ANARCHY IN THE HIERARCHY

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Editorial, The Armenian Mirror-Spectator Editorial, 29 August 2013

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This fragmentation behooves every single individual Armenian or group to rise above those divisions, imposed by history or unfortunate events, to realize that the survival of the nation requires cohesion, organization and unifying moral foundations adhered to by all segments of the nation. The moral high ground needs to be upheld by the clergy as well as lay leadership.

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But what we observe at the present time is the opposite — disarray, chaos and confusion, where every authority is a fair target for denigration. Criticism — and constructive criticism — certainly would be welcome. But the Internet, which could have become a powerful tool to unify all Armenians, has become a jungle where every indignity is fair game. We have reached a point where freedom of speech has become a license to commit libel.

Therefore, any participation in raging diatribes — in support of or against debating parties — would only exacerbate the situation. But by the same token, to keep silent in view of unbridled self-serving pontification will further block the way for sober and civilized discourse aimed to resolve problems plaguing Armenians.

As we approach the threshold of the centennial of the Armenian Genocide, unity becomes even more valuable, yet what we observe is further fragmentation and a foolhardy approach toward any authority, dignity and sanctity.

A Dangerous Precedent

The floodgate of the Internet has been thrown wide open and the dirty laundry is abundantly displayed, under the guise of a democratic right to express ideas.

We do not intend to dignify unsigned comments, hurled insults and unsavory remarks by

mentioning them here. But one brazen act should worry all Armenians, because this time around, it comes from a quarter that is one of the pillars of the Armenian Church, the Jerusalem Patriarchate.

The Armenian Church has held our people together over many centuries. Since the loss of the homeland, the church has served as a spiritual raft to keep our people afloat over turbulent waters. The hierarchy of the church is the structure of the Armenian soul. Over the centuries, that hierarchy has survived many challenges. Church leaders have had their differences and conflicts. After all, they are human, too, but they have demonstrated the wisdom and foresight to rise above personality differences and adversities in order to preserve the integrity of that hierarchy for posterity. Once it is shattered, Armenians will be reduced to disparate groups of nomads in this era of globalization.

Today, unity of the church is fractured and all good-will endeavors toward this end have thus far failed to heal the division.

The church rests on four main pillars: The Catholicosates at Echmiadzin and Cilicia and the Patriarchates in Jerusalem and Istanbul.

The Turkish government will never allow any patriarch on the throne of Istanbul who is willing to contribute to the unity and strengthening of the Armenian Church. Instead, the clergy allowed to ascend that throne have to serve as a political tool in the hands of the Turkish government. That development became codified during the reign of the late Patriarch Mesrob Moutafian, who literally and tragically succumbed to that pressure.

His Holiness Aram I of Antelias, a courageous vanguard of the Armenian Cause and patron of the Western Armenian language and literature, though still a hostage to the political powers behind his throne, has only taken minor steps thus far towards unity, despite the demise of the Cold War two decades ago. The conclave of high-ranking clergy planned for September 21-28, to be held in Echmiadzin, offered some hope to create coordination and cooperation between Echmiadzin and Antelias, which would transcend all the structures and hierarchy of the Armenian Church. As of this writing, those hopes are dashed because the Patriarch of Jerusalem, His Beatitude Nourhan Manoukian, has decided to boycott the gathering, for an unrelated reason.

His Beatitude was elected earlier this year. There were some reservations about his candidacy and he won with a slim majority. At least, that was a message that he did not enjoy the full support of the Brotherhood of St. James; instead, he was elected to rule a house divided. That should have guided him to put his house in order and prove to the Brotherhood that he deserved their trust and could move the 14-centuries-old institution forward.

Messing with the authorities Is a Dangerous Game

But, unfortunately, he began his reign on the wrong foot, with a politically-incorrect remark about Israeli authorities, who control the destiny of the Patriarchate. Answering a question from a reporter,

he dismissed the importance of Israeli government's recognition of the Armenian Genocide. "It is not the end of the world if they don't recognize it," he is reported to have said. And this, at the moment when the Patriarchate was waiting for the approval of his ascension to the Jerusalem throne by the Israeli government.

The law requires that the election of the Jerusalem patriarch be approved by the king of Jordan, the president of the Palestinian Authority and the government of Israel. The Israeli government was the last entity to approve his candidacy, certainly grudgingly, because of their reservations about him.

