



15.08.2023

NOTHING FUNCTIONS WITHOUT VALUES

INTERVIEW WITH ANTONIO MONTALTO

Regional Post interviewed the "most Italian citizen of Gyumri" Antonio Montalto – the honorary consul of his country in the city. Mr. Montalto shared his impressions and visions of social and business activities in Armenia and Artsakh carried out by the institutions he had led or continues to lead.

Interview : Tigran Zakaryan
Photo : From Antonio Montalto's personal archive

Mr. Montalto, how did you come to Armenia and decide to stay? Was it planned?

— I came to Soviet Armenia at the beginning of 1989 as a physician coordinating an assistance project in the Spitak region. Only when I agreed to join the program did I ask "Where is Armenia?" I wasn't an ignorant person, it's just that I've always valued unexpected human encounters, which eventually turn out valuable and decisive. My stay in Armenia was very interesting and full of historical, political, and social events. The first years were particularly dramatic – the earthquake, the war in Karabakh, and the collapse of the USSR. But, of course, there is a price for such things. I remember the electricity shortage and the hardships of the early years of independent Armenia.

Regardless of all that, I felt fortunate, immediately finding so many commonalities between Armenian and Italian temperaments. Thus, I accepted those limitations without losing heart.

I continue enjoying it here because human kindness is the precious treasure of Armenia. It is interesting to observe how bridges are being constructed between Armenians and Italians. In my case, spontaneity is why I chose to stay and continue our work here. It was a natural choice, and I never thought I should have made a different decision.

Of course, with all that, I see negative things here, too, but the positive things are much more. I don't like people who see only the positive side of things and are excessively enthusiastic, and I am cautious about people who tend to oversee difficulties.

Please tell us a bit about your activities in Spitak following the earthquake.

— In Spitak, in the beginning, it did not look like the general situation in Armenia would soon turn for the worse. Here's a fascinating fact – initially, it did not look like the hospital situation in Armenia would be normal. We worked with the conviction that everything would go back to normal. I love ordinary things, normality means constructing something diligently, step by step, for long-term functioning instead of assuming it will serve for a brief period.

The best projects are integrated into the nation's fabric in the areas where you are doing your work. The most crucial part of those projects is the relations with the involved counterparts, i.e., the people. These people are doctors, paramedics, and technicians with professional education and human skills. Turning from emergency operations to development activities is fundamental in this kind of assistance projects.

So back to the pediatric hospital. We have cooperated there with Spanish experts, and this is a beautiful thing that people from various nationalities come together to transfer knowledge and skills. Such projects are complex – they require years and years of training and patience, too. Their long-term objectives take time to implement in the beginning. When you see the seeds of some new idea, you cannot expect to see its results very soon. But what matters most are the values, and without values, nothing functions.

One of the reasons for the present crisis in the world is that we rely too much on experts, and they usually differ from those who build the future. The future is created by sound and knowledgeable people with skills and a vision of life. But, even with good and skillful people, it takes work to build something. Our projects reckon with this reality.

I am well aware of your input in the development of neonatology in Armenia and Artsakh. Could you elaborate on that?

— We have worked in Armenia and Karabakh, as well as in specific maternity centers in the regions. We channeled our efforts towards establishing connections between those institutions and the central ones in Yerevan and also – which is even more critical and fundamental – renovating regional institutions, refurbishing, providing equipment, and supplying sufficient medication. Last but not least, we also organized visits of specialists from abroad who came here to work with their Armenian colleagues. The last point is of utmost importance because seminars and theoretical training might be helpful – I don't argue – but it is only through working together for some period that a natural skill-learning process happens. So we have to pay attention to what is taught and how it is taught, which requires lots of time.

Seeing how a human feeling drives people to make sacrifices is beautiful. A heartless person is not capable of sacrifices. A mother is undertaking self-sacrifice for the sake of her own child but does not get exhausted by it because she has a caring heart.

With this approach, we did our job in different parts of Armenia, such as Goris, Martuni, Gyumri, Maralik, Artik, etc. We worked in Karabakh from 1998 to 2003 and renovated the maternity center there. It has been a key institution there, and there were doctors from Italy and the UK who visited there and specialists from Karabakh who have been in England. This was a very efficient exchange and thus became the new neonatology center in Stepanakert. Neonatology is complex; thanks to the excellent job done in those centers, many prematurely born children's lives were saved. After Stepanakert, we also set up maternity centers in Karabakh's Martuni, Martakert, and Hadrut. These have been success stories, and we served families there. This has been revolutionary even though it is a rather challenging project.

