

THE Գ Ա Ն Ձ Ա Ր Ա Ն TREASURY

Summer 2015

The Altar of the Lord

Catholicos Nerses III Shinogh

Taking the Church to the People

The Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross

Gregory of Narek, Doctor of the Church

THE TREASURY

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THE FELLOWSHIP OF ST. VOSKI

Nor Voskiank/Նոր Ոսկեանք is a fellowship of men and women working toward the revival and restoration of Armenian Orthodox theology and life within the Armenian Church at large. The fellowship is named after St. Voski and his companions (the Voskians) who were a group of Christian martyrs and monastics from the first century, many of whom were students of St. Thaddeus. According to tradition, St. Thaddeus ordained as their leader a priest called Chrysos (Greek for “gold”, Armenian “voski”), and thereafter the group came to be known as the Voskians. In the spirit of the Voskians, *Nor Voskiank* seeks to support the cultivation of a thriving, united, worldwide Armenian Christian community through prayer, fellowship, and the publication of practical educational resources covering the entire breadth of Christian life as lived, interpreted and testified to by the Armenian Church since ancient times. *The Treasury/Գանձարան* is published quarterly and subscriptions are available by request. To contact us or donate, please visit us at

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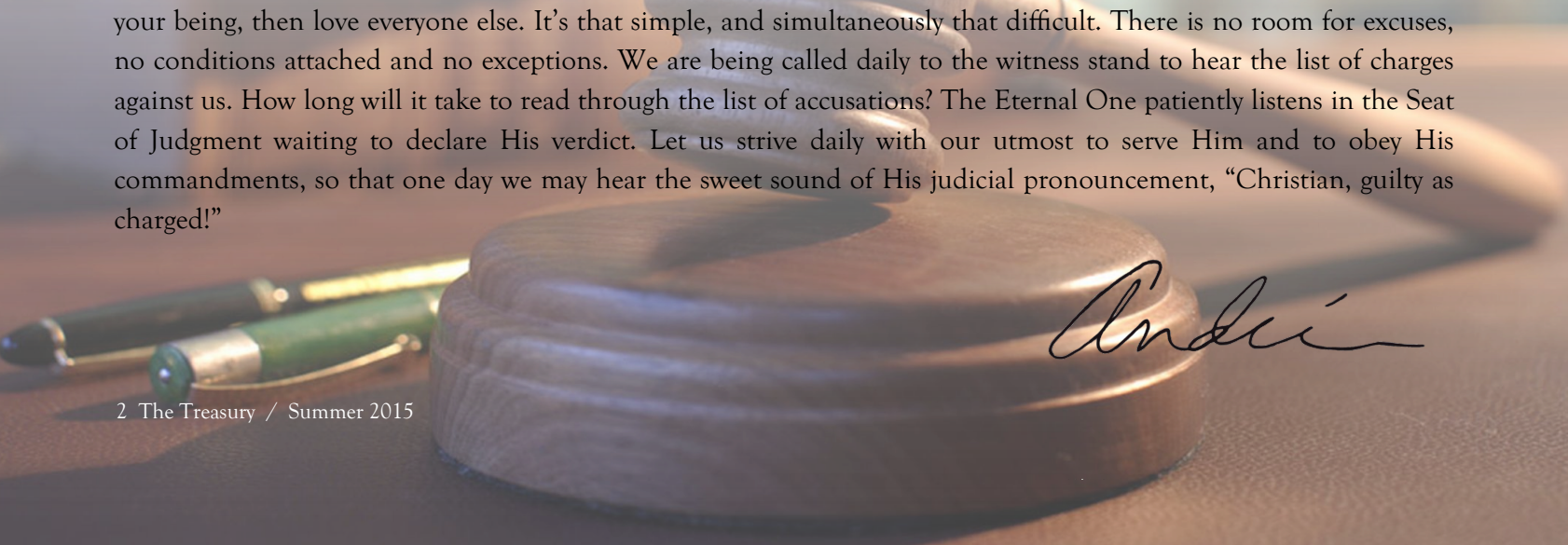
JOY OF THE ACCUSED

Summer is typically a time for dialing back from the more intense pursuits of the year, where we tend to engage in more relaxed activities to restore both the physical and mental health necessary to survive the remainder of the year. Well, not so with the Fellowship of St.Voski! As the days stretch to their peak length and the thermometer strives to outdo last year's records, the editorial staff at *Kantsaran* is actively preparing new and exciting material for upcoming releases. Future editions of *Kantsaran* will also include new sections covering more basic topics to help better understand and appreciate our Armenian Orthodox theological and liturgical traditions. Additionally, in response to your feedback, we will be expanding our website (StVoski.org) to include many other educational and spiritual resources to help maximize growth in the faith, and promote greater involvement in the life of the church through engagement of both culture and community.

Recently, I saw a movie in the theaters entitled "Do You Believe" by Pure Flix Entertainment. In a dramatic conversation between an atheist lawyer and a paramedic, the lawyer asks the paramedic why he was willing to risk his career and livelihood by sharing his Christian faith with a dying man at the scene of an accident. The paramedic's response was "If you were ever accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" Although this quote did not originate with this movie, I had never heard the question before, and it made me think. It made me think hard.

This question carries particular weight this year as Armenians all across the globe commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide by memorializing their martyred ancestors as newly canonized saints. History tells us exactly how these blessed martyrs answered the previous question "Would there be enough evidence to convict you?" And so, from the safety and comfort of my writing desk I wrestle with the idea that if I am to call myself a follower of Jesus Christ, I too must be able to clearly answer this same question. Which then leads me to ask: What does it really mean to be a Christian in this day and age? Well, I don't think the answer has changed since our Lord revealed it to us over 2000 years ago: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." [John 14:15] What therefore are Jesus's commandments? In an ironic twist connected to the aforementioned movie, Jesus provides us his answer in Mark 12:29 after being interrogated by a first century Jewish lawyer: "*The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*"

Our Lord's answer encompasses every aspect of life. It leaves nothing out. Love God first with the totality of your being, then love everyone else. It's that simple, and simultaneously that difficult. There is no room for excuses, no conditions attached and no exceptions. We are being called daily to the witness stand to hear the list of charges against us. How long will it take to read through the list of accusations? The Eternal One patiently listens in the Seat of Judgment waiting to declare His verdict. Let us strive daily with our utmost to serve Him and to obey His commandments, so that one day we may hear the sweet sound of His judicial pronouncement, "Christian, guilty as charged!"



