

St. Vartan Voice

The Newsletter of St. Vartan Armenian Apostolic Church

Rev. Fr. Hovel Ohanyan, Parish Priest

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May 2020

Easter Message of His Eminence Archbishop Hovnan Derderian, Primate of the Western Diocese

*"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die,
he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.
Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26).*

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ,

We would like to commence this year's Easter message with the above-mentioned words of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ addressed to Martha, for we believe they resonate with the spirit of the day and hearten us against the distress of current times. To better understand the context of the biblical verse, let us travel back in time to Bethany, where Lazarus, the beloved of Christ, had been dead for four days. When Jesus arrived there with His disciples, Martha, the sister of Lazarus, said the following to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21).

Martha, who had faith in God and believed in the resurrection of the dead, amidst the anguish of her bereavement, experienced a moment of theodicy, which may have contained elements of distrust. Genuinely empathetic to Martha's sorrow of loss, Jesus made the following affirmation, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die." To further emphasize this statement and challenge Martha spiritually, Jesus asked, "Do you believe this?"

In fact, this question was not directed to Martha solely but also to the disciples who accompanied Jesus. It is noteworthy to mention that Thomas, also referred by the Evangelist as the Twin, was among the disciples – the same Thomas, who in doubt, wanted to "put his finger into the print of the nails on Christ's hands and into His side" (John 20:25). "Do you believe this?" Jesus asks this question to each and every one of us. "Do you believe that I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die?"

Today, when the world is still suffering from the snares of the invisible enemy, namely the COVID-19 Coronavirus, in a moment of spiritual distress, many of us may question the existence of God in the words of Martha by saying, "Lord, if You had been here, this would not have happened to us." Of course, it is part of human nature to feel weak, afraid, panicked, suspicious or doubtful. During disastrous times, when we are in danger of perishing and imminent death seems so near, we may experience a spiritual breakdown in our very core, which can undermine the strongholds of our faith. Often times, we feed our fears, instead of bracing our faith, forgetting the veracious promise of our Lord, who asserted, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions, houses of prayer and worship, businesses, and schools closed. The CDC and other public health officials instructed us with ways we can protect ourselves and prevent the spread of the virus. We were advised to isolate ourselves and practice social distancing by separating ourselves at least six feet from other individuals. As we focused on social distancing, our

intimate relationship with God was compromised.

The period of the Great Lent, which is a time of spiritual quarantine (from the Latin quadraginta and the Italian quaranta, both meaning "40"), became a time of self-isolation for many of us as we faced our own fears, resembling the prophet Daniel, who was imprisoned in the lion's den (Daniel 6). We all remember the initial weeks of the outbreak when people rushed to invade the grocery stores and stockpiled essentials. The panic-shopping craze had a catastrophic impact on America's supply chain. The scene reminded us of the Final Days as described in the Book of Revelation. The national news that disseminated through various media platforms and social media outlets added more fuel to the fire instead of soothing public hysteria. It is very unfortunate that many of us succumbed to the fake news instead of embracing the Good Tidings. As a result of anxiousness we hoarded excessive amounts of food and supplies, forgetting the words of Christ addressed to the rich farmer, "Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then who will get what you have stored up?" (Luke 12:16-21).

John the Baptist cried and said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matthew 3:2). After John's imprisonment, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:14-15). He was preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and disease (Matthew 4:23). People witnessed those healings and divine miracles; however, they failed to heed the exhortations of the saints and did not prepare themselves spiritually. On the other hand, a droplet of doubt, a subtle hint of uncertainty from media, overwhelmed us, instilling panic in our hearts.

A few days ago, on Holy Tuesday, our church observed the remembrance of the Ten Virgins. The parable, which is from the Gospel of Matthew, recounts the story of ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were wise and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. When the foolish virgins woke up from slumber to refuel their lamps, they realized they had no oil. While they were out shopping for oil, the bridegroom arrived and those who were ready went to the wedding with him, while the door was shut to the others (Matthew 25:1-12).

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The lamps described in the parable of the Ten Virgins symbolize our souls and the oil is the Word of God. Woe to us, if our souls are emptied of the divine messages and we find ourselves unprepared for the second coming of Christ. Jesus says, "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Indeed, Christ has defeated this world. In the words of the liturgical introit, "He trampled down death by death and by His resurrection He has given us the gift of life" (Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church).

