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From the desk of...

Alex Derderian, ACYOA Central Council Chairperson

If you're receiving this newsletter, chances are the ACYOA has left a positive impact upon your life, like it has mine. If I wasn't encouraged to attend ACYOA meetings in my youth, I don't know if I would have been involved in the church or where I would be today. My active and continued involvement in the church and the Armenian community directly stems from my membership in the ACYOA.



As the Chairperson of Central Council, I wanted to share how excited I am about the current state of the ACYOA.

We're coming off of a successful General Assembly and Sports Weekend in Palisades, NY where we had excellent chapter representation at General Assembly, healthy sports competition and Christian fellowship the rest of the weekend.

Another group of young Armenian Christians experienced their homeland on the Armenia Service Program, sharing their lives with the children at Camp Tzitsernak and forming a strong bond with Armenia.

More recently, the fall was opened with a Regional Meeting in Springfield, Mass. with representatives from many of the New England parishes.

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A Legacy Remembered

Last September marked the 20th anniversary of the passing of Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, a visionary leader of the Armenian Church in America. As the founder of the ACYOA, Archbishop Nersoyan has left a well-known legacy, but how exactly did he move so many? His grandnephew and former ACYOA Central Council Chairperson, Deacon Diran Jebejian, reflects on the foundation laid by this great leader.

Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan: A name synonymous with vision, legacy, and impact; a person of whom many have heard, but so few in today's younger generation were able to know; an intellectual that challenged even the brightest minds, not to boast, but to further his own already progressive thinking. Without a doubt, he was a great man.

Archbishop Tiran's achievements throughout his service to the church are certainly no secret to anybody. He founded several important organizations, such as the ACYOA and AACCA (Choir Association), was instrumental in the establishment and development of the Diocese of the Armenian Church headquarters in New York City, and founded St. Nersess Armenian Seminary, which served as his pride and joy.

However, most of us are already familiar with these aspects of the Archbishop's work. It's easy to say that the ACYOA has been an important part of our church life for over 60 years; and as such, all of its accomplishments are part of his legacy. It's easy to discuss the impact St. Nersess Seminary has had on the Armenian Church in America; and as such, he was a visionary. But what else drew so many people into wanting to speak to him, listen to him, and learn from him?

Following Archbishop Tiran's death in September of 1989, Fr. Yeprem Kelegian wrote a tribute to him in an Armenian Church publication. In it, he referenced a story in which a young American-Armenian was struggling to speak in Armenian with Archbishop Tiran. After hearing him struggle with the words for a few sentences, Archbishop Tiran said to the young man, "...I am not interested in your language. I am interested in your thoughts." This



His Eminence Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan was elected to serve as Primate of the Eastern Diocese for three terms (1944-1953) and helped found vital organizations such as the St. Nersess Seminary, the ACYOA, and the Association of Armenian Church Choirs of America (AACCA).]

quote, amongst a handful of others, is what embodied the great Archbishop.

Archbishop Tiran was staunch in his beliefs. It was hard for him to "give in" to another viewpoint if he truly believed his idea was right. However, despite being a true intellectual, and despite being in a position of authority and respect, he would listen. He would ask questions, and try to understand why you believed what you believed. Dr. Roberta Ervine, in a recent publication of the Archbishop's unpublished letters, expressed it best: "He was that rarest of individuals; one who sought to understand what he sees, rather than to see only what he understood."

But Archbishop Tiran's influence didn't end there. Countless young adults who went to the Archbishop for advice and help could attest to that fact. He would ask questions, and try to understand the problem – but then, with the right questions and in his own special way, he would let you figure out the answer for yourself.

Far beyond the administrative and ecumenical duties he had, Archbishop Tiran was as down-to-earth as the next person. He understood young people's needs and spoke to them in a language they understood. His contagious smile and laugh could certainly make a gloomy room sunny. And despite being an "archbishop," he did things everybody does: he loved cooking, took things apart, tried (often unsuccessfully) to fix them, and did quite a bit of reading. His personality was loved by all, young and old, and to this day, his demeanor, his actions, and his words are repeated by those who knew him.

Archbishop Tiran's impact upon the younger generation was tremendous. Young people had an Archbishop that was approachable and who viewed them as the channel through which the Armenian Church would continue for genera-

tions to come. Young people were empowered by Archbishop Tiran to take charge and carry on the sacred mission of bringing the divine message of Christ to the minds and hearts of its members. Young people believed in him because he believed in them.

Even with all of his successes, and his great legacy already established later in his life, Archbishop Tiran represented humility. In a speech reflecting on his life, he said, "I have not always succeeded with what I have intended to do, but nevertheless the struggle itself is a credit to a person if that struggle is carried out for a higher purpose." I firmly believe that there are thousands of individuals who would agree that Archbishop Tiran's struggles, at their worst, laid the foundation for the successes that the Armenian Church enjoys today.