André

KHORHOORT KHOREEN: THE ALTAR OF THE LORD

By André Markarian

“In this dwelling of holiness, this place of praise; in this habitation of angels, this place of the expiation of mankind; before these holy signs and the holy place that hold God up to us and are made resplendent, we bow down in awe and worship.”

With the reciting of these words at the beginning of the Armenian Sunday Worship Service (**Սուրբ Պատարագ**/Holy Badarak), the Celebrant, along with his company of altar servers, approaches the main altar of the Church and bows down in reverence. Carefully placed upon this special table we find many of the articles of the liturgical service: the Holy Gospel Book, candles, crosses, the dove vessel holding the Holy Muron, and even fresh flowers. But what exactly is this sacred place we call the “altar” (**Սուրբ Սեղան**/Holy Table)? What is this place draped in white linens where the simple bread and wine offering of the faithful is mysteriously transposed into the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ? What is its origin, its role, its significance for the worship traditions in the Armenian Church?

Consulting first with *A Dictionary of the Armenian Church* (New York: St.Vartan Press, 2006. p 39) by theologian and historian Archbishop Malachia Ormanian, we read that because “Christ established the mystery of the Holy Communion at the dinner table, thus the mystery of the Holy Communion is performed also at a *seghan* (table).” This simple explanation, sufficient in

and of itself, can be further developed by searching deeper into antiquity. As far back as ancient pagan times, an altar was a structure upon which offerings such as sacrifices were made for religious purposes. Not restricted to just Judaism or Christianity, altars were used in places of worship of many major religions, both past and present. For Christianity, the altar derives much of its original significance from its use in the Old Testament. Altars were set up by all the Jewish patriarchs including Noah, Isaac, Jacob and Moses, typically as a way of commemorating an encounter with God. The most famous altar was the one erected by Abraham upon which he was to sacrifice his son Isaac [Genesis 22:9]. It is here, on this simple altar, that we so beautifully observe the remarkable thread that ties all biblical history together. Starting with the exceptional faith of Abraham, his son Isaac was offered up for sacrifice upon this altar; yet this time the son was not killed. “God himself will provide the lamb” Abraham tells Isaac [Genesis 22:8]. Over a thousand years later, God himself does provide the Lamb, His only begotten son Jesus Christ. Only this time He does not hold back: the Son is killed for our redemption, the

Lamb of God is offered as a sacrifice for the remission of the sins of all humanity.

How must we then understand the altar today? When we walk into Church, our attention is drawn immediately toward this focal point, where the entire Christian narrative converges. We see an oil painting of the baby Jesus being held tenderly in the arms of the holy God-bearer St. Mary (**Սուրբ Աստուածածին**/Soorp Asdvadzadzin). This image of the incarnation of the God-child is situated directly over the place where the priest will soon prepare Holy Communion: the representation of the one sacrifice being made “present again” to us believers. It is upon this “holy table” that we re-experience the life of Christ from his birth to his death every time we celebrate the Badarak. The altar derives its “holiness” therefore, not from of any special qualities that it may intrinsically have, but from the eternal presence of the Lord Jesus mysteriously revealed to us when we are gathered together in His name for worship and communion. So let us approach this special place both humbly and reverently, recalling what the Psalmist says: “Go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy” [Psalm 43:4].

FESTAL FOIBLES:

TRUE STORIES FROM THE CALENDAR OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

One of the most distinguishing features of the Armenian Church is her calendar of holy days and seasons. Every country sets aside holidays to commemorate historic events and individuals that are significant to the self-image and values of the nation. In the same way, churches, especially ancient churches like the Armenian Church, gradually developed calendars of holy days as a practical and ongoing way to nourish the people with the Gospel and shape their faith in Jesus Christ. Some holy days are common to all ancient churches: Christmas, Palm Sunday, Easter, and the commemorations of the apostles and other well-known Biblical heroes and saints. But every church supplements these common feasts with observances that are unknown in other traditions. Similarly, the plan of each church's calendar—on what days and dates the church observes its holy days and why—is very different from one tradition to another. The Armenian Church's calendar is one of the most ancient, most complicated, and most unusual in all of Christendom. Not infrequently the true stories of how the feasts of the Armenian Church came into being are at odds with our conventional wisdom. Their background and relevance for us are often fascinating: much more compelling than what we learned in Sunday School, hear in sermons, or even read in the Bible. More to the point, these true stories from the calendar of the Armenian Church also carry us directly into the heart of what it means to be a Christian and how the Armenian people understood and lived that awesome calling, a tradition that can be life-giving for Armenians and non-Armenians today.

THE FEAST OF THE EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS

Խաչվերաց/Khachverats

By Very Rev. Fr. Daniel Findikyan

Most of the ancient, eastern churches designate September 14 as the *Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross* (or the *Elevation* of the Holy Cross—the two words mean the same thing). In the Armenian Church this is one of the five principal solemnities of the year [Խաչվերաց / *daghavar don*]. As a result of the Armenian Church's ancient penchant for celebrating all major feast days on Sundays, we observe the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross on the Sunday nearest September 14. The exact date shifts every year a few days this way or that.

Let's be frank: Isn't it a bit odd that all of these churches should set aside a holy day to honor an object, even if that object is the sacred Cross on which Jesus died? After all, Good Friday is the day that all Christians everywhere commemorate our Lord's crucifixion. And in many traditions, including ours, the theme of Jesus's death colors the daily worship services of every Friday of the year. So why do we need yet another commemoration of the crucifixion, especially one that seems to focus more on a relic rather than on the mysterious event itself? And why set that commemoration on September 14?