We have arrived at this point only because we stayed so long here. Our projects were not short-term ones. This implies a significant responsibility, and we could see the results of our work and assess whether we succeeded or failed in the long run. It is not like seeing an immediate positive impact, declaring it a success, and going away. In reality, projects are of value if their outcome remains at least six months after their conclusion. Therefore, we should have the courage to face the outcomes after months, a year, and a longer period following their conclusion.

We have learned many lessons based on our previous errors and experience, and in the early 2000s we decided to stop providing humanitarian assistance and shift to other activities. After all, it is to the benefit of Armenia that its national institutions – i.e., the State – took charge of supporting the needy. We are but a small organization with limited means that could not implement a project of such magnitude. It was time to shift from emergency mode to normality. It is the Government that intervenes in favor of the needy under normal conditions.

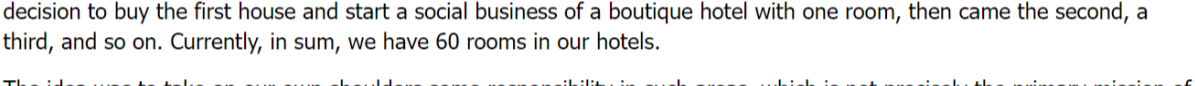
We can help but cannot substitute public institutions. We should gradually retire from the scene if we do a good job. By this, we would encourage public institutions to do their job.

How did you shift from assistance projects to growth-oriented ones? What about social business projects and their success?

— I was going to talk about the second phase. Our decision was a rather bold step. When you do a humanitarian project, there's always a specific budget. But we opted not to have one in this case. We assumed that looking only into the shortcomings of Armenia to pursue our work would not serve the country the best way. We decided to address the roots of the problems. This was a somewhat risky enterprise because, by that time, Armenia was only starting to recover from economic hardships.

However, once the country entered a period of relative stability, a marker of such normality should have been the presence of properly preserved and renovated historical buildings in the city. So I had to struggle with my colleagues over the decision to buy the first house and start a social business of a boutique hotel with one room, then came the second, a third, and so on. Currently, in sum, we have 60 rooms in our hotels.

The idea was to take on our own shoulders some responsibility in such areas, which is not precisely the primary mission of the State



Villa Delenda, Yerevan

We started to carry out regular business activities. We took bank loans, regardless of the tremendous personal risks put at stake. If we failed, we would have to close the business, if not – we would continue. Thank God it's been 25 years since the comparatively unstable year of 1998 that we are in business, and the Family Care Foundation is developing this kind of business with its particular philosophy. So we have renovated Villa Delenda, Villa Aygedzor, Villa Kars, Villa Kumayri, and so on.

This is an area from which we will smoothly retire, too. We have done things that were noticed. Our business has seen apparent success stories, including restoring historic buildings. In Gyumri, we have had time to take a particular building and recreate it, salvaging a piece of the city that can become a development model in miniature. This includes the restoration of historic buildings, tourism, and handicrafts as a source of income. The last point was mainly but not exclusively about ceramic arts and crafts. We also had the idea of adding here silversmithing and carpet weaving. A fourth element is essential here – it is not what we do but how we do it.

If we are not good citizens of Armenia and don't encourage others to become the same, our job is pointless. Transferring from a state of emergency to some normality requires interaction between solid State structures and its citizens. Many would say on any occasion – this is the State's responsibility! However, the reality is that simple.

If one asks me what is the result of our work? I would answer: Being good citizens and helping others to be good citizens is fundamental. Armenia can easily integrate into the world. But Armenia has first to regain its position, which is of a small yet significant nation. The value of a nation is what it succeeds in giving to the world and how it achieves the goal of making the world a better place, and with beautiful Armenian traditions, that is possible. This is not a complex task, and many looking at the present state of affairs globally can assume we have failed. In reality, Armenia is a gift from God, and Armenians are among the most positively influential people in the world. This sector we are engaged in – the restoration of historic buildings, handicrafts, and cultural activities – is a beautiful illustration of that point

I know about other social and social-business activities in Gyumri which were quite a success; what is the idea behind them?

