

ARAM I ON FAITH & THE HOMELAND

The Head of the Great House of Cilicia speaks about his commitment to education, fellowship, service and outreach, in the hope that they will lead his flock back to greater spirituality and a cohesive commitment to Armenia. Does the absence of church unity stand in the way?

In the last few years, we have been witnessing such sorrowful developments in the dioceses of the Armenian Diaspora that our heart and soul are filled with grief and sadness. Polarization and political struggles are dividing our people. These are harmful and shameful. [They] destroy our good name and pride in the eyes of other nations." It was before the Cold War in October of 1933 when Catholicos Khoren I wrote these words in an encyclical addressed to the dioceses in the Armenian Diaspora. (Khoren I was assassinated by the Soviet authorities in Armenia). Sixty-five years later, "polarization" and "political struggles" still keep the Armenian church divided, especially in North America.



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Catholicos Aram I in a patriarchal visit to the Vatican, with Pope John Paul II.

Hopes to resolve the decades-old rift in the Armenian church were raised when Karekin I was elected Catholicos of All Armenians in April 1995. Indeed, the entire process of his nomination and eventual election was eclipsed with the issue of church unity. Many thought—including the government of Armenia—that Karekin I's move to Ejmiatsin would bring a "de facto" unity in the Armenian church. But that did not happen. In June 1995, Aram I was elected Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia in Antelias. While both Catholicosoi considered church unity a most pressing national issue and pledged their commitment for a new *modus operandi*, "church unity" is nowhere to be seen.

During the Cold War, the administrative schism in the church took a political slant, and the Catholicos in Ejmiatsin became known as 'pro-Soviet' and the one in Antelias 'anti-Soviet'. In the late 1950s, the Cilician See stepped out of its historical area of influence and established dioceses in the United States, Iran and Greece, thus putting the "division" in the church on diocesan and jurisdictional levels.

Contrary to popular perception, church unity in the Armenian church is not likely to involve the merging of the Sees of Ejmiatsin and Cilicia. The Catholicosate of Cilicia has existed for 700 years. It was established in the year 1293 when the headquarters of the Armenian church was established in Sis, the capital of the Cilician Armenian kingdom. Since

then, the activities and mission of the Catholicosate of Cilicia have been intimately intertwined with the history of the Armenian nation. However, for most Armenians, the history of the Catholicosate of Cilicia starts in 1930 when it was established in Antelias, Lebanon, by Catholicos Sahag Khabaian – the "mournful" (*vshdali*) pontiff, as he called himself after witnessing the murder of his people in the Ottoman Empire.

In the last 50 years, the Catholicosate of Cilicia has significantly contributed to the development of the post-Genocide Diaspora by providing the Armenian communities spread throughout the world with four Catholicosoi—including Karekin I and Aram I—hundreds of clergymen, teachers, intellectuals, and community leaders. It is difficult to imagine that such an auspicious national institution will dissolve any time soon or, as some circles suggest, be demoted to a Patriarchate, as the ones in Jerusalem and Istanbul.

In essence, church unity means going back to the pre-1956 diocesan boundaries—when Antelias's "historical areas of jurisdiction" included Lebanon, Syria, Cyprus and, more recently, the Gulf states—and the forging of a new dynamic relationship between the two Sees.

On his election, Karekin I stressed the urgent need for "reform" within the Armenian church. "The reformation of the Armenian church should be our



Catholicos Aram I with Catholicos Karekin I during a meeting with former President Levon Ter Petrossian.

Catholicos Aram I, Moderator of the

goal, our target, our point of departure." That reform should "preserve an order that is alive, not an order which is just a structure. We need to reform the church in such a way that she will become an active and positive presence for the benefit of our nation."

Catholicos Aram I has stated similar goals. He spoke about his beliefs and intentions in an interview with AIM during his pontifical visit to the US in November, 1997. "We are in a nation-building process in Armenia, we need different kinds of activities and initiatives, both in Armenia and the Diaspora. It is time for the church to redefine its role, re-articulate its engagement in the life of our communities in the Diaspora... The church should come out of its frozen structures. The church should come out of its ossified mentalities, its blind traditionalism. The world around us is constantly changing. The church should go to the people, be with the people, identify with the concerns, suffering and expectations. The church should respond concretely to the needs of the people as Jesus did. Then, and only then, can the church say whoever believes in the faith of Jesus Christ should come to the church. Therefore, the church is not a place where we go or just visit, it has to become a living reality penetrating into the life of the people, embracing and making that life a God-centered life. I am becoming self-

critical here. This is what our church should do. We need a church that is not in the periphery or margins of the life of the community, but a church that is part of the daily life of the people. A church that goes out of itself and becomes a church for and in the life of the people. The church becomes authentically and fully itself only with the people."