There exist only a few handbooks that explain the meaning of the feasts of the Armenian Church. Most are in Armenian. Pick up most any one, turn to the section on **խաչվերաց / Khachwerats** and you will read all about the Cross. The Romans executed their most depraved criminals by nailing them to a large wooden crossbeam and effectively letting them rot to death. This provided a highly visible, slow, agonizing, yet effective way to do away with dangerous felons. Crucifixions were public events. Jesus was crucified on a hilltop so that many spectators would get an unobstructed view of the spectacle. More important, it sent a chillingly clear message to any of Jesus's followers that happened to be in the crowd, that they had best abandon their loyalty to Jesus or face the same gruesome fate.

Our textbooks talk about the mystery and irony of the crucifixion. God sends his Son into this world to heal it. That healing comes about as a consequence of the Son of God's full and total immersion into humanity and the human condition. Without compromising his divine "DNA," the Son of God becomes human—the man Jesus. Through Jesus, God identifies totally with the painful, lonely, anxious and awry state of humanity here on Planet Earth. To experience the depths of the human condition also requires the Son of God to die. This he does, in the most ghastly, humiliating way on the Cross at Golgotha. Yet rising from death on that first Easter Sunday, Jesus shows himself to be more powerful than death itself. The new and permanent life he inaugurates is not just for himself, but for all those who follow him as baptized members of his Body, the Church.



“ Through Jesus, God identifies totally with the painful, lonely, anxious and awry state of humanity here on Planet Earth. ”

So the crucifixion really is a big deal. It is the heart of the Gospel. The Cross is the consummate sign of Almighty God’s unlikely affection for his unruly creatures, a love so powerful that nothing, neither sin, nor guilt, nor injustice, nor pain, nor loneliness, nor grief, not even death, can obstruct it. Consequently, what Armenians call the “mystery” of the Cross is not something that Christians should recall once a year or



even once a week, but every day, indeed, every moment of our lives. Our lives on Planet Earth and our destiny for all eternity depend on it.

As to the precise origin of the feast of September 14, our textbooks look to the seventh century. In the year 614ad, the Sassanian Persians conquered Jerusalem and captured the actual wooden cross from which Jesus hung. For centuries the Cross had been enshrined in the Holy City as a sacred relic. In 628 ad, the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius, who was a native Armenian, led an expedition to Palestine that resulted in the rescue of the Cross. It is said that many Armenian soldiers were part of his force. Newly liberated, the Holy Cross was “exalted” or “elevated” over the heads of the Christian faithful as a divine blessing. Other accounts attribute that first “exaltation” of the Cross to St. James, “the Brother of the Lord” and first bishop of Jerusalem. Until today, the heart of the Armenian Quarter in Jerusalem is the Cathedral of St. James, where the Brother of the Lord had his episcopal see, and where his body is enshrined as a sacred relic. The textbooks teach us, therefore, that the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross is the annual commemoration of this seventh-century episode, with

all of its connections to the Armenian Church and people.

Allowing for a bit of sacred literary license, the basic elements of the seventh-century story are more or less confirmed by contemporary Armenian and non-Armenian historical sources. Yet this conventional explanation for the Feast of the Exaltation suffers from a number of problems. First, the textbooks tell us nothing about the reason why September 14 was chosen for this festivity. Even more thorny is the fact that none of the hymns [շարական / *sharagan*], Bible readings, or other liturgical texts that are associated with the Feast of the Exaltation have anything at all to say about Heraclius, the Persians, or any of the seventh-century events recounted by the textbooks. More troublesome still, manuscript evidence proves that the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross was already being celebrated in Armenia by the mid-fifth century, hundreds of years before the recapture of the Cross by Heraclius. What are we to make of these contradictions?

One of the most ancient, precious, and scrutinized liturgical texts in all of Christendom is housed in the Church of St. Toros, the archives of the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem. The twelfth-century manuscript, labeled *Jerusalem 121*, is a copy of an Armenian Lectionary that was translated from Greek by St. Mesrob Mashdots and his young team of scholars between the years AD 417 and 439. A lectionary (known as ճաշոց / *Jashots* in Armenian) is a calendar that lists what Bible passages are to be read during the church services every day of the year. Every church—Armenian, Coptic, Roman, Lutheran—decides for itself how to divvy up the Bible so that pertinent Scriptural passages are read on certain days of the year (while others are omitted entirely). Lectionaries differ from one tradition to another because Scripture speaks differently to Christians of different churches and varying cultures depending upon each tradition’s history, spirituality, culture and national experience of the living Son of God active in their midst. One tradition chooses the story of the Magi in Matthew for their December 25 Christmas liturgy, another selects the Shepherds and the Angels in Luke. And even if their choice of Scripture readings happens to coincide, some churches celebrate the same feast on different dates. For example, we Armenians read our Christmas story on January 6. So the Lectionary is also a liturgical calendar that outlines the shape of the church year

according to the tradition of each church.

The manuscript Lectionary *Jerusalem 121* reflects the liturgical life of the Christian community of Jerusalem in the early fifth century, when the Christians of the Holy City formed a single worshipping community. Syrian, Palestinian, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopian, Latin and other Christian monks, clergy, local faithful and pilgrims worshipped together. The spoken language of the time was Greek. The places of worship were grand basilicas and shrines scattered throughout the City that were built over the holy places where the sacred events of the Old and New Testaments took place: The Church of Sion, built over the “Upper Room” where Jesus shared his Last Supper with his Disciples; the so-called “Eleona,” or Church of the Olives on the Mount of Olives, where Jesus spoke about the end times at the end of his own life; and many others. Liturgy in fifth-century Jerusalem, in other words, was an indoor-outdoor, urban, multiple venue enterprise where the clergy and faithful processed among the churches and holy places of Jerusalem. The faithful did not worship in the nearest church, or in the church of their denomination or language, but in all the churches, according to the commemoration of the day.

