FROM BICKERING TO DIALOGUE

Posted on July 1, 2013 by Keghart

Category: Opinions

Believing in a Greater Armenian Community

By **Raffi Yeretsian**, B.Sc., LL.B., Montreal, 1 July 2013

The unwinding of events following Bishop Bagrat Galstanyan's ousting as Primate of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of Canada, at the 30th Diocesan Delegates' Assembly a little over a month ago, was as captivating as it was distressing. The widespread concern for community affairs we have witnessed was unprecedented. For once, a decision mattered. The announcement of the bishop's removal came as a shock to many who shared an affection for the warm and charismatic clergyman who embodied the greater ideals of inclusiveness, service and unity. The dismay expressed by frustrated individuals revealed a malaise that went beyond the outcome of the contested vote. Indeed, since the beginning of the crisis, the members of the community were not treated as stakeholders. They were left uninformed, distracted from the real issues and too often taken for granted. Although action should have come earlier, it is suggested that a public forum with the purpose of facilitating a dialogue among delegates and community members is the most expedient way of turning this crisis into an opportunity to further political maturity.

Until about two weeks ago, the community was still awaiting the verdict of His Holiness Karekin II with respect to the allegations of procedural breaches during the controversial vote. The vote would have been rendered void had these allegations been proven. For Bishop Bagrat's supporters, a finding of such breaches would have raised the hopes of his rightful return. In a recent turn of events, however, the resignation of the Primate-elect, V. Rev. Fr. Aren Jebejian, and the announcement by Karekin II of new elections seem to indicate a desirefor the Church's leadership in Echmiadzin to avoid dealing with the delicate matter of procedural breaches.

Although such a decision may be intended to bring a swift sense of appeasement within the community, the appropriateness of warding off the issues underlying the controversy is questionable.

The community is bound to remain split on the issue. It is doubtful that either of the pro-Galstanyan and anti-Galstanyan delegates will suddenly change their views. While it is uncertain whether Bishop Bagrat will accept his nomination to be reinstated in the upcoming elections, the polarization within the Diocesan Assembly and the community is almost certain to endure. Despite the apparent abatement of protests, the current situation makes the prospect of appeasement uncertain, if not unlikely. Further, the opaqueness surrounding the strife opposing both sides of the divide is almost certain to perpetuate traditional governance whereby members of the community affected by their decisions are paradoxically kept in the dark and called upon for support. Although the ousting of Bishop Bagrat triggered this crisis, its evolution reveals a much deeper need to revisit the role of leadership within the Canadian-Armenian community.

Until today traditional elitist governance, prevalent in the Canadian-Armenian community, made it irrelevant for its leadership to justify their decisions. This opaque leadership was not contested because, perhaps in a cynical way, these decisions were regarded irrelevant by a significant part of the community. And thus, unsurprisingly, the delegates in favor of replacing Bishop Bagrat never formally took the initiative to inform the community members of the motives behind their decision. While this attitude can be explained, its persistence within the specific context of this crisis was morally unjustifiable. From the moment that a large number of community members signed the online petition, that the decision was being hotly debated on social media and that a good number of individuals attended a silent protest in front of the primacy in Montreal, the anti-Galstanyan delegates must have realized that their decision was widely unpopular. From that moment on, any objection to justify their position on the matter was perceived as a blatant disregard for the concern expressed by members of the community. In spite of the distasteful means used by a few to express their objection, the anti-Galstanyan delegates had a duty to confront Bishop Bagrat's supporters to provide them with the motives of their decision. As leaders responsible for the proper governance of the Church and the well-being of the community, they should have taken these protests seriously. Even if they were unwilling to review their position, they still had the duty to justify what they regarded as a favorable outcome and to seek to understand the frustration felt by those who saw the vote as an injustice.

From a perspective of strategic communication, the anti-Galstanyan delegates' refusal to disclose their motives gave the impression that they were hiding something, a perception that has actually been quite aggressively instrumentalized by pro-Galstanyan group. To justify their action, some individuals raised the potentially devastating effect that such disclosure would have on the community. Better things are left unsaid, they claimed. Such a stance reveals an underlying skepticism of the capacity of members of the community to exercise their judgment independently. In some way, by refusing to share their version of the story with the community, they perpetuated the conditions justifying their opacity. By refusing to inform the members, they paved the way for speculation, something people naturally resort to as a way of coping with a confusing situation. Under such circumstances, distressed and bewildered members became prone to manipulation and were labeled as such by the leaders. Ultimately, leaders consider these same individuals as lacking the independence of mind necessary for a reasonable assessment of the situation and so justify their attitude. In other words, opaque leadership perpetuates the very conditions that seemingly justify its existence.

