

## **Apostolic Church Held Hostage – VII**

**The Armenian Church, as a spiritual "MASH" unit on the front lines of the war between good and evil, needs to heal its wounded soldiers; to revitalize the hearts and minds of the faithful, and succor them with hope and reassurance in the offing.**

Within the last century, one of the most pertinent and vital questions regarding the mission and founding purpose of the Armenian Church was posed by Karekin I of the Great House of Cilicia. He asks, "Why is our Church impoverished in the spirit of benevolence and bereft of institutions performing compassionate work, and what do we have to do in order for our Church to establish hospitals, orphanages, and missions for the poor and homeless?" As our great historian Pavsdos Puzant notes the want of dedicated and courageous clergy in our Church, he, thereby, validates the sacerdotal functions of Nerses The Great, who, by his work of feeding the hungry and cleansing the unchaste, led the way to reformation by example.

Do we currently have such compassionate, noble, and courageous clergy that is ready to take the Church to the people and heal their spiritual and physical wounds?

Are we going to be able to prepare such a role-model clergy that is willing to uphold the canons and the Constitution of the Church and administer its precepts to the people?

Unfortunately the Christian faith today, with all its denominations, has tarnished its image by unholy and self-serving practitioners, and the Armenian Church, in particular, is not immune to this reality. We no longer see benevolent institutions established by our Church, such as hospitals, orphanages, and missions for the poor and homeless, to aid and comfort a most needy laic population.

Most of our clergy has forgotten the poor and the needy, who are collectively the real treasure of our Church. As the Bible teaches, "Justice is the first fruit of mercy". Unfortunately, however, the concept of justice is absent from the lexicon of our clergy.

There was a time when the Christian Church did not fight against social injustice, did not defend the weak, and was only concerned with dogmatic religious teaching. The end result of such behavior was that the public disassociated itself from the Church and followed strange sects that promised wealth and prosperity.

The crisis in the Christian Church was a direct consequence of its failure to address the social issues of the public. The Christian Church started its mission by addressing the social needs of the poor and needy, yet, once the clergy had established a certain lofty position in society, they completely forgot the poor and began catering to the rich, the wealthy, and the corrupt segments of society that contributed to its coffers.

Therefore, by ignoring the poor, the Christian Church failed in its social mission, and the hard reality was that the Church could not survive or revive itself only with its theological and dogmatic teachings, and thus it could not stay true to its founding mission.

The image of the Church is a direct result of the social services it renders to the public. The less it renders, the less interest the public will show in the Church. The Church will no longer be the spring of inspiration, will lose its credibility, and cease to be the magnetic force to its faithful.

Today the Christian Church as a whole,--and the Armenian Church in particular,-- is, by and large, contemptuous of the needy and only seeks to propagate an obsequious relationship with the wealthy. Lured by the opulent lifestyles of the rich, this unacceptable behavior continues to permeate our motherland also--where, 25 years after the devastating earthquake in Gyumri, Armenia, our brothers and sisters still brave winter's harsh conditions in shanty towns comprised of hovels and metal shacks.

Shamelessly, in more affluent locations, gaudy and ostentatious churches are being erected by the contributions of rich "oligarchs", who are then, in turn, decorated with honors by our high ranking clergy.

As we speak, we are still hopeful and waiting for the Church to declare, as our Lord Jesus Christ did, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matt. 11:28).

If the Church wants to succeed in its mission, it must revitalize the social services that it is sworn to deliver, and reach out compassionately to everyone who needs help and hope.

We need a clergy that is ready, willing, and able to deliver these social services to the public. With great devotion, love, and compassion, they must innately feel the frustrations of the public, share their pain, and act according to the precepts of the Bible.

Currently, such a role model exists. A uniquely devoted person, Pope Francis, displays the courage a servant of God must possess in his response to a recent question. He was asked: "What does the Church need today"? Without hesitation, he replied, "*What the church needs most today is the ability to heal the wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after the battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else*".

He continues, "*The first reform must be the attitude. The ministers of the Gospel must be the people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them. The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials. The bishops, particularly, must be able to support the movements of God among their people with patience, so that no one is left behind*". *But they must also be able to accompany the flock that has a flair for finding new pats. Instead of being just a church that welcomes and receives by keeping the doors open, let us try also to be a church that finds new roads, that is able to step outside itself and go to those who do not attend Mass, to those who have quit or are indifferent*".

The words of Pope Francis must serve as a clarion call as well to the Armenian Church and its hierarchy. It must embrace this original doctrine as a categorical imperative; emerge from its

gilded stupor, and reclaim its moral authority by fulfilling its mission of beneficence. Only then can the Armenian Church assert the right to vie for the hearts and minds of the current and future generations.

We call upon the Armenian Apostolic Church to regain its righteous place in society by disavowing its descent into sinful extravagance and debauchery and fall from grace, by providing solace to the troubles of its faithful, warming their hearts, and giving them hope for the future.

***To be continued***