Now, if you are ever so privileged as to have the opportunity to page through manuscript *Jerusalem 121*, turn to September 14 and you will find that on this day the faithful of the Holy City in the early fifth century gathered in the greatest of the Jerusalem Churches, the basilica of the Holy Cross, built on Golgotha precisely over the site where Jesus was crucified. Today that spot is within the complex of shrines known as the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (though the church itself has been destroyed and rebuilt many times since the fifth century). In that church, known as “The Cross” for short, on that day, the bishop would “display the venerable Cross to the whole assembly,” the very Cross on which Jesus was executed, and the bishop would bless the people. September 14 was namely the second day of an eight-day solemnity commemorating the consecration (or “Dedication,” *նաւակատիք/Navagadeek*) of the church.

Indeed, contemporary historical sources confirm that the Church of the Holy Cross was dedicated on September 13, 335AD in the presence of countless Christians from all over the world including a

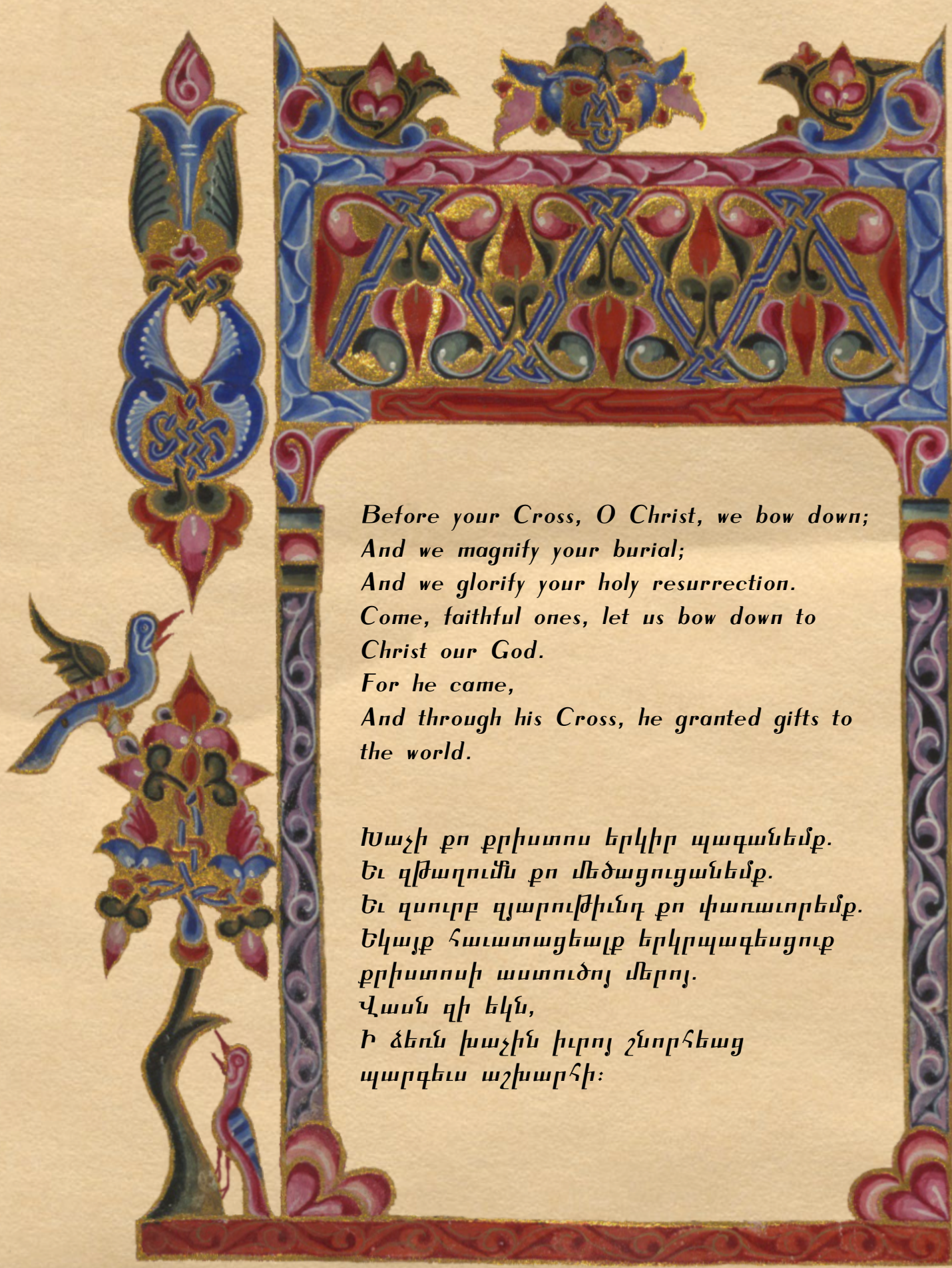
delegation of priests sent from Armenia by Catholicos Vrtanes, the elder son of St. Gregory the Illuminator. In the century or so between 335 and the production of *Jerusalem 121*, other churches in Jerusalem were built, especially “Holy Resurrection,” also known by its Greek equivalent, the *Anastasis*, the round shrine built a few footsteps away from “Holy Cross,” over the site of the Lord’s tomb. By the early fifth century, each day of the eight-day period beginning September 13 was devoted to commemorating the dedication/consecration of another Jerusalem church. All the faithful would process to that church and celebrate the Eucharist there. The commemoration of September 14 was the memorial of the *Church of the Holy Cross*, built over the site of Jesus’ crucifixion, and featuring the Elevation of the relic of Jesus’ Cross. This is the origin of today’s Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Consequently “Holy Cross” refers to Jesus’ crucifixion and to his Cross. More to the point, however, it refers to the *Church* “of the Holy Cross.”

