

ONE PRIEST'S MISSION


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One woman's death was offset by the breath of a new life.

The woman was 104-year Kalila Yaralian-Manjikian, somewhat of a matriarch they call Nene in this heavily-populated Armenian community.

The child belongs to Der Karekin Bedourian and his wife Sevan. The two had traveled 8,000 miles in 24 hours to get there --- a place they both call home. Double it both ways.

Even more ironical was the date, Nov. 11, 2011 or, putting it numerically, 11/11/11. It turned out to be the same church Der Karekin and Yeretskin were raised and baptized in their day in the same font. Soorp Asdavadzazin Church was also the setting for their wedding day in 2008 and Der Hayr's ordination the following year.

"It was the natural place to have our daughter Megheti christened," said Der Karekin, pastor of St. Gregory Church in North Andover, Ma. "We wanted her to have close ties with our beloved Kessab community with both families present. Many of those who attended the funeral in the morning came to the christening that afternoon. The emotion of this day will live with us forever."

The family left by car for New York where they boarded a flight at JFK Airport. From there, they flew to Jordan, then to Aleppo, followed by a 3-hour drive to Kessab over winding, unpaved roads.

Megheti was well-composed throughout her journey, bewildered by the planes and hordes of people at the airports. Once inside a car, she fell asleep.

The Bedourians arrived home to an exuberant family greeting, especially with a 16-month-old in tow. On hand were both sets of parents, siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins. It marked Der Karekin's first return visit home since his ordination in 2009.

"Tears of joy were shed," he described. "It's very difficult being removed from your family circle but

such is the lifestyle of a priest and his Yeretskin. Careers take hold. By traveling to Kessab for my daughter's christening, I made an entire village happy. Nothing is more satisfying for me than this."

Some 150 guests turned out on a Friday afternoon for the service, performed by Very Rev. Tatoul Anoushian (Bolis), accompanied by the host pastor, Der Muron Avedisian. A celebration followed in the church hall. Earlier that day, Der Karekin participated in the Yaralian-Manjikian funeral service.

"Until she was immersed into the holy water, Megheti was very happy," her father beamed. "Then came the tears. For us, tears have a very special meaning of rebirth."

The child was dressed in a special white dress bearing crosses made especially for this occasion. Six months ago, her photograph accompanied a story circulated throughout the ethnic press under the headline: "Blessed are the Armenian church babies." Seldom has she missed a Sunday badarak, often competing heartily with the choir.

Together with Megheti, the Bedourians have cultivated a lifestyle inside their new church. It's been a marriage blessed with tremendous faith and love.

The two have known each other since their kindergarten days in Kessab. They were classmates through school. While Der Karekin pursued his theological studies at Antelias, she waited patiently for him. Six hundred guests turned out for their wedding at Soorp Asdavadzazin Church.

The choices were simple, either have the child christened at St. Gregory Church where he was assigned or make the trip to Kessab. They chose Syria.

"When Megheti gets older, she'll visit Kessab and the church where her roots are planted," said Der Karekin. "It'll be a very significant moment in her life, knowing that was where her parents were baptized and the church where I was ordained."