–Dn. Diran Jebejian.

For more information on the life and work of Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, please visit www.armenianchurch.net/diocese/clergy/blessedmemory/

Continued from page 1 (Alex Derderian)

Right after the New Year, we held the 2nd Annual Chapter Workshop in Boca Raton, Fla.; and we're looking forward to the 11th Annual Leadership Conference in March. If you haven't visited the brand new acyoa.org, what are you waiting for!? Do it now!

ACYOA members around the Diocese take an active part in the life of the church. We serve on the altar, sing in the choir, teach Sunday School and fill various leadership roles in our home parishes.

We currently have many active chapters throughout the Diocese, but there are still parishes without an ACYOA chapter. If your parish doesn't have an active ACYOA chapter, encourage them to start one. It only takes five people and some encouragement. If your parish has an active chapter, please help them in any way possible. It is with your love and support that they will see true success.

I'd like to thank you for your continued support of the ACYOA and our goal of bringing the Armenian youth of America closer to the church. Through these efforts, we will be able to build a stronger foundation for the future of the Armenian Church and our nation in the Diaspora.



A Different Kind of Summer Fun: Tales from Damascus

Most ACYOA members spend their summer break vacationing, working summer jobs, and taking part in various Diocesan programs. Stan Sheridan and Ben Rith-Najarian had a unique experience: as seminarians of St. Nersess Seminary, they traveled to Damascus, Syria to immerse themselves in its Armenian community. Here are their reflections.

Stan Sheridan

Damascus was truly an enlightening experience for me. Being given the opportunity to live in a biblically ancient city, while strengthening my Armenian language skills and gaining valuable liturgical knowledge, was a great way to cap off the end of my first year at seminary.

Living with the Primate of the Armenian Diocese of Damascus, Archbishop Armash Nalbandian, was a great privilege. Being taken under the wing of an archbishop and having the experience of being personally taught by him, as well as being guided under his watchful eye was a unique privilege for a first-year seminarian. We had the chance to serve in capacities that I would not have had the opportunity anywhere else. Living on the “Street called Straight” (the only street mentioned in the Bible, Acts 9:11) and experiencing the place where St. Paul began his ministry and being able to visit other ancient holy sites was also another great privilege that not many have.

Overall, it was a great experience, and I can say confidently that I have grown, not only in my Armenian skills, but in my “experience” of the church. Having visited the Middle East and seeing where a lot of our people come from, I feel that I will be better equipped to serve our people in the future.

Ben Rith-Najarian

Last summer, Stan and I had the opportunity to travel to Damascus, Syria to be immersed in the language, life, and faith of the Armenian community living there. The main purpose of our journey was to learn Western Armenian (most people only spoke Armenian and Arabic).

However, we also had the opportunity to participate in the liturgical services, visit historical and



St. Nersess Seminary students Stan Sheridan and Ben Rith-Najarian assist during a baptism in Damascus, Syria

biblical sites, eat delicious food, and interact with the local people. On several occasions, we also had the opportunity to accompany Srpazan to the Armenian cultural organization events where we enjoyed khorovadz, dancing, and conversations with the youth.

We had the chance to meet many young Armenians of different ages in Damascus. There are many Armenians from Iraq seeking refuge in Syria, and we spent two days with a group of them who were 8-14 years old. We taught them how to play American football and basketball, helped them with arts and crafts, and went with them to visit monasteries, churches, and other holy places.

We also spent some time with Armenian young adults. While there is no official Armenian Church youth group in Damascus, Armash Srpazan, the Primate of the Armenian Church in Damascus, has a great relationship with the youth. Once a month he invites them to join in reading and studying the Bible and discussing faith issues; about ten young Armenian men and women would gather on these days. On one

particular occasion, the group began reading Genesis. Armash Srpazan would read a section and follow with questions for the group, which would often lead to further discussion over topics such as creation, evolution, and the role of humanity in the world. While Srpazan invited the young people to the church to talk

Scripture and theology, the young people would invite Srpazan to their events as well.

After traveling to Damascus, I am grateful to have learned not only about Armenian language and culture, but Armenian language and culture in a context that few have the opportunity to experience.

Are You Being Called to Serve?

Central Council member Danny Mantis interviewed Rev. Fr. Yeprem Kelegian, pastor of St. Mesrob Armenian Church in Racine, WI, to explore the ideas behind this year's Diocesan theme, "Vocations: A Call to Serve."

DM: Why did the Diocese choose this theme?

DYK: It is more than a theme. *It is a call to action.* We are in a crisis situation in America because of our shortage of pastors for our parishes.

DM: What do we hope to accomplish?

DYK: Increase the number of men seeking to be priests and getting them to St. Nersess Seminary, which is, in my opinion, the best place to train priests who will serve in North America.