All of this is confirmed in the Armenian hymns [*շարական/sharagan*] for the feast. As we noted above, among the many ancient hymns composed especially for this day, not one of them mentions Heraclius and the recapture of the Holy Cross. By contrast, many of them celebrate the “dedication” of the Church of the Holy Cross, its “birthday” so to speak. Here is one of them:

Faithful people, let us always sing a triumphant and new blessing in the highest to Christ the king, who came to illuminate his chosen, holy church. And he crowned her with his holy cross. Let us sing his glory. *Today we too celebrate the Dedication of [the Church of the] Holy Cross.* And to the Savior we offer glory and honor forever.(1)

Յաղթող և զնոր օրհնութիւն միշտ ի բարձունս
երգեսցուք թագաւորին քրիստոսի
հաւատացեալ ժողովուրդք: Որ եկն ի
լուսաւորել զընտրեալ սուրբ զեկեղեցի. և
պսակեաց սուրբ խաչին. նմա զփառս
երգեսցուք: Այսօր և մեք տօնեսցուք
զնաւակատիս սուրբ խաչին. և փրկողին
մատուցուք փառք և պատիւ յաւիտեան:

Much better known is the hymn *խաչի քո քրիստոս երկիր պագանեմք/Khachee ko Kreesdos yergeerbakanemk*:



*Before your Cross, O Christ, we bow down;
And we magnify your burial;
And we glorify your holy resurrection.
Come, faithful ones, let us bow down to
Christ our God.
For he came,
And through his Cross, he granted gifts to
the world.*

*Խաչի քո քրիստոս երկիր պագանեմք.
Եւ զթաղումն քո մեծացուցանեմք.
Եւ զսուրբ զյարութիւնդ քո փառաւորեմք.
Եկայք հաւատացեալք երկրպագեսցուք
քրիստոսի աստուծոյ մերոյ.
Վասն զի եկն,
Ի ձեռն խաչին իւրոյ շնորհեաց
պարգեւ աշխարհի:*

This ancient hymn, originally composed in Greek, is preserved and sung in virtually every tradition and language of ancient Christendom. It is none other than the hymn that would have been sung as the people were venerating the relic of Jesus's Cross after the bishop had "elevated" it over their heads in blessing. The hymn may well go back to the original dedication of the Church of the Holy Cross in 335AD. In the Armenian Church today we chant this cheerful hymn several times during Holy Week and Easter, and of course on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

The preservation of such an ancient hymn and the larger story of the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross tell us a lot about our Armenian Christian ancestors. First of all, they illustrate the centrality of the Cross in Armenian spirituality. Obviously the Cross is the primary symbol of Christianity. But the powerful paradox of the Cross resonated particularly vividly with Armenians. Jesus overturns death by dying. As the age-old Easter hymn puts it, "By your death you trampled on death" [մահուամբ զմահ կոխեցեր / *mahwamp uzmah gokhetser*]. The Cross is the perpetual reminder that through Jesus even the most desperate distress can become the starting point for healing and hope. St. Paul refers to Jesus's subversion of all evil and his Godly power to extract life out of death as "the message of the Cross." That message gave tangible hope to the Armenian people, whose daily life was violent and otherwise quite hopeless. Indeed, in the Cross, Armenians saw "the power of God" [1Corinthians 1:18].

It is no accident that the art of the խաչքար / *khatchkar* was born in Armenia. There is nothing deader than dead rock. And yet Armenian artisans found a way to make rocks pulsate with life. They carved Crosses into stone that are so vibrantly, dizzyingly intricate that they seem to sprout to life. Their crawling, interwoven vines and leaves virtually flutter in the breeze. The textbooks tout *khatchkars* as a uniquely Armenian art form, and this is certainly true. But they are much more. Every *khatchkar* is a solemn Armenian profession of the Gospel: "He who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has

eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" [John 5:24]. With the *khatchkar* is the Armenian Church's signature endorsement of the Angel Gabriel's declaration, "With God nothing will be impossible" [Luke 1:37]. No illness is so malignant, no darkness so obscure, no crime so perverse that it cannot be vindicated and redeemed by Jesus Christ.

The story of the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross also shows us how the earliest Armenian Christians were thoroughly captivated by Jerusalem. Armenians have had a significant and enduring presence in Jerusalem since at least the fourth century and likely long before that, perhaps even to the time of Jesus. The first monasteries in the Holy Land were founded by monks from Armenia. The oldest samples of St. Mesrob's alphabet are not in manuscripts in Armenia, but in inscriptions carved into walls and stones all over Palestine that date within a few decades after the creation of the Armenian letters in 404AD. From that early period we know that massive caravans of Armenian pilgrims were making their way from Armenia to the Holy Land at great expense and at great personal risk. From the earliest times, Armenians were prepared to pay a great price for the privilege of touching the ground where Jesus walked. The tradition of making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem is one of the most sacred, characteristic and abiding traditions of Armenian Christianity. To pray at the holy places where Jesus spoke and healed galvanized our ancestors' faith, a faith that was relentlessly assaulted in the homeland by Armenia's hostile neighbors. All of this helps us to understand why the Armenians are the only Christian denomination that occupies its own quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem today. Commemorating the dedication of Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Cross drew all Armenians into the historical events of our salvation in Jesus Christ, especially those who could never make a formal pilgrimage to the Holy City themselves.

So the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross is really the story of a double commemoration: it celebrates Jesus's Holy Cross and Jesus's Holy Church. In the Armenian Church's calendar the

celebration of the Exaltation extends for seven consecutive days beginning on the Sunday nearest September 14. This period is nothing but a remnant of the ancient eight-day commemoration of the Dedication of the holy churches of Jerusalem. During these days the Armenian Church commemorates the crucifixion of the Son of God and its sacred irony: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” [John 1:5].

Yet folded in and among these “Cross” hymns is a large number of ancient “Church” hymns that were first composed to celebrate the consecration of the Church of the Holy Cross and other sacred shrines of the Holy City. These *sharagans* and others composed by the saintly hymnographers of the Armenian Church contemplate the mystery of the Church. This is not just about bricks and mortar. More importantly, the hymns concern the community of people that assemble within its walls. We come together because through baptism we have been “called out” from the general population and have been adopted by God as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” [1Peter 2:9].

