

Kristos Hariav ee Merelots!!
Orhnia! eh Haroutuinun Kristosee!!
(Christ is Risen from the Dead...Blessed is the Resurrection of Christ)

Indeed Christ is Risen, whether you reside in Armenia, the United States or anywhere else! It is a glorious feast to behold.

It in 12:20AM on March 19, 2008. I find myself in my room at the Vaskenian Seminary and wish to begin this e-mail message to you while here. I shall finish it when I'm back in Gavar.

A few months ago Frs. Mgrdich and Kevork (who are the Rector and co-Rector) approached me and asked if I would be willing to teach at the Vaskenian Seminary which is located on the peninsula just outside of the city of Sevan on the Northern shores of Lake Sevan. His Holiness approved the request and so I now find myself here for the third time this semester. Frs. Mgrdich and Kevork have asked me to teach the "Lives of the Early Saints" and I am also co-teaching the Pastoral Theology class with Fr. Yesai. It is yet another amazing experience which I have to thank God for. The ability to form the minds of young seminarians who will someday be the future deacons, priests, bishops, patriarchs, and who knows??? maybe the future Catholicos of All Armenians, is a daunting and challenging prospect. This evening alone I had the opportunity to meet with four seminarians and discuss with them issues of faith and what we are about as servants of Christ. Fr. Kevork wants me to continue and to increase my time at the seminary especially since Fr. Mgrdich is now in the United States serving the Sts. Sahag and Mesrob Church in Wynnewood, PA. You all are gaining a great priest! I now digress...

These past weeks have been difficult in many respects. Great Lent is difficult enough without having to try and understand the happenings in recent weeks here in Armenia. At St. Nersess Seminary, we used to say that Satan did his best work during Great Lent. Well, this year was no exception. The presidential election here in Armenia has been filled with great controversy. I was in Yerevan when all hell broke loose. It was a very scary experience to say the least. I'll share below an e-mail I sent to my parents on the morning of March 2nd. All I can say about the political situation at that particular moment of time was such, that if I had left the country for 24 hours and returned, I would have thought that Turks had invaded and perpetrated those events which cost the lives of eight Armenians. It is a very sad and dark day in the history of our fragile people.

As I said, I was in Yerevan that fateful evening staying with a friend and could see and hear horrible events as they unfolded from our vantage point some two miles away. A friend from the US had sent me an e-mail that evening asking what was going on. I sent him the following e-mail, with a copy to my parents, from my Palm Treo while I was waiting for transportation back to Gavar on Sunday morning:

"Dear Greg, I'm now waiting for a bus to take me back to Gavar. Last night was pretty tense. I'm in Yerevan. From where I was (2-3 miles away) we could see smoke and hear the yelling and chanting. The election (in response to his question) was NOT stolen.

Even with the irregularities which took place, even if you tripled the number, it's still not enough to change the outcome. From my perspective, Levon is a sore loser. They are truly exaggerating the rally numbers. Two nights ago, (Friday night), I was at the Opera myself at midnight and witnessed about 2,000 people there. The next day (yesterday after they dispersed the people) someone I saw claimed that there were over 50,000 people at midnight...

This morning (one hour ago) I saw 8 tanks on Pghramian Street.

I'm safe and fine. Worried however how this will end. Levon has painted himself into a corner.

As you know, last night Kocharian declared a State of Emergency. Under that order are a number of declarations, including no news reports which in my opinion make the people nervous when they don't know what's going on. He did say, that he is not declaring a nighttime curfew, he stated that that would be too much for the over 1,000,000 other people who have nothing to do with this.

One person was killed last night after police fired in the air to warn the protesters, and an innocent bystander was killed.

I think that's it for now. If you don't mind, since I wrote all this on my Palm Treo, I'm going to also send it to my parents and sister for their info, Pray for peace in our homeland.

hayr aren''

As it turns out, eight people were killed and many others were hospitalized. Things have calmed down, however issues still linger. In my opinion, it's time to move forward. In this case everyone was at fault, there were no angels in this complicated scenario.

We all learned after the facts that on the morning of March 1st, His Holiness Karekin II, personally (alone and on his own) went to go see Levon Ter-Berdrossian to try and talk with him. His Holiness was turned away.

I now need to get to bed and will write more later....

It is now March 23rd, Easter, and it's 10:00PM. I sit in my apartment atop the hill of Gavar. My window overlooks the city of Gavar and I can't see much right now, but during the day I can see the Holy Mother of God Church in the center of the city. I'm quite tired from Holy Week and Easter Services, however I wish to finish this and get this out in the morning.

As I wrote in the previous lines from the elections, I realize how dreary and depressing they sound, however that's life in Armenia...you take the good with the bad. Hopefully I can share with you some of the good which has been going on in my life over the past month or so.

Over the past month or so I've been visiting the schools in Gavar. There are eight of them and each one has 300-500 students. I would typically meet with the oldest classes

(13-15yrs.). As part of Armenia's charter or constitution, the church has the ability to go into the schools and teach/preach. This may sound a little strange if we consider ourselves a democratic country with freedom of religion, however the Armenian Apostolic Church is the "official church" of Armenia. It was a smart move which gives us a little help when it comes to our struggle against the sects which run rampant, and it keeps them out of the schools as well. The sects are well financed by the non-Armenian churches and thus are able to sway our people into their religious belief's through money.

