

Holy Visit: Armenian spiritual leader speaks of hope

BY LARRY PALADINO
STAFF WRITER
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Frigid temperatures and blowing snow greeted Karekin I on his weekend visit to the area, but it didn't take long for the charismatic Supreme Patriarch and Catholics of All Armenians to warm the people and melt their hearts.

"You cannot imagine how delighted I feel today," the world-wide leader of the Armenian church said, in perfect English, to the many children and several hundred adults on hand for a short airport reception Friday. "I couldn't see the sun shining through the sky, but I could see the sun shining through your eyes."

St. John's Armenian Church,

Southfield, was his primary local stop. Residents of Birmingham, West Bloomfield, Farmington Hills and other metro communities greeted his arrival both at the airport and church.

Karekin is not only the religious leader, but also the cultural leader of those who trace their ancestry to Armenia, a land roughly one-quarter the size of Michigan, between the Black and Caspian Seas.

Armenia was dominated by the neighboring Turks, and later the USSR in this century. Recently, Armenia made news as site of a 1988 earthquake and a later war with neighboring Azerbaijan.

Harry Terzian, a West Bloomfield resident said, "Our faith has kept us going. The church has been the cement to keep our national culture together. This is very exciting."

A red carpet was to be rolled

out as Karekin got off philanthropist Alex Manougian's private plane at Detroit Metropolitan Airport, but the snow prevented that. However, the new *vechapar* of the Armenian Church — the church's equivalent of pope — received the red carpet treatment when he entered the private hangar of Manougian's Masco Corp.

Children handed him an armful of roses as he and his entourage entered the hangar.

A children's choir from Alex Manougian School, Southfield, sang the Armenian national anthem as Karekin took his seat on a small stage next to fellow cleric and the 94-year-old Manougian.

"This is the new sunrise of our Armenian people because you are the ones who will rebuild this nation and our church," the Supreme Patriarch told the children. "This is for the honor and glory of Armenia and the United States, where you enjoy all the freedoms anyone could have."

While the children filigreed, the several hundred adults from throughout the area, mostly of Armenian descent, stood enthralled

by the poignant words of the 63-year-old Lebanon native. There are more than one million people of Armenian descent living in this country, with some 30,000 living in the Detroit area.

Karekin was consecrated last April as head of the church to replace the deceased Vazken I, who had served for nearly 40 years.

"I have not come only to speak," Karekin said, "— but to listen." He spoke both in Armenian and English, two of the eight languages he speaks, then attended a brief reception that included a private interview with *The Observer* and *Eccentric Newspapers*.

That evening he spoke to a capacity crowd at St. John's Armenian Church in Southfield at an "Arashapart" service, which was followed by a banquet that included clerics from many faiths, including the Rev. Ronald Byars of the First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, and politicians including Eccentric-area U.S. Reps. Joseph Knollberg, R-Bloomfield Township, and Sander Levin, D-Royal Oak, and state Rep. John Jamian, R-Bloomfield

Hills, among the special guests.

Saturday morning, Karekin celebrated Mass at St. John's, gave a special address to Armenian children, then delivered a special message to young Armenian adults before his evening departure to Chicago.

Detroit was the fifth stop of a seven-city tour of the church's Eastern Diocese that began Jan. 10. He also will visit the Western and Canadian dioceses before returning to Armenia in late February.

Karekin's theme for his tour is: "A New Era — Church, Youth, Community," with his itinerary emphasizing interaction between himself and the younger generation.

"We are entering a new era in Armenian history, one that was dreamed of by our fathers for many centuries," Karekin said in his airport interview, as video cameras recorded the moment and patrons seemed absorbed by every word. "We now are masters of our land and servants of our church. We no longer follow a direction imposed on us."

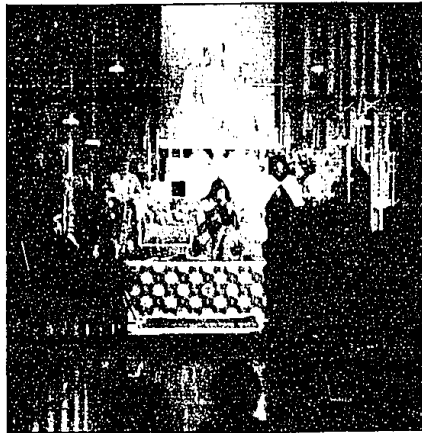
Religion in Armenia was kept alive underground during Soviet domination and official atheism. But 98 percent of Armenians belong to Karekin's church, he said, with a few others being Eastern Rite Catholics or Ecumenicals.

"The Armenian Church traces its roots to 301 A.D. when King Tiridates III was converted to Christianity by St. Gregory. The seat of the church since then has been Echmiadzin, a city near the capital of Yerevan."

"The Armenian Church is an independent Christian church, also known as Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church. It is not part of the Eastern Rite of the Roman Catholic Church, nor the Eastern Orthodox Church."

Armenia, "suffered 70 years of oppression and totalitarian rule," Karekin said. "Now, they are coming out of a state of stagnation, apathy, indifference, to anchor a new era of freedom and independence. This isn't an honor, but a duty for us. Democracy is not a privilege, it is a responsibility."

Historic visit: Karekin I, leader of the Armenian Church, visited St. John's Armenian Church in Southfield over the weekend as part of an extensive tour in the United States that particularly aims to involve young persons in ecumenical dialogue.



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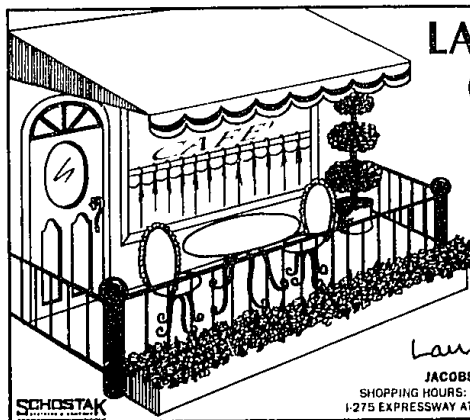
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