



DIOCESE OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH OF AMERICA
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Archbishop Khajag Barsamian, Primate

May 19, 1994

Mr. Aram Sarhadian
4032 Jordan Lake Drive
Marietta, GA 30062

Dear Mr. Sarhadian:

The Primate, Archbishop Khajag Barsamian, has asked me to take some time to answer your letter of April 21, 1994. As the Primate of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America, His Eminence is of course very concerned about any division within the Armenian community in Atlanta. I should add that your previous communications on this subject—as well as those of others—have not gone unnoticed by the Primate or the Diocese in general. Indeed, the Primate's dispatching of the Very Reverend Fr. Haigazoun Najarian, the Vicar General, to speak with the leaders of the Atlanta community was itself his response to those inquiries. I believe that was made clear at the time, but if some confusion lingers, I am happy to clarify it here.

As for the substance of your letter, let me begin with some details of the history of the Atlanta community. Our records show that the former Diocesan Primate, Archbishop Torkom Manoogian, took initial steps to organize a parish in Atlanta from as early as 1968. After several years of correspondence, fact-finding and negotiations, he personally went to Atlanta on March 1, 1978, and initiated and authorized the formation of the community's first appointed church committee. In his letter of June 5, 1984, Archbishop Manoogian "officially accepted the Armenian community of Atlanta as a newly organized parish under the jurisdiction of the Diocese."

That specific term "jurisdiction" is precisely what is at issue here. The Diocesan Bylaws, No. 99, state: "Any Parish may adopt rules and regulations, subject to and in conformity with these Bylaws, for the conduct of its internal affairs, provided such rules and regulations are first approved by the Primate and the Diocesan Council." According to this article, any rules and regulations adopted by a parish should be submitted to the Primate and the Diocesan Council. The Atlanta parish never submitted such rules and regulations; on the contrary, a Unified Armenian Church Council of Atlanta was formed, consisting of people who, you say, were elected under the bylaws of a *secular* organization.

The Armenian Church is the most ancient and venerable institution of our nation—older than any existing secular organization or group. Over the past seventeen centuries, the Church has operated according to canons set by the holy fathers of the ecumenical councils and the Armenian Church. It is a well-established fact that clergymen serving in high ecclesiastical posts and as parish priests, as well as laymen serving in higher councils, assemblies and parish councils, are all elected by the people. Yet the democratically structured process practiced in the Armenian Church does not in any way indicate that the rules of the Church may be bent by an ad hoc body that has no ecclesiastical credentials.

The Bylaws of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America contain no provisions for a "unified council." All the Armenians of Atlanta are welcome to join the parish and become members of the church. Only as eligible members of the parish assembly can they elect a new parish council. Therefore, we strongly urge that you set aside your dissension and disagreements, and join the parish, so that proper elections may be held and the present discord might be resolved.

You must understand that neither the Diocesan Primate nor the Diocesan Council can under any circumstance take actions that are contrary to the Bylaws of the Diocese. If the Atlanta parish is a part of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America—which it is—then it is under the jurisdiction of the Primate of the Diocese, who is elected by the delegates of all the parishes within the Diocese. The canons of the Armenian Church specifically state that there can be only one Primate within each ecclesiastical jurisdiction. The Atlanta parish cannot be at the same time under the jurisdiction of the Diocese and the Prelacy. If your "solution" were to be accepted, we would not only officially sanction the division within our Church—which we are trying to heal—but we would also be laying the grounds for further complications within the Church, and hamper the positive steps taken by the Diocesan and Prelacy Unity Committees.

Mr. Sarhadian, I appreciate the charitable tone of your letter, and I have tried to respond in the same spirit. Without composing a lengthy dissertation on the theoretical and practical problems of your proposal, I believe the above discussion addresses the major points you have raised. Unfortunately, the division in our Church is a persistent problem, but it cannot be realistically addressed in the manner you suggest.

Nevertheless, I know that you will be glad to know that progress is indeed being made on this front: after a period of stagnation, the combined Unity Committees have recently come to an agreement on some vital matters; and of course, God Himself removed the single great political obstacle to unity of the Church in recent times, when Armenia's Soviet captivity came to an end. With such great and small developments behind us, we can be optimistic about the prospect for true administrative unity under the Mother See of Etchmiadzin and the Supreme Patriarch-Catholicos of All Armenians.

With prayers,



Fr. Garabed Kochakian
Diocesan Chancellor