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Christian Witness in Armenia and the Middle East: The Case of Nagorno-Karabagh and Other Struggles for Integrity

As the churches of our Middle East region, extending all the way to Armenia, continue to witness hardships often in catastrophic dimensions, we as Christians are called to reflect on not simply **what** we are witnessing, but as Church **who** we are witnesses **to**. The first may be a matter of sociopolitical or economic reality, the second is clearly a spiritual calling.

The church falters if it only becomes a witness of the developments of the world, takes note, and simply makes adjustments, whereas it is called to rise to the level of active witnessing to the saving, oftentimes counterculture, gospel of Christ. The church also fails in the effort to witness to Christ internally, if it turns into a mere spectator and analyst of the external realities that surround it, both locally and globally.

What is our mission we should regularly ask? How is it related to Christ's mission and commission? Are we really sent out to the world today to bring the good news of Christ, or have we become the guardians of our own conveniences? Are we sent out, or self-satisfied? Are we sharing the good news or our news? Or are these statements and questions reduced to mere habits, symbols and soundbites of our Christian globalized identity?

On the Middle East

The Middle East, the cradle of many civilizations and the geographical birthplace of our Christian faith, continues to be severely pressured on many levels. Yet it struggles not only to maintain traditional faith but also to remain true to the church's central mission.

A major question I often challenge myself with is whether, in our experience of injury after loss and grief after war, we in the Middle East, should expect goodwill from external sources-perhaps seeking mercy and pity-or whether we, as the church, are also called to minister to the world from within our pain and weakness. After all, mission is about being sent out into a wilderness in the name of the Incarnate Lord for the sake of the Good News, rather than merely an expression of comfortable faith and its accessories.

The general mood of the Middle Eastern church is a mix of of deep-rootedness in a faith that values the reality of Jesus-both theologically and socially- and a historical connection to the very lands where Jesus walked and the apostles visited and evangelized. While this may

not be a welcome description for the post-modern mind, these lands also bear witness to martyrdom, forced uprootedness, and the costs of discipleship, from the biblical martyr Stephen in Jerusalem to the tragic losses of the present day.

The same disposition within Middle Eastern Christians carries pride in the rich history of a socio-religious Christian civilization that has impacted all parts of the world. It also reflects a determined, centuries-old coexistence with various religions and cultures, even when facing hegemony and oppression. This is especially true for Armenia, north of the geographical Middle East, where its Christian identity as a nation historically precedes many others. Unfortunately, this memory includes victimization, particularly evident during crises or wars that lead to emigration, forced assimilation, or genocide. The dramatic decline in the Christian population in the Middle East, as well as in the former Ottoman territories, is distressing to record. In each war of recent centuries, we see churches closed or demolished, land usurped, rights robbed, cultures annihilated, and regions emptied of their Christian populace. This reality is mirrored in Christian and non-Christian cultures and ethnic groups as well, evidenced by the presence of many Syriac, Chaldean, Armenian, Yazidi and Kurdish peoples.

For instance, had there been at least two million Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1914, and assuming an annual population growth of 1.5%, that number should have exceeded 30 million by now. Yet, genocidal acts, deportations, and forced Islamization have sharply and rapidly diminished these demographics. Such examples abound for Armenians and other ethnic and religious groups. The well-documented friendship between Swiss Protestant missionaries and Armenians stands as a testimony. The Swiss, primarily Swiss Reformed, have not only been aware of our plight but also witnesses to atrocities, as well as to the goodness of God during our tragic times.

The Swiss presence, in the memory of Armenians over the past century, is deeply rooted and appreciated, and a number of Armenian institutions in Lebanon witness to it up to these days.

A Personal Reflection

Allow me to share a simple personal example:

The home church I attend, founded in 1922 by survivors of the Genocide, is located in the Ashrafieh district of central Beirut. The sanctuary, built on a hill overlooking Beirut port, was completed in 1932. The church bell, which chimes every Sunday half an hour before worship, was donated in 1936 by the Swiss Friends of the Armenians, thanks to their devoted representatives, Karl Mayer and Jacob Künzler.

The bell rang for many years to alert people nearby that it was time to come to worship. Now, it rings to remind those who live far from the area that knowing the time is not sufficient,

and that the church space has an identity of faith, a history of witness over the ages, and it endures.

