

Building Up the Body of Christ

The Treasure of the Armenian Church for Our People Today

Bishop Daniel

PRIMATE

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

EPHESIANS 4:11-13

Եւ նա ետ զոմանս առաքեալս,
զոմանս մարգարէս, զոմանս
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վարդապետս: Ի հաստատութիւն
սրբոց, Ի գործ պաշտաման, Ի շինուած
մարմնոյն Քրիստոսի: մինչև հասցոք
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հաւատոց և գիտութեան Որդոյն
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հասակի կատարմանն Քրիստոսի:

ԵՓԵՍՍՑԻՍ 4.11-13



*By the order of His Grace Bishop Daniel, Primate
Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of America*

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Building Up the Body of Christ: The Treasure of the
Armenian Church for Our People Today

ISBN: 978-0-934728-05-8

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Book Design, layout, and cover by Vardan Sargsyan
Printed by Vick Mazbanian, Delta Printing

CONTENTS

Synopsis	vii
Believers Here and There	1
It Wasn't Always That Way	5
Building Up the Body of Christ	13
The Journey Toward Culture Change	19
A Foundation on Which to Build	33
Onward	45
Acknowledgements	49

Synopsis

“We challenge our church leaders and faithful people to aspire to work toward the strengthening of our diocese, so that she may more effectively shepherd our people in the name of Jesus Christ, open their hearts to the blessings of the Creator of all Reality, and be rejuvenated by the vitalizing example of Christian life inherent in the history and Christian culture of the Armenian Church.” — Bishop Daniel

We American-Armenians of the early third millennium—and all who declare the Armenian Church to be their own—have the rare opportunity to restore our Church to its traditional stature in Armenian life. Few Armenian communities, past or present, can match the freedom, resources and potential that the American-Armenian community enjoys today. The history of our diocese is the story of heroic men and women of faith making remarkable sacrifices for the sake of God, their ancestral Church, and their children. Our generation has the potential to reclaim the heavenly energy that gave hope and creativity to our forebears. We have the opportunity to bring healing, hope and the true joy of the Kingdom of God to those who so desperately need it—beginning with ourselves.

Today, the Armenian Church is no longer uniquely responsible for managing every facet of the subsistence and destiny of the Armenian people. In areas of Armenian life where other groups have come into being, the Church may now step back to a supporting role to focus on her primary competence. Indeed, our generation has the *obligation* to reinvigorate the Church and the Christian commitment of her people.

But time is short. We have the chance to invest in our Church, children and grandchildren. But we cannot allow ourselves to be afraid of the real risks involved in boldly confronting the challenges before us.

Our God-given calling will require more than tweaking. It will require nothing short of a culture change: a complete overhaul in our attitude toward the ultimate things of God, and toward the Armenian Church. Jesus Christ the Savior, as the head the Armenian Church, is the foundation of this culture change. The Armenian Church manifests a Christian culture that is second to none. Its balanced, rational and compassionate understanding of God’s will is neither legalistic (“do this, don’t do that”) nor subjective (“anything is ok if it seems good to me”). Her unique theological experience of God is captivating. Her witness and message are possibly more compelling today than ever before—not just for Armenians, but for the world.

Our task is to strengthen the Church by rediscovering the essence of our ancestral Christian heritage; reclaiming it; and rededicating ourselves and our diocese to it. The name given to this vision, *Building Up the Body of Christ*, originates in St. Paul’s classic description of the Church [Epistle to the Ephesians 4:11-16]. In that sense, to “Build Up the Body of Christ” is to make the Church what she truly is, placing Jesus Christ at the forefront of everything we do.

The realization of *Building Up the Body of Christ* is a vast enterprise, comprising five “pillars.” All constituents of the Diocese from the primate and diocesan council, to the clergy, local parishes, church organizations and faithful are called to focus all their work, resources and prayers, in the direction of these pillars, which are these:

1. “Coming to the Unity of Faith and of the Knowledge of the Son of God”: Education and Formation

Rearing all of our people to be faithful Children of God and Children of the Armenian Church must become the primary focus of everything

we do. Most critically, we must repair the fatal rupture that has opened in the Armenian Church's identity, which has falsely distinguished a separate "Christian" mandate versus a separate "national" or ethnic mandate. The two are one.

When all of us in the Church are consciously seeking to grow in our knowledge of God and of God's holy Church, it is then that we "come to the unity of the faith." We grow together, as the Church, supporting each other, and *Building Up the Body of Christ*.

2. "To Equip the Saints for the Work of Ministry": Everyone is a Servant and Minister

Culture change requires the participation of many people with assorted skill sets and perspectives. St. Paul's vision for the Church of Ephesus is a guide: "Some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers."

Our Christian education and formation efforts must have as their final goal to prepare every person of the Church to become a "minister" to do God's will in the Armenian Church with love and compassion. The ministries are as varied as our dedication to God and our commitment to one another: teaching, mentoring, visiting, cooking, singing, cleaning, praying, painting, organizing, promoting stewardship, writing, serving, greeting, building relationships with outsiders, to name only a few.

3. "Knitting Together the Body in Love": The Holy Badarak

Biblically, theologically and historically the Holy *Badarak* is the centerpiece of the Armenian Church's life and identity. Through prayerful teaching and especially mentoring, we must lovingly challenge our people to rethink their assumptions regarding this most magnificent mystery.

The challenge of drawing our people into a meaningful engagement with the *Badarak* is a complex and emotional problem. Careful, prayerful efforts must be made to restore the Holy *Badarak* to be the source, heart and summit of our Christian calling within the Armenian Church.

4. “Speaking the Truth in Love”: A Healing Church

To “Build Up the Body of Christ” is to bring unity and reconciliation wherever there is fragmentation and discord. The Armenian Church must actively forge *communion* among its own children, through the Holy Spirit of Christ, deploying kindness and compassion toward her people and toward all.

To be a member of the Body of Christ is to embrace a higher calling: when one commits fully to the Body of Jesus Christ, then all other rivalries and polarizations dissolve into irrelevance by comparison with the dignity of being loved by the Creator.

This diocese of the Armenian Church must therefore prepare herself to engage her people in Christian love wherever they are, meeting them in the midst of every hardship and every moment of uncertainty. A healing Church cannot be content only to preach to her own. She must model the loving *communion* of Jesus Christ from its Christian Armenian perspective outside her own doors. Most important of all, the Armenian Church must be present in the home and family.

5. “Renewing the Attitude of Our Minds”: Reforming Church Structures and Governance

The *Body of Christ* only upbuilds itself in love when each part is working properly, and when those parts are interacting with single-minded purpose.

The geographical expanse of the Eastern Diocese is enormous by comparison with other Christian denominations in America. However, our decades-old governance structures are deficient in important ways.

Among these, the Diocesan Bylaws and other codes do not encourage consensus-building; they greatly magnify fiduciary matters, and pay scant attention to the actual work of the Armenian Church and its specific Christian mission.

The cultural change involved in *Building Up the Body of Christ* will require a careful examination and revision of our inherited models for leading the Church—“in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus ... to be renewed in the attitude of our minds.”

Appended to the “five pillars” of the vision are specific, practical objectives to realize the *Building Up the Body of Christ* vision in the Eastern Diocese.

Our Armenian Church should be the beacon of faith and life today that she has been for two thousand years. We want her to be a vital and living force that leads our people to a full and meaningful life in accordance with God’s will. We want our Church to be a place of dignity, holiness and hope in a world where these virtues are in short supply; a community where the laurels of Armenia’s Christian past are made relevant and life-giving today. We want our Church to be a portal to all that is genuinely good and just, a pathway to God and to the splendors of eternity. This is the vision of *Building Up the Body of Christ*.

01

Believers Here and There

“I love the Armenians,” said the young priest, opening his arms wide toward a group of Armenian seminarians. “We Episcopalians know the Armenians very well. Every Episcopal Church in America has a few Armenian congregants.”

I winced.

“I have three Armenian families in my little parish in Connecticut. Wonderful people. Great kids,” the priest went on. “They’re an asset to our church.”

My teeth clenched. Had I miscalculated by inviting Father Porter to lead a workshop on preaching for our St. Nersess seminarians? He had come highly recommended. Widely regarded as an outstanding preacher, he had served in the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem for a number of years. He had even been invited to teach in the Seminary of the Armenian Patriarchate there.

He paused to let his words resonate in the ears of the young students.

“It’s not that they’ve forgotten their Armenian identity,” he went on. “Not at all. Most of them are very proud Armenians. They speak Armenian, support Armenian causes, send their kids to Armenia...”

Again, a pause, as if daring someone to ask the fatal question...

“They join our Episcopal churches because they’re looking for Christian faith that is real and compelling for their lives today.” He went on, “If the Armenian Church won’t do it, the Episcopal Church will be happy to preach the Gospel to the Armenians.”

Then, turning suddenly stern, he gazed into the eyes of the young future clergy and said, “But it shouldn’t be that way. The Armenian people were fervent Christians 1500 years before the Episcopal Church even came into being. Your blood relatives knew Jesus and his apostles personally.”

I couldn’t stop my brain from number-crunching. I knew there were about 7000 Episcopal Churches in the United States, probably roughly half that number in the territory of the Eastern Diocese. If only half of those parishes actually had one or two Armenian families, we come up with something on the order of 10,000 Armenian Episcopalians at least. That alone is more than the number of dues-paying members on the parish rolls of the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church. It does not include the countless Armenians who have found their Christian home in communities of Evangelical, and other Christian denominations. Nor does it account for the many Armenians who feel no inclination to belong to any Church at all.

