

REALITY CHECK, PLEASE

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✘ Audrey, Germany, 3 August 2011

Audrey is a Keghart reader. We present her [comments](#), re Edmond Azadian's article ("[Echmiadzin Under Attack](#)") in our previous issue, in lieu of editorial.--**Editor**.

Mr. Azadian,

While your language is certainly articulate and some of your reasoning worthy of debate, your article overlooks that Diasporans--most of us--are not in the business of "turning on Armenia" or on our Holy See for the fun of it. Believe it or not, most of us have better things to do. The corrupt governance that is rampant and endemic in our Mayr Hayastan thrives on the truism that most of the rest of the "nation" outside Armenia's borders is busy surviving, working, and doing everything we can to keep our identity intact, our children speaking our language, and our institutions in order. After that, most of us engage in some sort of 'giving back'; for some this means active engagement, for others it means checkbook philanthropy. ✘

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It seems obvious to state that few have the disposable income, time, and resources to make the restoration of institutional transparency (whether in government or Church) a top priority on a personal level, as if it were even possible in a machinery as complex as that to which we are referring. And yet, you actually blithely dismiss the word 'democracy' and put "transparency" into big fat quotation marks as though it is something to be derided, mocked. Does the concept of 'feedback' make you nervous, Mr. Azadian? Are you worried that all those ghostly 'local feudal lords' are at their evil cauldrons again, cooking up some black magic because the markets for trouble elsewhere are a little depressed right now? Can you really write all this in good faith, with insinuations in the same

breath of "ill will", when you see normal people in Diaspora taking time to write, call, and speak up when an abuse of power happens to be so blatantly obvious?

I dare say our Holy See has not elicited this kind of active participation from the Diaspora since the beginning of this current administration, and that's not saying a whole lot for the Center of our Holy life, either.

We are living in astonishing times. People in the Arab world, this past spring, have been standing up in unprecedented masses, marching and risking their lives in the name of calling an end to unjust rule and systems in which 'checks and balances' are lacking. We may enter a debate at any moment about the perverse reality wherein national interest(s) and latent imperialism get cloaked with the word 'democracy' and brandished like a sword over the heads of the Iraqs or Afghanistans of the world. Yes. But we all know well that the idea that people should be able to FEED BACK into the institutions and structures that govern them, and do so without peril to their person or their work, is objectively a GOOD THING. Who in their right mind reverts to the godforsaken Leviathan as a model for appropriate governance in our day and age, and in so doing, invokes divine right? We Armenians are an ancient people indeed, but do you think a mass regression to 5th century thinking will serve us well? Should we really bow our heads in subservience because our catholicos is who he is, the incarnation of God on earth? Didn't the English go through something along these lines of questioning in the 1500s?

You are correct: any freedom, not balanced with constructive responsibility, is reckless anarchy. Now take the word 'freedom' and replace it with "power".. Whether or not constructive responsibility has been taken on either 'side' may be a matter of debate, but the results today are clear; the center of "power" is obviously fuelling reckless activity that is damaging the people it is here to serve. And other than contributing to centralization of power and resource in Armenia, for whose benefit is this occurring in Diaspora? Enlighten us, please.

In that light, your reference to "manufactured gossip" and "self-serving agendas" seems exaggerated at best. To what end can one actually ascribe these phenomena? Explain to us please who stands for personal gain in the community when people stand up to say that there has been a breach of procedure and by-laws, not to mention one of trust? Are we all just egomaniacs with nothing better to do than dismantle our Holiest institution? All bearers of 'ill will', really? It's so easy to use that broad brush stroke on a false canvas. Or rather, does the current crisis raise a red flag worthy of a second glance into the deeper obvious dysfunction of an institution that has for too long espoused a culture of the kow-tow?

What is worse? When people speak up or when people numbly swallow what is shoved down their throats in the most un-Christian manner possible, totally devoid of an iota of the spiritual sustenance of which our Holy See is supposed to be the fount? This is perhaps best illustrated with the inconsistency of the de-frocking policies currently being exercised with free hand. Do you position your logic by calling the fiasco in Nice, France all a pile of 'manufactured gossip', upon which (some

of our (fully frocked, to date) clergymen and their unsavory associates have been covered in the French press with their activities in the counterfeit, drug trafficking and prostitution "sectors"? And for argument's sake, if those really are all falsehoods, we can certainly deduce one thing, Mr. Azadian: our Holy See is having a major PR and public diplomacy crisis, the likes of which could put Bernie Madoff's "due diligence" teams to shame. Will you and the blind venerators of the emperor continue to adore the silken garments while attributing their own institutional dysfunction to the 'local feudal lords' of Diaspora as well? The blame game is such a slippery slope.

