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Archbishop Khajag Barsamian

**Address: 48th Choir Association Annual Assembly—November 3-6, 1994
St. James Church, Richmond, Virginia**

1375 words

Dear Delegates of the Choir Association Assembly:

I would like to welcome all of you to this 48th Annual Assembly of the Association of Armenian Church Choirs of America. We convene this year in a community which displays a vitality and enthusiasm that is truly exemplary. Let me congratulate the people of the St. James Church of Richmond, Virginia, and especially their pastor, Fr. Nareg Berberian, the choirmaster, deacons, choir members and altar servers, for the splendid job they have done in organizing this Choir Association Assembly.

I should also express my gratitude to the local Assembly committee and its chairman Mr. David Livingston, the Choir Association Central Council, and all of you who devote your energies and talents to the service of God each Sunday.

This has been a banner year for the Choir Association, and the key to its success can be stated in one word: education. Through its new publications, and through workshops at the regional and local parish levels, the Choir Association has worked hard to fulfill its mission of bringing the Armenian Divine Liturgy into the hearts and lives of our parishioners.

This year saw the publication of two major new liturgical works. The first of these is the product of five years of planning and work, and is a real milestone in the modern history of the Divine Liturgy. I am speaking, of course, about the new edition of The Sacred Music of the Armenian Church, revised and edited by Dr. Socrates Boyajian.

This has been a major undertaking for the Choir Association, and you can all be proud of the result. The Sacred Music contains the full musical text of the Ekmalian Liturgy, plus the variable hymns which are sung over the course of the year. It promises to be the new standard for choirs across our Diocese, and it has already set a very high standard in its scholarship, its use of computer technology, and its "user-friendliness."

The second publication is equally exciting, and has an even greater potential to positively affect our parishes. The book is called A Treasury of Armenian Chants, and the title is literally true. Our sharagans, liturgical chants and traditional songs are things of tremendous value. Indeed, our whole musical heritage is a precious treasure, which belongs to all of us who love the Armenian Church.

A Treasury of Armenian Chants has been published jointly by the Choir Association and the Diocesan Department of Religious Education. The book itself—expertly compiled and edited by Mr. Sahar Arzruni—is aimed primarily at educating children. But it is also a wonderful teaching resource for the entire family. It is accompanied by a cassette tape which features a children's choir from Armenia, which was also produced under the direction of Mr. Arzruni.

The great virtue of this package is that it allows our people—young and old alike—to learn about our musical heritage, to actually listen to it, and to make it a part of their daily lives. This is an excellent example of how our Diocesan departments and organizations can weave together to teach the whole community.

I should add that in addition to these works, the Diocese has produced a new volume containing the music and text of The Celebrant's Intonations. This is another major liturgical resource—especially for our priests and deacons—and we can thank Mr. Khoren Meikhanedjian for his efforts in producing the book, as well as the instructional tape which comes with it.

These publications represent only one part of the Choir Association's total mission to the faithful of the Armenian Church. Another important part involves actual instruction, and in this area, too, this organization has been a real leader. More regional and local choir workshops have taken place during the past year than in any previous year. And these workshops are not only effective educational programs, but they also build fellowship and enthusiasm among choir members from various regional parishes.

Once again, we can thank the Choir Association Central Council, under the chairmanship of Mary Selvinazian, for planning these events. And we must also extend our gratitude to Maestro Khoren Meikhanedjian, whose musical expertise and engaging personality are a real key to the success of these workshops.

Our Diocese is using the tools of today—books, tapes, videos, and even computers—to bring the ancient Armenian Christian faith alive in the hearts and souls of our people. Of course, our community has a special interest in passing on this faith to its children. One of the best and most delightful ways to accomplish this is through the sacred music of our Church. Learning the sharagans is a powerful introduction to the Scriptures and to the living tradition of our faith. We also have a moral obligation to draw our children into the praise of God, which is at the center of our worship experience.

This was brought to my mind recently, during our celebration of Holy Translators' Day at the St. Vartan Cathedral. As part of the observance, a young vartabed taught a group of Armenian school children to sing the Divine Liturgy. The instruction sessions took place over a brief two months,

but the results were magnificent. Listening to those angelic voices singing praises to God was beautiful and truly touching.

More to the point, the success of that children's choir proves that the so-called "language barrier" does not necessarily alienate children from worship. Indeed, our children are eager to learn, and can pick up the music and meaning of the liturgy very quickly. What is needed are the proper tools to bring the music to life, and the determination on our part to teach and lead by example. This is true not only of our efforts to educate children, but of our efforts to revitalize the entire family of the Church.

It is this theme of the Church as a kind of family—and of each family as an extension of the Church—which has been our emphasis this year, during our Diocesan "Year of the Family." It is worth remembering that, even as we produce more effective educational tools and programs, the success or failure of our efforts depends above all on the simple love and dedication each member of the Church should feel towards the other members of the Armenian Christian family. This is a lesson I learned from personal experience, growing up as a boy in the town of Arapkir. And the lesson was taught to me by my grandmother.

Like many Armenian families living in the interior of Turkey, we had no formal structure to go to for worship; no religious sanctuary or altar. We had no church building—but we still had the Church. My grandmother read to us from the Bible, told us stories about the saints, taught us the sharagans, and kept the Church and the love of God alive in the hearts of our family.

In that time and place, actively preserving our Christian heritage was an act of great courage for my grandmother; but she felt it was vitally important, because she loved us, and she wanted the best for us. And that meant bringing us into the arms of the Church, and introducing us to the joyful service of God. Just as she would not deny us food or drink, so too did she work and sacrifice to give us nourishment for our souls. As our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God."

Nourishing the soul with the word of God is what our musical heritage is all about. And the work of an organization like the Choir Association helps to bring new vitality and energy to that heritage. Our Church's liturgical tradition has united the Armenian people across generations and geographical distances. And it continues to do so today, as publications and projects originating from our Diocese go on to benefit the entire Armenian Church. As a result of the efforts of the Choir Association, all the choirs in our Diocese—and outside our Diocese—now have some important resources available to them. We can all take pride in that accomplishment, even as we prepare to take on the demanding tasks which still lie before us. Thank you.

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