DM: Is there a particular message they want to send to young men? What message do they hope to convey to young women?

DYK: Younger *and* older men. Look, you don't have to wait for a (sometimes mysterious) "Call from God" to come to the Seminary. If your life, your spiritual journey is, in any way, leading you to try the Seminary in order to find out if the priesthood is for you, then *do it!* If you are drawn to the altar, drawn to serve others, drawn to the Lord, I would suggest taking a look at the Seminary.

And, one more thing: The priesthood, for me, has been utter joy!

Women—again, if you sense the Lord leading you to a deeper relationship with Him, to serve Him and His Church...better check out the Seminary. Finally, if you don't check out the Seminary and explore the possibilities of serving the Lord in His Church and it turns out that you did have the call, later in life you may regret the emptiness you will feel.

DM: Why, after all these years in the U.S., do we still have a shortage of clergy?

DYK: *Perhaps* our parishes are not the best recruiting "soil." Are all of our churches "hot beds" of Armenian Christian spirituality? Are our parishioners outwardly showing their utter and absolute love of Jesus Christ? Part of the problem may be what Dr. Sara Terian pointed out in her sociological study of 2006. She found that those interviewed viewed the Armenian Church as a cultural institution in the context of faith, rather than a faith center in the context of culture. In other words, they viewed the Armenian Church as a cultural club that was pretty religious, rather than a Church with a rich culture. Big difference.

Would a guy be drawn to the Seminary if he is growing up in an institution that is viewed by many as a vehicle for maintaining culture? Our culture is great. But that is not what will inspire our young and old men to be priests.

Do you think you are being called to serve? Contact your pastor or St. Nersess Seminary for more information on how to explore opportunities to serve the Armenian Church.



Danny Mantis with his pastor, Rev. Fr. Yeprem Kelegian.

KEF IS THE CURE

Harry Kezelian, a member of the St. John ACYOA chapter in Southfield, Mich. gives five great reasons to attend an Armenian dance this season.

It's almost spring, and we've reached the end of another kef season. Several dances this season were arranged by ACYOA chapters in different parts of the Diocese, including Providence, Detroit, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Fair Lawn. But inquiring minds want to know: why is autumn and winter the best time for kef? Well, it's mainly because the church considers it improper to hold a dance during Lent, and that takes up half of the spring... but we are not here concerned with the finer points of canon law. Rather, we ask your attention as to the benefits of Kef for Body, Mind, and Soul.

1 Kef Is Good For the Body

As anyone who has ever done the *Haleh* can tell you, Armenian dancing can be very strenuous. Doing any line dance for an extended period of time is a good workout for your legs and great for the cardio-vascular system, especially a running dance, like a fast Michigan Hop. You can work on your shoulder and arm muscles by changing it up with a few *Tak-Bars*. The *Haleh*, especially the modern men's variation, is a full-body workout. Meanwhile, if you can actually perform them correctly (as opposed to the average Armenian), the Greek *Zeybek* or the Russian Cossack Dance are a good workout for your thigh muscles as well as your overall coordination. Remember to relax your muscles with a light *Tamzara* or you might tear your ACL!

2 Kef Is Good For the Mind

Kef music and dance is actually quite complex, especially the more traditional dances. Learning the steps to the *Sepastatsi Bar* or the old-country variations on *Tamzara* is a mental challenge, which takes most people quite some time. Meanwhile, the complex rhythms used in Armenian music, such as 10/8, 9/8, 7/8, 5/4, and so on, are constantly wafting through the air and into your ears at a *Kef* dance, undoubtedly improving your skills at music theory through some kind of osmosis. They say that knowing multiple languages is good for you and that the best way to learn a lan-

guage is to hear it spoken. You can sharpen your brain and improve your knowledge of Armenian, Turkish, Greek, and Arabic simply by attending your local *Kef* dance and listening to the lyrics of the songs being played.

3 Kef Is Good For The Soul

As we all know, rest, relaxation, and partying (in moderation, of course!) is good for the soul. At an Armenian *Kef* dance, you can dance, eat, drink, sit and talk, or just listen to the music. Try this: next time you are at an Armenian dance, instead of flirting with your best friend's cousin, hang out by the stage and listen to those guys actually play. The best *kef* musicians are master soloists, like jazz musicians. During the *taksim* (instrumental solo) at the beginning of each song, you can hear the oud or clarinet player put his Armenian heart and soul into the improvisation, and it will move your soul as well, if you can dig it. As one *Kef* veteran likes to say, listening to master *keffjis* on the bandstand is "better than Led Zeppelin." The soul of Armenian music comes out of the rough times our people have been through. As the celebrated Oudi Hrant once sang, "*Sirdis vera kar muh gab, tzain nedeloo jar chiga*" (There is a rock on my heart, there is no way to make a sound). If you've got "a rock on your heart," there's no better way to lift it than to dance or just listen to the sounds of live Armenian and Near Eastern folk music.