None of this should come as a shock. What percentage of the people in the average Armenian’s circle of friends has any sustained involvement with the Armenian Church? It’s certainly less than 50%. Is it 25%? As for me, fewer than 10% of the many Armenians I know has anything more than a passing connection to the Armenian Church: the proverbial Christmas-Easter Armenians; the picnic/bazaar Armenians; those that long ago gave up on the Armenian Church or never had any real interest in faith, or in the Christian facet of their Armenian heritage and culture. Instinct tells me that those in the latter category are many.

Looking at the situation from another perspective, if even half of the Armenians living in the territory of the Eastern Diocese attended the Armenian Church around once a month, the 61 churches of our Diocese would not have the capacity to contain them all. Sunday worshippers would be overflowing into the streets.

“It shouldn’t be that way.”

Fr. Porter’s words haunt me every day. Yes, thanks, in recent years, to the redoubled commitment of our seminaries to preparing outstanding leaders for the Armenian Church, and to the visionary benefactors that make it possible, we have cultivated a number of truly gifted pastors among our clergy, who are bearing fruit in the parishes of our diocese.

But the sobering fact remains: the Armenian Church is attracting a minuscule proportion of those people that in any way identify themselves as Armenian, at least in the territory of the Eastern Diocese of the United States. Many Armenians—let’s face it, *most* Armenians—are more inclined to invest themselves in other churches or in no church at all, than to commit themselves to the Armenian Church.

It is even questionable whether the Armenian Church is adequately caring for the saintly diehards that fill our church pews every Sunday. By any number of markers, the Armenian Church is in decline. Attendance at worship services, if not measurably shrinking, is at best barely holding steady in the majority of the parishes in our Diocese, especially during this COVID era. The same can be said for most of our church organizations and bodies. Very few people are inclined to take leadership positions in the Church. God bless the men and women who are eager to share their talents, faith, spiritual yearnings, life-experience, and wisdom with their Armenian Church community in a sustained way. But they are vastly outnumbered by those who do not step forward. Paying the bills increasingly burdens our churches at the local and Diocesan levels. Perennial financial struggles make it nearly impossible

for the church to launch new educational and spiritual ministries. With a few notable exceptions, the affluent children and grandchildren of the great benefactors of the twentieth century are far less forthcoming than their elders were. Many, in fact, have little to do with the Armenian Church at all. Both at the local parish and diocesan levels, our church institutions are compelled to rely increasingly on bazaars, hall rentals, golf tournaments, and other creative money-making ventures in order to raise the funds needed to do God's work.

To be sure, some Armenians cede from the Armenian Church for doctrinal, linguistic or other personal reasons. For others, their departure from the Church, or their aversion to it, is due to a shortcoming of the Church, real or perceived. In any case, most Armenians' apathy toward their ancestral church comes about because the Church in some way falls short in justifying their time, energies and support.

What follows is an appraisal of the situation in which the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church of America finds herself in the volatile COVID era of the early third millennium. It is offered by a cradle member of this diocese who loves God and loves the Armenian Church; a clergyman who now holds a position of authority and influence in this diocese. We challenge our church leaders and faithful people to aspire to work toward the strengthening of our diocese so that she may more effectively shepherd our people in the name of Jesus Christ, open their hearts to the blessings of the Creator of all Reality, and be rejuvenated by the vitalizing example of Christian life inherent in the history and Christian culture of the Armenian Church.

02

It Wasn't Always That Way

Seven years ago, seemingly out of nowhere, Pope Francis declared the revered tenth-century Armenian monk St. Gregory of Nareg to be a “doctor of the church.” This title, unique to the Roman Catholic Church, is bestowed upon the most highly venerated theologians of the Catholic Church. Among the Catholic Church’s many thousands of saints, only a few dozen have been granted the exalted title, “doctor of the church.”

The Pope’s proclamation was extraordinary. It was stunning. St. Gregory of Nareg was never a member of the Catholic Church. Holed up in his monastic cell on the southern shores of Lake Van, it is highly unlikely that Gregory ever met a Roman Catholic. He likely wouldn’t have recognized one if he saw one. For the Catholic Church to proclaim St. Gregory of Nareg as a “doctor of the church” is like the President of the United States bestowing the Presidential Medal of Freedom on an obscure playwright from Peru. What should qualify an Armenian Apostolic Orthodox monk to be heralded as an authority on the teachings of the Catholic Church? More to the point, whatever Nareg’s gracious and saintly virtues may be, how would the Roman Catholic Church even know of this man’s existence? Why would they take interest in his writings, his prayers, his theology and other godly gifts?

How many *Armenians* have ever read a line of his writings, or could state the century in which he lived?

And not just St. Gregory of Nareg. How many of us could name six saints of the Armenian Church and give a brief synopsis of their contributions to our theology, sacred culture, or distinctive expression of the Christian faith? The massive twelve-volume medieval compilation of the life stories of the many hundreds of saints venerated by the Armenian Church is currently being translated into English for the first time by the Roman Catholic scholar Dr. Edward G. Mathews, Jr. The first volumes were published by Brigham Young University, the renowned Mormon academy in Provo, Utah. The series is now in the hands of Gorgias Press, a distinguished Syriac Orthodox publishing house. What motivates a Roman Catholic scholar to master the Classical Armenian language and to embark on a multi-year translation project concerning the Armenian Church? Furthermore, what do the Mormons and the Syriac Orthodox Church care about the Armenian Church's register of saints? More curiously, with more than a century of history in the United States, why has the Armenian Church herself not yet inspired a scholar from within our ranks to produce an English version of this work so that our people might get to know the heroes of our heritage and learn from their Christian example?

Or consider our Diocese's own Krikor and Clara Zohrab Information Center. It attracts Armenian and non-Armenians of many disciplines to its small but precious library at the diocesan headquarters in New York, and to the Center's monthly presentations by authors, scholars and artists whose work in some way touches on the life and vision of the Armenian people and our Church. A few years ago, the Director inaugurated a program called, *Krapar yev Kini* ("Classical Armenian and Wine"), an off-beat elementary course in the Classical Armenian language, offered in a relaxed, non-classroom environment—yes, over a glass of wine. The program continues to attract a modest but avid

group of Armenians and non-Armenians, ordinary folks who are eager to learn the ancient language of the Armenian Church. That language is the key to all Armenian literature, theology and culture before the nineteenth century. Clearly, there is something exciting hidden away in the writings of our classical language, that these people consider worth investing their time to discover.

Many are the examples of the unlikeliest of people taking an interest in the Armenian Church. The celebrated 18-19th-century English poet Lord Byron spent a year with the Armenian Mekhitarist monks on the island of San Lazzaro in Venice, where he studied Armenian and translated several Armenian biblical, theological and other works into English.

Virtually every Armenian Church in our Diocese has opened its doors to non-Armenian individuals and families who stumbled in and chose to make our Church their Christian home.

The Armenian Church possesses something unique that has captivated people, Armenian and non-Armenian; something that continues to resonate with many people, who consider it worth investing in. She offers a perspective on the mysteries of life, and of life beyond, that intrigues even people who have no ethnic or other obvious connection to the Armenian people.

Jesus speaks of a “treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” Those that immerse themselves into the heart of the Armenian Church, and commit themselves to its values and strenuous but extraordinary way of life might be compared to Jesus’ “merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.” [Mt 13:44-46]. Many people throughout history and until today have discovered for themselves that “pearl of great value” in the Armenian Church.

So why are our churches not bursting at the seams with American-Armenians who are the heirs of Armenia's unparalleled Christian culture and message? What has gone wrong? It seems that our Church has lost track of the precious pearl in her midst, and has become distracted by other diversions.

The time has come for this generation to recognize "the signs of the times," as Jesus counselled [Matthew 16:2-3]. The time is now for us to summon the courage to face the hard fact that our Church is in decline. Despite the efforts and dedication of many, our people and our children are being deprived of the Armenian Church's bright pathway to God; a road that is well-travelled and has escorted innumerable souls to the joy, the hope, and the presence of God and His Kingdom. We need our holy Church to flourish. We need to discover and share the "pearls" of our Christian heritage, most especially, the one Pearl that inspired all the rest: Jesus Christ the Son of God.

We American-Armenians of the early third millennium—and *all* who declare the Armenian Church to be their own—have the rare opportunity to restore our Church to its traditional fortress-like stature in Armenian life. Few Armenian communities, past or present, can match the freedom, resources and potential that the American-Armenian community enjoys today. The history of our diocese is the story of heroic men and women of faith making remarkable sacrifices for the sake of God, their ancestral Church, and their children. That precedent alone should be enough to spiritually catapult others to follow their example. Our generation has the potential to reclaim the heavenly energy that gave hope and creativity to our forebears. We have the opportunity to bring healing, hope and the true joy of the Kingdom of God to those who so desperately need it, beginning with ourselves. Each one of us can begin to do so today.

