PRESS RELEASE - CHURCH COUNCIL OF ARACS

Posted on June 23, 2011 by Keghart

ՀԱՅԿԱԿԱՆ ՀԱՅՑ. ԱՌԱՔԵԼԱԿԱՆ ԵԿԵՂԵՑԻԻ ԽՈՐՀՈՒՐԴ
CONSEIL DE L'ÉGLISE APOSTOLIQUE ARMÉNIENNE DE SUISSE

Category: Opinions

la version française sur le lien ci-dessous

PRESS RELEASE

Armenian Apostolic Church Council of Switzerland
St. Hagop Armenian Church
Route de Troinex 64
1256 Troinex (GE)
Switzerland
E-mail: a.a.church.switzerland@gmail.com

28 June 2011

Dear Compatriots,
Dear Faithful Members of the Armenian Apostolic Church,
Dear Members of the Ecclesial Community

The Vehapar Karekin II has deprived us of:

-The services of Fr. Abel Manoukian
-The freedom to choose our own priest
-The right to organize ourselves as per our will
-Our attachment to our Holy See of Etchmiadzin.

la version française sur le lien ci-dessous

PRESS RELEASE

Armenian Apostolic Church Council of Switzerland
St. Hagop Armenian Church
Route de Troinex 64
1256 Troinex (GE)
Switzerland
E-mail: a.a.church.switzerland@gmail.com

28 June 2011

Dear Compatriots,
Dear Faithful Members of the Armenian Apostolic Church,
Dear Members of the Ecclesial Community

The Vehapar Karekin II has deprived us of:

-The services of Fr. Abel Manoukian
-The freedom to choose our own priest
-The right to organize ourselves as per our will
-Our attachment to our Holy See of Etchmiadzin.

For several months now, Holy See of Etchmiadzin has been intensifying the diffusion of erroneous information about the Armenian Apostolic Church of Switzerland in order to justify its dictatorial policies and to minimize the legitimacy of the backlash of our community.

In order to allow you to draw a distinction between what is truth and what is not, we document for your perusal the following unequivocal and uncontestable facts:

History

On 27 September 1992 at the request of the members of the Church Council of Switzerland but without consultation of their ecclesial community , H. H. Vazken I pronounced the creation of a Diocese in Switzerland.

On 21 November 1993, the General Assembly was to vote on the statutes and organs that would have transformed the Armenian Apostolic Church of Switzerland into a Diocese. This vote never took place due to the tension that members of the Community had with their Council. Therefore, this Diocesan decision, without a body to support it, was never promulgated by statute, and its creation was never submitted to a vote of the members of the General Assembly until 2010. Despite this, two communities within the Neuchatel-Jura and Zurich regions constituted themselves as parishes of this future 'Diocese'.

As numbers and demographic information may be used to manipulate opinion, let us specify that if Switzerland is comprised of approximately 4,000 inhabitants of Armenian origin, only some of which bear any interest in the life of this community, among them are scarcely 500 individuals who could be said to participate actively in the life of our Church.

Today, a majority of these are registered and paying members of the Armenian Apostolic Church of Switzerland, while the rest adhere to the parish structures of Neuchatel-Jura and Zurich.

Since 1992, our ecclesial community pursued activities on the basis of the Statutes of the Armenian Apostolic Church

of Switzerland, recognized and endorsed by H. H. Vazken I in 1985.

It was in October 1995 that our priest Fr. Abel Manoukian, upon the invitation of the Church Council, began his work and functions in Switzerland with a contract and legal work permit. The launch of his work at that time received the endorsement and approval of H. H. Karekin I and of Fr. Viken Aikazian.

Throughout all of this period until 2010, Holy See of Etchmiadzin recognized our priest as well as the successive elected church councils with which normal communications were conducted.

