

Community

Fr. Vasken Movsesian speaks about Rwanda at ANC-PA event

by **Adrineh Gregorian**

GLENDALE, Calif. — The room is filled with young professionals gathered to hear Father Vasken Movsesian speak about his trip to Rwanda and In His Shoes Ministry's work on the present crisis in Darfur, Sudan.

The events in Rwanda and Sudan occurred, and are still occurring, in a different time and different region of the world, but the similarities to the Armenian Genocide are overwhelming.

"The only difference is in the color of our skin," says Father Vasken.

The psychological impact on survivors is color blind and is the same regardless of when the atrocities occurred. It is Father Vasken's mission with his In His Shoes initiative to mobilize people to address issues in their own lives, their own communities, and people who share their plight.

Father Vasken emphasized that the Armenian Genocide isn't an issue that just happened in the past, but that the same injustice is happening today. It's up to our generation to use the past to initiate social change on a global level.

Wednesday's lecture was the first installment in the Armenian National Committee's Professional Network's Lecture Series.

Board member Sevag Demirjian emphasized the relevance of these events: "We are presenting this series to educate the Armenian community through the world's leading intellectuals and professionals, and to promote new ideas for the leaders of our community; all in an environment perfect for constructive networking with like-minded individuals."

Why Rwanda?

Father Vasken's message promotes the cross-cultural connection between groups who have suffered the same injustice. As a grandson of a genocide survivor, the magnitude of witnessing grave suffering resonated in him and led him to the small central African country of Rwanda.

Between April and June 1994, an estimated 800,000 Rwandans were killed in the span of 100 days. On April 6, 1994, Rwandan President Habyarimana's plane was shot down by a surface-to-air missile as it approached Kigali airport. Responsibility for the assassination has never been confirmed, but the existing tension between the majority Hutus and minority Tutsis triggered conflict and led to the eventual ethnic cleansing of the Tutsi people.

Like in the case of the Armenian Genocide, the international community failed to react effectively and horrific acts of inhumanity persisted as the rest of the world turned a blind eye.

Rwanda is currently an impoverished country dealing with the aftermath of genocide. The United Nations has recognized this tragedy as genocide and the International Criminal Tribunal of Rwanda was established to bring perpetrators to justice. Yet, the country continues to suffer the psychological consequences. Over 15 percent of the population are orphans and the number of people infected with HIV/AIDS is staggering.

In 2006 University of Southern California Professor Donald E. Miller and his wife Lorna Touryan Miller, authors of *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide*, invited Father Vasken to join them on a trip to Rwanda for ten days in an effort to make connections between their mutual experiences.

With his vividly delivered stories, Father Vasken had the audience on the brink of tears and bursting out laughing.

"Imagine what it would be like to go to Armenia after the Genocide?" Father Vasken posed to the audience, "This is what Rwanda looked like. A country that has just been through a genocide."

Upon landing in the capital city of Kigali, they went straight to the Genocide Museum. "Genocide is so real in their lives," he recounted with fervor.

Inside the museum, Father Vasken saw stories and pictures of the Rwandan Genocide. The stories that he read were all too similar to the Armenian story. Story after story he read and wept, thinking, "What kind of world do we live in if these stories keep repeating." These were the same stories of 1915 happening in 2006.

Father Vasken told a museum guide that he is the grandson of genocide survivors. She asked "Which genocide?" And he promptly responded "The Armenian Genocide." She then eagerly led him to the second level where there were two rooms dedicated to the Armenian Genocide. There, in the middle of Africa, Father Vasken saw what the past was about and what direction the future should be.

In Rwanda, Father Vasken saw that genocide survivors have dignity. "There are people all around the world experiencing the same thing we have and our grandparents have," he added. The people he met were smiling about small things in life that add joy and excitement. And he started seeing Armenia — his expressions were too similar — and what Armenians can learn from the Rwandan experience.

Fellow ANC-PN Board member and attendee Teni Hovanissian had the following impressions: "Despite the differences in outward appearances, cultures, and lifestyles we are essentially all the same." She went on to say, "We grieve the same, cope the same, and reach out to one another the same."