— We have set up a European library, an Italian one, and currently, we are setting up a Russian one. This has nothing to do with politics, it is simply cultural, as people become better with culture. We have to create meeting points for the community.

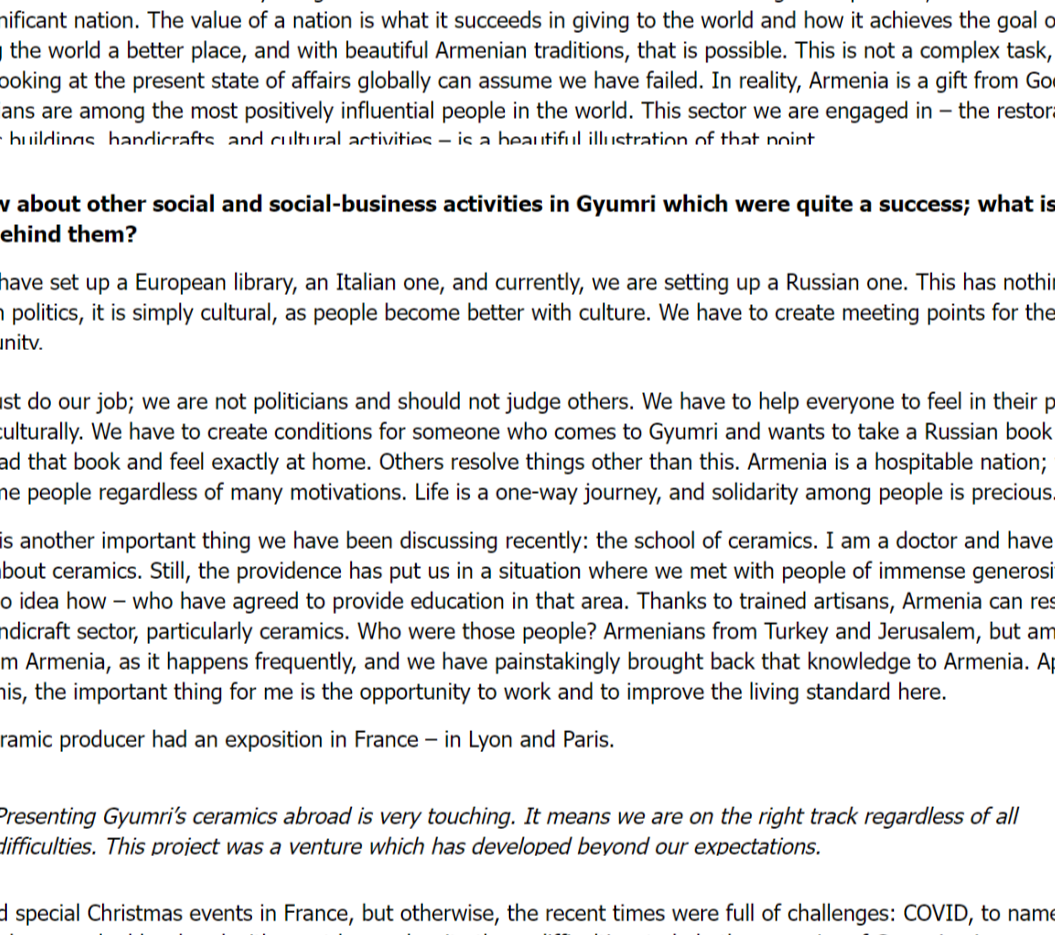
We must do our job; we are not politicians and should not judge others. We have to help everyone to feel in their proper place culturally. We have to create conditions for someone who comes to Gyumri and wants to take a Russian book to sit and read that book and feel exactly at home. Others resolve things other than this. Armenia is a hospitable nation; we welcome people regardless of many motivations. Life is a one-way journey, and solidarity among people is precious.

There is another important thing we have been discussing recently: the school of ceramics. I am a doctor and have yet to learn about ceramics. Still, the providence has put us in a situation where we met with people of immense generosity – I have no idea how – who have agreed to provide education in that area. Thanks to trained artisans, Armenia can re-enter in the handicraft sector, particularly ceramics. Who were those people? Armenians from Turkey and Jerusalem, but amazingly not from Armenia, as it happens frequently, and we have painstakingly brought back that knowledge to Armenia. Apart from this, the important thing for me is the opportunity to work and to improve the living standard here.

