

Armenian church is rebuilding, reaching out

Leader touring the U.S. will visit an Armenian church in St. Paul and the University of St. Thomas.

By ANNE MARIE IDDINS Special to the Star Tribune

ETCHMAIDZIN, Armenia - During 70 years of Soviet domination, Armenian parents and grandparents baptized their children in secret, fearing reprisals.

The Soviets left Armenia in 1991, and today in the holy city of Etchmiadzin, baptism parties grace the flowered grounds of the Mother See, the Armenian Apostolic Church's Vatican. On a late summer Sunday, young girls in puffy pastel dresses waited outside the 18th-century baptistery, where more than 100 people are received into the church daily.

Soon baptisms will take place in a new building, one of three going up near the Mother Cathedral, parts of which date to the fourth century. The new chapel will have a marble pool where adults can be baptized by full immersion.

The construction is an example of how the Armenian Church is revitalizing itself after centuries of political strife, genocide at the hands of the Turks in 1915, a massive earthquake in 1988 -- and decades of Communist repression.

"During the Communist years, it wasn't forbidden to enter the seminary, but if you did, the next day you would be shipped to Siberia," the Very Rev. Zaven Yazichyan said. "At the time we had one Catholicos and 10 clergy for all Armenians. Now we have 20 to 25 graduating the seminary each year."

Just as the church is rebuilding its physical base, it also is reaching out to help Armenians around the world find their heritage. On Sept. 30, Karekin II, the Catholicos of all Armenians, began a monthlong visit to the United States. The Catholicos, the temporal leader of the Armenian church, will make 18 stops in 12 states, including next Thursday and Friday in the Twin Cities, where he'll visit St. Sahag Armenian Church in St. Paul and the University of St. Thomas.

He will participate in a service at St. Sahag at 7 p.m. Thursday, which will be followed by a public reception at 8 p.m. Karekin II also will give an address and receive an honorary degree at 10:30 a.m. Friday at the University of St. Thomas School of Law in the Schulze Grand Atrium on the university's downtown Minneapolis campus. (For more information about the events, call 651-603-1940 or go to www.saintsahag.com.)

The church's outreach is important because most Armenians live outside the country, including about 1,150 Armenians or people of Armenian descent in Minnesota. They are part of a diaspora that has gone on for centuries.

Minnesota Armenians opened St. Sahag's in 2001, a symbol of the church's renewed role in the lives of Armenian-Americans.

"We have a small congregation, but lots of talent," said Sam Charchian, chairman of the parish council. "We're continuously growing."

Elyssa Karanian, 22, an Armenian-American who has studied the role of the church, believes that the church plays a larger cultural role in diasporan communities than in Armenia itself.

"I think the years of Soviet rule did quite a bit to diminish the church's role in Armenia," said Karanian, who lives and works in the capital city of Yerevan.

Added Sister Katarina Schuth, Endowed Chair for the Social Scientific Study of Religion at the St. Paul Seminary: "In Armenia's case, I think [religion] is critical to help keep people together and bring them closer." ■