Today, the Armenian Church is no longer uniquely responsible for managing every facet of the subsistence and destiny of the Armenian

people. The Church is no longer the only player on the field of Armenian identity and welfare. By the grace of God, the independent Republic of Armenia was reborn. Fragile as it may be, the Republic has as its primary responsibility to assure the security and well-being of the people within its borders. A network of embassies throughout the world communicates the interests of the Republic to the great powers. Countless NGO's (non-government organizations) assist the homeland in a myriad of specific causes. Affluent benefactors from the diaspora are able to invest in Armenia's well-being and development with an immediacy that was never possible during Soviet and pre-Soviet times. Professional organizations—health professionals, lawyers, and numerous others—bring their expertise to the service of communities in and outside of Armenia. Lobbying groups support Armenian causes via diplomatic efforts. Charitable organizations throughout the world such as the Fund for Armenia's Relief, the Armenian General Benevolent Union, the Children of Armenia Fund and many others raise millions of dollars per year to support all manner of educational and charitable causes in Armenia and throughout the world. The point is this: no longer do the manifold responsibilities of assuring every facet of Armenian welfare rest solely on the shoulders of the Church. Instead, the Armenian Church today has the opportunity to refocus on the one sacred mission that is unique to her; the life-and-death spiritual mission that no other Armenian body can, will or should undertake. No servant of the Church must be condemned to God's terrifying indictment according to the Prophet Ezekiel: "The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought..." [Ez 34:4]. In areas of Armenian life where other more specialized and competent bodies have come into being, the Church may now step back to a supporting role to focus on her primary competence and obligation. Indeed, she has a sacred obligation to do so.

But time is short. There is a finish line to this life. Judgement awaits us [Matthew 10:39]. We will be held accountable to the eternal Authority for what we have done and for what we have failed to do. Each of us, and all of us will at some point be required to justify what we have done with our lives. Every individual is free to minimize or to reject the reality of that judgement, but at a staggering risk. Fr. Porter asks: Of all Christians in this world, why would an Armenian turn his back on his ancestral experience of Christian life by devoting himself to other churches, other religions, or, most tragically, to no Christian commitment at all?

You and I, in this Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church of America, have the opportunity to invest in the regrowth and flourishing of our Church. We have the chance to invest in our Church, to invest tangibly in our children and grandchildren, to invest in eternity. We do this not simply for the preservation of our Church, not even for its Christian culture, but for the eternal welfare of the people that have been entrusted to us. And that, not only for “our” people, but for all people. The story of Christian Armenia—the full, unedited story—is one of suffering, indefatigable resilience, endless hope-filled faith in the three persons of the Holy Trinity and the glorious realm of God. That is a story that must be widely heard, a light to be “put on a stand [to] give light to all in the house.” [Matthew 5:15]

Note that we are not advocating “preserving” the Armenian Church, or working for its “survival.” For the first post-Genocide generation, “survival” was the appropriate byword. Today, in 21st-century America, survival means suicide.

Jesus teaches otherwise. The Armenian Church testifies otherwise.

If we are satisfied merely to keep our Church alive so that we can “hand it on” to the next generation, then we have made the Church something akin to great-grandmother’s silver teapot; a precious and poignant relic of the past that is displayed in a case. Pulled out from

time to time as a conversation piece, the souvenir's interest fades as the generations pass. We will have happily attested to the irrelevance of the Armenian Church.

Jesus teaches otherwise. The Armenian Church testifies otherwise.

Our God-given mandate is unquestionable, our calling is awesome. It will require not tweaking, but nothing short of culture change, a complete overhaul in our personal and corporate mindset and attitude toward the ultimate things of God, and toward the Armenian Church. Jesus Christ the Savior, as the head the Armenian Church, is the foundation of this culture change. Our commitment to him must be unwavering, rock solid and growing ever stronger. In the Armenian Church we have a time-tested and stunning tradition of discipleship, of knowing and following Jesus Christ; of making the Son of God the unconditional priority of our short lives on Planet Earth, as a preface to living with God for all eternity. At its genuine heart, the Armenian Church exhibits the genius of Christianity and the Truth of Jesus the Savior. The Armenian Church shows us how to overcome doubt and vacillation when we inevitably face tribulation. Long before the Genocide, our Christian ancestors overcame the worst imaginable horrors that this world can serve up. The Armenian Church is our model for defending the Christian faith, for sacrificing what we treasure for the sake of the privilege of being faithful Children of God and faithful Children of the Armenian Church. The Armenian Church manifests a Christian culture that is second to none: her music, art, architecture, languages, theology, Biblical reflection and application, saints, and liturgies are compelling expressions of the robust faith of the Armenian people for two millennia. The Armenian Church's balanced, rational and compassionate understanding of God's will for his creatures is neither legalistic ("do this, do that; don't do this, don't do that") nor subjective ("anything is ok if it seems good to me"). Her unique theological experience of God, and her insights into the truth of Christianity, when discovered

and understood, are captivating. Her witness and message are possibly even more compelling today than ever before, not just for Armenians, but for the world.

In all that has been offered so far, it would seem that our task is to strengthen the Church by discovering the essence of our ancestral Christian heritage; reclaiming it; and rededicating ourselves and our diocese to it. At the most practical level, this is surely correct. However, in reality, our task is simultaneously more mysterious and more magnificent.

03

Building Up the Body of Christ

If our aim is to discover the essence of our ancestral Christian heritage, this must begin by articulating the mission of the Armenian Church and zeroing in on it with laser focus. What is the mission statement of the Armenian Church? The question is not an easy one. Many and varied are the formulations of the Armenian Church's mission. For most of the Diocese's history, its bylaws did not contain a formal statement of the Armenian Church's mission. Only in the last thirty years did the diocese frame an official mission statement to guide the ministry of the Eastern Diocese:

The mission of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church is to preach the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and to proclaim its message of salvation. This mission is realized through worship, education, witness, service, and the common life in Christ as expressed in the distinctive faith-experience of the Armenian people. All members of the Armenian Church—both clergy and lay—are called to participate fully in its mission.

A much more theologically refined formula is attributed to St. Gregory our Illuminator in his extraordinary catechism, known as *The Teaching of St. Gregory*.

To bring light to all people who come into this world [John 1:9, 3:19, 9:5]; to offer repentance of salvation to all [John 3:17]; to wash all people and deliver them from the chains of darkness by means of baptism [Ephesians 5:26, Titus 3:5, 1 Peter 3:21]; to seal all nations as Christ's inner circle [2 Corinthians 1:22]; to make the Spirit of God dwell in people's hearts [Romans 5:5, 2 Corinthians 1:22, Galatians 4:6]; to unite and join them to the love of the Son of God [Ephesians 4:16], so that the heart of all might shout out as one, and to unite all the world in saying: "Abba, Father," so that the name of enslavement might be taken away, and the name of adoption be placed on them by the grace of Christ; [Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6-7] to enable them to eat the Body of the Son of God and drink the life-giving Blood, [John 6:54] so that thereby they escort the entire world into the inheritance of Christ, to become "heirs of God and fellow heirs of Christ." [Romans 8:17]

Լուսաւոր առնել զամենայն մարդ որ գալոց է յաշխարհս. տալ զապաշխարութիւն փրկութեան ամենեցուն, լուսնալ զամենեսեան, արձակել ի կապանաց խաւարի՝ մկրտութեամբն, և Քրիստոսագունդ դրոշմել զամենայն ազգս. տալ զՀոգին Աստուծոյ բնակել ի սիրտս մարդկան, միաբանել խառնել ի սէր Աստուածորդոյն, զի սիրտ ամենեցուն իբրև մի աղաղակիցէ, և զամենայն աշխարհս միաբանել ասել, թէ «Աբբա հայր»: Զի բարձցի անուն ծառայութեան, և դիցի անուն որդեգրութեան շնորհելովն Քրիստոսի: Ուտել զմարմին Աստուածորդոյն և ընպէլ զարինն կենդանաբար. զի այնու մտցեն ամենայն աշխարհ ի ժառանգութիւն Քրիստոսի, լինել ժառանգորդ Աստուծոյ և ժառանգակից Քրիստոսի:

St. Gregory's exquisite statement consists of little more than a chain of passages from the New Testament. Many of the very same Bible passages, as well as other phrases above are repeated in the prayers and hymns of the Armenian Church's Sacrament of Baptism, which is the Church's gateway to living a life of faith in God. Noteworthy is St. Gregory's broad view of the Armenian Church's mission as pertaining to "all people that come into this world." Striking as well is the joyous, hope-filled tone of the Church's work, and its emphasis on bringing people together, "to unite and join them to the love of the Son of God;" and to draw them into "Christ's inner circle." As members of the Church we are called to build such closeness and intimacy with one another that we become truly a family, brothers and sisters calling out to one Father.

Every word from Jesus' mouth and every step of his life was, in a sense, a synopsis of God's expectations from his people. Something similar can be said of the teachings of St. Paul the Apostle. It is from the Letter to the Church of Ephesus, traditionally attributed to St. Paul, that we choose a passage which succinctly yet eloquently articulates the essence, mission and blessed destiny of the Church. It fully embraces the convictions above, and speaks to the heart of the Armenian Church.

And [God's] gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for *building up the body of Christ*, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God... Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and up-builds itself in love. [Ephesians 4:11-16]

Building up the Body of Christ. The phrase itself, and its context in this passage, are rich with meaning. That richness begins with the subtlety of the word “body.” We use the word to refer to an organism, or an organization, in which many subordinate units interact for the functioning of the whole. A body is alive. It is active. It is creative and productive. Its constituent elements or “members” all contribute in very different ways to the well-being of the whole; they contribute to the identity of the whole, which is much greater than the sum of its parts.