Our Middle Eastern Christian story is often characterized by an **in-betweenness** of East and West, positively understood as a necessary bridge-building role between the two. Our story also conveys a feeling of being misunderstood, even unsafe. In various parts of the East, Middle Eastern churches have been viewed as agents or extensions of a perceived infidel West, while in parts of the West, we have been regarded as insufficiently westernized in mentality, standards, outlook, or social value systems. Furthermore, the entire history of Armenia and the Armenians reflects a costly and sometimes convenient in-betweenness amidst invaders, colonial powers, and religions and empires from the east, west, south, and north of Armenia.

In our defense, we sometimes find ourselves seeking to prove to the local others—whether they are Muslims or Jews—that we are indigenous from the oldest times. We also strive to demonstrate to the West that the lands, countries, and populations of the Middle East each possess their own particularities, distinct identities, rights, and histories, independent of the West, while being similar enough yet different enough. Being a Christian in our region may feel like being an illustration, a case study from which lessons can be drawn. Therefore, from my perspective, our approach should not be naively romantic about others, whether they are our next-door Muslim neighbors or our distant Christian siblings. We must be owners and guardians of our integrity, even as we share deep spaces with some in the East and share virtuous ethos with others in the West.

On Pessimism

Moreover, our current Middle Eastern Christianity is subject to a high degree of pessimism regarding the future. In conference after conference globally, I am asked about the gradually decreasing numbers of Christians in our lands, including Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Palestine, Turkey, and Armenia. My typical response is to say that I am neither an ecclesiastical demographic statistician nor a fortune teller, and that if we are sent by the Lord to share the good news, it does not depend on social strategy or numbers, but rather on faithfulness in brokenness and being part of the warmth of the whole Body of Christ in all times and places. Naturally, we prefer larger numbers and wish our figures would not decline, but neither social stability nor numbers guarantee mission or faithfulness, nor do they promise Christian joy.

I confess there is fear among and around us, mingled with stubbornness and resilience, even though we often romanticize our losses while denying our pain and calling it faith.

What may be lost in the process is the joy of Christ's promises, as the sense of mission is often replaced by a mere struggle to survive and persist—proving that we are still present, exaggerating our social role, keeping our doors open, and allowing some light to shine, while primarily celebrating the glory of a Christian past. Humbly speaking, this diminishing image may also resonate with some European churches.

Let us remember that statehood is usually not a reality for Christians in our region, except partially in Lebanon. If we look north, we find a predominantly Christian Armenia surrounded by unfortunate circumstances—between an unrepentant perpetrator of genocide, namely Turkey; a committer of ethnic cleansing, Azerbaijan; an isolated, ultra-religious regime in Iran; and, of course, a Christian Georgia, which holds little significance for modern Armenia at this point in time. Armenia oscillates between its aspirations to be considered an extension of Europe while remaining close to the Russian orbit. With this context, I turn to the pressing case of what is known as Nagorno-Karabagh or Artsakh.

The Costly Case of Artsakh

Let us focus on Armenia, which traces its history back to the 9th century BC.

Today, the Republic of Armenia occupies only one-tenth of the size of historic Armenia. Over the centuries, large parts of the country have been lost, some regained, only to be lost again. The modern Republic now faces various existential threats, which I will not dwell on. Instead, I will focus on the mountainous region of Nagorno-Karabagh, known to Armenians as Artsakh. This region has garnered global attention since September 2020, when Azerbaijan’s army, accompanied by thousands of Middle Eastern Islamist mercenaries, marched in, leading to significant territorial loss, the deaths of at least five thousand young people, an extended period of blockade, and ultimately, in September 2023, the forced evacuation of nearly 120,000 people and the total loss of Artsakh. The argument presented was that this was Azeri land and part of its Republic, insisting that Armenians were separatists—an assertion conveniently echoed by aggressive neighbors and even some international media.

Why is Artsakh significant in Armenian history, and what lessons should we learn?

Artsakh is one of the 15 regions or districts of historic Armenia and has several unique characteristics. Unlike the other 14 regions, it has enjoyed relative geographic seclusion within the Armenian Highlands. This seclusion has made it less penetrable and vulnerable to foreign invasions compared to the more accessible regions of the Highland. In fact, after Gregory the Illuminator spread Christianity to this easternmost part of the Highland in the fourth century, and after Saint Mesrob Mashtots and his disciples taught the indigenous Armenians of Artsakh to read and write in Armenian with the Armenian alphabet, this region gradually established a form of political autonomy. It developed its own political leadership while maintaining strong cultural and religious ties to the Armenian mainland. Over time, it became an impassable citadel that fostered distinct dynamism, developing its own autonomous dialect, cuisine, culture, mindset, and ethnography.