Direct contact and exchange between frustrated members and contested delegates in an atmosphere of cooperation would have helped to dispel any speculation regarding the latter's motives or any doubt regarding their concern for the well-being of the community.

Through enabling an informed debate, open disclosure of the motives would have also created favorable conditions for a more thorough and intelligent discussion among members of the

community regarding its internal affairs. Additional information would have contributed to the elevation and political sophistication of the community. By declining to be transparent, the anti-Galstanyan members missed an opportunity to promote a balanced debate on what constitutes worthy leadership--the question at the heart of the current crisis. Perhaps they could have even persuaded a number of members that their decision was well founded. More fundamentally, they took part in perpetuating the very conditions of opacity and frenzied speculation that merely contributed to aggravating the crisis.

Prior to submitting this commentary, a meeting regarding the controversy was convened at the primacy in Montreal on July 4 at 8 p.m. Although such a meeting would have been more appropriate at an earlier date, such an initiative represents a step in the right direction. Hopefully, the organizers will make an effort to reach every concerned member of the community as well as to address their concerns as being genuine and serious.

The way in which the pro-Galstanyan faction handled the crisis is not immune to blame either. Their strategy consisted primarily in labeling their opponents as puppets, controlled by ill-intentioned individuals, dishonest and unreasonable. They avoided confrontation on substantial issues, namely the motives behind their adversaries' position. The pro-Galstanyan actors exploited the popularity of Bishop Bagrat to discredit their opponents. The issue, however, should not have been the popularity of Bishop Bagrat but rather whether he had done something morally reprehensible to the point of compelling a majority of members of the Diocesan Assembly to replace him. If the pro-Galstanyan side wanted to constructively criticize their opponents, they should have emphasized the question of accountability; not simply the lack of popularity of their decision.

By doing so, it was implied that we should choose our leaders based solely on our emotional attachment and on what they embody, regardless of their actual leadership abilities or moral rectitude. Indeed, history provides us with many examples of morally wicked leader who were very lovable individuals. That said, the emotional attachment we feel towards our leaders is not completely irrelevant. Yet such affection cannot in and of itself be the sole source of legitimacy of a leader. By focusing exclusively on the affection people have for Bishop Bagrat, the pro-Galstanyan group prevented the emergence of a substantial debate regarding the alleged wrongdoings for which he was presumably ousted. The long-term impact of these attitudes is the continuation of emotion-driven community politics fuelled by a lack of information. Seeking the truth must be pursued as a way to make more informed and hopefully better decisions.

Some who lead the "Stay With Us" movement in support of Bishop Bagrat may argue that their knowledge of the latter's moral rectitude and abilities as a leader was sufficient to justify their campaign directed against the anti-Galstanyan delegates, and also the joining of members to the cause. This justification, however, is based on the premise that statements made by leaders must be taken at face value. This discourages independent judgment and the condition of transparency without which such judgment is effectively disabled. This stance reveals a belief, seemingly shared

by both parties to the dispute, that members of the community who are not involved in the day-to-day decision-making process cannot understand the substantial issues.

An anonymous letter entitled "Let's set the record straight and then move ahead together for the benefit of our Church and community", distributed on June 14, 2013 by email provides a poignant illustration of this mindset. From a public relations' perspective, the letter is intended to provide a more moderate pro-Galstanyan position by distancing itself from "occasionally excessive" writings and the "ugly language" they contain. This letter fails, however, to promote a more substantial debate on the core issues. The fact that the letter is written by an anonymous group–laconically referred to as "we" throughout the letter–makes it impossible for a diligent reader to validate the information contained therein. Further, the letter contains a notice mentioning that it "is based on first-hand information from reliable sources and verified facts and is issued by concerned members of our church on behalf of the more than 4,000 people who signed the petitions." Referring to "reliable sources" in an anonymous letter that fails to identify these sources prevents anyone from verifying the validity of the facts put forth. Although it is claimed that these facts have been "verified", any diligent reader would ask the following question: verified by whom? Impossible to know. How can anyone wishing to exercise his or her own critical thinking do so under such circumstances? The answer is that they obviously cannot. Implicitly, the letter is drafted upon the assumption that the readers should not use their judgment to form an opinion and that it is perfectly acceptable to take whatever is stated in the letter at face value. The disregard for independent judgment underlying this letter only serves to perpetuate a tradition of opacity within the community.

