

Armenian Genocide Service

How grateful I am to Bishop Vikan for the invitation to join you this evening. We now reflect together on one of the most tragic events of the 20th Century, the terrible slaughter of so many Armenians in what is aptly described as a genocide, one of a number of events in Armenian history that brought so many to martyrdom.

May I ask a question: were any of you present about 10 or 12 years ago when Catholicos Karekin I made his first visit to the Washington area? What a wonderful evening that was, and how privileged I was to be present and to help set in motion his request for a meeting with Pope John Paul II in Rome.

How many took part in the extraordinary, ecumenical service commemorating the visit of Catholicos Karekin II to Washington several years ago? That day lives vividly in my memory, and I was deeply honored to speak on behalf of the Catholic community in the United States at a service in the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in which representatives of the member churches of the National Council of Churches participated, under the leadership of the Rev. Dr. Robert Edgar, whose part in this evening's program I deeply appreciate.

Last September, Archbishop Khajag Barsamian and Bishop Vikan Aykazian, who were of tremendous assistance to us three years ago on the occasion of that visit, escorted a significant group of American Catholic bishops and priests in a weeklong visit to Armenia. Our bishops came from throughout the United States, and the priests included Monsignor Robert Stern, General Secretary of our Catholic Near East Welfare Association, which has special responsibilities with respect to the Eastern Churches, and Father Ronald Roberson, who, when Catholicos Karekin I asked to see the Holy Father, responded to my request that he help to facilitate the meeting.

Among the highlights of our pilgrimage to Armenia, in addition to the meetings with Catholicos Karekin, was the somber visit to the monument to the Armenian genocide. We stood in respectful silence in the monument itself; we toured in stunned silence the nearby museum to view the maps, artifacts and photographs that made vivid for us what transpired when so many Armenians were compelled to set forth on a march of no return.

The website for “Armenian genocide” is filled with quotations from the newsmakers of the last century, from Adolph Hitler, who used the forgetfulness of people about what had been inflicted on the Armenians as an excuse for his own efforts to annihilate the Jewish people, to the American presidents of the latter part of the century, who were very pointed in their comments on the great sufferings of the Armenian people in the latter years of the second decade of that century.

Bishop Vikan kindly sent to me a book about the American reactions to the genocide. Our Ambassador to Turkey, Mr. Henry Morgenthau, reported in detail on the tragic unfolding of events, and other Americans as well worked together to put the spotlight of public opinion on Armenia and on Turkey. It is clear that the Armenian genocide was much better known to the American public while it was occurring than some of the later genocidal efforts of the 20th Century.

(The other genocides, many of them remembered today, include at least these: the Ukrainian genocide of the 1930’s, when more than 10 million perished under Stalin; the horrors of the Holocaust, when Hitler tried his “Final Solution”; the Nigerian bloodbath, when tribal attacks upon the Ibos caused a million deaths; what occurred in Cambodia under Pol Pot; and the Rwanda terror of just ten years ago. There is the ongoing genocidal situation in Sudan, to which, thank the Lord, our own government and others are trying to resolve. In the year 2000, in my titular Church in Rome, Santa Maria degli Angeli, Michelangelo’s last major architectural project, a meeting of the English-speaking young people at World Youth Day took place. T