4 Kef Dances Are A Good Place To Meet Nice Armenian Girls

All Armenian girls love a guy who can impress them by doing the *Haleh* with the rest of the men one minute, charm them with a *Tak-Bar* the next, and then get down on one knee and propose marriage, so that everyone can dance to *Hars-oo-Pesa* (bride and groom) at their wedding. As the Vosbikians once sang, "*Darikus kusan antsav, midkus loosavorvetsav / amoosnanal oozetsi, tzerkus aghvor muh ch'antsav*" (I passed the age of twenty, and my mind was enlightened / I wanted to get married, but a nice girl never came into my hands). Don't let that be you. Attend some *Kef* dances and hopefully you'll be set.

A look back...

The Central Council recently spent some time going through the ACYOA archives at Diocesan headquarters. Here is some of what we found. Maybe things haven't changed as much as we think they have...

From a report on the 1969 Mission Program in which a team of ACYOA members, led by a clergyman, visited several mission parishes and spent time in the homes of local parishioners. Here's some of the conversation that took place in those homes:

- “Mr. ----- suggested that more ACYOA members attend church services. He also said that a committee should be set up to avoid bad rumors coming out of the ACYOA conventions.”
- “Mr. and Mrs----- thought that Armenian youth go out too much with odars.”
- “The young people in the home just had one comment against the church: the service is too long. In our fast-paced world, people have no time.”

From an ACYOA questionnaire (sometime during the '60s):

“Which of the following subjects interest you for panel discussions or debates?”

- Smoking and Drinking
- Being equipped for marriage
- Armenian juveniles and delinquency
- What's involved in being a mature person?
- Dating
- What's love?
- Overcoming shyness
- Is there enough sex education in Armenian homes?
- Politics and the Church
- My money
- My vocation
- Do our parents understand us?
- Religion in prison
- Psychology and religion
- The work of women in the Armenian Church
- The mission of the Armenian Church in America
- Is Sunday school our business?
- What is a Christian home?
- Do we have to learn Armenian?
- My idea of a priest.
- Hotrods and hangouts

From a flyer, sent during the 1960's:

“Tuesday Night: You can stay at home and (1) count how many toothpicks you own, (2) straighten out your sock drawer, (3) watch the latest Joe Namath commercial OR you can attend the ACYOA meeting, see old friends and make new ones, exchange ideas and conversation. Come and take part in our heritage. We're looking forward to meeting you.”

4½ Kef Dances Are A Good Place To Meet Nice Armenian Boys

I know it sounds like a stretch, but we exist, I promise!

5 Kef Dances Are A Good Way To Live Our Heritage

It's a rarely-noted fact that music and dance *are two* of the most strongly-retained aspects of Armenian folk heritage in the United States today (along with excessive amounts of *pilaf*, and possibly excessive running times for *Badarak*). At a *Kef* dance with a traditional-style band, you can hear Armenian folk songs from all parts of Anatolia and the Caucasus and participate in folk dances like the *Tamzara*, *Haleh*, *Sepo*, *Pampouri*, and others that have been passed down to us from the Old Country through several generations of Armenians born in America. Like our ancestors who gathered on the rooftops or in the fields of their villages, we continue to celebrate joyous occasions with traditional music and dance. Many of these songs and dances no longer exist in their places of origin (or even among the people of Armenia) because those places no longer exist. The Armenian people, however, live on, and the tradition of folk dance has been continued in this country by the Armenian-American youth who have not only learned the old dances but also created new ones, like the Shuffle, Michigan Hop, and others, living out their heritage.

Roupen Altiparmakian once sang, “New York, Boston, Caaalifornia, *inch aghvor, inch siroon, inch aghvor, aman!*” Undoubtedly, one of the reasons that all those places were “*inch aghvor, inch siroon*” (how nice, how lovely), was that Roupen and all the other Armenians brought their ouds and clarinets with them to this country and had themselves some good old fashioned *KEF!*

Now you'll have to excuse me, but I have to go practice my clarinet. Kef season will be here again before you know it... *-Harry Kezelian*



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Upcoming ACYOA Events

March 28 – Palm Sunday, ACYOA Day

April 10 – Midwest Regional Retreat, St. John Armenian Church, Southfield, Mich.

May 27-31 – 64th Annual ACYOA General Assembly and Sports Weekend, St. James Armenian Church, Watertown, MA

June 29-July 20 – Armenia Service Program

To add your ACYOA chapter's events to the master calendar, contact Public Relations Coordinator Ara Janigian at arajanigian@gmail.com.

Check out our monthly e-newsletter for more events and information. To subscribe, visit www.acyoa.org and sign up on the left.

To sign up for any of these programs, contact acyoa@armeniandiocese.org or call **212.293.1248**.