

BAPTISM MATTERS

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 **Editorial**, 22 September, 2015

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By early September "Moslem Armenians" (Aug. 19) article by Souren Seraydarian, head of the National Congress of Western Armenians and Raffi Bedrosyan's "Church Refuses to Grant Baptism to Hidden Armenians" (Aug. 18) had a combined 1,500 hits, not counting the additional number of 2,500 hits tracked through the distribution software and Facebook, which do not appear on the website. Together, the two pieces received 28 comments. Readers overwhelmingly supported facilitating the baptisms and many condemned Echmiadzin for its perceived intransigence. The clergy were dismissed as Pharisees, ignorant, archaic, holier-than-thou... The Church was called preposterous, dysfunctional.

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Keghart readers also argued whether being part of the Armenian Apostolic Church was mandatory for someone to call himself/herself Armenian. Pagan King Medzn Dikran was exhorted to assert that one doesn't have to be Christian to be Armenian.

While oligarch-Catholicos Karekin II brings little honor or decorum to the Armenian Church or to the Nation, in this instance the attack on Echmiadzin was a tad harsh.

Judging by the Armenia clergymen's improvised response and transparent excuses for refusal, it's obvious Echmiadzin—and perhaps the Armenian Church—is unprepared to tackle this new

challenge. The Church is unprepared because the situation has not been an issue in the Church's history. As well, the Armenian Church isn't a proselytizing institution.

The uncertainty and inconsistency of some clergymen is also manifested by the fact that several hidden Armenians were baptized last year while visiting Armenia.

Baptism is an elaborate sacred ritual. The Armenian Church takes it seriously as it should. It is one of the sacraments. It's not a matter of dunking the person in water or spraying water on him/her and, saying "Hail Mary" pronouncing the candidate instant Christian.

There's also another issue which discourages the Church from baptizing helter-skelter. It's not known to most Armenians that a number of Kurds in Syria have asked the Armenian Prelacy of Aleppo (of the Cilicia See) to be baptized. Their intent wasn't to adopt Christianity but a ruse to claim "persecuted minority" status at the Western embassies and thus be granted a visa to emigrate. The Church, obviously, has to be careful not to be hoodwinked by these insincere candidates.

There are also concerns about Turkish secret agents assuming Armenian identity through baptism so as to infiltrate Armenian communities, particularly the Patriarchate in Istanbul.

Yet another challenge is the diversity of the global Armenian communities. There are Armenians in roughly 80 countries. Some Armenians live in "liberal/progressive" societies while others live in "traditional/conservative" regions. A radical change in Armenian Church baptismal procedures has to be acceptable to a rainbow of communities from Armenia to Uruguay.

The fact that Echmiadzin takes the issue seriously is indicated by its refusal to give in to the intervention of the minister of diaspora affairs. Since the minister represents Catholicos Karekin's fellow-oligarch President Serge Sarkissian, one would have assumed Minister Hranush Hakobyan would have found a friendly ear in Echmiadzin.

In a rapidly changing world, the Church—like other institutions—has to evolve to meet the changing needs of the faithful. In this instance, what's a trickle can become a deluge if an increasing number of hidden Armenians or Hamshens decide to become Christian. There are hundreds of thousand Hamshens in Turkey and in the Caucasus. When some/many of them decide to become "100% Armenian" they might decide becoming a member of the Armenian Church an essential aspect of their revived identity. Other Armenians—particularly in the West—might not consider Church membership essential to their Armenian identity and might glibly cite that pagan Medzn Dikran, Argishti were as Armenian as St. Vartan. But the fact is the hidden Armenians of Turkey or the Hamshens, who want to return to our nation, don't share this mostly-Western perspective.

The Catholicos and his Synod must convene ASAP and resolve this quandary. It's not just of paramount importance to the Church but also to the Armenian Nation. Considering the shrinking population of Armenia and the rampant assimilation in many Diasporan communities, we need Armenians to return to the fold. This is a God-sent opportunity for our Nation. It's also a God-sent for

~~the unpopular ecclesiastical leader in Echmiadzin to shine for a change.~~

Armenians who demand hasty or “compassionate” baptisms for hidden Armenians would probably scoff at the notorious storefront “wedding chapels” of Las Vegas. Like a wedding ceremony, baptism is a sacrament which should be approached with seriousness and deliberation. It also should be conducted in a proper ecclesiastical framework.

By next summer, when (hopefully) more hidden Armenians head to their homeland, their National Church should have comprehensive baptismal rules and procedures in place. No excuses; no improvisation; no pushing the junior clergymen to take the flak as this past summer.