Compared to the other 14 districts of the Armenian Highlands, Artsakh was able to develop with fewer interruptions and maintained a remarkable sub-identity while preserving many of the most characteristic features of Armenian culture, including rug-weaving, ethnographic music and songs, a rich dialect, cuisine, and architecture.

Additionally, the socio-cultural and ethnographic output of Artsakh has been relatively well preserved. It has maintained its integrity more than any other district in the Armenian Highlands. I cannot emphasize enough that Artsakh has long been the most intact, untouched, and least 'tarnished' district in the Armenian Highlands.

If we delve deeper into the history of the past few centuries, we uncover the roots of the issues that have emerged in recent decades, particularly over the last four years.

Due to the escalating power struggle between the Ottoman Empire and the resurgent Persian Empire from the mid-16th century onward, Artsakh became a contested territory. As a result, Artsakh changed hands between these two powers; it was closer to the Persian Empire but was also viewed as a strategically desirable eastern area for the Ottomans. Artsakh fell into Persian hands in the early 17th century and remained so until the emergence of a third power, Tsarist Russia, which entered this territorial contest. In the first quarter of the 19th century, Russia, which controlled large parts of Transcaucasia, implemented an administrative division of the area based on geographic rather than religious or ethnographic features, naming the regions after their principal cities.

It was only after the fall of Tsarist Russia and the establishment of the three Caucasian republics that territorial disputes erupted. Turkey, having lost World War I, was not strong enough to defend and support Azerbaijan as it does today. Additionally, the region was partially under British control, who had their eyes on the Baku oilfields. Between 1917 and 1923, territorial disputes arose between Georgia and Armenia, as well as between Armenia and Azerbaijan, regarding contested areas such as Nakhichevan, Karabagh, and Zangezur. These disputes persisted until Soviet Russia imposed its authority on the region and established communist rule. Nariman Narimanov, the leader of Soviet Azerbaijan, welcomed the Sovietization of Armenia and announced that Azerbaijan would return the territory of Karabagh to Soviet Armenia. However, this decision was later overturned by Stalin, who ordered that Karabagh remain within Azerbaijan as an autonomous political entity after its lowlands were ceded to Azerbaijan. Consequently, Artsakh became a mountainous territory of Karabagh within Azerbaijan.

Now to 2020 and the following years marked by the loss of Artsakh. While following the developments and discussing the issue with everyday people, politicians, and some church leaders in Europe, I often received responses grounded in “**territorial integrity**” and the idea that, according to the current world order, Artsakh is part of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Therefore, any rights for self-rule, autonomy, independence, or a special status were deemed inapplicable. Territorial integrity became the opportunistic keyword—and ultimately the justification for ethnic cleansing.

I then ask: if almost three thousand years of indigenous identity, cultural homogeneity, language, and life on the same land are not sufficient to establish a people’s rights, what would be?

Much of the so-called civilized world urged the Azerbaijani government, which imposed a dehumanizing blockade on what remained of Artsakh, to negotiate, thus equating the perpetrator and the victim. While the world sided with Azerbaijan, they attempted to send relief supplies to Artsakh instead. Yet, more troubling was the international emphasis on the notion of territorial integrity, as mentioned.

Let me take you to early 2023, when I posted a question on social media that I would like to repeat here. I said:

“The next time the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan is used against the will of the people of Artsakh to live freely, we should remind them of other fundamental aspects of integrity: historical integrity, political integrity, human integrity, national integrity, cultural integrity, social integrity, integrity of memory, and the integrity of international morals.”

I continued:

“The blockade on Artsakh should be lifted immediately, but the story must not end there. The free world should recognize the will of the Armenian people in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabagh) to live according to their dreams, their right to self-determination, and integrity on their historical land.”

Unfortunately, what followed was the forced evacuation of the entire population, convenient neglect by regional countries, and the silence of world powers, all in the name of “territorial integrity.” This old understanding effectively translates to “might is right.”

Where is the question of Artsakh now? Where are the prisoners of war and the detained Armenian leaders of Artsakh? Why should a few hundred thousand people be denied the right to their homeland of thousands of years? Why should the world tolerate the displacement and suffering of these people? Some might argue that this is a minor issue compared to the world’s greater challenges. Yet it remains a critical reminder of a just cause lost in the maze of global interests.