In February 2001, H. H. Karekin II sent two emissaries to Geneva, the archbishops Kude Nakachian and Zaven Tchintchinian, to address the question of a Diocese with principal leaders of the Armenian community. The outcome of their findings expressed that «the Armenian community of Switzerland is not disposed to accept a Diocese.»

The first collective consultations of the community upon the question of adopting a Diocesan structure took place in 2010 and 2011 with each time a very clear and overwhelming majority rejected in culmination. The course of these exchanges with Etchmiadzin has been detailed in previous communications.

Despite the clear desire of the majority of the faithful members of the community in Switzerland, it appears that H. H. Karekin II has sought nevertheless to impose a Diocese. To this end, he sought the collaboration of Father Abel Manoukian and the Church Council. As both of the aforementioned lack the power and autonomy to act against the will of the General Assembly, the Vehapar found himself deprived of support.

He began then to apply increasing levels of pressure on Father Abel Manoukian, announcing first his retrenching from Switzerland (February 2011), then his suspension (10 May 2011) and finally his defrocking (1 June 2011). He completed the ousting of Father Abel Manoukian by appointing a "*locum tenens*" for the Diocese of Switzerland (as substitute for the Bishop who should have arrived) in the form of Father Mesrop Parsamyan. The Vehapar simultaneously appointed Father Mesrop Parsamyan as priest of the Church of St. Hagop in Troinex, without any consultation with the Church Council and contrary to the will expressed by the General Assembly on 6 March 2011 to maintain Father Abel in his position.

In order to realize his plans and the mission of Father Mesrop Parsamyan in Switzerland, Vehapar has appealed to the highest political circles in Armenia and Karabakh, in order to obtain the help of their Armenian friends and business contacts in Switzerland.

In March 2011, a famous watchmaker and his close collaborator, two Armenians who had heretofore remained well distanced from the affairs of our committees and assemblies, suddenly turned their attention on the life of our church. They adopted the plans of the Vehapar (to distance Father Abel Manoukian, implement a diocese, and install Father Mesrop Parsamyan) with deliberate disregard for the legitimately voted upon decisions passed in General Assembly.

These two 'apostles' of the Diocese of Switzerland have approached the Church Council and Father Abel Manoukian to convince them to accept the dictates of Vehapar. As both of the latter are bound by decisions that are by definition 'voted upon', their approach was obviously not successful. They then chose to create, around Father Mesrop Parsamyan, a new church community by bringing together those attracted by the prospect of a Diocese and the ousting of Father Abel Manoukian. To achieve this, they have deployed an intense campaign to discredit the institutions and structures of our community, while trying to deprive them of legitimacy with the goal of ascribing it to their new "organizations". We are witnessing here a deliberate scuttling of the harmony and unity of our Armenian community in Switzerland!

While the "friends" of Vehapar campaign, the Church Council continues to defend the choices of the community and is working to overcome increasing difficult obstacles to maintain religious services at St. Hagop. To these activities and concerns, which comprise more of a battle than a mere task of management, we cite the added enormous pressures of the countless e-mails and phone calls that Council members have had to deal with. This extremely stressful environment has adversely affected the health and wellbeing of some Council members to the point that they have no longer been able to pursue their stated mandate.

Facts and Recent Dates

On 18 March 2011, a newsletter is sent informing you of the outcome of the general meeting held on March 6th and its transmission to H. H. Karekin II.

On 20 March 2011, Etchmiadzin notifies the Church Council that at the meeting of the Supreme Council (*Kerakuin Khorhurt*) on March 17-19, the Holy See of Etchmiadzin has:

- Confirmed the Diocese of Switzerland
- Named Father Mesrop Parsamyan the "locum tenens" of the diocese and priest of the Armenian community in Geneva, from April 1, 2011
- Announced formal notice to Father Abel Manoukian to travel to Etchmiadzin before the 1st of April, 2011.

On 25 March 2011, the Church Council responds to these decisions by reminding the Holy See of the wishes of the community and the democratic principles underlying our church meetings, which confer to lay ecclesial communities the right to choose their own priest and structure.