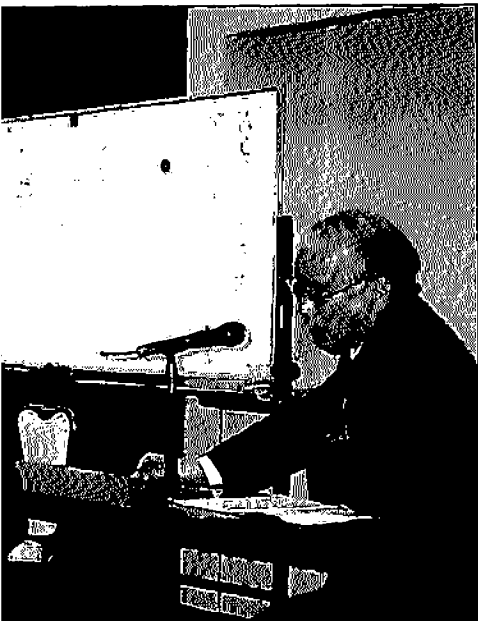
Catholicos Aram I is one of the most eminent and internationally known figures in the ecumenical movement. Born in Beirut in 1947, he was educated at the Armenian Seminary in Antelias, the Near East School of Theology, the American University of Beirut, the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, Switzerland, and Fordham University in New York, where he received his doctoral degree in systematic and contemporary theology and ecumenics. He was ordained a priest in 1968. In 1978, during the worst period of the Lebanese civil war, he was elected primate of the Diocese of Lebanon. He received episcopal ordination from Catholicos Karekin II of Cilicia in 1980. He is eloquent, multilingual, charismatic—a lot like Karekin I.

As primate of Lebanon, Aram I's skills and leadership, under the most difficult conditions of the civil war in the 1980s, gained him the respect of not only the Armenian community in Lebanon, but also the numerous religious-political fac-

tions and governments in the Middle East. In addition to establishing innovative pastoral, educational and charitable programs in his diocese, he has contributed greatly to the process of reconstruction and reconciliation of the Lebanese society, through Christian-Moslem dialogues, confidence building measures, and by soliciting assistance from the world community.

Aram I explains the context of the church in the Middle East: "Unlike western societies, where you have a state and civil society and, in that context, the church is just another institution. In the Middle East the church is not just an institution. It is more than that, it is a reality that touches the everyday life of the people. It is a reality where you see the life of the people in all its aspects and manifestations. This is very true in our own Armenian church ... In the Middle East you cannot draw a line of demarcation between what is political and what is social and what is economic. Because in Islam, these are all interrelated, and we live in Moslem societies. The Christian church is also called to play a political role, but it all depends on what we mean by "political." Especially, in the context of the Middle East, where you have a legal status of being a community, you are supposed to get engaged in political life, to play a political role."

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World Council of Churches, at a WCC meeting in Japan..



Archbishop Mesrob Ashjian of New York and Catholicos Aram I with United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan.

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In June 1995, just months after Karekin II of Cilicia had been ordained Karekin I of Ejmiatsin (see AIM, July 1996), Karekin I, together with 12 other bishops, consecrated Aram I as Catholicos of the See of Cilicia. This was the first time in the history of the Armenian church that the Catholicos of All Armenians participated in the consecration of a Cilician Catholicos.

As a prolific theologian and writer, Aram I has generously contributed to the process of reformulating a theological and pastoral vision, not only for the Armenian church, but especially for the World Council of Churches (WCC)—the equivalent of the "United Nations" of Christianity. Aram I has been the Moderator of WCC since 1992, the highest position within the structure of the Geneva-based organization, which counts 160 churches around the world (with the major exception of the Catholic Church) as its members. His term ends this year.

