

Hearing Voices: The Armenian Genocide in the Context of the 21st Century

By Sdn. Aram Sarkisian

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When Der Garabed asked me to prepare this meditation, I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to write. After all, the Genocide means so many different things to people within our diverse community, and thus this day above all others takes on a different meaning for everyone. The Genocide is a common experience amongst us all, even if in an ever so small way. And, thus, it is easy to hate, to feel an anger so deep and unquenchable that we are consumed by it. As a relatively young person, born exactly 70 years after the beginning of the Genocide, I have a certain amount of separation from this horrific event. And I too have felt this anger. Yet I refuse to allow myself to be consumed or defined by it. I believe to be Armenian means to be an individual who transcends the evils perpetrated upon our people across our history, and to contribute to our collective heritage. Thus, I look at April 24th a little differently than some.

For me, this is not a day to picket. It's not a day to hate, it's not a day to write letters or call my Congressman. It's not a day to advocate for legislation or dissect presidential statements. Some of these things have their time and place, but they all ultimately cloud our ability to move forward as a global community, for both Armenians and Turks, as this issue concerns us both. As President Obama correctly noted in the statement he released this afternoon, "Together, Armenia and Turkey can forge a relationship that is peaceful, productive and prosperous. And together, the Armenian and Turkish people will be stronger as they acknowledge their common history and recognize their common humanity."

We must never lose sight of this spirit of "common humanity." We must be confident in our knowledge of the truth, but we also must be able, as Christ taught us, to forgive. This does not mean condone, forget, or accept the atrocities of our history. Rather it means that we must be able to place it into the context of our lives, into our responsibilities as global citizens, and to make sure it never succeeds further in physically or emotionally eradicating our people. Thus, this day is a day to reflect, and to ask ourselves how we are living the lives our martyrs and survivors wanted us to live. This is a day to reevaluate the future of the way of life they fought so hard to protect.

We are a people of dispersion, as we have been for thousands of years. But we are also a people who value that wherever we are, we should be together in one

community of faith. I am standing in an Armenian Church in which I am free to worship, in the Classical Armenian language each and every Sunday. I can possess, read, and openly profess the Bible. Across our parking lot there is a school teaching Armenians and non-Armenians alike about our cultural and linguistic heritage. At our colleges and universities, there are Armenian cultural and social organizations and courses of study where students research and learn about our people. I can be a member of the ACYOA, the AGBU, the Knights of Vartan, or any of the other Armenian social, political, and fraternal organizations. When I am older, I can send my children to Sunday School or to a St. Nersess Summer Conference, where they can freely receive a Christian education without fear of governmental or social persecution.

Around the world, almost without exception, these things are all available for Armenians. Most importantly, these are things available in a free and independent Armenian state. These things are the simple rights we take for granted, and are the things that were denied to those who suffered in the Genocide. And for those who survived, these were the first things that were established in new homelands, wherever Armenians found themselves.

Of course, Detroit is no different. Though it is hard to imagine when we look at our beautiful, spacious sanctuary, there was a time when our community had to rely upon the charity of others for valuable worship space to serve an ever-growing congregation. For our early years in Detroit, we were, for all intents and purposes, homeless. Yet our community grew and prospered. And so by 1928, the time had come to build a church of our own, a permanent and lasting place for Armenians to gather and worship.

As any student of American history knows, this was not the most advantageous time to raise money for anything. But our parish did it anyway. Fr. Atig Dzotsikian literally went door to door in the Armenian neighborhoods blessing homes, collecting money, and building enthusiasm for the new church. He blessed over 400 houses in the last four months of 1930 alone. The parish building committee visited hundreds more. Donations ranged from a few dollars to a few hundred dollars, and as a direct result, our former home on Oakman Boulevard opened in 1931. Compared to our current complex, our first home was relatively modest. But it was place of our own. And this made all the difference.

Many of the people who made this possible were our parents and grandparents, and it is certain all of them were affected in some way by the Genocide, whether or not

they were survivors. Those of us who trace our descent from those original families know that our ancestors didn't have a lot, especially in the heart of the Great Depression. Yet they gave anyway, whatever they had, because they knew the value of their Church, and they took their responsibility to build and cultivate a permanent sanctuary seriously. They were looking towards the future. In these trying economic times, if Der Garabed were to knock on your door tomorrow, what would you give? Do we value the permanence of our parish home as much our predecessors?

And so we must ask ourselves how we use our resources in the diaspora. Every time we put our dollars and our strength behind the universal recognition of our past instead of cultivating our present and building our future, Armenia and Armenians suffer, both today and tomorrow. The actions of modern governments to affirm what we know is historical fact means nothing if the efforts to achieve such a thing come at the expense of providing affordable and available housing, health care, education, infrastructure, and employment opportunities for people in the Republic of Armenia, ensuring that the religious, educational, and cultural institutions we take for granted in the diaspora remain open, or making sure that our parishes and communities in North America remain vibrant and relevant into the coming generations.

America is littered with the shells of ethnic groups who have lost their identity, who have been absorbed into the melting pot, and who have abandoned the religious heritage and customs of their forefathers. We want more than this for our children, as our martyrs and survivors did for us. Today's youth are faced with an increasingly multi-cultural society. Many of us, including myself, come from multiethnic families. Our friends come from many different backgrounds, a myriad of ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, sexual orientations, religious beliefs and non-belief, and political viewpoints. We are at the tipping point, and it is so easy for us to turn our backs on our Armenian Christian heritage and become a part of the generic mainstream, to abandon our Church, to forsake our language.

Yet we don't. We want to hold on to the essence of our ancestors because we value our Church, we value our heritage, and we expect it to be here when it is time for our children to be raised in the faith. Thus, we look to you, our parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, to make sure our community is there when we need it.

Genocide is the most heinous of crimes. What is worse, however, is letting that crime reach its full measure of completion. We are here because someone somewhere

in our family tree survived at any number of critical junctures in our history. We have a responsibility, as a community, to make sure our people are not forgotten, and to also make sure that our best days are not behind us.

Our people will not perish from this earth as long as there is a single Armenian voice crying in the wilderness, and another to hear that voice and be comforted in knowing they are not alone. This is our responsibility in a spirit of “common humanity.” And so I say that our martyrs and survivors are calling out to us tonight, asking each of us to never forget their sacrifice. More importantly, however, they are asking us to sacrifice of ourselves, to make the most of the opportunities made for us both in the diaspora and in the Republic of Armenia. Are you prepared to hear their voices?