

Fresno Armenian leaders praise Pope Francis' acknowledgment of genocide

By Rory
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Marchers remembering Armenians massacred earlier in the century walk towards City Hall up the Mariposa Mall.

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Here are upcoming events organized by the Armenian Genocide Centennial-Fresno Committee:

- April 17 and 18, 7:30 p.m.; April 19, 2 p.m., “Nine Armenians,” a play by Leslie Ayvazian, Fresno Art Museum’s Bonner Auditorium.
- April 23, 5 p.m., Requiem Service, Ararat Cemetery’s Memorial of the Unknown Armenian Martyr, 1925 W. Belmont Ave.
- April 24, 9 a.m., Flag Raising Ceremony, Fresno City Hall, 2600 Fresno St.
- April 24, time to be announced, Monument Unveiling, Fresno State Maple Mall.
- April 24, 7 p.m., Traditional Community Commemoration, St. Paul Armenian Apostolic Church, 430 S. First St., and Pilgrim Armenian Congregational Church, 3767 N. First St.
- April 25, 7:30 p.m., Fresno Philharmonic Concert, “Witness & Rebirth: An Armenian Journey,” Saroyan Theatre.

For a complete listing of events, go to: agcfresno.org.

Pope Francis’ remarks urging the world to recognize the slaughter of Armenians by the Ottoman Turks a century ago as “the first genocide of the 20th century” drew unanimous praise Sunday from several prominent leaders of Fresno’s Armenian community.

“Today’s papal remarks speak from our heart in not only advocating for Armenians but also recognizing that atrocities like genocide remain a point of concern,” said Berj Apkarian, who was named an Honorary Consul of the Republic of Armenia in October.

“Denial of the Armenian genocide is the foundation for current and future genocides,” Apkarian added. “Genocide is continuing in the Middle East. Unless the world says this is unacceptable, this will continue to be a tragic chapter in history.”

April 24 marks the 100th anniversary of the start of the genocide. By its end in 1923, an estimated 1.5 million Armenians — two-thirds of the population — were dead, many children left orphans.

Apkarian, who is also a deacon at Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church in downtown Fresno, said the Pope’s statements were mentioned during Holy Trinity’s morning service and were probably echoed throughout the Armenian spiritual community.

Rob Saroyan, a leader of the Valley Children’s Healthcare Foundation and distant relation of author William Saroyan, said the impact of the Pope’s statements goes far beyond the Armenian community.

“As an important spiritual leader in the world, this recognition (of the genocide) means a lot to humanity,” Saroyan said. “It’s not just Armenians, but everyone who suffers or is persecuted. It says a lot about the Pope, and God bless him for having the courage to do the right thing.”

Mark Shirin, on the executive council of the Western Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church, which oversees about 35 Armenian churches in California and other western states, also called the Pope’s statement courageous.

“I was amazed at the courage of the Pope to call it what it is — a spade’s a spade,” Shirin said.

Shirin said he agreed with the Pope’s belief that if the world had been more responsive during the Armenian genocide, the subsequent genocides of the 20th Century may not have occurred.

“The next step in this process is asking for reparations — demands for lands and property lost,” Shirin said.

Shirin wasn't surprised by Turkey's swift decision to recall its diplomatic ambassador from Vatican City shortly after the Pope's statement Sunday morning.

“Whenever a country recognizes the genocide, they (Turkey) have done the same thing,” he said. “They sever diplomatic relations temporarily, then reestablish them.”

Apkarian said he's saddened by the United States' refusal to do as the Pope has done and officially acknowledge the genocide.

“Turkey has been a NATO ally and close friend of the United States, and we hide behind that shield,” he said. “Recognizing that the U.S. is the champion of human rights, fighting inequalities and democracy, it saddens me that the greatest nation in the world remains silent on the issue.”

Saroyan agreed.

“It's surreal that we even have to question a genocide,” he said. “It's sad that some people are surprised by announcements like the one made by the Pope.”

Sergio La Porta is a professor of Armenian studies at Fresno State and president of the Armenian Genocide Centennial Committee. This committee seeks to bring awareness and education to the community about the Armenian genocide and will soon unveil a stone monument at Fresno State commemorating the tragedy.

Like the other men, La Porta echoed the Pope's concern about atrocities now being committed against Christians in the Middle East.

“Many (Christians) are suffering the same torture and displacement as the Armenians did 100 years ago,” La Porta said.

Saroyan added: “The way people are suffering today for their belief and faith in Christ — it reminds me of the stories I heard growing up.”

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