RESPONSE TO E. AZADIAN'S 'ANARCHY IN THE HIERARCHY'

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Rev. Dr. V. Nerses Nersessian, London UK, 17 September 2013

I have read Mr. Azadian's above inappropriately titled article. The author has injected poisonous nonsense into the debate about the governance of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church by circumventing all the serious issues and resorting to fatally-flawed *clichés*. In a stampede to retrieve the situation, Mr. Azadian has pushed all the wrong and worn out arguments – the Genocide, 'Cold War' sentiments, and the Antelias-Etchmiadzin crisis.

The reason why the Armenian people have raised their voices is because the only unifying institution based on moral foundations is being governed by the Catholicos, and not by the Episcopal Synod according to the long held canons of the church. The hierarchy of the Church is not the *soul of the Armenian people*. The soul of the Armenian nation is its Church, Holy, Apostolic and Orthodox, upon which the hierarchies of Holy Etchmiadzin, Cilicia/Antelias, Jerusalem and Constantinople/Istanbul were founded on to protect and preserve "*without blemish in spiritual love and one accord*".

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The Patriarchate of Jerusalem and its Brotherhood have been a principal source of our faith for nearly 1,500 years. Over the centuries, countless Armenians have made pilgrimages to the Holy City, prayed and renewed their Christian vows on the shrine of St James, Brother of Our Lord. During the most critical times in the history of our Church the noble clergy (Patriarchs Yeghishe Turian, Torkom Koushagian, Guregh Israelian) have kept the flame of St. Gregory's lantern alight.

When the late *locum tenens* of the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin, the Patriarch of Jerusalem Torkom Manoogian passed away, the Catholicos did not attend his funeral. Failure to attend was disrespectful to the members of the Jerusalem Brotherhood, who hold high and responsible positions in the west. He also failed to attend the enthronement of Nourhan Manougian the present Patriarch of Jerusalem. The latter needs the visible support of Holy Etchmiadzin. His absence also

diminished the status of the Patriarchate in the eyes of the hostile Israeli government.

His Grace Archbishop Mesrop Moutafian, Patriarch of Constantinople succumbed to his present state due to his spending several years in prison for his stance against the Turkish government, and not because of being a "political tool in the hands of" that government as Azadian alleges. Likewise, the antagonism of the Israeli government toward the Patriarch of Jerusalem arises from the courageous stance he has taken on the question of the Armenian Genocide.

There is no tradition of a newly- elected Patriarch of Jerusalem making a pilgrimage to Holy Etchmiadzin to renew his vows at the throne of St Gregory, as Mr. Azadian suggests. The Patriarch takes and renews his vows at the shrine of the Apostle St. James, Brother of Our Lord.

No serious observer believes that the survival of an individual is much more important than the integrity of our Church, the oldest institution of the Armenian nation. The cavalier approach of Karekin II is unraveling and the conspiracy theories expounded by Mr. Azadian to defend the Catholicos are disingenuous. There is obvious cronyism on the part of Mr. Azadian, a lifelong beneficiary of the organization he represents who defends his patron and ally rather than heed the cry of the people, who for the first time, after 75 years, have come together in defense of their Mother Church.

Political conformity has for long been the cause of ill-health for the Armenian Church. Even before the Russian Revolution, the Church and the State in Armenia existed in a sort of unified harmony, which was not always pleasing to the church. After the Revolution, the Church fell silent. During the time of repression and extreme persecution nobody expressed political views. To start to think politically, and to speak of politics from within the Church, will require a long and deep period of learning. The Church cannot belong to one party or another. It must be the voice of conscience, permeated with the light of God. Ideally, the Church must be in a position to speak for every party, for every point of view, to say, 'this is worthy of Man and God, and this is not worthy of Man and God'.

It is not the Catholicos who imparts prestige and authority to the Catholicosate. But the Catholicosate, with its 1,700 years of heritage and 131 Catholicoi, whose witness has been tested by sweat and blood that imparts authority and prestige to the Holy See. It is the sacred oath of every new Catholicos to uphold and enrich that heritage.

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