On this Easter morning, the all-merciful God has shone the dawn of the new life upon us. Today, we celebrate that new life. By proclaiming the resurrection of Christ, we reaffirm the presence of God in the depth of our souls. By sharing the luminous greeting of Holy Easter, we strengthen our faith, for Christianity is not merely a philosophy but a way of life. By celebrating Christ's resurrection, which revolutionized the history of humanity, we renew our commitment to become teachers of faith for our children so that they may not stumble from the path of righteousness.

The recent temptations taught us a good lesson. In the words of the disciple, "We had the sentence of death in ourselves that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead" (2 Corinthians 1:9).

Besides fear, anxiety, and panic, we have witnessed practical expressions of a living, conscious faith. We have all seen the sacrificial service of doctors and other healthcare professionals around the globe, who put their own lives on the line to save those who were affected by COVID-19. We saw numerous expressions of humanitarianism and acts of kindness. With great admiration, we saw young volunteers delivering food and supplies to the most vulnerable segment of our society - the elderly. We were amazed by the generosity of individuals, companies and organizations, who donated medical supplies and other life-saving essentials. With a debt of gratitude, we recognize the men and women in uniform, the military, police, firefighters, paramedics and other representatives of government agencies, who continue to serve our communities around the clock. It was especially delightful to see the consolidation of wonderful men and women in our motherland Armenia, who spared nothing to deliver much-needed help to the less fortunate. In these heroic and compassionate deeds, we perceive the power of the victorious resurrection of Christ.

The Armenian nation survived many perils throughout history, including natural disasters, warfare, famine and disease. Nevertheless, we have always risen from the ashes like a phoenix by virtue of our ancestral Christian faith. As St. Paul states, "We were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4).

Dear faithful brothers and sisters,

Our exhortation to you is to pray unceasingly for the sick, the distressed and the needy around the world. Please pray for the motherland Armenia, Holy Etchmiadzin and its Holy See headed by His Holiness Karekin II, Catholicos of all Armenians.

Believe in the miraculous resurrection of Christ and bear in mind that these tribulations too shall pass. We urge you to lead your lives with this message of Christ's resurrection, despite the current circumstances. Do not forget your Lord during times of joy and prosperity, rather glorify His holy name always, for to Him befits the glory, the power and the dominion. Amen.

Christ is risen from the dead. Blessed is the Resurrection of Christ.



Bible Readings

May 3 John 5:24-30
May 10 John 7:14-24
May 17 John 9:39-41,
10:1-10
May 24 John 12:12-13
May 31 John 14:25-31



The Quiet, Resounding Word

“The eyes of the Armenians speak long before the lips move and long after they cease to.”

– Arshile Gorky (Vostanik Manoug Adoian, 1904-48)

What do your eyes say? What language does your life speak? In the world of visual art, Gorky was the masterful painter of Armenian ancestry who created a language on canvas that served to bridge European Surrealism and American Abstract Expressionism. Have you ever experienced a time and place where you did not know the language? Were you able to bridge the disconnect? Subject to translation, your eyes reflect more than you realize and the language your actions speak have the capability to build bridges.

THE GOOD NEWS

Centuries ago, our spiritual ancestors were compelled to translate the language of the Good News of the Holy Gospel. Beyond a message of words, the essence of the Gospel is to communicate the benevolence of God in the person and presence of Jesus Christ the Word.

From The Father of Light: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” – Saint John, Chapter One

Our God and our Lord has appeared to us. Full of grace, this eternal truth is perpetually proclaimed in the liturgical hymns and prayers of the Armenian Church.

GOD IS WITH US. զի Աստուած ընդ մեզ է:

The presence of Jesus – God’s Word – is, was, and always will be with the afflicted, the downtrodden, and the meek; true to His name, Emmanuel is with us all. As heirs of this Good News of Peace, we are gifted beneficiaries called personally by name to be attuned to the unfailing promise of His ever-loving presence and to reflect God’s goodness, mercy, and peace among all.