On 28 March 2011, the Church Council addresses President Serge Sargsyan with a letter drawing attention to and explaining the divergence of opinion between Holy See of Etchmiadzin and the ecclesial community of Switzerland. This letter has gone unanswered.

On 29 March 2011, the Church Council and representatives of the community hold a meeting with his Excellency Mr. Charles Aznavour at the Embassy of Armenia in order to make him aware of these serious problems. The Ambassador expresses his agreement with the democratic principles underlying our Church and to the firm position of our community. The meeting has not resulted in further action.

On 1 April 2011, Etchmiadzin, in response to the letter dated March 25th, writes that the position of our community is unacceptable and violates the rules of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

On 9 April 2011, Father Mesrop Parsamyan arrives in Geneva where he has been living since, albeit without the support of the Armenian Apostolic Church of Switzerland.

On 10 April 2011, the Church Council decides to maintain the doors of the Church closed in order pre-empt the possibility of physical confrontation, as happened in the precedential case in Nice, France.

On 5 May 2011, the Church Council receives a hard copy of the decision of Vehapar to suspend Father Abel Manoukian from the 10th of May, 2011. This translates to a ban on presiding over any kind

of religious act.

On 11 May 2011, the Church Council organizes a broad consultation of the community in order to clarify the choices they face; it was decided here that once again, the church would be closed on the following Sunday in order to preserve its sanctity as a place of prayer. It was also decided to form an independent 'working group' (commission) to assist the Council in matters of strategy, communication and information based on the expectations of its members.

On 12 May 2011, the Church Council addresses the Vehapar while in the midst of his travels to France and to South America, requesting a meeting in order to discuss the questions that may be asked of the members of the Armenian Apostolic Church of Switzerland in a forthcoming General Assembly setting. To this date, no response has been forthcoming.

On 16 May 2011, Viken Vartzbed, President of the Church Council, resigns from his post effective immediately for reasons mentioned above. As well, Hayguhi Zancanaro and Vatche Markoussian also announce their resignations from the Council on May 29th.

On 25 May 2011, the Church Council invites Raffi Garibian and Daniel Papazian to join it.

On 2 June 2011, it is in evidence on the website of Holy See of Etchmiadzin that the defrocking of Der Abel by the Vehapar has taken place on 1 June 2011.

On 17 June 2011, the Church Council addresses a letter to Vehapar to ask him to confirm in writing the information in circulation about the defrocking, as this had heretofore only been readable on the internet. The letter further expresses on behalf of all faithful members, a sense of immense injustice if this response does not provide sufficient grounds upon which this decision had been based, aside from the already contested invoked justification of 'disobedience'.

On 25 June 2011, the Church Council receives formal information about the defrocking of Father Abel Manoukian as well as a declaration from H. H. Karekin recognizing a new parish to the Diocese in Switzerland founded on 16 June 2011 under the name "Parish of the Apostolic Church of Geneva and the Lemanic Region", while simultaneously ejecting from his jurisdiction the ecclesial assembly

of the Armenian community of Switzerland called the "Armenian Apostolic Church of Switzerland".

In the month of March 2011, the President of the Swiss Confederation paid an official visit to Armenia and attended to protocol with a visit to Etchmiadzin whilst there. The Vehapar took the opportunity to present Father Mesrop Parsamyan in the context of his future functions in Switzerland. Since this announcement, the Church Council was quick to inform President Micheline Calmy-Rey, by letter dated 2 April 2011, about the differences existing between the Armenian community in Switzerland and the Holy See of Etchmiadzin, with a view toward preventing a possible recognition of the official envoy of the Vehapar. By letter dated 21 April 2011 the President of the Confederation assured the Church Council of their position of state-level non-interference in community affairs, whilst urging the parties toward dialogue.