In the subtleties of her history, liturgy and theology, in other words, the Armenian Church has zealously guarded the ancient Christian premise that God has rescued humanity from its ultimate demise. God achieved this in a loving act of self-sacrifice through the incarnation of God’s Son, Jesus the

Christ. God’s mission to reconcile Heaven and Earth reaches its culmination on Golgotha in the crucifixion and resurrection of the Son of God, which is eternally symbolized in the Cross. It is in baptism that a person signs up to reap the rewards of the Cross. It is in baptism that a person is adopted by God as a joint heir of God’s Kingdom with Jesus Christ, and in which one sets out on the path of becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ. It is in baptism that one becomes a member of Christ’s Body, the Church [Colossians 1:24]. It is no coincidence that after emerging from the water, the newly-baptized child is marked in the form of a cross, nine times, all over his body, with the holy oil [միւռն / myooron]. It is no coincidence that a cross is now hung from the child’s neck lest he ever forget to Whom he belongs and to Whom he is held accountable. Branded with the Cross, the members of the Church are uniquely and indelibly identified as followers of Jesus Christ.

So the Cross and the Church go together like an Apple and an iPad. The early Christians of Jerusalem understood their integral connection. The Armenian Church understands their integral connection. But the Cross is not just a logo. It is a call to action. “If any one dares to follow me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me,” Jesus said, challenging the throngs of curious people that gathered around him. Raising the stakes even further, he added fatefully, “Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will save it” [see Mark 8:34-35].





The path of the Cross has been a painful one for the Church of the Armenians. But that is the testimony of their faithfulness to Jesus Christ. Some modern pundits ask whether the bloody price that the Armenians have paid over the centuries for being “the first Christian nation” was worth it. This is not an unreasonable question from one whose view is restricted by the monochromatic perspective of geopolitics. But the perspective of the Armenian people has always been multicolored and multi-dimensional. A conviction coded very deep in the Armenian identity has compelled the Armenians to follow Jesus Christ at all cost. This is why the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross has always stirred our people and given them hope against hope.

That attitude, and the story of the Feast of the Exaltation, are perhaps most elegantly typified in the dome [գմբեթ / *gmbet*] that crowns every Armenian Church. The massive cone-shaped dome hovers high above the people, seemingly embracing us and, as the cone contracts to a point at its apex, funneling us upward to heaven. Unashamedly, triumphantly planted on the pinnacle of the church is the Holy Cross, the perpetual reminder of God’s unimaginable love for his creatures, of God’s call for them to follow Him at all cost, and of God’s promise of life to those who do, today, tomorrow and always.

To read more about the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in the Armenian Church, see the following articles by Fr. Daniel Findikyan: “Armenian Hymns of the Holy Cross and the Jerusalem *Encaenia*,” *Revue des études arméniennes* 32 (2010) 25-58; and “Armenian Hymns of the Church and Cross,” *St. Nersess Theological Review* 11 (2006) 63-105. Both are available from the Krikor and Clara Zohrab Information Center of the Armenian Diocese (Eastern) in New York.
zohrabcenter@armeniandiocese.org.

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Footnotes:

1. Չափադաշարական [Hymns Arranged by Tone] (Jerusalem, 1914) 346.



DOCTOR GREGORY OF NAREK

By Eric Vozzy

On February 21, 2015, Pope Francis proclaimed the 10th century Armenian monk, poet, mystical philosopher and theologian, Saint Gregory of Narek, a Doctor of the Universal Church. The proclamation took place at the beginning of a Mass commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide of 1915.

Many faithful were not only excited to receive a 36th Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church — joining the company of important figures and saints such as St. Augustine, St. John Chrysostom, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Athanasius, St. Ephrem, and St. Teresa of Ávila — but were also wondering just who St. Gregory of Narek was, how he was important, and what he contributed to the Church, specifically the Catholic Church.

Questions arose asking whether or not St. Gregory of Narek even belonged to the Catholic Church, which would entail him taking the Christological position decided at the Council of Chalcedon in 451AD. If he was instead in communion with the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church, which has remained “non-Chalcedonian” since the year 554AD, was St. Gregory at least sympathetic toward Chalcedonian Christology? And so, the decision to designate St. Gregory of Narek as a Doctor of the Universal Church was for some, peculiar. Here is why it made sense to Pope Francis.

WHO WAS ST. GREGORY OF NAREK?

St. Gregory was probably born in the province of Antsevatik in 951, although it could have been as early as 945. He was the son of Bishop Khosrov Antsevatsi and scion of a family of scholars, one of whom founded the Monastery of Narek. [1] St. Gregory's mother died while he was young, and so his father took St. Gregory and his brother Hovhannes to Narek Monastery, a state of the art institution on the south-eastern shore of Lake Van founded by St. Gregory's mother's cousin, Anania. As the chief teacher of the monastery, Anania had a profound influence on St. Gregory.

The 10th century was a time when Armenian creativity flourished with church-building, miniature painting, music, literature, science, and theology, of which St. Gregory became a guiding light. [2] Across his lifetime, St. Gregory produced a variety of written works, in addition to having a career in public speaking. He composed homilies, hymns, and commentaries, including a commentary on the *Song of Songs*, as well as numerous festal odes and litanies.[3] St. Gregory's most renowned work is his *Book of Prayers*, which he wrote with the help of his brother, Hovhannes. St. Gregory of Narek died in the year 1003 (or perhaps as late as 1010), sometime in his sixth decade, due to illness. He frequently references his illness in his prayer book, which influenced the content of his prayers.



I lie here on a cot struck down by evil, sinking in disease and torment, like the living dead yet able to speak. O kind Son of God, have compassion upon my misery. Hear the sobbing of my agitated voice. Bring me back to life with the dew of your blessed eyes as you brought back your friend [Lazarus] from breathless death. In a dungeon of infirmities, I am captive, bitter and in doubt. Give me your hand, O Sun that casts no shadows, Son on high, and lift me into your radiant light.

