

**Bishop Daniel Findikyan**

Title: **Primate**

Company: **Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern)**

Location: **New York, NY, USA**

Affiliation: **AGBU Camp Nubar**

Bishop Daniel Findikyan  
inside the St. Nersess  
Armenian Seminary in  
Armonk, NY.

# THE FEARLESS SHEPHERD

*Bishop Daniel Findikyan is on a crusade  
to face human crises with courage*

**S**till in the grips of a double-edged public health and financial crisis impacting the 63 parishes and mission communities under his leadership, Bishop Daniel Findikyan, Primate of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern), decided to take on a national moral crisis of equal urgency: systemic racism in America. As the Summer of 2020 saw the spread of mass protests across the country, the Texas-born, New York-raised clergyman had a compelling message to share with Armenian-Americans during an ice-breaking virtual town hall on *Racial Injustice and Responsibility*. In his view, the key to ending the injustices of America's proverbial original sin could be distilled to one word: courage.

Shortly thereafter, graciously sitting

down for one more in a recent spate of Zoom interviews about leading in a crisis, the Bishop elaborated: "We think of racism as a social-political issue. Then we think of the biblical issues of sin, forgiveness and reconciliation, eternal life, salvation and God's love as something different. But the two are intimately connected. And that's something that we need to be talking about, thinking about, praying about and preaching about a lot more. If we're honestly Armenian Christians, these issues should be a part of every sermon we preach," he explained. "We simply must have the courage to acknowledge that darkness within us in order to ultimately embrace the light. I am speaking metaphorically and biblically."

He also made assurances that the Diocese is walking the walk through its ecumenical outreach. "Fortunately, we have His Eminence Archbishop Vicken

Aykazian, who represents our diocese in Washington, D.C. He is among the louder voices in the global ecumenical arena and a real ally to the African-American churches, along with our Ethiopian Orthodox brothers and sisters with whom I am in regular communication."

Well before his election to Primate in 2018, then-Father Daniel, who had also served as the dean of St. Nersess Armenian Seminary and the director of the Zohrab Information Center under the aegis of the Diocese, offered a glimpse of his instinct to expose human darkness. Risking controversy and criticism, he organized a public community discussion on sex trafficking in Armenia. "It was a topic about which we never talked about and obviously we don't like to advertise our weaknesses as a people," he noted. "But the only way you take hold of issues is when you acknowledge them. And it takes courage

to do that. I thought we should be courageous enough to see the truth for what it is. As the Church, how could we not?"

Now as Primate, His Grace is affably forthcoming in speaking about a host of contemporary social ills that challenge the spiritual core of humanity—from the opioid epidemic and social media abuses, the trend toward tribalism, polarizing politics, and inner crises such as depression, anxiety and the search for meaning, exacerbated by such upheavals as the COVID-19 pandemic. Reason enough to add yet another first to the list of Bishop Daniel's unique attributes in the pantheon of Armenian Church leaders in North America.

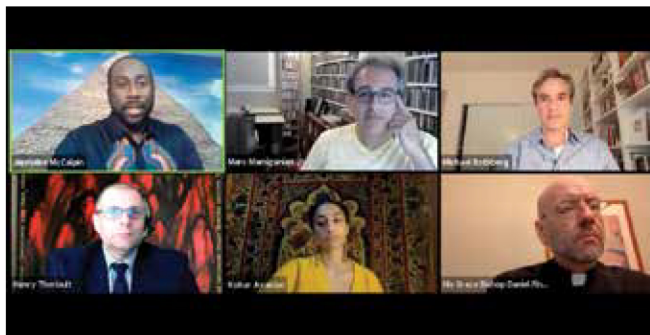
He is the first primate in the history of the Eastern Diocese born in the United States; and the first high-ranking clergyman of mixed ancestry, as the son of a German-born mother and an Armenian father from Istanbul. Moreover, with no knowledge of the Armenian language upon entering seminary, he proved himself a quick study in gaining proficiency in both modern and classical Armenian, an achievement he insists is still a work in progress.

After pursuing a major in chemistry with ambitions to become a physician, the self-described brainy undergrad made the radical decision of switching from the sciences to study theology at St. Nersess Armenian Seminary. Not quite ready to step back from his life-long passion for music, especially the Armenian mystical chants that

first drew him as a teenager to a small Armenian Church in the upstate city of Binghamton NY, he simultaneously earned a masters in musicology at the City College of the City University of New York. Later, he expanded on that interest, completing his doctorate in liturgical studies at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome, Italy.

The fluidity with which he was able to navigate his spiritual calling with secular scholarship foreshadowed what is clearly a flair for interpreting earthly affairs in the context of divine principles, speaking with intensity and authority on both.

He also thoughtfully weighed in on mat-



ters concerning the Armenian Church, such as the absence of women in church hierarchy. "I can see the frustration when the only sign of leadership is the priest, which you're told must be a man. I would argue that men should not be the only source of leadership. Where are our true monks? Our nuns, teachers, and doctoral-level theology students who are women? Even female icon painters? Yes, they're out there. And women deacons are part of our church history. We need the courage to evaluate that and come up with solid reasons why women deacons in the Armenian Church cannot be re-established."

