
BISHOP SAHAK MASHALIAN OF ARMENIAN PATRIARCHATE IN ISTANBUL VISITS NEW YORK

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26.04.2019

Mirror Spector (25 April 2019)

On Sunday, April 7, Bishop Sahak Mashalian from the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul celebrated an Episcopal Badarak at St. Vartan Armenian Cathedral and delivered an inspiring sermon, delivered in both Armenian and English. Presiding over the occasion was Diocesan Primate the Very Rev. Fr. Daniel Findikyan.

His visit to America afforded an occasion to speak with Bishop Mashalian about his personal ministry and the state of the church in general.

A wise, respected, charismatic, deeply faithful, and compassionate clerical leader, Mashalian has served in his birthplace of Istanbul, in Jerusalem, and in Armenia as dean of the Gevorkian Theological Seminary. At present, he is the director of ecumenical and interfaith relations of the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople, and secretary of its Religious Council.

In his April 7 sermon, he paid tribute to the late Patriarch of Constantinople Archbishop Mesrob Mutafyan, who was mourned by Armenians worldwide. I pray that we elect a worthy patriarch, he declared.

Mashalian is himself one of six candidates to succeed the late Patriarch. An election to choose the next occupant of the patriarchal throne is scheduled to take place at the Istanbul Patriarchate following the 40-day mourning period for Patriarch Mutafyan, who passed away following a decade of illness and incapacitation.

Mashalian extolled the spiritual power of the late Patriarch during a luncheon-reception that followed the April 7 service. Instrumental in bringing the bishop to the Diocese and donating to the event were community benefactors Hirant Gulian and Harry Toufayan, who called the days presentation inspiring and uplifting.

When Gulian introduced Mashalian to the crowded Kavookjian Auditorium, the guests gave the visiting leader a lengthy and thunderous standing ovation.

The bishop had been invited to the Eastern Diocese to lead the Diocesan clergy in their annual Lenten retreats, meeting regionally from April 1 to 10, organized by the Primate, Fr. Daniel Findikyan, and Diocesan Vicar Fr. Simeon Odabashian.

As the retreat leader, Mashalian led three sessions on the theme, Prayer in the Personal Life of the Priest.

Bishop Sahak drew on his own experience of prayer and deep knowledge of the Bible and the Armenian Church's spiritual tradition, explained Fr. Findikyan. He addressed the distinctive challenges to prayer faced by priests: praying for a living, and praying for others. Ironically, this can sometimes negatively affect a priest's personal prayer life, which can become mechanical or cold.

The Primate continued: Srpazan addressed these issues head on with specific advice on how to revive and fortify our own prayer life. He spoke to us frankly and in a relaxed and fatherly way about a topic of great importance for our lives, faith, and work.

The retreat also focused on liturgical prayer, including the meditative Armenian service known as the Service for the Forgiveness of Penitents, which is conducted in monasteries on Holy Thursday morning, but is little-known in common parish life.

For Mashalian, the retreats were a very positive experience. We don't have this tradition in Jerusalem, Echmiadzin, or Bolis, he said. Retreats like this are more of a Western custom. But this gave me an opportunity to slow down a little while enjoying the spiritual, brotherly atmosphere. This is a positive influence of American religious culture, which I would like to spread to other parts of the Armenian Church.

During an exclusive interview, he spoke of his childhood in a family with Armenian parents, two sisters, and a grandmother whose 15-year-old brother Avedis had been killed during the Genocide.

Over this tragedy, my paternal grandfather became blind from incessant weeping, he revealed quietly.

During his childhood, the young Shaheen (the bishop's baptismal name, meaning bird of prey) found happiness in nature. I loved the sea very much. Summertime entertainments left vivid and lovely memories, and I always rejoiced when guests filled our home. There were special meals, laughter and jolly noise. I was a naughty boy as a youth and had many accidents which jeopardized my life, but I was mostly saved by sheer miracles.

God kept me for these days, I suppose, he said.

Growing up in a family of strong Armenian feeling and faith, he attended the Armenian Church from the age of five. It was natural to become a priest, he related, adding, My paternal grandmother prayed for me to become a vartabed.

The family lived in an area near Istanbul with no Armenian schools, so he read the Bible in Turkish. At university, he studied electrical engineering and philosophy, and decided to attend Christian meetings in a Protestant church, preaching in Turkish at age 18, and even helping to write a book on the existence of God at age 19. At age 20, he met Patriarch Shnork Kaloustian.

In 1982, he met the future Patriarch Mesrob Mutafyan, who in that phase of his life had come to Istanbul to start a youth movement, giving lectures in Armenian which young Shaheen attended, learning Armenian at age 20. Following a six-month stint in the army, he decided to become a celibate priest.

Eager to Do, Not Just Observe

Why did he take vows as a vartabed? I asked. His answer: Life is very short. Celibacy is more focused, dedicated. I wanted to understand things more deeply. I didnt want my life to be as an observer, but as a doer; to be more contemplative, contented.

Some of the difficulties of his work have been that we are in a church that is not complete, especially for celibates. We dont have a monastery, not enough accommodation, he lamented.

If I had a choice, I would be a teacher, a preacher in a monastery. But I have to do administrative work.

He said he considers the best elements of his work that of preaching, teaching, advising, listening, organizing, helping charities, and other activities which are essential parts of being a pastor. They have given me a rich human experience that for an attentive person becomes the source of wisdom, he said thoughtfully.

My relations have enriched me greatly, and my contacts with other people have balanced my intellectual flights and inner journey. In my work, I meet all kinds of people – both good and evil. It has greatly helped me to understand humankind.

Showing his humility and dedication, he said quietly: God changed my life. When I preach the word of God, I feel refreshed. To imitate Christ is the meaning of my life. You feel whole when you feel the grace of God.

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