~ Prayer 18g (4)

THE “NAREK”

As St. Gregory was very ill while he composed his prayer book, he would therapeutically write out daily, in penitential and poetic form, the ideas basic to his life of faith. The “Narek” as it is sometimes called, “was designed to be an applied synthesis of theology and worship, a handbook for the spiritual development of ordinary Christians and monastics the world over.” What resulted was “a masterpiece of intuitive and direct communion with God.” [5]

The *Book of Prayers* is also referred to as the “Book of Lamentations.” When reading it, one may be struck with what seems to be St. Gregory's overwhelmingly dark and negative approach to his own spiritual state. One might even wonder if St. Gregory misses the point of what it means to be a Christian, and accuse him of partaking in an over-exaggerated, flagellant attitude toward his own sinful self.

And now, O wretched soul of mine, what appropriately revolting words shall I use to describe you in this book of woes, my testament of prayers? If I were to set the Cedars of Lebanon as a scale and to put Mount Ararat on one side and my iniquities on the other, it would not come close to balancing.

~ Prayer 9a

And I have fixed my mind's eye upon you, O worthless soul of mine, sculpting a monument in words. I cast stones at you mercilessly like some untamed wild beast.

~ Prayer 9c

Contrary to common perceptions, penance and penitence in the Armenian tradition are always vehicles for expressing grace and light. Even if grace and light remain as underlying elements, their affirmation is always present. St. Gregory is fully aware of the reality that is his own heart, and what it means to be in the state of becoming a Christian.

From his own experience, he knows and is confident that there is always forgiveness no matter what we do; that the opposite side of everything that is bleak, ugly, painful, and grim is exquisitely beautiful. And the vision of this comes only by God's grace.

With what measure I mete out reprimand to my soul, let your undiminishing compassion be measured for me, that I might receive your abundant grace many times greater than the magnitude of my sins, though my wounds and injuries overpower me, incurable and inescapable, yet the genius of your curative art, exalted and honored Physician, shines twice as brightly. The increase of my sins is more than matched by your generosity, my Benefactor.

~ Prayer 9c

DOCTOR OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH?

Now that St. Gregory is Doctor of the Universal Church, how should we understand this title? The "Doctor" portion of the title is the recognition that individuals designated as such have theologically and doctrinally contributed to the Church, while "Universal Church" simply refers to the Roman Catholic Church; the words catholic and universal being synonymous.

Thus, the title, "Doctor of the Universal Church" is a designation of and for the Roman Catholic Church. Also, the intention of the designation is not to imply universality on behalf of Christendom as a whole, except inasmuch as the Roman Catholic Church considers herself the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church" of the Nicene Creed (this attitude was largely challenged at the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s).

That being said, it is perfectly appropriate to designate St. Gregory of Narek with the title of "Universal" as it means, "all-encompassing". As Dr. Thomas Samuelian writes, "Although he wrote in Classical Armenian...St. Gregory believed he was inspired to write this book for all people and hoped that it would be translated and recited by many nations, by people of all stations and in all times." [6]

A new book of psalms sings with urgency through me, for all thinking people the world over, expressing all human passions and serving with its images as an encyclopedic companion to our human condition, for the entire, mixed congregation of the Church universal. ~ Prayer 3b

Let the perfume, the bouquet of this book of confessions be redoubled and affect multitudes. Let its memory be told everywhere and fill the world.

~ Prayer 33b

IF ST. GREGORY IS A DOCTOR OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, WAS HE "CATHOLIC" AND THUS CHALCEDONIAN?

According to some scholars, it was only in the year 554 at the Council of Dvin, under the auspices of Catholicos Nersess II, that the Armenian Church officially rejected the Council of Chalcedon of 451 and its formula regarding the nature(s) of Jesus Christ, which stated, "one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in *two natures*, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation". Instead, the Armenian Church along with the Ethiopian and other commonly called "Oriental Orthodox" Churches favor Cyrillian Christology: that Jesus Christ is *one nature* of God the Word incarnate. (7) That is, Jesus is fully divine and fully human, but as *one nature*, rather than two.

Historically, there has always been a minority of Armenian Christians in communion with the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church, and simultaneously, sympathetic to Chalcedonian Christology. The list has included various Catholicoses who espoused opinions ranging from recognition of Chalcedonian Christology as not differing essentially from its non-Chalcedonian older cousin, to outright rejection of the non-Chalcedonian formulation in favor of the Chalcedonian one.



Narekavank (The Monastery of Narek): X century, Kingdome of Vaspurakan; demolished during massacres of 1915.

So where does St. Gregory of Narek fit into all of this? First, it is true that St. Gregory did *not* belong to the Armenian Catholic Church, as that body exists today. Rather, he belonged to the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church, and faithfully upheld its teachings and doctrines without compromise. Thus, what makes Pope Francis's designation of St. Gregory significant is that St. Gregory is the first Doctor of the Catholic Church to be outside direct communion with the Church of Rome.

Even so, it's not entirely out of the question to assume that St. Gregory was personally sympathetic to the Christology and formula established at the Council of Chalcedon, and some attempts have been made to demonstrate exactly that. In an online article titled, *St. Gregory of Narek: Was the New Doctor of the Church a Catholic?* (8) Dr. R. Jared of the University of Mary in Bismarck, ND writes, "I do not have any definitive evidence one way or another, but many people are claiming that St. Gregory upheld Chalcedon. Here is one example: "The hieromonks of the monastery of Narek, from among whom we have the remarkable mystic St. Gregory of Narek, are indisputably for the two natures in Jesus Christ."

Again, the above quote from J. Mecerian, an Armenian Catholic and theologian, is only one example, and others like it would have to be examined on their own merit, but before anyone takes this reference too seriously, one should not only consider the possible innate bias of the source, but also that this quote is a passing reference from a secondary source about Mariology, not a work devoted to expounding the theology of St. Gregory. The point is, one should be careful interpreting claims, demonstrations, or theories that St. Gregory upheld Chalcedon.

Furthermore, St. Gregory's teacher Anania, founder of the Narek Monastery, specifically composed a work promoting non-Chalcedonian theology, and as mentioned earlier, had a profound influence on St. Gregory. But the best way to truly understand the position of St. Gregory is to let him speak for himself, and arguably, his voice is best preserved in his *Book of Prayers*. For the purpose of this article, only excerpts from the Narek have been and will be used to communicate the thoughts of St. Gregory.