Innately predisposed to care about the suffering of outcasts, Michael, as he was known to his fellow campers at AGBU

Camp Nubar, found his footing on the spiritual path in a progression of exposures to the church community and religious educators. It's an approach he recommends for identifying and nurturing future church leaders, just as he was—a non-pressure way of mutually assessing an individual's potential to succeed in the demanding, all-consuming vocation that is the Armenian priesthood. However, young Michael's personal journey comes with the big disclaimer that, from his earliest conscious memory, he felt close to God. "I don't recall a conversion moment when I suddenly began to believe and to be a Christian. For all my life, I've been sensitive to those who are cast aside, judged because of some superficial criterion, whether it's skin color, ethnicity, or even, in my own early encounters in our Armenian community, not speaking Armenian. I have always felt this sorrow for those rejected by peers or society. Not to sound trite, but as a kid I was bullied. Then growing up, I saw racism or 'otherism', sadly, all around me and in the Armenian world as well."

As for the many positive experiences that shaped his Armenian identity, one of the earliest could be traced back to his first day at Camp Nubar, when, as a boy of nine, he was devastated when his parents dropped him off for his first camp experience, placing him in the care of a young counselor hailing from Canada. "But he immediately put his arm around me like a big brother and showed me around the camp. About ten minutes later, I was in love with Camp Nubar. And that love has never gone away. I went for five or six years in a row and made lifelong friends." He recounts the day when he reluctantly was put on a basketball team and could barely manage to hold the ball, but was "nothing but encouraged" by the taller, stronger boys. "That's the magic of Camp Nubar," he mused.

Such eloquent but candid commentary on an array of worldly topics and questions should not belie the Bishop's preoccupation with defining the mission of the Armenian Church, writ large, for the 21st century. On this, he is more purist than progressive. "Our clergy is stretched beyond its limits, even without the pandemic. We should not expect a young man with a few years of seminary education and maybe a master's degree in theology, to be competent to lead a diasporan community, with the stresses

Inset: A still from the Racial Injustice and Responsibility forum held on June 23, 2020. Below: Prime Minister Pashinyan (right) visits with Bishop Daniel at St. Vartan Cathedral in New York on September 26, 2018.





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Bishop Findikyan and H.H. Karekin II, Catholicos of All Armenians, at his Consecration at Holy Etchmiadzin on May 12, 2019.

that we face in this country, to preserve the Armenian nation, the language, the culture, the art, the music, as well as teach the history, preach the gospel and minister to those suffering in a meaningful way. Not only is it impossible, it's not prudent.”

Notwithstanding the complicated history of the Armenian people, when for centuries the Church was the one institutional structure to hold the nation together, Bishop Daniel pointed out that today there are “hundreds and hundreds of non-profit organizations with which folks can engage aspects of Armenian life that move them deeply,” but observed that many community members expect the church to be whatever they need it to be. “We need to draw the lines more carefully, especially now that we have a free and independent Armenia. The Armenian Church is here not only to serve the spiritual needs of its people, but also to spread our message to the world that no other Christian church can express in quite the same way. We have lived the Christian faith, spilled blood for that faith, created sacred music and art, lived a monastic life and taught the gospel in ways utterly unique. We need to share our inspirational story with others, but I

fear that we're losing ground by trying to be all things.”

Ironically, the coronavirus and locked down the economy thrust the Diocese in a daily struggle to live up to even its basic mission. Never did this ‘fearless shepherd’—an appellation conferred to him during his consecration ceremony at Holy Etchmiadzin—imagine that his first momentous test of leadership would be leading his flock out of the wilderness of uncertainty, to a new normal yet to be defined.

“We continue to serve our people—bury the dead, baptize the babies, marry the couples, preach Christ's message of life, and everything else to build up the Body of Christ—being the Church. That doesn't end. What changes is the way we approach that. It's challenging. It's frightening. It's sad at moments. But I'm simply proud and delighted by our clergy, our lay leadership, and our ministers over what they're doing, despite the many disruptions and distractions.”

He goes on to predict that the Church will change, operationally, in a significant way, but that most of it will be “very good, something I wouldn't have said that quite

so enthusiastically a few months ago.” He cited his recent participation in traditional evening services hosted online, a virtual chapel attended by as many as 60 people worldwide, even priests from Armenia. “That's something we stumbled upon in this pandemic. I don't want to say by the grace of this pandemic, but it's almost at that point.” Yet he quickly cautions, “Worshippers must again gather under the beautiful Armenian dome. It's essential to the Christian faith that we come together in person. That time will come.”

In the meantime, he referred to his online lecture called *Communion in Quarantine*, in which he explains that the physical act of receiving “a morsel of holiness on your tongue”, unconditionally essential as it is, only serves a larger communion. “The hard work takes place when we leave church on Sunday and we have the privilege to turn the page on old grievances with one another, to restore and strengthen relationships, reach out to that person whose language, whose race, whose economic level is not ours, and love and serve them in the name of Christ. And that doesn't stop just because there's a pandemic.”

Neither does Bishop Daniel Findikyan's crusade for courage as he marches on to the other side of crisis—and the better side of human nature—inspired by the transcendent prayer songs that called him to serve the Armenian Church in the first place. ☪