Your "analysis" of the situation of our Diasporan communities in Switzerland and elsewhere is regrettably flawed. You obviously neither understand the actual community dynamics to which you refer nor have you painted a picture of the "players" in good faith. The last general assembly election saw 96% of the Swiss membership of the community vote AGAINST in formation of a Diocese and what appeared to be the arbitrary replacement of a priest with a bishop (said to be the Vehapar's brother-in-law, perhaps hearsay). Does that sound like a "few local leaders" to you?

"Sending 30-40 young aspiring clergymen to the centers of higher learning or major seminaries overseas" has never been nor is today the problem; you unwittingly make Holy Etchmiadzin sound like a cultural association sending its exchange students into abusive foster families. No one would be or has been unwelcoming of such emissaries, who are typically assets to the communities in which they serve. Rather, the problem lies in the overriding of legitimate local election results, in subverting the rights of communities (who, by the way, pay the bills as a collective) to choose their priests, in exercising campaigns of personal slander and disinformation, and in exerting open pressure to place these "exports" into positions of power on advisory boards and committees of foundations without earning their right (and doing their time) to do so. Is it a wonder that public perceptions of these "policies of unification" are not positive, and that already nearly a 1,000 people have signed a petition calling for a change in Holy Echmiadzin's approach to Diasporan communities?

We probably agree on one thing: Our Holy Catholicos as an entity should not be a target for character assassination. Who gains from this? What end does this serve? Who feels pleased that their church, their place of peace and prayer, of christening and final rites, has been turned into a haven for self-serving businessmen who answer to the call of the puppet strings pulled from the highest ranks in government? One thing is certain: something is wrong, and the problem emanates at least in equal parts from Armenia as from the Diaspora, where organizations that are often volunteer-based happen to be run frequently with laxity and a general lack of professionalism. It's one thing to acknowledge this and quite another to capitalize on it.

You write: "Echmiadzin has been under Soviet rule for 70 years and is still recovering from the damage of that oppressive regime. Many Armenians, mindful of the historic role of the Mother See, have been supported and helping the supreme spiritual center to overcome its challenges." Pray tell, other than exhorting the long and venerable history to which our current leadership is doing

regrettable limited justice, what excuse is there for these kinds of scandals to erupt?

How interesting that suddenly those with such screamingly obvious private interests of various kinds in/with Armenia have become the great "holier than thou" defenders of a Church that is betraying its mission to be a force of unification rather than one of fragmentation. As our Church 'strives' to get organized, has its leaders given a moment of thought to the collateral damage of that "re-organization" undertaken with a 'strong hand'? The outcome is clear and you obviously are not one who lives with its consequences: these are deep fissures in our communities today all over Europe and in the US, amidst a Diaspora that cannot afford to be dissolved.

And in all of this, where is the Christian approach that our Christian leadership should be practicing? Not in the current strategy? Are we all simply the misguided flock who dare to speak about 'checks and balances' in an institution that functions on a Central Asian Nazarbayev-style "cult of personality"? It's possible. I like to keep an open mind. But then an opportunity exists for our "spiritual" leaders to put in practice the teaching of Christ, and to find a path towards constructive dialogue based on forgiveness, and one rooted in the ground (and not in the plushness of their motor vehicle cavalcades). Where was the campaign to properly and respectfully inform and communicate Holy Echmiadzin's end goals to its flock? Or did we miss that in our genetic zeal to be destructive?

There is a self-destructive gene, indeed, Mr. Azadian. And it lies in those who seek to cast a thick holy veil over the truth of the great improprieties that we are currently witnessing in some of our Armenian (religious) institutions. Not only are they destroying the legacy of a millennia, they are overturning the inherent principles that set our ecclesial community apart from its counterparts hundreds of years ago. Oh, and as a by-product, genuflecting at the altar of neo-Soviet autocracy, with the people they are meant to serve as the 'great sacrifice'.

My theory is that we Armenians suffer from a genetic predisposition to hoard power and avoid power-sharing at all costs, possibly as a result of our historical collective experience; the lack of transparency we witness today in our Holy See is endemic, running right up through the management of some local businesses in Armenia, through some of the major Armenian non-profit organizations in Diaspora, into the tragic lack of 'rule of law' in the country and the realm of 'strongman' politicking. If only our spiritual leaders could help us.

The solution, you ask? Not to hide under those stones you mention. To speak up when we see injustice. To shout about power-mongering, no matter who it emanates from. To yell from the rooftops when people are using public positions for private gain. To not be fearful just because our historical experience commands it, almost as an auto-response to conflictual situation. See if we will not create a new Armenia.

