

On being ordained Acolyte in the Armenian Church

Address to Conference of Armenian Church Leaders 1996

by Seta Simonian Atamian

I appreciate the opportunity to tell you about my experience of becoming an ordained acolyte of the Armenian Church. It's a subject that's very near and dear to my heart.

I first became active at St. Andrew Armenian Church in Cupertino, CA when I moved half an hour away from home and attended Santa Clara University. The church was only 10 or 15 minutes away from school, so I attended weekly and became active in the choir, in the ACYO, and in other church related activities. It was a small, warm and cozy community with lots of people in my own age bracket.

As time went on, every Sunday when I sang in the choir, I looked up at the altar and I couldn't help but notice how many of my male peers were serving at the altar. I was envious and felt that, I too, had the ability and the calling to serve. After all, I spoke and read Armenian (unlike many of them) and I was even taking religion classes at my Jesuit University. They were friends, and at church these young men participated in the same bible studies that I did, went to the same retreats that I attended, volunteered in projects as I did, and some were even members of the ACYO the year that I chaired it. Yet I, self-imposedly, felt confined to singing in the choir because of my gender.

My big break had its beginning at a workshop at one of our annual religious retreats led by our own Fr. Vazken Movsesian and Yetttem, CA priest, Fr. Vartan Kasparian. One of the participants of the workshop asked why it was that women couldn't serve at the altar in the Armenian Church. Both priests looked at each other and agreed that there was no "official" reason why women couldn't participate in the divine liturgy at the altar. Fr. Vazken even went one step further and said that he would offer deacon's training to anyone who was interested. I couldn't believe my ears. After the workshop was over I approached Fr. Vazken and asked him if he was serious about the offer that he had extended. He said of course he was. So I told him that I was interested in being trained.

And with that the work began. I started attending the weekly deacon's trainings that Fr. Vazken held. I was happy to see that I was welcomed without resentment to the group of 5 or 6 young men already engaged in the task of being trained. Since they already served at the altar on a regular basis, they were way ahead of me, and they were very helpful in getting me up to speed. Fr. Vazken's goal was to have officially ordained servers at the altar, and since none of us were ordained, this was the goal we were all working towards.

Over the course of about a year, as we trained, Fr. Vazken slowly educated the congregation and the community with articles and talks about women's role in the church. Of course, during this time, my fellow classmates continued to serve at the altar while I waited in the choir.

Finally it all came to fruition on December 9, 1984. We all received the sacrament of ordination from the Archbishop Vatche Hovsepien, primate of the Western Diocese. There were seven of us in all. It was the day we were all waiting for. My presence and participation in the ordination was very matter of fact. There were no bells and whistles being blown by wither the clergy or the congregation over a woman being ordained. It was as if it was a common everyday occurrence. The real test came the following Sunday when I could finally be on the altar. It was a wonderfully spiritual and fulfilling experience. I really appreciated the opportunity to be up there and serve. In general the congregation was very supportive with positive comments and encouragement. Of course there are always some people who are uncomfortable with change, and that's to be expected, but eventually, as the novelty wore off, even those people came around. I never felt like a freak because I was supported by Fr. Vazken, my friends and family. I felt entitled to being there. Which is a good feeling to have in one's church!

I continued to serve on Sundays as well as assist at weddings, funerals and baptisms, until the summer of 1986 when I graduated from SCU and moved to the Boston area. Once in Boston, I of course, I immediately wanted to continue my calling to serve I felt at home in the Armenian Church and thought it would be a haven in a new and strange city. I knew that I would be a novelty to the Eastern Diocese. After all I hadn't heard of any other female acolyte anywhere in the country. I had hoped that I would serve as an encouragement for other interested women on the east coast to come forward. But I wasn't prepared for what was ahead. Apparently the Archbishop of the Eastern Diocese did not share the views of the Archbishop of the Western Diocese, of the same church, ordained by the same Catholicos. I never dreamed that my ordination wouldn't be recognized by churches in the east.

At the first church that I went to I was invited to sing in the choir. I had done that since I was twelve and I felt I needed to continue the work that I had begun. At the second church I went to the priest was welcoming and sympathetic to my situation. He invited me to participate in the morning service litanies and allowed me to hold candles at special off-the-altar processions or ceremonies. It was a lot less than I'd been doing at St.Andrew's but it was a start and I was running out of churches to go to. This time, however, I did feel the penetrating gaze of the people and the resentment of long time morning service servers. And yet again when the divine liturgy started I was back to the choir. I was back to square one. I really could appreciate that the pastor's hands were tied, and he really couldn't operate outside of the Primate's value system.

It was a huge congregation and I hardly knew anybody. I felt that I couldn't fight the battle by myself. After all I had a new life and career to start. Slowly I stopped even attending church because it felt empty. Something had slipped away. I no longer got out of it what I used to get, or give for that matter.

Now as a mother I'd like for my children to learn and participate in the rich tradition of our church, but I wrestle with the idea of exposing my daughter to a church that is patriarchal and inconsistent. I don't want her to feel alienated or inferior as a female. I also don't want my son to think that our family thinks that that is acceptable.

As my mentor Fr, Vazken would say, "the Church is not some abstract thing 'out there,' but it is the living (changing, growing) body of Jesus Christ. We make up that body together and each of us has a role to play in the body. Some are eyes, others mouths, others hands, legs and still others are called to serve."

I have faith and hope that Armenian women (and men) will come together and empower themselves to make an impact on the leaders of their church, so that women who feel called to serve may have the benefit of the sacrament of ordination.

And maybe someday when my daughter goes to church and looks up at the altar she won't get a pang of longing for wanting to do the seemingly impossible. She will know that her options are open to her and that her church realizes that we all deserve the same opportunities to serve and that we are all equal in the eyes of God.