THE PRINCE OF PEACE

Our Lord’s princely presence is magnificently experienced each time we attentively gather to be renewed and transformed into the Body of Christ. As we celebrate from all and for all the holy gift of Soorp Badarak, we communicate with God and His people through collective expressions of thanksgiving and pious prayers for a personal reunion that reignites the baptismal promises empowering us to be bearers of His healing light in this world. Notably we look directly to Saint Mary – the Dawn of Peace – whose picture adorns every altar of the Armenian Church as a visible and reverent reminder of our ultimate model.

In today’s world of pain and suffering, how do we as an honored household of God bear the countenance of God’s light and “translate” our experienced reality of His powerful and protective presence? If we had no words to utter, how would anyone know we harbor the eternal presence of the quiet, resounding Word within our heart?

HOLY TRANSLATORS

For the spiritual well-being of a nation and its neighbors, our ancestors embodied a holy responsibility to communicate the Wisdom of God and the healing presence of Christ. Strengthening an identity rooted in faith, Saint Sahag Bartev and Saint Mesrob Mashtots ushered in the Golden Age of the 5th century with the establishment of a unique alphabet of the Armenian language and the translations of biblical, historical, and literary texts noted for their beauty and accuracy. More than mere historical recollections, our liturgical commemorations are invitational in the here and now with a relevant call to action. As we recall the lives of our Holy Translators, may their devotion serve to encourage us to further recognize, consider, and creatively “translate” the ever-present Word in our daily lives.

ENCOUNTER WITH THE WORD

Unequivocally, Jesus Christ preserves and strengthens us. “THIS is life...” the priest declares as the chalice of consecrated bread and wine is elevated for all communicants to witness. Prior to the blessed privilege and reception of Holy Communion, we melodically share in communicating our collective awareness that Christ is present among us in the ritualized Kiss of Peace as a visible sign of unity. The deacon’s bid instructs: “With awe and in faith, draw near and communicate in holiness...” while the faithful’s responsorial hymn rejoices: “Draw near to the Lord and receive the light. Alleluia.” In the Holy Gifts upon the consecrated altar, it is the Prince of Peace who offers and is offered as the bridge restoring us in harmony with the source of light and distributor of grace.

Week by week, nourished by Jesus Christ in Holy Communion, illumined by the Light of the indivisible Holy Trinity, comforted with the Psalms, strengthened for just deeds, we are emboldened day by day – as holy citizens with holy responsibilities – to be messengers of the quiet, resounding Word.

“Through the intercession of the holy Mother of God and all of God’s saints, we collectively pray for the continuous renewal of our baptismal sanctification of our souls, our minds, and our bodies so that we may

serve God and others in holiness all the days of our lives.”

“All good gifts and all perfect bounties are from the Father of Light.”

– Divine Liturgy declaration

To reflect the radiant light of God’s goodness, there is a diversity of gifts from the same spirit with different kinds of service “for the common good.” [I Corinthians – Chapter 12]

Consider how you are expressly gifted to “translate” the Good News in today’s age. As faith-filled representatives of the Prince of Peace, we are each uniquely equipped to serve as “translators” of a profound compassion to the most vulnerable among us. In the most seemingly simple ways – even without a murmur – a sincere smile, a glance of acknowledgment, or a gesture of support by quietly standing next to someone facing a challenge can convey much more grace than words.

THE QUIET, RESOUNDING WORD

In a time of increasing isolation, a greater awareness and experience of the eternal presence of the Prince of Peace is vital. Instead of contributing to a malady of despair, we are called to be modern-day “translators” bridging a spirit of compassion with the true Word of hope.

Today more than ever, surrounded by an excess of “clanging cymbals”, we may heed the centuries-old counsel from Tatoul to Thomas: “Speak little; use your deeds as a sermon.” (5th century)

In stewardship of our baptismal calling, the quiet, resounding Word speaks through us each time we offer a listening ear, share tears of unity with someone’s sorrow or joy, stand with the vulnerable and oppressed, reach out to a neighbor, make strides toward restorative justice, uplift wounded hearts by visits with the sick, grieved, and imprisoned, clothe those in need, feed those who are hungry, or exhibit temperate and modest behavior marked by integrity.