The world’s attention is on the so-called ‘sanctity’ of political maps, alliances, and once in a while humanitarian assistance, followed by emigration routes of mercy. But then whole populations’ integrity and dignity is gone down the drain.

On Integrity

It seems to me that a major ethical test for the world, including the church, lies in how we define and uphold integrity. A fundamental failure for both, however, is the selective adoption of one form of integrity at the expense of others.

The same principle applies to all crises in the Middle East, indeed to all regions and all times.

Various forms of integrity should overlap, complete, and reinforce each other. This is also a Christian calling. We cannot choose certain forms of integrity for convenience or ideology while ignoring others. Just as human rights are indivisible and inseparable, so are the aspects of integrity. We should not hide behind a narrow, fleeting concept of territorial integrity alone.

How Integrity Needs Integrity

- If moral integrity and ethical standards are taught, but personal integrity is disregarded,
- If professional integrity is celebrated, but intellectual honesty is compromised,
- If territorial integrity is enforced, but cultural heritage is neglected,
- If social justice is promoted, but spiritual coherence is neglected,
- If financial integrity is prioritized over environmental sustainability, ...

...then what we have is a shallow ethics, a weak spirituality, and an opportunistic politics—all in the name of “integrity.”

Here, integrity loses integrity. And on that cross, Christian integrity is crucified.

While I may seem to have strayed from the Middle East and Armenia, in reality, I haven't. Don't most crises and conflicts result from abandoning integrity in one form or another? Isn't “partial integrity” just a new name for sin—a distancing from God?

Christ, Our Integrity

True integrity, both as an inner spiritual gift and as an outward expression of truth, embodies a Christian understanding of fullness of life and the fullness of God in us. It is Christ's love in action, that we “may have life, and have it in all its fullness.” This in other words, this same fullness also denotes Christian integrity.

As Ephesians 3:16-19 says: “That according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

These may sound like ideals, but I believe they are also core to our Christian mission and self-understanding. We are not whole without the love of God, and the love of God cannot be manifest in the absence of a sense of wholeness that is also known as integrity.

Returning to the heart of this discussion, what we witness around the world is deeply painful. Unfortunately, we become numb to its horrors and the suffering it brings. Yet these horrors are not only the visible wars and invasions. They include the misuse of moral language to manipulate, the use of religion to pacify, and the distortion of philanthropy and goodness to exert control. They're also seen in personal lives: the fixation on individual gain over community, and satisfaction of ego over self-giving. These subtler forms of violence lie at the root of much evil in the world.

We may respond to these wrongs in some way, and many of us do. Our statements matter, our solidarity is meaningful, and our humanitarian actions are critical. But that is not enough. We must hold fast to a higher and lasting Christian integrity, nurtured by faithful discipleship and living out the love of God in the Christ who exemplified, taught and enabled a wholistic sense of integrity.

The Walk Together

In cases of ongoing oppression and victimization, we must keep memory alive. The world cannot leave small nations in hostile regions to fend for themselves. The same holds true for endangered communities, particularly Christian communities at risk of losing institutions, dignity, and basic support.

We must not be only witnesses **of** suffering, but witnesses **to** Christ's love and the fullness of God in us. This is the higher calling. And how do we express this fullness through integrity in the ways we discussed?

As the apostle says, I am convinced that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. This love should move us to walk closely with others—sharing in their lives, supporting them hand in hand.

I learned long ago that to truly understand, support, and uplift others, we must walk beside them, and often hand in hand. Close enough to hold their hand when they stumble, to keep pace when they go too fast or slow.

We sing of Jesus walking with us, or of us walking with Jesus, the Incarnate. Our witness to His love is most powerful when we walk together, united as one Body, guided by Christ, our Head.

In this mission, we may need your support in our region—in Armenia, Lebanon, and beyond. But in turn, we are also called in our region to walk with you and support you in your journey, sharing our unity in the Church.

Just as the church bell rings in Beirut, a gift from you, may my words today ring as a reminder of our fellowship and our common mission. Our witness will never be exhausted in

this world, no matter what the circumstances, but will draw us together into eternal life, ringing joyfully in our words, deeds, and teaching—all in honor of Christ, **our integrity**. AMEN.

PH