Here, as in a number of his writings, St. Paul’s analogy refers specifically to the human body. [see esp. 1 Corinthians 12:14-31]. The Church is like the human body. The members of the Church are like the parts of the body. Those parts are astonishingly diverse: the liver is as different from the fingernail as the tooth is from the adrenal gland; as the deacon is from the parish council chair. And yet, “when each part is working properly,” each in its own way, they facilitate the health of the whole. Just as God created and assigned a function for the kidneys, the thumbs, the heart, the liver and so on; in the same way, God ordained “apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers” to collaborate in the Church.

This Body, the Church, is “of Christ.” She belongs to Christ and is his possession. This is why Christians refer to Christ as “Lord.” She is accountable to Him, just as the renter is accountable to the landlord. In our day, it is all too easy to overlook this crucial point.

Christ’s ownership of the Church is much more intimate than a person’s ownership of his car. Christ’s body is *a part of him*. It is a part of who he is, just as my body does not just *belong* to me, *it is who I am*. Here is the grand mystery that sets Christianity apart from every other religion: in Christ, God *is one* with God’s creatures; God is united to God’s Church. *The Body of Christ*—the Church—is not just an organization devoted to Jesus Christ, the Son of God; an institution dedicated to proclaiming his teachings and following them. She is much more than that. The Church is a living organism *inhabited by God*. Christ, the Son

of God, is the *Body's* head. He is inextricably united with her. As head, Jesus Christ is the Church's nerve center, coordinating her members, maximizing their efficiency so that in full union with him—what the Bible refers to as *communion*—she can do God's work in this world as she inaugurates its fulfillment in eternity.

To *Build up the Body of Christ*, is to make the Church what she truly is, placing Jesus Christ at the forefront of everything we do, and to “upbuild” ourselves “in love”: not only in our church services, but in our meetings, our fund-raising, our activities, our bazaars, our personal relationships, our cultural events, our classrooms, our fellowship, our leadership, our planning... We can only be the *Body of Christ*, if we recall and continuously reclaim our integral connection to Jesus and to one another. As the Lord states categorically, “Apart from me you can do nothing” [John 15:5].

St. Paul recognizes that his beatific vision of the Church does not come about automatically. Apparently, it was not being realized in the Church of Ephesus. There, it seems, each part was *not* working properly. There was dysfunction. There seems to have been some space between the “Body” and “Christ.” The members were not “attain[ing] to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.” Some additional efforts had to be made in order for the community to “up-build itself in love.”

The Armenian Church faces some of the very same challenges. Not all of our people, parishes, parish organizations, and diocesan structures are truly “grow[ing] up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” It is questionable whether we are genuinely following Jesus. Instead of following him, many people call on him to follow *them* only when they need him. Not every “member” of the Church is fully committed to our Christian mission and ministries. Too many have surrendered that effort to the clergy. The primary business of our church meetings needs to focus on the true business of the Body of Christ: “at-

tain[ing] to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.” It is so much easier, so much more instinctive to immerse ourselves in the comparatively easier work of fund-raising, “programming,” building maintenance, and numbers games. It is by exploring the specifically *Christian* culture of the Armenian Church that we discover its unique experience of Jesus Christ. We come truly to know God when we immerse ourselves in the insights revealed in her saints, liturgy, history, theologians, music, and sacred art. We must breathe that life into our people and upbuild our communities and church bodies in love.

Do we *love* God (not just believe in him)? Jesus says, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” [John 14:23]. St. Paul urges us to “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” The Church must guide her people to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, so that we may follow him as our Lord and master. In this way we become disciples of Jesus Christ. Over and over again in the Gospels, Jesus said to the people he encountered, “Follow me.”

St. Gregory our Illuminator asks us essentially the same questions: Are our church parishes “bring[ing] light to all people who come into this world? Is our diocese bringing relief to those who are bound by “chains of darkness”? Are the churches of our diocese drawing people into “Christ’s inner circle”? How well are we uplifting people’s hearts with the Spirit of God? Are our churches places of safety, serenity, harmony and *communion*? Are they places of joy, where, like a family, we look to one purpose, to one God who is Father? What is our diocese’s role in “uniting all the world”?

Tough questions. Their purpose is not to indict, however, nor to blame or guilt people into action. Their aim is to invite critical reflection, to recognize the signs of the times; to see if “each part is working properly.” By thinking “outside the box,” they prompt us to aspire to the integrity, the hope and joy that is the Body of Christ.

04

The Journey Toward Culture Change

The challenges that we face are momentous. But the potential for a renewal and renaissance of our faithful, inspired by the traditional Christian vision of the Armenian Church, is also momentous. To achieve this goal will require nothing short of a culture change, investment not only by higher authorities on the local and diocesan levels, but by every individual who in any way associates him or herself with the Armenian Church. This vision statement should not be considered a strategic plan, but rather the seed and justification for that plan to be designed. The vision shows us the starting point and the endpoint, along with certain mile-markers that can give us guidance along the way. It is like a GPS system that gives us turn-by-turn directions to our destination, but must take into account all kinds of real-time circumstances: traffic, weather, accidents, detours, road construction, closures, etc. In the same way, determining the best path to our blessed destination is also dependent upon a number of variable factors.

The realization of our vision to *Build Up the Body of Christ* is naturally a much more than simply traveling from Point A to Point B. It involves not one vehicle headed to a single, defined destination, but many vehicles: men and women, church parishes and mission parishes, clergy, diocesan leaders and structures, the primate, young people, deacons, teachers, unaffiliated or partially affiliated folks, and various church organizations. The destination is one, but the travelers are many, departing from varied places, and therefore requiring individually tailored routes.

The real-time circumstances that need to be calculated in order to *Build Up the Body of Christ* in any lasting, meaningful way could never be predicted in advance and set down in a document such as this. Those variables include budget constraints; the inclination or disinclination of leadership at the local and diocesan levels at any given moment; priorities discerned by the primate, clergy, church leadership and faithful; competencies of leadership available at any given moment; availability of resources; unexpected circumstances demanding our diocese's attention such as COVID and tragedies in Armenia; not to mention our readiness to discern in our midst, and to call upon the Holy Spirit of God, apart from Whom, "You can do nothing." [John 15:5]

What follows then, are five guideposts or pillars. They are designated to coordinate the culture change that will be required to *Build Up the Body of Christ* within this diocese of the Armenian Church. Let us repeat: these pillars constitute neither a strategic plan nor an action plan. They represent focus areas or broad objectives to guide every aspect of the work of this diocese, its parishes, church organizations, and faithful people. The precise strategies, priorities, schedules, funding and implementation of the vision are to be defined by the primate, clergy, Diocesan Council and local parishes, who will direct their energies, resources and prayers into each of these pillars, to move in the direction of the vision. Each of the pillars is drawn directly from St. Paul's vision of the Church, "when each of its members is working properly." The pillars are these:

“Coming to the Unity of Faith and of the Knowledge of the Son of God” Education and Formation

Repeatedly throughout this document, we have emphasized the rich Christian tradition of the Armenian Church, the centuries-old path paved by the Armenian people in response to Jesus’ call to “Follow me.” Our Church’s sacred tradition comprises libraries of theological writings and biblical commentaries; volumes of *sharagan* hymns of many types, prayers for every occasion, Christian rituals unknown to any other denomination, sacred iconography and architecture, each expressing profound insights into Christian life. Many readers may be surprised that their ancestral church, among the smallest surviving ancient churches, offers a most compelling perspective on the meaning of life that is of great relevance today, not just to ethnic Armenians, but to the world. To be frank, most Armenians have no knowledge of this richness at all. Touting “the first Christian nation,” and citing the glorious Armenian language and beautiful sacred music, they pat themselves proudly on the back and go on with the business of daily life, leaving the details of the Church to the clergy to curate. This is sad because the Christian tradition of the Armenian Church should not be an object to be admired from afar, but a living pathway to vibrant faith. It is the business of all who in any way associate themselves with the Armenian Church. The sainted theologians, composers, poets, martyrs, monks, nuns, men and women of prayer, teachers, and artists of Armenia’s past must be our mentors in Christian faith today. When discovered, reclaimed and properly adapted for today’s age, according to today’s circumstances, they point to God; they show us how to pray, how to worship, how to believe, how to love, how to do God’s will in a hostile world; how to reconcile; how to suffer; how to forgive, how to find inner peace, how to rejoice and, ultimately, what these few years of biological life on Planet Earth mean.

“Coming to the knowledge of the Son of God” according to the holy tradition of the Armenian Church must become the primary focus of everything we do. Our goal, according to St. Paul and to the holy Illuminator, is not to learn data *about* God, but to *know* God, the way I know my mother or my dearest friend. To memorize verses from the Bible, or the date of the Armenia’s conversion to Christianity is important, but it is not the goal. The word “education” must therefore be understood as more than studying and memorizing. Forming our people into fervent and hope-filled followers of Jesus Christ must become the priority of the Diocese, its parishes and all affiliated bodies and organizations. Quality, stimulating Christian education and formation as Children of God and Children of the Armenian Church must take place *always*—not just on Sunday mornings, not just during Lenten lectures, not just during Bible Studies and sermons. Forming and mentoring our people in a way that challenges them to change their lives and draws them closer to God must take place *everywhere*—during parish council meetings, at the annual bazaar, during coffee hours, at choir rehearsals, women’s guild meetings, in the gym, in the kitchen, at parish and diocesan assemblies, during youth gatherings of every sort; in every venue and at every activity of the church, including, perhaps, most critically, in our one-on-one interactions and relationships. Finally, Christian education and Armenian Church formation apply to *everyone*, from font to funeral, as the ongoing, ever-present work of the Church.