Why this is important

Father Vasken's message is simple: part of our healing is reaching out to other groups who are suffering the same fate. He's asking Armenians to use their history to promote positive social change in the present. Along with efforts to educate, pass legislation, and remember the Armenian Genocide, the Armenian community has the power to prevent genocide internationally.

He advocates that Armenians can make an impact globally by directing energy toward ending injustice in all parts of the world.

Father Vasken is the director of In His Shoes, a nonprofit faith-based organization created in response to the Armenian Genocide. It was established on the Christian principle of repaying evil with good. In His Shoes believes that people who have suffered evil have a responsibility to others, especially those who share struggles. As such, they organize rallies, information programs, and fundraisers for victims of inhumanity.

Father Vasken encourages Armenians to start leveraging the power that's been given to them by the Genocide and Christianity and promotes the idea that non-violent revolution is possible. "We can be on the forefront speaking out against genocide," he says. "Speaking out against other genocides. Because certainly, we have a lot to give."



Fr. Vazken meets with orphans outside at Solace Ministries in Rwanda. Photo: Don Miller.



One of the mass graves, with the background of Rwandan Capital Kigali, a decade after the Genocide.



The challenge to end Genocide continues with members of In His Shoes Ministries lined up on the Golden Gate Bridge in a gesture of solidarity.

Success with Darfur initiatives

Father Vasken and his ministry have given a lot and his efforts have not gone unnoticed. With his campaign against genocide in Darfur, through Emergency in Darfur, he has seen action turn to results.

On September 25, 2006, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a bill barring California state pension funds from investing in companies with interests in Sudan amid international pressure over the Darfur crisis. Father Vasken stood beside actors George Clooney and Don Cheadle as Gov. Schwarzenegger signed the monumental bill.

This is testimony that if Armenians protest against the crimes in Darfur, they have the power of preventing the injustices perpetrated on their people from ever happening again anywhere else in the world.

The power of forgiveness

Father Vasken's teachings are simple yet profound in their effect. "We have not forgotten what happened to the Armenians and there are multiple ways of serving justice. I present the nonviolent method of reaching justice."

"Let's strike a pose of forgiveness," proposes Father Vasken. "It is our genocide and we have an obligation to use Armenia's past to touch the world and the future."

He recently brought two Rwandan genocide victims to Los Angeles for a forum at All Saints Church

to teach about forgiveness. Father Vasken adds, "Once we can start dealing with our genocide and forgive our situation, not the Turks, we can use our efforts to help the Rwandans and Darfur."

Father Vasken also conducts retreats to teach young people about Dr. Martin Luther King's approach to use nonviolent, passive methods to bring about social justice.

He eventually wants to organize missions between Armenian and

Rwandan youth. There is a lot to be learned from cultural exchange and mutual understanding.

These outside-the-box methods are evidence that Father Vasken definitely walks the walk on an unpaved road and is leading the way for the new generation to initiate global change. His success rate is proof that it can work. ☞

connect:
InHisShoes.org

MILESTONES

Rita Deukmedjian, Pasadena High valedictorian, will attend UCLA

PASADENA, Calif. — Rita Deukmedjian will attend the University of California in Los Angeles this autumn, having graduated as valedictorian of Pasadena High School's class of 2007. Ms. Deukmedjian made the decision to attend UCLA after being accepted at a number of prestigious universities.

The National Honor Society and the California Scholastic Federation member achieved a 4.0 grade-point average in every one of her four years in high school.

Her many awards include the Academic Achievement Award and the Mamigonian Award, a Knights of Vartan scholarship, the St. Sarkis Church Sepetjian Scholarship, and the Armenian Relief Society Scholarship. Rita is an active member of Pasadena's St. Sarkis Church, singing in its



Rita Deukmedjian.

choir, leading youth groups, and teaching Sunday school.

She is the daughter of Mrs. Aznive Deukmedjian, and granddaughter of Mrs. Sara Shahnazarian. The student gives particular credit to her mother, who having lost her husband when Rita was a young child, raised her daughter alone with great dedication. ☞