Our ceramic producer had an exposition in France – in Lyon and Paris.

Presenting Gyumri's ceramics abroad is very touching. It means we are on the right track regardless of all difficulties. This project was a venture which has developed beyond our expectations.

We had special Christmas events in France, but otherwise, the recent times were full of challenges: COVID, to name a few. But we have worked hard and with great hope, despite those difficulties, to help the ceramics of Gyumri gain recognition. It is an element in the touristic product we offer – Armenian authenticity. At least we have to preserve the Armenian ceramic traditions whose origins are in the cities of Kutahya and Iznik and which have moved elsewhere. Otherwise, we are happy because handicrafts and agriculture are the bright future of Armenia. I believe that technologically-managed bio-agriculture and ceramics using modern technologies, added to the immense potential for inspiration from the untapped Armenian traditions, would produce great results. Armenia has no match in this sector globally. These sectors can be an integral part of economic growth. Everyone, including those engaged in the intellectual type of job, should do some handicraft because it helps people in life, pushing their limits beyond, opening up new horizons for creativity.



Antonio Montalto & Manoug Petrosyan, Gyumri ceramics expo, Lyon, 2016

We are moving in these directions, having at our disposal the studio in Gyumri, the handicraft promotion center, which means a permanent vernissage.

How well do you think you and your projects are integrated into local community life, particularly in Gyumri?

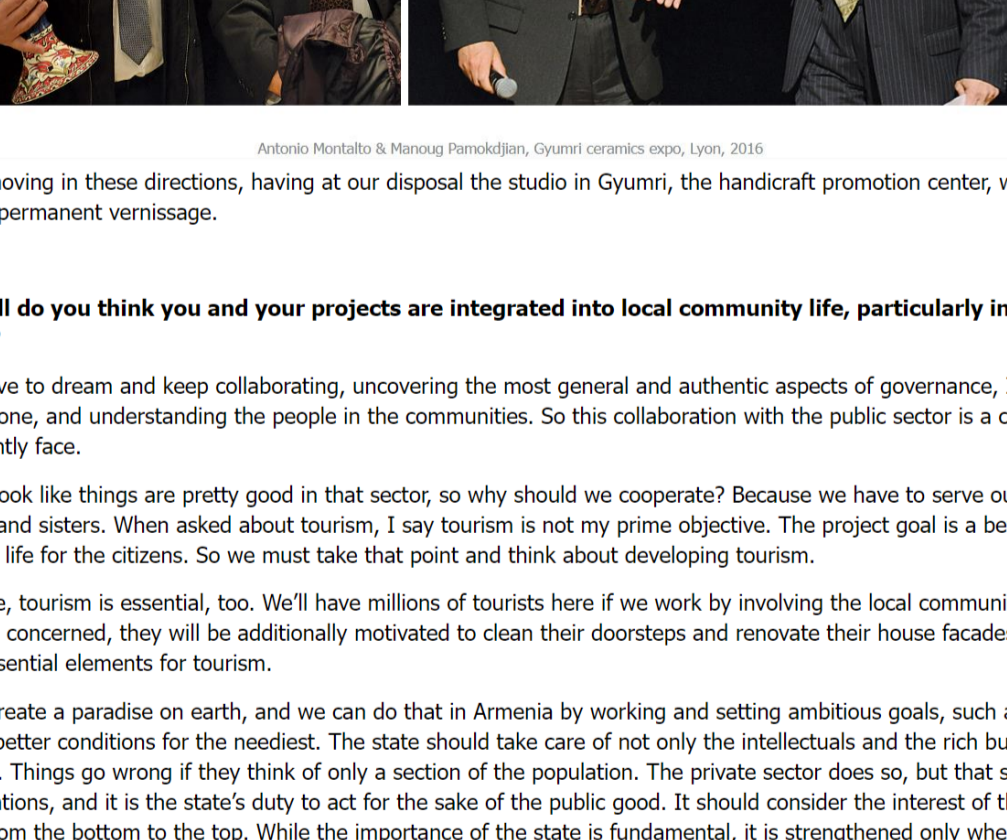
— We have to dream and keep collaborating, uncovering the most general and authentic aspects of governance, I mean the local one, and understanding the people in the communities. So this collaboration with the public sector is a challenge we currently face.