Most critically, we must repair the fatal rupture that has opened in the Armenian Church’s identity, which has distinguished a “Christian” mandate versus a separate “national” or ethnic mandate. The two are one. To bisect the Armenian Church’s mission in this way has damaged our Armenian identity, which comprises both. There can be no “Armenian School” separate from “Sunday School” and vice-versa. The split personality that we have created for the Armenian Church has served only to divide the Armenian people and damage the integrity of our

Church and civilization. One of the chief goals of our diocese’s educational initiatives must be to heal this schism by drawing our people’s attention to the 95% of Armenian culture that is distinctly Christian.

We must collaborate with academic and cultural institutions to find the most effective ways to teach the modern Armenian language. At the same time, we must also give attention to the Classical language. It is the classical literary language—*Krapar*—that is the key to the Armenian Church’s vast library of historical and spiritual writings; the lives and testimony of the saints of the Church; the worship tradition; the Armenian Church’s insights into the Bible; the profuse body of sacred hymns—not just their exquisite melodies, but the theological and spiritual content of their lyrics—which comprises a veritable encyclopedia of the Christian faith; the countless spiritually invigorating sermons of the great preachers of the Armenian Church, from ancient times to our day; and the beauty and profound significance of the church’s iconography. Discovering the spiritual richness of our authentic tradition will be life-giving. The task of presenting the richness of Armenia’s sacred culture to our people will require the creative energy of our best minds, and it will take time, but it must be made a priority.

When all of us in the Church are consciously seeking to grow in our knowledge of God and of God’s holy Church, it is then that we “come to the unity of the faith.” We are no longer individuals pursuing our own spiritual interests in our own ways, on our own schedules and according to our own subjective sense of spiritual need. We grow together, as the Armenian Church, supporting each other, and *Building Up the Body of Christ*.

**“To Equip the Saints for the Work of Ministry”
Everyone is a Servant and Minister**

Culture change requires the investment and the participation of many people with assorted skill sets and perspectives. Enlivening the Church

is bound to falter or fail if it is relegated exclusively to the clergy. In the minds of many, the priests are the professionals, paid to perform their religious duties; while everyone else retreats into the mode of consumer or audience. Furthermore, in most communities of our diocese the priests are already overwhelmed by their strictly spiritual responsibilities. In our largest parishes a single priest is responsible for the spiritual care of hundreds or thousands of people.

St. Paul's vision for the Church of Ephesus is clear. "Some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers." The complexities and challenges inherent in ministering to our people in these difficult times requires that every member of the Armenian Church brings together his and her collective wisdom, gifts, experience and faith to the mission that God has assigned us. In so doing, we come together, join our efforts, and brace each other in Christian commitment. No baptized member of the Armenian Church may be excluded from the privilege of serving God in the Church, or caring for one another in the church and outside her walls. In our diocese we must inspire and "equip" every person to participate actively in the ministries of the Armenian Church according to each one's gifts. Every member of the church must be a servant. Our Christian education and formation efforts must have as their final goal to train "ministers" and servants to do God's will in the Armenian Church with love and compassion. The ministries are as varied as our dedication to God and our commitment to one another: teaching, mentoring, visiting, cooking, feeding, singing, cleaning, praying, painting, organizing, promoting stewardship, writing, serving, greeting, building relationships with outsiders, to name only a few. Mentoring must become the hallmark of our parishes and our diocese. So "equipped," everyone in the parish works with the pastor to "promote the body's growth in building up [the parish] in love."

“Knitting Together the Body in Love” – The Holy Badarak

“He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him,” says Jesus [John 6:56]. St. Gregory the Illuminator’s statement of the mission of the Armenian Church, quoted above, culminates with his conviction that the Church must “enable [the people] to eat the Body of the Son of God and drink the life-giving Blood, so that thereby they may escort the entire world into the inheritance of Christ, to become ‘heirs of God and fellow heirs of Christ.’”

Biblically, theologically and historically the Holy *Badarak* is the centerpiece of the Armenian Church’s life and identity. The *Badarak* is the universal that has always been the beating heart of everything that the Armenian Church does, until today. It could be argued that ultimately it is the *Badarak* that has kept and sustained the Armenian people throughout its tumultuous history. Above all, it is through the *Badarak* that the Church becomes the *Body of Christ*, the living agent of God’s healing in a broken world, armed with “the grace, the love and the divine sanctifying power” of God, as the priest chants in the midst of the *Badarak* every Sunday.

The challenge of drawing our people into a meaningful engagement with the *Badarak* is a complex and emotional problem that involves issues of faith, language, culture, a general lack of biblical and liturgical knowledge among our people, societal and economic pressures, and other factors, many of which are out of our diocese’s control and jurisdiction. Nevertheless, they must be addressed as issues of primary importance.

Careful, prayerful efforts must be made to restore the Holy *Badarak* to be the source, heart and summit of our Christian calling within the Armenian Church. As a community we must examine the prayers, hymns and rituals of the *Badarak*, drawing out their Biblical content, theology, and critical importance for our lives today. Through prayer-

ful teaching and especially mentoring, we must lovingly challenge our people to rethink their assumptions regarding this most magnificent mystery. Every activity and occupation of the parish must feed, and be fed by the community's meaningful participation in the *Badarak*. Thinking outside the box, we must rediscover and reclaim the *Badarak* as the fuel of our faith, which inspires us, challenges us, and guides us "into him who is the head, into Christ."

"Speaking the Truth in Love" – A Healing Church

To "Build Up the Body of Christ" is to bring healing and reconciliation wherever there is fragmentation and discord. This is what Jesus did wherever he went, whenever he said, "Follow me." We must follow Jesus, the "Head" of the "Body" and bring active compassion and healing wherever there is loneliness, sickness and isolation. Ours is a society of increasing polarization and fragmentation in society at large and within the family. Increasingly in our country, the noble notion of "liberty" has mutated into an individualistic, egocentric attitude that is entirely non-Christian. It alienates rather than conciliate. It breaks down rather than build up. It promotes *me* rather than *we*.

The Armenian Church, in accordance with her holy mission, must actively forge *communion* among its own children, through the Holy Spirit of Christ, deploying kindness and compassion toward her people and toward all. The Armenian community in America is a society of many ethnicities, languages and cultures. Too often we view this diversity as a handicap. On the contrary, the Armenian people have had a global presence for over a millennium. We speak many languages. We make our home in every continent on this planet. We forge fruitful social and professional ties with virtually anyone with whom we come into contact. Few other nations can make such a claim. In this global world, the ease with which Armenians move from one culture to another should be recognized as a major asset. It follows that the

distinct mission and competence of the Armenian Church should be to bring harmony and *communion* to this world through her commitment to Jesus Christ, in whom “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” [Galatians 3:28].

This is not to imply that differences in gender, ethnicity or social status are erased in Christianity. By no means. It means that to be a member of the Body of Christ is to embrace a higher calling. When one commits oneself fully to the Body of Jesus Christ, then all gender, ethnic, political, nationalistic and other rivalries and polarizations dissolve into irrelevance by comparison with the dignity of being embraced and loved by the Creator of all reality. Our goal is not to create some neutered, culture-free church or society. Nor is it to be an entity without any norms, where any and every behavior, lifestyle, creed and attitude is accepted. Our goal is to welcome all people onto the path to God, where together, we might advance toward the realization of the *Body of Christ*, as the Armenian Church knows and has known him for two thousand years. Progressing along that well-travelled path requires every trekker to examine and adjust his or her life daily to conform to the heavenly standards of the Kingdom of God. The Bible calls this *repentance*. It is in this context too, that the riches of Armenian culture are made fully manifest.

Isolation also results from all kinds of human suffering that are native to this world. Bodily, mental and emotional illness, betrayal, anxiety, relentless busy-ness, addictions, abuse of all kinds, spousal discord, unbearable economic pressures, societal demons, manic materialism, political polarization, racial injustice, savage competition, and other misfortunes cause agonizing pain and they ultimately push vulnerable people to the margins of life. It is at once the obligation and the privilege of the members of the Armenian Church to reach out to, and to embrace these people in love—as Jesus exemplified and countless saints of the Armenian Church realized.

This diocese of the Armenian Church should thus prepare herself to engage her people in Christian love wherever they are, meeting them in the midst of every hardship and every moment of uncertainty. We must translate the wisdom of the Gospel, the sacred traditions of the Armenian Church—especially her liturgy, and the insights she has acquired through two thousand years of Christian discipleship, into concrete action, motivated by selfless love, much more resolutely than ever before. We must reach into the reality of people’s lives today. All the members of the *Body*, not just the clergy, must show a willingness to respond wisely and compassionately to all people who are struggling with all manner of challenges, and to lead by example in providing spiritual care and guidance for the vulnerable and marginalized. Jesus extended his hand to those discarded by society. For those people embroiled in ethically and morally corrupt or ambiguous lifestyles and behaviors, the Church must “speak the truth,” but always with love and compassion.