Both Catholicoses of the Armenian church have played pivotal roles in the ecumenical movement. Aram I explains, "I learned ecumenism from Catholicos Karekin. He has been my spiritual and ecumenical teacher and I have followed in his footsteps in ecumenism. I continued the role that he started in the ecumenical movement and now it has been almost 27 years that I'm in the ecumenical move-

ment. Catholicos Karekin and I, in my role as the Moderator of the World Council of Churches, have done our best, in terms of giving visibility to our church, our people and in pursuing, in the context of human rights, the question of Genocide, the rights of our people and recently the question of Nagorno Karabakh."

A closer reading of Aram I's discourse in over a dozen books, monographs, and numerous interviews, reveals a deeper theological vision for the Armenian church in particular and the Christian church in general. Five complementary themes constitute Aram I's missiological vision:

1. Christian education—the proclamation of the Gospel and education of the entire faithful of the church from childhood to adulthood. Christian education is not an intellectual exercise only, but the beginning of discipleship of the faithful.

2. Service—the very essence of the church, the *raison d'être* of the church is its service to all of humanity. Christian faith must be lived and practiced.

3. Fellowship—participation in the life of the church—"the body of Christ," the "outpouring of oneself" into a community of shared faith, belief and mission.

4. Outreach—Christian education, service and fellowship set the parameters of the church's outreach. Without outreach, the

church community becomes an inward-looking, self-serving entity. The church's outreach is mandated by its "apostolic mission". Just as the apostles were sent to preach the Gospel to "all nations of the world," so is the church called to reach out within and without her immediate community. As such, "Eucharist (the mass) without outreach is just a memorial service; and mission without a eucharistic dimension and vision lacks any ecclesial nature."

Finally, Aram I explains how all these processes come together in the concepts of Unity and renewal. In one of his fascinating books, entitled *Orthodox Perspective On Mission* (1992), Aram I writes: "The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Unity. The church as a community of faith is sustained by the unity of the Spirit (Ephesians 4:3) and is called to grow in this unity and translate it into mission in the power of the Holy Spirit." Without unity and renewal in the Spirit, a "community of faith" cannot be sustained. Without unity, the mission of the church is compromised.

While these concepts provide a theological framework for the church's mission, they are yet to be fully practiced in the Armenian church. The most obvious hurdles remain to be the church's protracted administrative and jurisdictional disputes.

During his last pontifical visit to the United States, Catholicos Aram I explained the situation of the church in North America: "I believe, we have to be very realistic and

een what is political and what is social and what is economic".



The Catholicos blessing bread in New York. Standing alongside are Lebanese Consul General Antoine Chedid, Bishop Mushegh Mardirossian and Father Mushegh Der Kalustian.



Karekin I and Aram I with the Maronite Patriarch Masrallah Sfeir

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not dogmatic or systematic in our approach. We have to be very realistic. This is very important. Due to many reasons, this situation was created in the past. As I said, we have passed the stage of blaming and criticizing people, analyzing the situation, so on. We should not do this anymore. We have to be pragmatic, realistic and existential in our approach. In the current situation, we are caught up in various tensions and uncertainties. This is a divisive and abnormal situation. Therefore, it is a must for this situation to become normalized. Of course, we cannot do this overnight. It is a process. Unity cannot be considered an event, but a process of maturation. A process of appropriating the issues involved in what we call unity. And we have to proceed in this process, slowly but surely, step by step, to confidence building and mutual understanding. I believe, this could be done through collaboration. Collaboration is key in this process. By collaboration I mean more than what is happening now, more than joint ventures and programs; a collaboration in the full sense of the word."

Aram I believes that church unity should not be imposed "from the outside or from above." He stresses the need to "prepare the kind of atmosphere in which the people get involved, naturally, in the process" of unity. In the final analysis, "it is very important that unity emerges from the life of the people," he stressed. What about the role of the leaders? Aram I said, "We, as church leaders, have a prophetic role, as we say it in our theology—to challenge, to remind, to criticize, to lead, to facilitate, this is the role of the church leadership. Therefore, the grassroots level in our church

life is very important. Since our churches are governed by the people, we need to prepare the minds and hearts of our people."

Aram I made it very clear that it is ultimately up to the people to decide the question of unity. Who must take the first step, he was asked. "Antelias came here not

The challenge to the Armenian church hierarchy is to overcome the "historical circumstances" and remove all political obstacles from the path of unity.

to divide the people, but to serve the people. We came here to serve the people. If the people whom we are serving tell us thank you very much for what you did, the next day Antelias will go back to Antelias. Antelias is a mission; we came here to

serve the people. That's the reality. Therefore, as I said, the mind and heart of the people should be prepared for this kind of unity."