I usually show up and there are a group of 20-40 students who look scared to see me. It's not often they get to interact with a living breathing priest. Don't forget that there are over 10,000 inhabitants in the Gavar region and only one "Pastor", Fr. Knel Mardirossian who is my age who ministers to them. How can one person reach 10,000 uneducated parishioners? If tomorrow Gavar had 10 priests, I don't think it would be enough. The Soviet Regime did quite a number on our Nation. I digress...So when I show up, I ask them what I'm doing there amongst them? They have different responses and start asking questions about their faith and the Armenian Church. They have teachers who teach them "Armenian Church History" which is NOT religion, simply the facts of the Armenian Church. So when they have questions, unless the teacher is a faith-filled member of the Armenian Church, which is rare, they cannot answer the questions that the students have. After about an hour or so, I say that it's time for me to go. If they have other exams, I leave, otherwise I've stayed as long as 3 hours until the end of the school day which is around 1:00PM. I actually find it quite invigorating and I seldom get tired. I have to also add that many of the teachers from the school stop by during their free periods and ask questions themselves. Does this give you an idea of how starved our people are for information? The sad part is, is that the parents of these students did not have the opportunity themselves to learn about their faith. So there are no parents or grandparents who can answer or teach these children about their faith within the home.

Needless to say it is a very fulfilling experience living here in Gavar. Almost every day that I walk the streets of Gavar in my "Parekod" or black robe, those students who recognize me, will yell across the street, "Asdvadz Oknagan Hayr Soorp", or will approach me to bless them, or will turn to their parents or friends and say, "that's the priest that came to our class". Word's getting around that religion is hip!

The local Gavar TV Station has been following me around recently and doing some pieces on my ministry here, which is great for the community. The local people get to see what my ministry is about. The longest piece was regarding my weekly spiritual meetings in Hatsarad.

Ministry abounds everywhere I go. The stores, the local market and even in the taxi cabs. Gavar has a convenient Taxi Service which will take you anywhere in Gavar for 300 Dram, which is about \$0.97. It's quite reasonable and they have newer Volgas which are roomy. The cab drivers have recently gotten to know me.

One cute story I want to share, recently took place after I finished teaching in School # 5. It was a sunny day and I decided to walk down the hill back to the diocese. One of the

cab drivers saw me and motioned to me to get in. I understood that he wanted to give me a free ride (no pun intended). I motioned to him that I wanted to walk. He was insistent and I caved. When I got in the cab, he asked where I was going. I told him, the diocese. He got on the radio (to inform the dispatcher where he was and where he was going). He straightened himself up, and began to speak into the handset stating with great pride, “This is car 14. I’m taking our HAYR SOORP to the diocese”. Until a few weeks ago, the cab drivers would call me: Der Hayr, Soorp Hayr, Der Soorp, Srpazan Soorp, just about anything you can think of. Well, about 3 seconds later, there were four other cab drivers who chimed in on the radio and were saying, “Tell Hayr Soorp cab # 10 says hello” or “Say hello to Hayr Soorp from cab #26”...you get the idea. At least the cab drivers of Gavar now know the difference between a Der Hayr, Hayr Soorp and Srpazan...I’m getting somewhere (no pun intended).

Another aspect of my ministry here is to work with the clergy in the Kegharkounik Diocese. I recently spend numerous days with both Fr. Hagop (from Vartenis – about an hour away from Gavar) as well as with Fr. Nishan (from the city of Sevan). They are both eager to learn the Western ways of the church and apply them to their local situation. Fr. Nishan is newly ordained and quite willing to learn. Fr. Hagop is the priest from the sister parish program of the Eastern Diocese (connected with Sts. Joachim & Anne in Palos Heights). Both priests are wonderful examples of dedicated clergymen of the Armenian Church. They do what they can under the circumstances. They have to build communities out of nothing. There is hardly any semblance of a Parish Council, budget or local support. They are on their own. Their stipends come from the Sacraments they perform. That’s it folks! No fixed monthly stipend to work from. If they want a car, they have to buy and pay for it themselves. There is no “Diocesan Clergy Stipend” guideline which is followed here in Armenia.

I find that even I’m getting bored reading what I’ve written, so I’ll keep this short.

Holy Week was fine here in Gavar. I had my feet washed, not that they were dirty, but it was moving to have this take place here in Armenia. Today I celebrated a communion service in Hatsarad and distributed communion to about 150 faithful there. Following the service I had to bless the eggs and wine which the faithful brought. They bring colored (onion colored) Easter Eggs on a plate of wheat which has grown to be about 4-5”. It looks like healthy green grass. It’s an old tradition here.

After that I did four home blessings at homes in the village which have never been blessed. It’s quite an amazing experience to go walking down a village street (soil, not asphalt, littered with cow pies) and as you pass the homes, you can hear the cows and chickens within the walls of the villagers...(you can also smell the cows and chickens as well).

During Great Lent I tried to keep a strict fast. While I was recently in Yerevan I found Skippy Peanut Butter...both Smooth and Chunky. I bought one of each. To give you an idea of the economy, each jar cost about \$9.00. But when you’re fasting, it’s worth it!

Since the weather is starting to get warmer, the snow has begun to melt, which means lots of mud!! I got word today that even Lake Sevan has begun to thaw. Now that the weather is warmer, they have begun to ration the water so on a daily basis I don't know if they'll provide water in my apartment in the morning or in the evening. They seem to keep us in suspense without any notice of when it will come on or when it will go off. I had a warm shower this morning, but no water this evening. So we'll see what the morning will bring...there's always the 3 liter wash-up if nothing else...

As always, please forward onto whomever you see fit, and even those whom you do not see fit. I've found that the power of the Holy Sprit moves in ways we cannot understand.

Anyway, that's enough for now...until we meet again.

With love and prayers,

fr. Aren

P.S. The latest e-mails of mine can be found on the St. Gregory website at

www.stgregorychicago.org

You are free to call anytime (Armenia did not change time) Armenia is eight hours ahead of EST time.

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