A healing Church cannot be content only to preach to her own, within her own doors. She must model the loving *communion* of Jesus Christ from its Christian Armenian perspective outside her own doors: in ecumenical and interfaith circles, in her immediate neighborhood, in the broader conversation of American society.

Most important of all, the Armenian Church must be present in the home and family. The Church must never become a ghetto, an isolated island of like-minded people secluded from the world and afraid to engage it. In Armenian life, the home has always been the rich seedbed of the *Body of Christ*. In a society that is hostile to the home and to the family, the Armenian Church must reach out proactively, with all of the spiritual tools at her disposal through the Holy Spirit, through Biblical models of Christian domestic life in her own holy tradition, in order to strengthen the family as the foundation of the Church.

Many, perhaps most people who identify as Armenians, or who in any way associate themselves with the Armenian people, have little or no meaningful connection to the Armenian Church. Many do not live within easy traveling distance of an Armenian Church community. As Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, we must find the compassion and selflessness to reach out to all those who, for whatever reason, are out of our reach and who, therefore, are only nominally members of the Armenian Church. The creative use of electronic ministries, such as the Diocese's *Vemkar* application, are a good start. We must do more.

“Renewing the Attitude of Our Minds” Reforming Church Structures and Governance

The *Body of Christ* only upbuilds itself in love when each part is working properly, and when those parts are interacting with single-minded purpose. A vision that calls for culture change will only advance when existing church structures and governance are examined and reformed as necessary for the circumstances of the current times. The rudiments of this diocese's governance structures were conceived almost a century ago. While periodically updated over the years, the bylaws of the diocese were drafted in a world very different from ours today; under conditions that have changed radically over the years. The Armenian Church in America was in its infancy. The Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, held captive by the atheistic Soviet regime, was unable to serve its jurisdictions in the western world.

Today our diocese is over a century old. It has grown from a handful of scattered communities to a network of dozens of parishes, some small, some very large. In recent years the Diocese's population center is shifting from New England and the greater New York metropolitan area to the southern and southeastern United States. The old Armenian political parties' influence over the affairs of the Church has declined radically, if it remains at all.

The geographical expanse of this diocese is enormous and unparalleled by comparison with other Christian denominations in America. One bishop is expected to shepherd and administer the affairs of a vast diocese that, in any other Orthodox, Catholic or Episcopal Church, would encompass a number of auxiliary bishops extending the primate's reach on a regional basis. The cultural diversity within the Diocese is unprecedented in its history, creating further challenges to the unity and proper functioning of the *Body*.

Perhaps most troubling of all, except for the short mission statement cited above, the diocesan bylaws are a completely secular document, focused almost entirely on administrative matters. Our current governance structures do not encourage consensus-building, they stifle it by contenting themselves to majority rule. They reduce the sacred work of the Church to business items on an agenda. They magnify fiduciary matters beyond anything we find in the Bible or in the history of the Armenian Church. Overlooked is any attention to the actual work of the Armenian Church or how the various constituent bodies of the diocese are to achieve the specific Christian mission that introduces the document. Prayer, baptism, faith, youth ministries, the sacred language, Armenian Christian culture, sanctity, stewardship, contemporary societal issues, the Bible, the *Badarak*, ecumenical issues and opportunities, St. Gregory the Illuminator, and the Holy Trinity of God are nowhere addressed or even alluded to. With only minor editing, the current bylaws could regulate the operation of a large bowling league or country club.

The cultural change involved in *Building Up the Body of Christ* will require a careful examination and revision of our inherited models for leading the Church. The perpetual lack of people, especially young professionals, who are eager to become candidates for various offices in the diocese and parishes should be enough to demonstrate that our diocese's governance system is not working. Our diocese and, in turn,

each parish under the jurisdiction of the diocese, needs to review every aspect of its operations, organization, funding, infrastructure, and communications, improving and reaffirming itself “in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.... to be renewed in the attitude of our minds... all members of one body.”

05

A Foundation on Which to Build

Over the last three years, despite the restrictions imposed upon the world by the COVID pandemic, the clergy and faithful of the Eastern Diocese—both at its center in New York City, as well as on the ground in local communities—developed various, creative approaches to *Building Up the Body of Christ* within the diocese. Some of the outgrowths over this period have matured beyond short-term trials, into long-term ministry initiatives.

The official diocesan digital ministry, *Vemkar*, is one such initiative. During the worst days of COVID, our faithful were left with nothing but virtual access to the Armenian Church. Our ministries staff rose to the occasion and launched topical learning modules: “Christ as Healer” and “Christ as Hope,” which promulgated numerous digital resources for all ages and ministry groups. *Vemkar* social media accounts and its weekly newsletter recalibrated to focus on the immediate needs of our parishes and of our faithful, who were struggling with their faith in a quarantined world.

Adapting to a rapidly changing time, the Diocese literally broadcast the Gospel and the Armenian Church into the lives of our people in unprecedented ways through digital and other technologies. Virtual ministry expanded throughout the pandemic, introducing live-streamed sermons and messages from the Primate, clergy, and other experts in the field, dealing with family challenges of COVID, post-COVID, societal polarization, and mental and emotional pressures.

Education and fellowship opportunities were established and activated among our clergy and faithful, including new, annual Clergy Continuing Education Seminars. The Diocese's *St. Vartan and Hye Camps* took to cyberspace to draw together hundreds of youngsters and teens into the life of the Church in new ways, but with the same energy, laughter and fun. The *Sacred Music Council* was charged with assisting parishes in restoring the beautiful sacred music of the Armenian Church. Among other initiatives, the SMC organized three virtual and hybrid Sacred Music Festivals, to refresh our appreciation of the Armenian Church's unparalleled sacred music tradition, and to inspire our faithful to aspire to excellence in performing it.

Three new fellowships were established to focus on unique groups within the Armenian Church, thereby "equipping the saints" and broadening the impact of our ministry. The *Deacons' Fellowship* aims to bring ordained deacons and sub-deacons together to prepare them for fuller ministry in the parishes, in collaboration with the priests of the Diocese. *Faith Building Women* mobilizes women in tangible ministries of the diocese according to their God-given gifts. The *Yeretzgins' Sisterhood* brings the unique perspective of priests' wives to the benefit of the Church.

These initiatives and others are early efforts toward the vast culture change represented by *Building Up the Body of Christ*. Culture change must inspire the participation of every child of the Armenian Church within the jurisdiction of our diocese: every member of every parish, men and women, young and old; the clergy; the primate, the diocesan council; every parish and mission parish, their faithful people and their leaders. Every person and every entity of our diocese must examine prayerfully and honestly the vision outlines here, and then faithfully chart the steps to realize it.

What follows is a catalogue of specific goals that exemplify the actions that should be taken to begin the culture change required in *Building Up the Body of Christ* within this diocese of the Armenian Church.

Let us state it again: this is not a business plan. It is a broad vision intended to guide the Children of the Armenian Church in reclaiming the faith that has been transmitted to us and to cultivate it in ourselves and among one another within our diocese. It will be the responsibility of the ordained and non-ordained leaders of the Diocese, and of each parish therein, to examine these actions and determine their priority. In close collaboration with the faithful on the ground, they will do well to propose other specific goals that will advance the mission and values described in this document. Accordingly, we charge the leadership at all levels to establish achievable short-term and long-term objectives, markers of success, and timelines to evaluate progress, difficult as it obviously is to measure success in matters of the heart.

Education and Formation: Children of God and Children of the Armenian Church

- Further enrich the Diocese's *Vemkar* digital ministry to be the primary online educational resource for *Building up the Body of Christ* and reaching out to shut-ins and the many faithful who have no easy access to an Armenian Church parish. This should include creation of additional Armenian-language resources and migration to a more robust, tailor-made web platform.
- Strengthen educational opportunities via social media, tailored to diverse demographics of our Diocese.
- Establish a department of Armenian Language Ministries to spearhead the Diocese's efforts to (1) bring the riches of the Armenian Church's Christian Culture to the awareness of our people, especially non-Armenian speakers; (2) provide resources and guidance to church schools and their teachers, especially in enriching the specifically Christian content of the Armenian Church's languages,

culture and history; (3) integrate elementary Classical Armenian resources and instruction into the curricula of the diocesan and parish educational programs; (4) collaborate with other Armenian organizations to strengthen Armenian language instruction.

- Transform every activity and gathering of the diocese and parish into a teaching opportunity by introducing compact, relevant lessons about Christian-Armenian life into coffee hours, parish council meetings, youth activities, choir rehearsals, picnics/bazaars, cultural events, flyers, newsletters, et al.
- Promote alternative schemes for Sunday morning with the aim of eliminating the overlap of Church School with the Holy *Badarak*, encouraging all but the youngest children to participate in the *Badarak*, with their families, and with each other.
- Explore out-of-the-classroom modes of forming our young people into faithful Children of God and Children of the Armenian Church.
- Promote learning about, and devotion to the saints of the Church as role models for Children of God and Children of the Armenian Church: in classrooms, at meetings, at gatherings, in preaching, in print and electronic resources, in worship services.
- Promote the study and application of the distinctive Christian tradition of the Armenian Church as revealed in her liturgy, saints, patristic heritage, sacred arts and spirituality.
- Expand the diocese's crowdsourcing efforts to facilitate sharing of existing educational resources among parishes, clergy, educators.
- Prepare topically-based learning modules tailored for various age groups and demographics, addressing *real life challenges* and spiritual issues facing the faithful of our Church in the United States; and drawing upon insights from the Armenian Church's theology,

history, worship, and Christian culture. The modules will rotate seasonally, and be adapted for use in church schools, camps, et al.