The Holy Places in Jerusalem rest in one of the most sensitive spots in the world. Every action of the Israeli government is carefully calculated. The reputation and the status of the Patriarchate are at stake when any thoughtless step is taken at the Patriarchate.

All Armenians worry — rightfully — about the patriarch himself and the patriarchate as a whole. They must genuinely support the patriarch to be able to navigate successfully through the minefield which Jerusalem has come to be.

After carelessly snubbing the Israeli authorities, His Beatitude has directed his ire this time at the Supreme Spiritual Head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, with arguments which hold no rhyme nor reason.

Any patriarch, upon his election, traditionally makes a pilgrimage to Holy Echmiadzin, to renew his vows at the throne of St. Gregory the Illuminator. Instead, His Beatitude traveled to Antelias which demonstrably issued a news release that he was at the Cilician See on personal business. His ill-conceived missive followed a statement by the Dashnag party of France attacking the Catholicos under the pretense of defending Archbishop Norvan Zakarian. The connection and the conclusion do not need any interpretation.

His actions rightfully fueled suspicions that he was being groomed by the powers behind the Cilician See to reinforce the divisive policies of the Antelias See, paving the way to institutionalize the division within the Armenian Church.

After all, since the Cold-War era, the political party behind the See of Antelias has advocated that Holy Echmiadzin limit its jurisdiction over the Dioceses in Armenia and the former Soviet Union and allow Antelias to control the diaspora. This politically-motivated theory was promoted first by Simon Vratsian, the last prime minister of the First Republic and continues to be upheld by his followers, since Antelias refuses the unification of the church in the diaspora.

Despite all the dangers of being labeled as communists — during a dangerous period — the majority of the church continued their loyalty to the traditional spiritual house of Echmiadzin.

Fears of the Brotherhood Materialized

In a very disrespectful letter dated August 3, 2013, His Beatitude has taken on the Catholicos of All

Armenians. The letter was circulated for three days on the Internet before reaching the addressee, making plainly obvious that the subject matter of the letter was only an excuse to air his personal grudges against the Pontiff. The words and adjectives, carelessly chosen, betray a dangerous stance for a clergyman. Accusations laid against Karekin II by other irresponsible parties are irrelevant at this time.

The letter is full of contradictions. He is supposedly defending Archbishop Norvan Zakarian, Primate of France, who had resigned from his position and whose resignation was approved by the "disreputable" Supreme Spiritual Council on July 31.

The letter begins with the statement: "I incidentally received the communiqué of the Supreme Spiritual Council." Whereas the two patriarchs are officially co-chairs of the Council. To begin with, he has failed to attend the council's session which was the proper venue for the patriarch to be informed and to express his views on those important issues. But, instead, he blames his failures on others.

And then, he goes on to sermonize his superior with the following presumptuous statement: "Your Holiness, allow me to tell you in a brotherly fashion that threats do not become the clergy."

It looks like he himself needs most of the advice he has been dispensing freely to his superior, since at the end of his letter, he directs the following threat to Echmiadzin: "I have decided not to participate in the bishops' convocation to be held on September 21-28" at Echmiadzin. He further aggravates the situation by concluding his letter with the following missive: "Although Archbishop Aris Shirvanian will be attending, he does not represent the Patriarchate of Jerusalem."

Members of the Brotherhood are entitled to ask whether this rash decision was taken at an official meeting at the Governing Council (Dnoren Joghov) or it was the patriarch's arbitrary decision.

Reading through the letter one is convinced that Archbishop Norvan Zakarian's resignation is the least of his worries. Instead, he has another ax to grind. He refers to a letter which has no relevance to the archbishop's resignation, and yet which has touched him deeply. He remembers His Holiness Karekin II's letter to the late patriarch, Archbishop Torkom Manoogian, advising him to appoint a coadjutor patriarch in view of the latter's incapacitating ailments.

Any member of our church, and especially the Supreme Spiritual Head of the church, would rightfully worry about an incapacitated member of the clergy bearing an awesome responsibility in the most dangerous region of the world.

But it seems that Archbishop Nourhan Manoukian has perceived that suggestion as a ploy to bypass his candidacy in a succession process.

If, indeed, that was the intention of His Holiness in hindsight, Archbishop Nourhan Manoukian has vindicated His Holiness, through his disrespectful outburst and dangerous political missteps.