
Where to Invest Our Resources?

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When visiting Armenia for the first time, one's itinerary invariably includes a multitude of churches and monasteries. Modern Armenia is the land of churches. Historic Armenia in Anatolia was also a land of churches, with nearly 4,000 churches and monasteries. The Van Lake region alone had over 300 churches. The ancient city of Ani, dubbed the 'city of 1,001 churches,' contained 40 churches. We are proud of our churches, awed at their architectural beauty and intricate construction techniques, and amazed at their settings, perched as they are on inaccessible mountaintops.

Poetry reading and music at Sourp Giragos Church (Photo by Arif Temel)

Yet, this obsession with churches, when combined with our tragic history, makes me think, 'I wish we had fewer churches to visit, and instead many more victory monuments like Sardarabad. I wish our Armenian kings, princes, political leaders, and wealthy notables in the past had spent less time, talent, resources, and money on these churches, and instead more on fortifications and defense of our lands and territories.'

Delving into the reasons why these churches were built, it becomes apparent that it was not merely to meet the religious needs of the population; rather, it was to bring glory to the benefactor and perhaps help him 'ease into heaven.' Throughout history, our religious leaders have told benefactors that there is no better way to serve God, Jesus Christ, and Armenians than to build another church. Therefore, regardless of political, economic, or social realities and upheavals, Armenians continued to build churches, in both historic and modern Armenia, as well as in all corners of the world, often times disregarding other needs and priorities. This was the case in medieval Armenian kingdoms in historic Armenia, in Cilicia and Eastern Anatolia up until 1915, then in the diaspora, and now in modern Armenia.

When future generations look back on our 22 year-old Armenia and on the diaspora, they will see the challenges we faced in establishing a new country from the ruins of the Soviet Empire, while at the same time fighting the deadly Karabagh war, dealing with the closed borders and economic blockade by Turkey and Azerbaijan, the disastrous 1989 earthquake, and most critically, the continuing depopulation of Armenia due to a lack of employment and investment opportunities. And they will also see examples of vast church-building activities both in Armenia and the diaspora. In 1997, in the midst of urgent needs to reconstruct Armenia and Karabagh, Armenians found the money to build the St. Gregory Illuminator Cathedral in Yerevan. In 2001, diasporans in Los Angeles started the construction of a huge cathedral, while there was and is still scarce resources to keep Armenian schools open. In 2011, an oligarch donated all the funds to build the St. Hovhannes Cathedral in Abovyan, while the starving local population had almost emptied the town. Just last month, wealthy Russian Armenians opened a vast new cathedral in Moscow. The Etchmiadzin Catholicosate has become a Vatican-like complex continuously expanding with new buildings. The combined total expenditure on these large churches, as well as several other smaller church projects, easily exceeds \$200 million. These projects are not funded from revenue-generating sources or regular budgets, but instead, from one-time significant donations from benefactors, mostly from the diaspora. They will not generate any revenue, either, but

will create a continuing need for additional donations for upkeep and maintenance.

One wonders if these donations could be used for more worthwhile projects, such as helping Armenians remain in Armenia, or helping Armenians remain Armenian in the diaspora. There seems to be a widely accepted belief that neither the government nor the church is in touch with the concerns and needs of the common people. During a recent private audience with the Catholicos, he was asked what the Armenian Church can do to keep our youth more interested in the church and attached to their Armenian roots. His curt response was, 'This should be done at home and at school.' The much-anticipated Bishops Synod, assembled last month for the first time in 600 years, did not produce any tangible resolutions to address the concerns of the common Armenian, be it in Armenia or the diaspora. Most benefactors do not want to invest in Armenia, due to a fear that government corruption and required bribes will make their investment useless - and, in so doing, will fail in creating economic benefits for either themselves or the Armenian population. Unless the government takes concrete steps to change the valid perception that investments only end up in the hands of the governing oligarchs, there will not be much participation in the desperately needed economic growth of Armenia. In the meantime, church leaders will continue to preach the tried and true argument that the most beneficial donation a benefactor can make for himself and his family is giving to the church.

Of course, there are truly worthwhile church-building and restoration projects, with strategic and significant benefits for all Armenians. One example is the restoration of the Ghazantchetsots Church in Shushi, undertaken immediately after the Karabagh war. During the war, Azeris controlling Shushi used this historic church as an arms depot and military center, from which they continuously bombarded Stepanakert in the valley. They knew that Armenians would never attack or fire on their own church. When Armenian commandos victoriously entered Shushi in May of 1992, they found the church in shambles, burned, desecrated, and full of human excrement. Today, it stands as a symbol of victory against all odds.

The other critical restoration project is the total reconstruction of the Diyarbakir/Dikranagerd Surp Giragos Church in Turkey in 2011, the first time a church was restored as a functioning church (and not merely a museum) in historic Armenia after being destroyed in 1915. This project was strategically significant for a number of reasons: First, the restored church is concrete evidence against the denialist state version of history of the government of Turkey, as it demonstrates that there was a large Armenian presence in Anatolia before 1915. Secondly, it immediately became a religious and cultural center, helping the Turkish and Kurdish population of Turkey understand the realities of 1915 through media events, conferences, and concerts. Third, and for the first time since 1915, the foundation that restored the church started the process of reclaiming the properties belonging to the church (but confiscated after 1915) with several properties already secured through negotiations and courts. Fourth, the church became a living genocide memorial, attracting tens of thousands of Armenian visitors from the diaspora and Armenia annually, and starting a dialogue while fostering closer relationships with liberated Kurds and Turks who have faced the historical truths of 1915, and now demand their government to do so as well. Last but not least, the most significant outcome of the restoration of this church has been the emergence of 'hidden Armenians.' Islamized Armenians have started 'coming out,' visiting and praying in the church, getting baptized, participating in Armenian-language courses, helping build an Armenian museum on church grounds, contributing to the security and administration of the church, demanding acceptance of their real identity by the government, and so on. The church acts like a magnet

for these people. More than 100 people visit on average per day, coming from all over Anatolia, and not just Diyarbakir, to try to find their Armenian roots. New initiatives are underway to restore and reclaim other destroyed Armenian churches and monasteries in historic Armenia.

It is my sincere hope that future government and church leaders, as well as future benefactors, will decide more wisely on what projects to invest in, giving higher priority to the needs and wants of the Armenian people compared to their own.

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