The notice also states that the letter was written by "concerned members of our church", implying that the anti-Galstanyan delegates do not share this concern. What is implied is that those holding different opinions are not concerned and perhaps even that their interests lie elsewhere. The letter essentially expresses a judgment on the conscience of the anti-Galstanyan delegates, a tactic that unnecessarily diverts attention from the substantial issues at hand: whether their motives were reasonable and what should be considered good leadership within the Canadian-Armenian community.

Furthermore, the notice claims that the letter was written in the name of "the more than 4,000 people who signed the petitions". The petition, however, was only intended to request His Holiness Karekin II to withhold ratification of the controversial decision. The letter goes further by making judgments regarding the motives of those who voted to oust Bishop Galstanyan and by implying their dishonesty. The petition was intended to support Bishop Bagrat, a highly popular and loved leader of the Armenian community, not to question the honesty or conscience of those who thought he should be replaced. Essentially, the authors of the letter equated a lack of popularity with dishonesty. This only contributed to diverting attention from the substantial issue at hand: on what grounds should a popular leader be ousted? Most fundamentally, they instrumentalized, in a reprehensibly dangerous manner, the name, identity and conscience of more than 4,000 individuals

whose names can be easily traced online. The purpose of this was perhaps to give a sense of legitimacy to the claims contained without having to substantiate them but it was done so by hijacking the freedom of thought of the signatories. Signing the petition did not mandate an anonymous group to write the content of that letter in the name of those signatories. Although some may very well have agreed with the content of the letter, a clear mandate to that end should have been given. Contesting an unpopular decision is very different from questioning the moral rectitude of the proponents of that decision. By falsely declaring that they were acting in the name of the signatories of the petition the authors of the June 14 letter took hostage the conscience of the signatories of the petition. The authors unrightfully took the initiative to think in the name of others.

By their behavior, antagonists on both sides marked their preference for a short-term vision consisting of publicly discrediting each other while failing to properly inform the members of the community, the primary stakeholders in this dispute. The result has been acrimonious polarization. By their actions, both sides prevented the community from using this golden opportunity to mature politically. Under such circumstances, the moral foundations upon which our community is founded are at stake. How can the Canadian-Armenian community voice demands to Turkey of an honest assessment of its history when its own leaders are unable to respect the tenets of intellectual integrity? How can it promote further democratization of Armenia when its own leaders do not consider the grievances of its own members as indicators of legitimate concern? How can it consider itself Canadian at all if its leadership does not believe that the conscience of its own members matters? This having been said, something can still be done to stir this crisis in a more constructive direction.

It is argued that the best approach of ensuring an inclusive, transparent and efficient way of managing this crisis is to set up a public forum through which the concerned delegates would be called to clarify their position directly to the community. A truth-seeking public forum would bring two or three delegates of the Diocesan Assembly from both sides of the divide and would be given a chance to explain their side of the story. The public would be given the chance to ask questions. The discussions would be animated by a competent moderator.

Such a forum has the potential of being highly beneficial for the entire Canadian-Armenian community. Setting a precedent of cooperative dialogue as a viable dispute resolution alternative would assert our belief that we can, as a community, work together. It would allow both decision-makers and stakeholders to realize that our community is composed primarily of reasonable individuals who share a genuine concern for the well-being of the community in spite of their diverging views regarding what that well-being means. Direct communication would pave the way for the ending of speculation while elevating the discourse on community affairs. Encouraging involvement in and discussing community affairs would make the community relevant again. By engaging in a dialogue on what it truly means to be a leader in the community and under which circumstances one should be evicted would allow for the community to assert the values it expects

its own leadership to uphold. Finally, by organizing a public forum where decision-makers would be asked to explain and justify their positions would set a precedent of accountability for all current and future decision-makers to bear in mind. It would be a healthy reminder that community decisions are relevant to individuals who are distant from the decision-making centers and that their interest should be taken into consideration.

This crisis compels Canadian-Armenians to reflect on the outcome they seek as a community. It represents an opportunity to make things better; to enhance community governance; to make the very concept of community more relevant for its stakeholders. The community can choose to uphold the values it perceived in Bishop Bagrat: inclusiveness, service and unity. Canadian-Armenians can choose to embrace these higher values that are not and should not stem from the work of one man only, for these ideals are everyone's responsibility. It is a choice. It is a choice to believe in a greater community. Meeting and discussing by acknowledging each other's concerns as worthy of serious consideration may very well be a first step in asserting this choice.