- Restore a printed resource (like the Diocese’s signature periodical, *The Armenian Church*) to be widely distributed, containing high-quality, engaging articles about faith and spirituality, especially from the perspective of the Armenian Church’s sacred tradition.
- Teach our faithful about discipleship, what it means to be a follower and student of Jesus Christ. Encourage one-on-one mentoring, and spiritual formation. Create opportunities to teach others how to pray and exercise their spirituality.
- Revive the ancient tradition of private confession as a powerful means of deepening Christian faith in the tradition of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church. Strengthen training in this discipline for priests and encourage our faithful to avail themselves of private confession.
- In all education endeavors insist on the authentic theological expressions, beliefs, and teachings of the Armenian Church as contrasted to other Christian traditions, holy as they may be.

Everyone is a Servant and Minister

- Strengthen and expand the *Deacons’ Fellowship* to draw more deacons and sub-deacons into active ministries; to facilitate their interaction and relationships; to explore further possibilities for deacons to participate in other ministries of the Church; and to raise standards for education, practical training, spiritual growth, and continuing education for sub-deacons and deacons of the Diocese; all in collaboration with the priests of the Diocese.
- Strengthen and expand *Faith-Building Women* as a sisterhood devoted to exploring and expanding ministries of the diocese and its par-

ishes suited especially to the particular gifts bestowed by God upon women according to the Bible, the Armenian Church's tradition, and the needs of today.

- Explore and implement ministries for young girls that are analogous to those available to young boys (*tbir*) according to the tradition of the Armenian Church.
- Strengthen the work of the *Sacred Music Council* as the leading body in reviving the tradition of magnificent, faith-building sacred music within the parishes.
- Steer the Diocese's youth organizations toward more meaningful and tangible involvement in the church's day-to-day ministries, particularly among college-age young people.
- Expand pilgrimages to Armenia, the Holy Land, Constantinople and other holy places. Traveling, praying and learning together, pilgrims return home with renewed "unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God," eager to inflame others with Christian fervor and commitment to the Armenian Church.
- Refine the Diocese's camp programs so that they focus increasingly on training children and teens to become true disciples of Jesus Christ and ministers/servers of the Armenian Church.
- Employ a full-time Coordinator of Children and Family Ministry for the Diocese to oversee our efforts to strengthen the home as seedbed for raising Children of God and Children of the Armenian Church.
- Employ youth mentors for four regions of the Diocese (New England, Mid-Atlantic, Mid-West, South) to train youth ministers for each parish. Working closely with them, and under the supervision of local pastors, the youth ministers will work to more effectively

invite teens and college students into a sustained commitment to the Armenian Church and to bring their love, energy and gifts to her service.

- Support the *Yeretsgins' Sisterhood* in ministering to the Church from their unique perspective and gifts, and for their spiritual growth.
- Produce a manual of the Christian vocation and the Armenian Church to be given to parents preparing for the baptism of their children, and to adults preparing for baptism themselves. The manual will place emphasis on the privilege of every baptized person to be a “Child of God” and a “Child of the Armenian Church,” actively involved in the Church’s work in *Building Up the Body of Christ*.
- Restore the notion of the *family* as the *home* of Armenian Christian life and formation, through home-based educational and worship opportunities, consistent with the tradition of the Armenian Church.
- Explore with renewed emphasis the challenges facing parents and families today, drawing upon the experience of faithful Christians in our parishes and closest sister churches. Provide assistance and support as possible and appropriate.
- Increase the frequency of traditional, extra-*Badarak* worship services in our parishes (e.g. Evening Service, Healing Services, and others), especially to attract and nourish those who do not attend the *Badarak* regularly, as a means of reaching out to those who struggle to engage the *Badarak* meaningfully.
- Bring the vocation of monastic life in the tradition of the Armenian Church to the greater awareness of our people with the objective of restoring within our diocese forms of monasticism appropriate for the conditions of our day in the United States.

The Holy Badarak

- Pursue alternative schemes for Sunday morning to minimize or eliminate the overlap of teaching and worship, exploring the matter with clergy, Church School teachers, and parents. All but the youngest children should be integrated into the *Badarak*.
- Explore new ways of drawing the faithful of all ages—especially children and young people—into active participation in the Holy *Badarak*. Study best practices of other Orthodox Churches.
- Encourage sober, informed discussion regarding the feasibility of prudent, limited, and well-defined use of the vernacular in the celebration of the *Badarak*.
- Create devotional and instructional resources for every segment of our faithful to draw them more thoughtfully and meaningfully into the sacrament of the Holy *Badarak*.
- Produce a new, revised edition of our diocese’s Divine Liturgy Pew Book, refining the introduction and annotations, and modernizing the English translation.
- Encourage clergy and parishes to explore, share, and install electronic mechanisms for real-time display of the text and translation of the prayers and hymns of the *Badarak*, along with annotations.
- Explore “out-of-the-box” ways of assisting older children, teenagers, and others in following the *Badarak* in real-time, in the church.
- Strengthen continuing education opportunities for priests, deacons and choir members in the history, structure, and theology of the *Badarak*, with emphasis on its centrality to the life and mission of the Armenian Church.
- Draw attention to the model of Christian life presented in the hymns and prayers of the *Badarak*, discussing how the *Badarak* challenges us to change our lives and grow in Christ.

Speaking the Truth in Love: A Healing Church

- Organize parish-wide discussions to explore new ways of reaching out to the poor, the wounded, the marginalized, and the bereaved in our parishes, caring for them, assisting them, and drawing them into the life of the Armenian Church.
- Explore and implement specific ways for deacons, women and youth to assist the parish priest in extending the Church's reach to those who are marginalized or have become alienated from the Church.
- Establish prayer and care for "lost" members of the parish as a standing item of business for Parish Councils.
- Establish prayer and care for the needs of the parish neighborhood as a standing item of business for Parish Councils.
- Increase collaboration with faithful of our Oriental Orthodox sister churches on the local level in spiritual, educational, outreach and liturgical activity, including periodic concelebration of the Divine Liturgy.
- Examine and adjust diocesan and parish budgets and fund-raising efforts to better reflect and support our missionary responsibility to those on the "outside." This should comprise direct assistance to those in need (in our parishes, in Armenia, in other countries, in our parish neighborhoods); and also funding to support charitable ministries and the training of ministers in the parish and at the diocesan level.
- Encourage pastors to apply all preaching on the Gospel's message to the issues afflicting our people today, as discussed above.
- Assist individuals and parishes in encouraging the formation of prayer groups: men and women, young and senior, who will meet regularly, either in-person or virtually, to pray for each other, and

for those in need, locally and globally. In this way, the *Body of Christ* is built up immediately, using its most powerful tool.

- Explore the Armenian Church’s unique contribution to the search for social justice in the United States and in our own communities, with special attention to Armenia’s history of violence and injustice, and the Gospel paradigm of the Good Samaritan.
- Train and mentor teachers, ordained and non-ordained leaders in the Armenian Church’s position on the polarizing and painful issues of the day, including issues of gender, freedom and liberty, marriage, parenting, abortion, addiction, mental illness, political engagement, and others.
- Explore the concept of *Building Up the Body of Christ* in a COVID and post-COVID world; how to balance the opportunities of developing a robust cyber-community against the essential need for the members of the Church to sustain loving, in-person communities anchored in the in-person participation in the Holy *Badarak*.

Renewal of Structures and Operations

- Establish a diocesan committee to engage in a complete review of the current Diocesan Bylaws, making recommendations for better aligning them with the vision presented here; setting priorities and timelines for making changes according to existing procedures for doing so.
- Organize discussion groups in the parishes and church organizations to review this vision and discuss its implications for the current structures and operations of the parishes and the diocese.
- Establish a committee to produce user-friendly materials that explain the concept of stewardship and the Armenian Church’s traditional, biblical understanding of “membership” in the Church arising from the sacrament of Baptism.

- Expedite and facilitate the transition from a dues-paid system of Church membership to a stewardship-based model in our parishes.
- Prepare printed and electronic resources on the Church as *Body of Christ*, and on the Armenian Church as the *Body of Christ* among the Armenian people, and their families.
- Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages for the *Body of Christ* of the “Zoom Era,” from its practical, but especially its spiritual and pastoral perspectives.
- Explore and implement authentically biblical models for fund-raising as opposed to those that are generally relied upon today in our diocese and parishes. The concept of sacrificial giving, and giving gratefully out of love for Jesus Christ and for one another.
- Increase and develop the Diocese’s regions as laboratories for the testing innovative approaches to the Armenian Church’s work and ministry.
- Study the feasibility of dividing the Eastern Diocese into separate dioceses or regions, each with its own auxiliary bishop, to provide more immediate oversight and care for the parishes and faithful.
- Support non-ordained leaders at the parish and diocesan levels, to assure that every leader of the Church is a qualified, devout and faithful Child of God and Child of the Armenian Church.
- Study alternative means for electing and/or appointing the primate that assure that God’s will is done in the assignment of that most critical minister; and that political intrigue and division are minimized, if not eliminated. Study the best practices of our closest sister Orthodox Churches and make reforms to the bylaws as needed.
- Examine and draft diocesan and parish budgets as opportunities to reshape the *Body of Christ* and our Christian Armenian identity.