General Information

As per the traditions and rules of our Church, the communities of the faithful in the Ottoman Empire and in Diaspora have, for centuries, managed their Churches on the basis of democratic principles, to which we remain extremely attached. It is an assembly of laypersons that decides upon its organization, its institutions, the mode of engagement of its priests and of its own financial accounting and management. It submits to the clergy, for approval, only the decisions that affect religious activity (status, choice of priest, board composition, etc.)

The Diocesan structure of Etchmiadzin seeks to implantitself throughout the Diaspora and is promulgated by the personal wish of the Catholicos. It consists of different parishes that benefit each from their own mini-parish(es), elected by paying members and presided over by a priest. The assembly of parishioners also selects on a regular basis its lay representatives at the Assembly of Diocesan Delegates (ADD). The ADD then selects a Diocesan Council (DC). The length of term for a Council of a Parish is determined by this abovementioned Assembly. The priest is both appointed and dismissed by the bishop. The economic activities of the parish remain under the control of the bishop and the DC.

The Catholicos names a Bishop for a Diocese, with the exception of those Dioceses in which the bishop is traditionally elected. In this case, the ADD is elected amongst three candidates proposed by the DC and approved by the Catholicos. The Bishop presides upon all the structure and facets of a Diocese. Only the Catholicos can put in place a cap or 'stop' to the activities of a Bishop before the

age of 70 years.

The ADD is composed of all the priests from parishes and from elected lay persons. This body votes on the statutes that benefit from the force of canonic law after approval by the Catholicos. It decides the financial budget of the parishes in the diocese, and validates the annual reports of activities and finances of the diocese. It elects the national ecclesiological delegates, as well as a supervisory committee consisting of three persons responsible for monitoring the economic and financial activity of the diocese. The diocese pays 4% of its budget to Etchmiadzin.

The DC decides the number of representatives at the ADD for each Parish and validates reports of their parishioner activities, minutes of general meetings and elections of parish pastoral councils.

In this new organization, parishes are responsible for priests and bishops over whom they bear no decision-making/elective power, neither to choose nor to dismiss!

Defrocking a priest is a measure that consists of ousting from a Church a servant whose conduct violates its fundamental values. This is not so much a measure of punishment as it is a precaution to protect the very core of an institution. The charge of disobedience, as applied to Father Abel Manoukian, does not constitute in any instance such a threat to the institution. The defrocking of a priest occurs only in the cases of the gravest violations of canonical/theological law or in the case of heresy, and is an extremely rare measure adopted in Christian churches. If Vehapar seeks to express his displeasure with a person, he has chosen a misguided method in doing so, unless of course the target is and has been our community!

Conclusions

Today, we find that H. H. Karekin II justifies the existence of a Diocese in Switzerland through the promulgation of the Catholicos Vazken I in 1992, but chooses at the same time to deliberately ignore the laws of our church, *also approved by the Catholicos Vazken I in 1985*.

Moreover, H. H. Karekin II, in order to legitimize and justify his unilaterally adopted decisions, invokes

new rules formulated in Etchmiadzin in 2001 (yet to be accepted universally) and claims to be the bearer of Christ's message. He displays a boundless contempt for the perspective and feelings of the faithful members of the Church he leads.

What has happened to the charity, tolerance and compassion taught by Christ?

Has he forgotten he was elected as the Catholicos of All Armenians?

Has Etchmiadzin become a Church in structure only without content?

The division created by Etchmiadzin obliges the ecclesial community in Switzerland to make fundamental choices about its future. A General Assembly will be convened after the summer break to allow all concerned members to express themselves.

With our sincere best wishes

The Armenian Apostolic Church Council of Switzerland

P.S. All information and facts stated herein are based on available documentation. We will happily respond to the extent we can to the eventual questions or comments that you would like to submit to us at the following email address: a.a.church.Switzerland@gmail.com.

Voir la version française sur le lien ci-dessous: