

JOURNEY TO A BRIGHTER FUTURE

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✘ Bishop Bagrat Galstanian

[Primate of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of Canada](#), 22 Oct. 2010

Sireliner,

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During these years I extensively visited our parishes and communities across this beautiful country, seeing first-hand and listening carefully to the needs, demands, aspirations and dreams of our people. The one message that was conveyed to me most frequently and strongly was the need and desire to live together as one united people, united in faith, heritage and identity, and with a strong sense of belonging to an indivisible community.

Earlier this year, inspired by the successful jointly organized commemoration of the 95th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, I wrote two letters on the subject of unity addressed to our churches and community organizations. Today, sensing the urgency of achieving unity in our community, I appeal with this open letter to every Armenian living in Canada. It is written from my heart with love and without any hesitations or reservations, suggesting that we start a community-wide dialogue that can eventually lead us to a more united and stronger community for the benefit of all and most especially for our future generations.

Over the past seven years, I have witnessed numerous conflicts and experienced difficult and frustrating situations that could have easily been avoided. I have seen the continuing loss of Armenian identity of our young generation, their indifference and apathy towards our heritage and values, and their resentment of those who claim to lead our people in Canada. The issue that concerns me the most is the lack of unity in our community and of unbiased and non-partisan loyalty to our Armenian identity.

Dr. Philip A. Salem, a highly decorated American physician, educator and humanitarian and winner of the Ellis Island Medal of Honor from the National Ethnic Coalition Organization, describes the importance of identity as follows: "Those who forget who they are, and where they come from, have a vision which is permanently out of focus and a life which is permanently marginal. Identity not only gives you character, it also gives meaning to your life. Without it you also lose direction. To achieve

identity and maintain it, you must preserve heritage". While we all have certain aspects of commonality, our identity is unfortunately sometimes tainted with our narrow partisan or sectarian loyalties. Do we all belong to the same people, or are we each just members of our own organizations and parties? Are we not all Canadians with our roots in Armenian culture and Christian faith, which we were the first nation to adopt as the "colour of our skin"?

It is high time that we overcome the psychological obstacles to unity that are based on ecclesiastical, historical and political issues with courage, honesty and intelligence. I urge everyone, both individuals and organizations, to send a strong message that henceforth we must learn to act together as one united people of God in a spirit of brotherly love and joint victory. This spirit of oneness must go beyond just coming together each April 24. It must become a continuous, sincere and all-encompassing unity, through which we can resolve our divisions and problems, and through which we can work together to create a newly invigorated and exemplary community ready to face the challenges of our times.

Unity in and of itself is not the goal or final objective. It is the means by which we can fulfill our aspirations, build on our strengths, and realize our dreams, while respecting our individuality and each other's points of view and the respective missions and values of our various organizations.

Today we face a number of serious challenges concerning Armenia, Artsakh, our Church, the identity crisis in the Diaspora, our schools and education. These issues require long and tireless efforts to bring about resolution. They require frank and honest dialogue in complete humility, not just between "this" and "that" side but also among all Armenians.

I am convinced that urgent actions are required if we care about the assimilation of the new generation, if we care about losing our heritage and our unique culture, if we care about our Diaspora which was built on the blood of our martyrs, and if we care about the achievements that you have made thus far with personal sacrifices at times at the expense of your families.

We are living at a point in our history when crucial decisions must be made, and when we need to take concrete actions and new initiatives. We are all inclined to blame others for the lack of unity that we now find ourselves in, but we often forget that it is WE who are responsible for the present. It is therefore OUR responsibility to take the right steps to ensure a brighter future. Do we have any other choice but to stand and work more closely together? The time has come to make a difference.

There are many specific suggestions that could be made on what to do. As a start I propose that we hold a meeting of all the Armenian organizations in Canada to jointly decide on how best to proceed. We can then form specific committees to oversee the joint organization and execution of those actions that are most urgently needed, building on them with time and as we receive encouragement from our community. A friend of mine rightly said: "It will be difficult for us to reach agreement on the past, but there is certainly much ground for agreement when we think and plan for the future." Let us heed the wise words of one of our greatest Patriarchs St. Nerses Shnorhali:

"UNITY in important matters, LIBERTY in secondary matters, and LOVE IN EVERYTHING".

I also propose that we bring together in a forum the leaders of our churches, parties and organizations with several prominent Armenian scholars, thinkers and academics specialized in contemporary Armenian history to provide advice.

I am not naive to assume that all of our differences and difficulties can be resolved immediately. It will take time, and it will require a lot of patience and dialogue and hard work as we slowly build mutual trust and understanding. But as the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said: "A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step".

This is my vision. I am ready to bear my share of responsibility in the process of healing the wounds of our precious community. I know that some may say that this is an unrealistic dream, and that "the devil is in the details". Yes, the devil may be in the details, but our loyalty is to God and Christ our Lord, to our Armenian identity, and to our future. We are above all Armenians, proud heirs of our martyred ancestors and bearers of our rich spiritual heritage, and witnesses of continuing heroic deeds in Armenia, Artsakh, and throughout the world.

I strongly believe that this is our destiny. We must follow this path to guarantee a brighter future as one, strong, united community, to rise above our individual colours and political attachments, to heal our wounds, to live in love and harmony, and together to achieve and celebrate new victories.

Let us do this so that we may be blessed by the generations to come. "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:8).

Amen.

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