06

Onward

Our Armenian Church should be the beacon of faith and life today that she has been for two thousand years. We want her to be a vital and living force that leads our people to a full and meaningful life in accordance with God's will. We want our Church to be a place of dignity, holiness and hope in a world where these values are in short supply; a community where the laurels of Armenia's Christian past are made relevant and life-giving today. We want our Church to be a portal to all that is genuinely good and just, a pathway to God and to the splendors of eternity.

This is the vision of *Building Up the Body of Christ*.

It was also the vision of one of the great Armenian churchmen in modern times, a former Primate of this Diocese, Archbishop Karekin Hovsepian, who later went on to become His Holiness Karekin I, Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia. In 1938 Catholicos Khoren I Muratbekyan charged him to travel to the United States to become the primate here. By this time Archbishop Hovsepian, nearing eighty years of age, had earned graduate degrees in Germany; authored scholarly books; made archaeological expeditions at Ani; participated in diplomatic efforts at Kars in historic Armenia; and risked his life as a military chaplain at the Battle of Sardarabad, among many other achievements. Only then, at the twilight of his life, did the Archbishop travel to the United States to bring order to an Armenian Church community that was self-destructing, crumbling under the weight of tribal strife, political intrigue, cultural shifts, and simple lack of faith. Grass had

not yet sprouted over the grave of his predecessor, Archbishop Ghevont Tourian, who had been murdered by Armenians, in the church sanctuary, during the celebration of the *Badarak*. The very same year that Hovsepian was elected Primate, his spiritual father, Catholicos Khoren I was murdered by Stalinist operatives in Holy Etchmadzin. The Armenian Church in America was on the brink of extinction.

If Hovsepian had hoped to crown the last years of his prolific life in retirement with a cushy pastoral assignment in the affluent New World, he was dead wrong. The outlook was dismal. The dust of the Genocide still hung thick in the air. Archbishop Hovsepian could have done well simply to bide his time, celebrate his *Badaraks*, preach goodwill, smile a lot and most of all, not to rock the sinking ship. In a word, he might have chosen as his watchword *survival*.

He did not. He launched an ambitious and vigorous campaign to *Build Up the Body of Christ* in the Armenian Church, in every corner and at every level. He created, he inspired, he educated, he wrote, he lifted up. He published, he raised funds, he dialogued, he reconciled. He envisioned an Armenian Cathedral in New York. He envisioned an Armenian Seminary in America. His tireless work was fueled by a boundless vision of the true, inherent potential of his people and their civilization; of their singularly precious Christian culture, and most of all, by an astonishing, unflinching certainty that even in the dust of the Genocide, even within the mire of internal discord, almighty God would bring forth in them renewed life, and even greater life beyond that [see Matthew 12:6, 41, 42].

Mere survival was not Hovsepian's goal. His sights were set much higher. "National preservation is not merely the idea of physical continuation from generation to generation," Hovsepian wrote. "Physical continuation is rather a means and a tool for bringing about spiritual immortality."

The time is now for us to summon the faith, spirit and temerity of Catholicos Karekin Hovsepian to set our sights on spiritual immortality. Like the diocese that Hovsepian inherited, ours today faces fresh challenges. It is time for us to aspire to the greatness and blessedness promised by the Lord, which are encoded in the richness of our Armenian Christian tradition and the holiness of our countless martyrs.

“I have loved you with an everlasting love,” says God, in the words of the prophet Jeremiah [Jer 31:3]. God is speaking to all humanity, of course, including us, the children and stewards of the Armenian Church. To *Build Up the Body of Christ* is to recognize that divine love within the Armenian Church, and to make her our home—not just the headquarters for Armenian religious activity, where we attend church services and functions, but to incorporate ourselves into the unique family of Jesus Christ and his people. Let us come home, like the Prodigal Son, into the loving embrace of our Lord. Let us discover that precious *Body*, and reclaim our true and genuine identity as Children of God and Children of the Armenian Church. Let all of us and each one of us set out today, to “commit ourselves and one another to the almighty Lord God,” as we repeat time and again in our Holy Badarak. To do so, day by day, is to *Build Up the Body of Christ*, a privilege that can change the course of our lives on this earth and for all eternity.

Let us commit ourselves to Him who is the Head, to Christ.

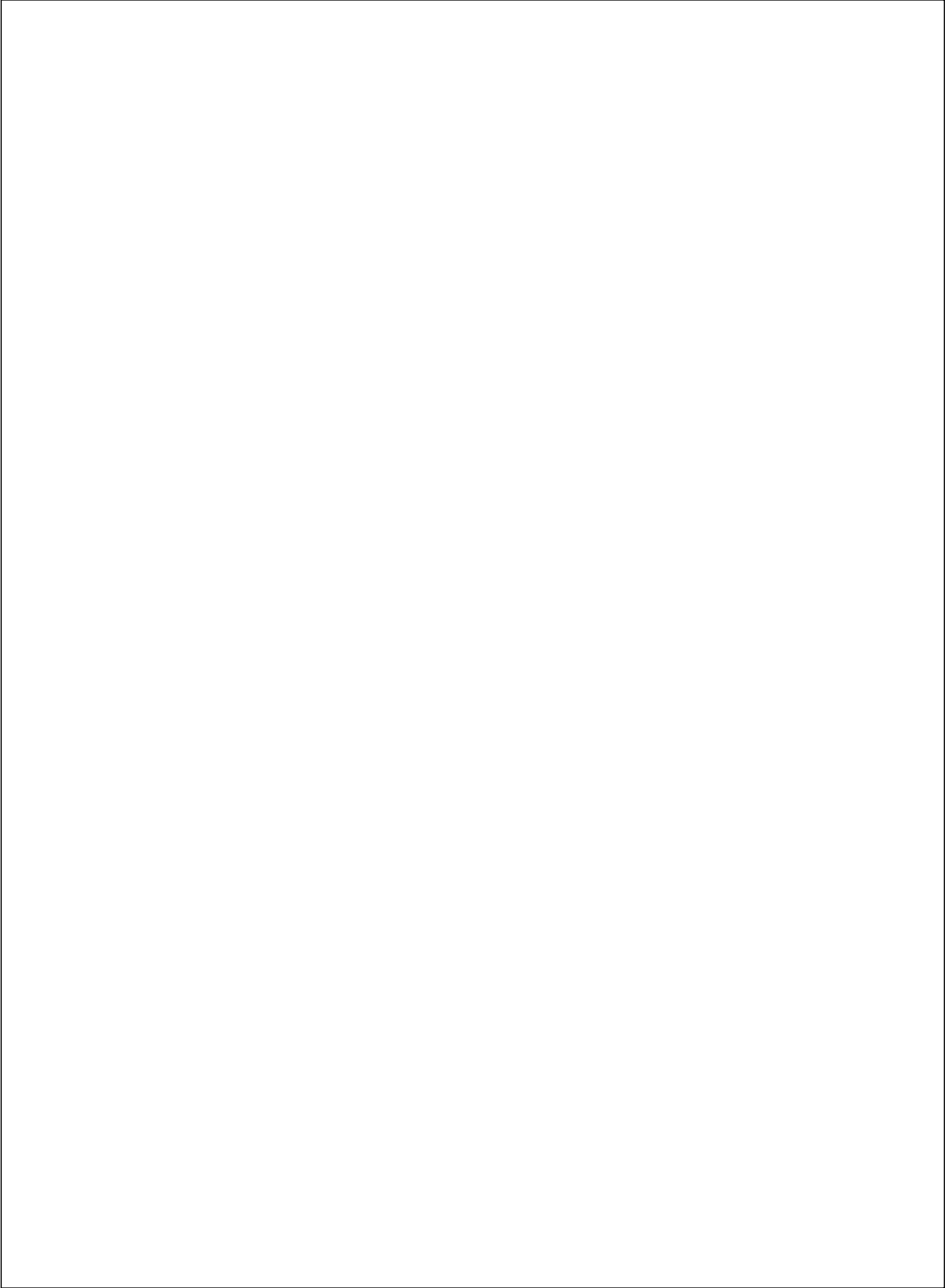
Bishop Daniel

Commemoration of the Forty Martyrs of Sebastia

MARCH 26, 2022

Acknowledgements

It is a pleasure to express my profound gratitude to many people, more than I can count, who contributed to this vision statement by sharing with me their ideas, suggestions, observations and criticism. Their insights, experience, prayers and faith have made this document a much more formidable statement than the scattered ideas that I began with when I was elected primate. In particular I wish to acknowledge the members of the *Building Up the Body of Christ Advisory Board*: Yeretzgin Natasha Aljalian, Rev. Fr. Hovnan Demerjian, Deacon James Kalustian, Rev. Fr. Krikor Sabounjian, and Arpi Nakashian. I am also very grateful to Dr. Jesse Arlen, Dr. Mihran Aroian, Michele Bergerac, Professor Roberta Ervine, Rev. Fr. Vazken Movsessian, V. Rev. Mesrop Parsamyan, Rev. Fr. Nicholas Porter, Yeretzgin LuAnn Sabounjian, Vardan Sargsyan, Deacon Eric Vozzy, and Christopher Zakian.



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