Popular opinion remains doubtful whether relegating the responsibility to achieve church unity to "the people" would actually resolve the problem. It seems that what is lacking in the Armenian church is a "realistic" mechanism that would take "the people" beyond mere discourse on unity. Experience shows that the community, the "flock," looks to its leaders and shepherds to show the way. In world affairs, leaders take the initiatives for peace, reconciliation and unity—Nelson Mandela is one example—and provide the processes and mechanisms that lead their people to renewal.

As the Armenian church prepares to celebrate the 1700th anniversary of its establishment, the challenge to the Armenian church hierarchy is to overcome the "historical circumstances" and remove all political obstacles from the path of unity. In the meanwhile, high-ranking clergy and lay leaders in North America remain skeptical about "church unity" in the foreseeable future. The status quo is likely to continue until at least the end of the century.

As the renown sociologist Robert Bellah puts it, "Community is [also] a form of intelligent, reflective life, in which there is indeed consensus; but where the consensus can be challenged and which changes often gradually, sometimes radically, over time, because it is continually asking the question 'What kind of community is this?'" In the Armenian community, one may wonder if the self-questioning has even begun.

by Hratch Tchilingirian

The Church and Today's Priorities



There are two Catholicosates due to special circumstances. We have always recognized the primacy of honor of Ejmiatsin as the Mother See of the Armenian church. There is no question about that. We have to strengthen Ejmiatsin and together we have to strengthen our church and people.

On the impact of increasing Islamification of the Middle East on the Armenian church.

This is not a problem related exclusively to the Armenian church, but to all the churches in the region. Therefore, in the Middle East Council of Churches which includes all the churches of the region, the whole question of Christian witness in the context of the Middle East is becoming more and more an acute problem of existential nature. Because we are constantly and directly exposed to the kinds of realities, uncertainties, tensions and challenges, where we are called to reorganize, re-strengthen our Christian witness.

On the Church's position regarding contemporary social and moral issues, such as abortion, sexuality, etc.

We, as a Church, cannot ignore the existence of these problems. The question is, how do we deal with these problems. I believe that our role must be a pastoral role, to guide and remind people, not to impose certain values or traditions, particularly in the US. It all depends on our context. In the Middle East, if you talk about these issues, you would sound like a very strange person, because they are not ready to discuss with you these kinds of issues. I am not say-

ing these are non-issues in the Middle East, but I want to emphasize the important of context. That is why we cannot generalize these issues, we have to contextualize them vis a vis the particularities of a given environment. In the US, these are priority issues, in our context in the Middle East, these are marginal or non-existent issues. In the Armenian Church with can no longer speak in terms of my issues and your issues. The issues are there, they are our issues, we may look at them with different perspectives, we may offer different solutions, but the issues remain, and I believe, the role of the Church is essentially a pastoral role.

On the priorities of the Cilician Catholicosate.

The Catholicosate of Cilicia and I as Catholicos have the following priorities: strengthening of Armenia; strengthening the struggle of Karabakh for resolution; strengthening the unity of our people. These are our priorities and we can do them by participating in the nation-building process.

The Church has an important role to play in that respect. Armenia is our homeland and the strengthening of our homeland is the priority of priorities for us. We believe in one homeland and in one church. I want to underline that we

are part and parcel of one church. There are two Catholicosates due to special circumstances. We have always recognized the primacy of honor of Ejmiatsin as the Mother See of the Armenian church. There is no question about that. We have to strengthen Ejmiatsin and together we have to strengthen our church and people. The existence and the role of the Catholicosate of Cilicia in the Armenian Diaspora is a must. We have to see Armenia, the Diaspora, Ejmiatsin, Antelias, all political parties, within one whole. They are so much interconnected. Within that one whole, each of these structures has its specific place and role to play. But we have to see where their roles are interrelated and reaching one another, not contradicting each other. This is also true with the Armenian church. A full, unconditional collaboration between Ejmiatsin and Antelias is a must. We have that now, but my expectation is more. We have to do more than what we have now, because we are serving one people, who live under different conditions. Serving our people in Armenia is not the same as serving our people in the Diaspora, or the Middle East for that matter. We are living in different conditions. This collaboration is very important, otherwise, unity remains somewhere in the air with no relevance to our lives.