DIGNITY and BENEVOLENCE FOR ALL

At all times in all places, may our eyes be a reflection of the Word’s eternal light speaking the language of DIGNITY, and may our humble actions build bridges with the quiet yet resounding language of BENEVOLENCE for the Glory of God and for the betterment of all.

—by Megan A. Jendian

Join Fr. Krikor for a 3-week course of

on-line Bible Study

Disasters and the Bible’s Response

Wednesday, April 22, April 29, and May 6

at 7 pm

Register for the class on the church website
www.stvartanoakland.org in the events section,
or email the church office at
stvartanoakland.com
for instructions to log in to Zoom.



Parish Council Update

We appreciate everyone who has continued to support St. Vartan during this unprecedented time. We thank Der Krikor for his dedication to ensuring the parish of St. Vartan continues to thrive and be spiritually fulfilled, especially during these times of tribulations. A special thank you to all those who continue to volunteer, even as we all Shelter In Place.

The Badarak is now streaming online!

We have begun to live-stream our services, not only on Sundays, but throughout the week. These live streams can be found via our website (stvirtanoakland.com), as well as, on our Facebook page @stvirtanoakland, (the live streams are also available afterwards for on-demand viewing). Der Krikor took on the extraordinary task of live-streaming the services during Holy Week and through Easter, along with holding weekly Q&A sessions via zoom meetings, which all started this month. We continue to add new events to stay involved, please, continue to visit the site for updates and schedules of events.

As part of our efforts to enhance our online presence, we've had to strengthen our network to ensure that a clear signal can be sent from the Sanctuary to all of your homes and online devices. In addition, I would like to take this opportunity to recognize Nicole Vasgerdsian, along with the entire Parish Council for transforming our new and beautifully designed website. Additionally, I'd like to express my gratitude to Nataline Jindoian for her invaluable assistance and coordination of our Q&A sessions with Der Krikor. They have both been instrumental in establishing a social media presence for St. Vartan. Please, support the hard work everyone has put forth, by ensuring you follow us on both, Facebook @stvirtanoakland and the ACYO instagram @stvirtanacyo.

We need your continued support. At this time, we are able to meet our financial obligations through April, but in order for us to continue to be financially secure, we are relying on receiving your contributions. We have also taken measures to take advantage of the government programs available to us to help sustain our finances. These programs may take several weeks before we realize any benefits and we appreciate your continued support.

Please continue to offer your donations online or by mailing a check to the church office at 650 Spruce St, Oakland CA 94610. You can also make your Sunday weekly offering, light a candle or simply send a general contribution.

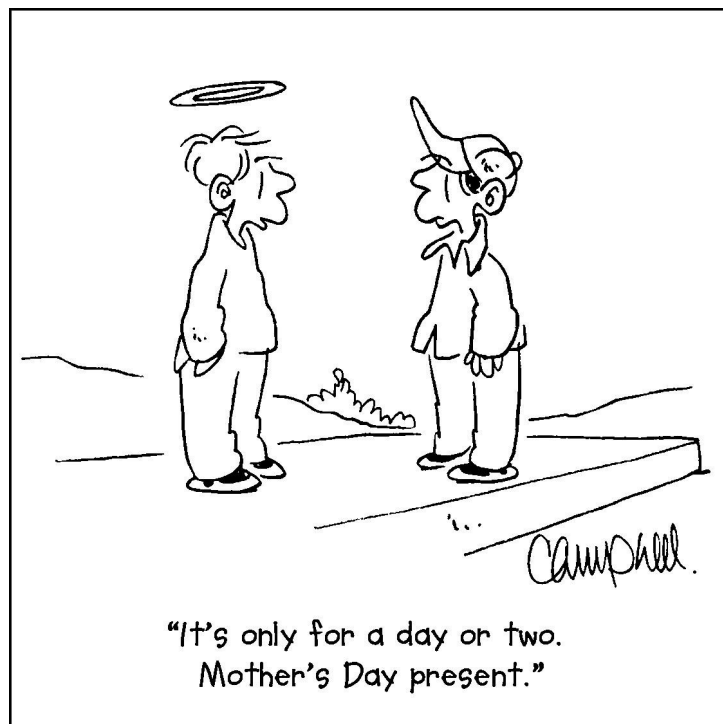
Your donations also enable us to help those who are personally in need of our parish support during these trying times. If you or someone you know is in need of assistance, please reach out to the church office, as we are ready to help where needed.

