on the fact that our Diocese is 100 years old. We reviewed where we have come from, what we have accomplished during this time, and focused on the challenges that remain ahead of us. While our Diocese is strong, we need to insure that it will continue to prosper during the next 100 years. This will be accomplished by becoming financially stable, providing programs that make our parishes stronger, continuing to focus on attracting the youth to our church, and uniting the Armenian Church in our Diocese.

While we did not focus on as many areas as usual, the message was clear for all of us in the Diocese to get involved in our church to help Armenia become a strong nation. Hopefully, all of the delegates will accept the challenge we have in front of us.

This is the tenth year I have been a delegate and, once again I thank you for allowing me to represent our parish.

Respectfully submitted

Alice T. Bogdasarian
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