

1974 Pastoral Report

The most important aspect of my service was spiritually to console our people and to lead and enlighten them according to the teachings of our sacred traditions. The main consolation they received was in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. This was celebrated each week except for the Sunday I attended the Diocesan Assembly. During the course of the year two baptisms, two weddings, one engagement and one funeral was performed. I attended three funeral services of friends of our church community.

Again without any assistance, that is without the aid of a staff or committee, I have continued to give Armenian lessons to two classes every week except for a few weeks during Christmas and Easter. I have worked with our Sunday School staff and superintendent, Bobby Garian, on school programs.

I am pleased to report once again that most of the secretarial chores that had burdened me for years is being done by Mrs. Ann Goff, who although is salaried does much more than what is required of her. The Memorial Book has been completed and also a complete inventory of the church and Educational Building.

In conjunction with the work on the church library, I want to extend my gratitude to Mrs. Nectar Kantarjian and Mrs. Annig Zabel Bandoian for the listing of all the Armenian books.

I attended as one of the representatives of this church community, the Diocesan Assembly. I also attended a local joint meeting of church clergy and also upon invitation, an Ecumenical service held at the Catholic Diocesan Cathedral at which only clergy attended. On another occasion I attended upon invitation, the ceremony and dinner honoring Father Salwaan's elevation to Papal legate at St. Anthony's Maronite Church.

I was called upon to offer prayer at the naturalization ceremony of new citizens and have assisted persons who needed aid in their problems with the Immigration-Naturalization Office.

An arrangement was made whereby a dinner-meeting of the Chesterfield County Librarian Association was held in our church at which our Ladies Aid prepared and served a meal. The exterior of the church was painted and yard work such as the cutting of the two large trees. Small booklets were printed to make special services of our church meaningful and also arrangements for the programs of several of our dinners.

Come September next year, September 1976, St. James Armenian Church in Richmond will be celebrating its 20th anniversary. Twenty years ago the Richmond Armenian Community built a church and at long last a dream became a reality.

Not only have the Armenians but the Greater Richmond area has enjoyed the presence of this church and a priest serving it for 20 continuous years.

I am the second of the two that have served this community. The first, Der Boghos, ably served the first ten years. From my own personal experience (having served two communities being their first permanent priest) I know that the first years of a church are the most

difficult ones. No one in the community feels the pressures to meet the needs more than the priest and that pressure is constant.

To meet these needs the Parish Assembly convenes each year to determine the course for the ensuing year especially concerning the financial budget. You who attend these meetings are to be highly commended, for it is by your voice and your vote that the program of this church is formed.

To see that the constant demands are met you select individuals to the Parish Council. It is their duty with your cooperation to see that these needs are taken care of.

It is sad to note, however, that in the 20 years of existence, not once has there been a committee to see to these needs, although each year, I have brought this point to the attention of this assembly and also the Parish Council.

Often persons misinterpret these criticisms as an expression of my discontent. I have said on numerous occasions, both privately and publicly, that this community is second to none. The problems confronting us today will be the problems of all Armenian churches in the diaspora tomorrow, be it the near or distant future. My criticism is not to destroy but to build.

The immediate and future existence of this church, however, rests in your hands. If you do not respond to its needs, you will be deprived of its presence. Yesterday's deeds, no matter how praiseworthy, do not fulfill today's needs.

We will never be able to progress unless there is organization of our manpower and to date all of our available manpower be it men, women or youth is not organized. This is not peculiar to this congregation. The reason our problems are magnified to such a great degree is because our weaknesses are not easily hidden as those in larger congregations. We are constantly exposed to these demands.

What is needed?

A Parish Council that is inclusive of all three groups with the responsibilities as outlined in the Parish Council Questionnaire divided among them. The burden of those constant demands explained in that questionnaire are upon too few persons; essentially the Priest, the Parish Council Chairman and Treasurer.

Why is there a communication gap between the elected body, the Parish Council, and some members of the community?

The reason is that not everyone realizes the enormous workload entailed in the upkeep of this church. Only those, the aforementioned, can visualize what is possible and what is not, because they are immediately involved.

Everyone should have to serve on the Parish Council to be exposed to the constant and immediate demands facing the church each year. Until that time, there always will be a communication gap. Beside being a balance of men, women and youth, the Parish Council should be a nucleus of experience and inexperienced persons.

This was brought to the attention of the Parish Council in a booklet that I sent to them. In it, among other things, I outlined the duties I perform which are required of me and those which I volunteer. According to a report to the Diocesan Assembly by a committee to investigate clergy stipends, comparable to his counterpart in society, a priest would be earning \$15-17,000. annually. Add all that I voluntarily offer to this community in addition to what is required, my services are worth well over \$20,000. a year.

It is not my intent to increase my earnings, to be commensurate with my services, but according to the committee's minimal pay scale recommendation, (which was accepted by the Diocesan Assembly and will be implemented this June) I am receiving less now than a priest ought to receive when first beginning his ministry and I have been serving some fifteen years.

There prevails an attitude by some which makes it doubly difficult to accomplish much. The priest is also looked upon (without any committees) to produce spectacular programs and extraordinary services, in addition to the religious and educational programs.

This is our church. When the congregation becomes convinced of this, opportunities will open for more progress.

We are all brothers and sisters and I feel free to express myself as I do.

As in the past, so now and always, this church's existence rests in the hands of the Richmond Armenian Community; young and old; men, women and youth. It is what we do together that will determine its future. The challenges are great but where there is a will and a willingness to cooperate to meet its basic needs, all is possible.

Cv. Arsen Benamian