It might look like things are pretty good in that sector, so why should we cooperate? Because we have to serve our brothers and sisters. When asked about tourism, I say tourism is not my prime objective. The project goal is a better quality of life for the citizens. So we must take that point and think about developing tourism.

Otherwise, tourism is essential, too. We'll have millions of tourists here if we develop by involving the local community. If the locals are concerned, they will be additionally motivated to clean their doorsteps and renovate their house facades, which are all essential elements for tourism.

We can create a paradise on earth, and we can do that in Armenia by working and setting ambitious goals, such as creating better conditions for the neediest. The state should take care of not only the intellectuals and the rich but everyone. Things go wrong if they think of only a section of the population. The private sector does so, but that sector has its motivations, and it is the state's duty to act for the sake of the public good. It should consider the interest of the entire society from the bottom to the top. While the importance of the state is fundamental, it is strengthened only when the citizens are empowered. Collaboration between the two is a must. This applies not only to Armenia but also to every other country.

This country has so much kindness and generosity that should radiate worldwide, its tremendous spiritual energy should be set free.



Antonio Montalto with a customer, Family Care Foundation, Muscari Association, Gyumri ceramics expo, Paris, 2017 Dec

And you are one of those contributing to it.

— I hope so. When I see my Armenian colleagues catching up with me and going ahead, I say to myself, "Ok, maybe it's high time for us foreigners to leave the scene gradually; we shouldn't be overrepresented." So then, it's the turn of our Armenian colleagues to further the cause. In that case, I can state that we have succeeded. Otherwise, it is a failure.

Why is Gyumri so important to you? Why are you so attached to it?

— I have been an honorary consul in Gyumri for 22 years. The city has been reanimated economically and more fundamentally, with elements of growth germinating. I say only "elements" because an ungrounded and inflated hope will be counterproductive. Meanwhile, my hope is based on the hard facts of the great potential that Gyumri has had historically.

This large city center is essential for the further development of Gyumri, and I mean the development in terms of this city's mission – arts and culture. You can otherwise do high tech and stuff like that, but this is more fundamental. So we have worked out a project on the city's historical center. This means providing thousands of jobs to the locals and creating conditions for increasing the living standard.

But all this requires determination and adapting to saying "no". Let me explain what I mean: one can give up a general good for the sake of a particular one. It happens when relations matter more than values, which should not be the case. This happens especially in smaller communities where one has to have strong convictions to say "no" to friends, relatives, or neighbors. Instead, the common good should be prioritized over a particular one – this should be the guiding principle for a person in the office.

This is a challenging task, however. In that fight, one loses friends, significant connections, and some relatives who could otherwise be supportive.

We need warm-hearted people, and Armenia is blessed with such people. You can feel it here for some reason, which is why I have never thought of leaving this country.

Looking back on your accomplishments and maybe some failures, what is your feeling about them?

— I say two things. One – I am very thankful for the providence which has put me in touch with a world that is both small and big simultaneously, such as Armenia. Another thing I say – and generally I feel very uneasy at – is that I have made many errors of which I am ashamed. On the one hand, I am creative and have done lots of things, but on the other hand, without the support of God and my Armenian friends, all this would have been impossible. I hardly notice people complaining about me or telling me I'm fantastic. But behind all the achievements, there is a lot of sacrifice by the people.

All this gives me hope that even with all the errors and mistakes, one can build something meaningful.



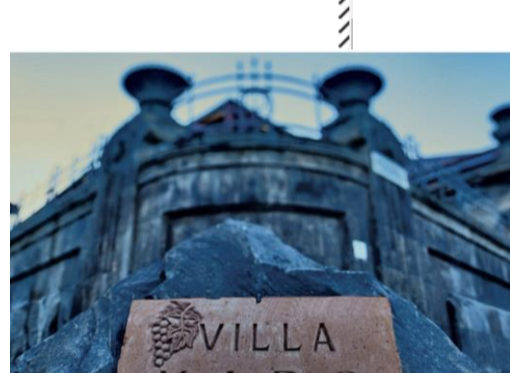
Concert for the population of Spitak, 1996



OFMA, Spitak, training activities, 1996



Spitak Art School, 1995



Family Care Foundation, Muscari Association, Gyumri ceramics expo, Paris, December 2017