Together, and with God's amazing grace, we will get through these difficult times and emerge as an even stronger, loving and inclusive parish.

Gratefully, Dicko Shahvekilian, Parish Council Chairman



On Merelots Sunday, April 19, Fr. Krikor presented hokehankist prayers for departed loved ones.



St. Vartan Church Parish Council gratefully acknowledges the following donations:

In Memory

† **Richard Demirjian**

Margaret Layshock

† **Edward Godoshian**

June Demerdjian

† **Virginia Ratcliff**

June Demerdjian



Easter Yughakin Donations

Suzanne and Razmik Abnous
Eevet Aghajan and Family
Samuel and Arpine Alikian
Shari Arakelian
Lou Aronian
Annie Avadissian
Kim Bardakian
Jack and Barbara Bousian
Sandra Cadell
Seda and Charles Chavdarian
Ellen Sarkisian Chesnut
Brian and Cynthia Der Matoian

Berge and Sara Dermatoian
Gary and Satenik Eldemir
Seno and Dickie Garabedian
Ed and Shannon Gentry
Rosalie Gifford
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Aylin Gulbenkian
Amy Hailozian
Lori and Andy Hill
Edward and Armineh Jamgotchian
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Edward and Karen Sarafian
Richard and Judy Sharafian
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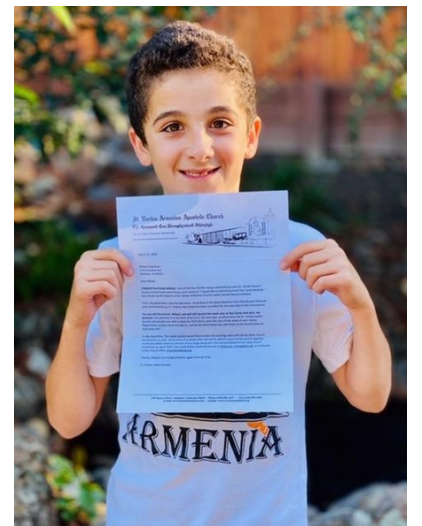
Ladies Society Update

We have all been “sheltering in place” since early March and slowly we are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel. We all need to do what we can to gain some control over the course of this virus. We hear daily reports that the rate of infections is decreasing so we hope our next newsletter has more positive news to report. And unfortunately, because of the virus, our Mother's Day luncheon has been cancelled this year.

Our board did meet via “zoom conferencing” a few weeks ago. Der Krikor was instrumental in bringing our ladies together and we appreciated the opportunity to meet with him and discuss a few ideas.

At the beginning of March, the Ladies Society encouraged our Sunday School students to submit an essay titled, “I would like to go to WD Summer Hye Camp because...” and offered to sponsor the winner to a week at this year's summer camp. Of the four terrific essays we received, Mikael Avanesian received the majority of votes. Sadly, due to the Coronavirus, Hye Camp 2020 has been cancelled. However, Mikael's scholarship will be honored next year as well as our offering of a 2021 scholarship.

We pray all of our members will stay healthy as we work through this virus and that it won't be long before we gather again to worship and rekindle our many friendships.



Mikael Avanesian, Hye Camp scholarship winner

Thank You

St. Vartan Church thanks the Armenian Community Task Force of the San Francisco Bay Area for the donation of 500 face masks and 500 pairs of medical gloves, to distributed to St. Vartan Church community members. If you would like to receive a face mask or pair of gloves, email stvirtanoakland@aol.com and include the number of people in your household. Equipment is distributed in a first come/first served basis.

The task force was formed by the SF Bay Area ARF Tashnagsutune, along with representatives from the Armenian Cultural Foundation, Homenetmen, Armenian National Committee of America, Armenian Relief Society, Armenian Youth Federation, Armenian Youth Federation Juniors, Hamazkayin Armenian Cultural & Educational Society, KZV Armenian School, in partnership with churches.