This book will cry out in my place, with my voice, as if it were me.

~ Prayer 88c

His profession of faith resides in poetic and prayerful form rather than creedal and didactic. Speaking from the depths of his heart, St. Gregory often confessed his position regarding the Incarnation and the Trinity.

You who are and were totally perfect and lacking nothing, took our nature truly and in its entirety, in order to complete it with your perfection.

~ Prayer 93e

Lord of all, who for the sake of infirm and unruly servants like me submitted to everything willingly according to your plan together with your perfectly human body, submitted even to the sleepy tomb of the sepulchre, who lack nothing of divine perfection, being identical with God who is beyond human understanding, yet bore human indignity with patience beyond words, you rose with your body, alive and of your own power, in exalted light, with undiminished humanity and flawless divinity.

~ Prayer 77d

Mother of our exalted Lord Jesus, creator of heaven and earth, whom you bore complete in humanity and total in divinity, who is glorified with the Father and the Holy Spirit, uniting his essence and our nature in a manner beyond human understanding. He is all and in all, one of the Holy Trinity.

~ Prayer 80c

Being named first among the Trinity does not make one greater than the other, or being named after the other, less than the rest, or by saying that they are one, that there is a confusion of persons, or by dividing into three, a separation of wills.

~ Prayer 34h

Three persons, one mystery, separate faces, unique and distinct, made one by their congruence and being of the same holy substance and nature, unconfused and undivided, one in will and one in action.

~ Prayer 13a

At least from St. Gregory's prayers, one cannot make a definitive case as to his *formulaic* position regarding the nature(s) of Christ. [9] Rather, St. Gregory takes a different approach. V. Rev. Fr. Daniel Findikyan writes, "Much more profound is [St. Gregory] Narekac'i's understanding of the "Communion of the Word" as revealed throughout his prayers...for Gregory, the Word is first of all the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, dwelling within us by virtue of the incarnation." Findikyan continues with what he

believes to be the key to St. Gregory's Christology: "For Gregory the incarnation is not a point of dogma to be disputed—in the copious Christological meditations scattered throughout his prayers he studiously avoids the controversial, conventional terminology of earlier eras, replacing these problematic terms with strikingly original images that foil stock polemics, leading the reader instead to consider the mystery of Christ from fresh perspectives." [10]

The creed of the co-existing Holy Trinity, the rule of life and grace of salvation, I taught in the following way: We confess and profess, honor and worship the shared glory and unity of the Holy Trinity, Godhead beyond description, always good, of the same substance, equal in honor, beyond the flight of the wings of our thought, higher than all examples, beyond all analogies, surpassing the limits on high.

~ Prayer 34c

One of three glorified persons equal in power and awe, who descended from on high to here below, who was indeed by nature indistinguishable from those below, without relinquishing the throne of glory, without leaving the watchful gaze of the parent of love, merely entering the vessel of the virgin womb purely and coming out joined with a body inseparable in essence, without any flaw in his humanity and lacking nothing in divinity, one and only Son of the only Father and the first born of the Mother of God, Virgin Bearer of the Lord, creator becoming a true man as originally created, not in the fallen state of mortals, but new and splendid with the sublime glory of kings, not seen in the ages or existing in time. The first born, as the Psalmist said, higher than all the kings of earth, formed from an incorruptible combination like us in body, in the manner of the soul with body, and as gold with fire, or to put it more plainly, light in air, neither transformed nor separated.

~ Prayer 34e

You who are and were totally perfect and lacking nothing, took our nature truly and in its entirety, in order to complete it with your perfection... You gave the oil, and in this oil you placed a wick, which exemplifies your union, without imperfection, with our condition, formed and woven with your love of mankind...

~ Prayer 93b

Furthermore, it does not logically follow that if one were to not find what one would assume to be non-Chalcedonian references, that St. Gregory is therefore Chalcedonian. Their non-existence only substantiates the claims of this particular article – 1) that St. Gregory was avoiding such categorical and debatable terminology and explanations, and/or 2) that Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Christology is not as essentially different and divisive as has been traditionally supposed. That is, if either side of the debate dropped the traditional words, formulas, and explanations, one would see that each is approaching the person of Jesus Christ from two perspectives but reaching the same conclusion.



AGAIN, WHY DOCTOR OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH?

None of what has been said thus far is intended to resurrect ancient divisions, or to claim one side of the Council of Chalcedon as orthodox and the other side as heretical. Instead it is simply to point out that St. Gregory, a member of one of the “non-Chalcedonian” Churches, did not resort to the battle of Christological dogma and formulas as the defining point of the Armenian Church, within its local context, or within the context of Christendom as a whole.

The absence of a traditional, dogmatic Christological position from St. Gregory’s writings underscores how ecumenically significant St. Gregory’s designation as a Doctor of the Universal Church is, and points out the overt message this event sends to Christendom. The vision of Pope Francis is similar to that of St. Gregory of Narek. Pope Francis knew full well who St. Gregory was – his theology, his Christology, and with which Churches he was and was

not in full communion – yet he specifically chose St. Gregory to represent the Roman Catholic Church in a prominent role.

Just as St. Gregory wasn’t interested in debating contentious terminology such as “Monophysite” and “Dyophysite”, Pope Francis is also pointing beyond the barriers we create for ourselves to something greater. That something greater is holiness, wherever it is, and in whatever Church tradition it may reside. It would behoove all of us to follow the examples of both St. Gregory of Narek, and Pope Francis, the Bishop of Rome.

And may you make this book of mournful psalms begun in your name, Most High, into a life-giving salve for the sufferings of body and soul. May you perfect what I have started and may your spirit be mixed with it. May the breath of your great might infuse these verses with grace so that you may brace the wilting heart and accept praise from us all. Amen.
~ Prayer 3e

“Saint Gregory of Narek, a monk of the tenth century, knew how to express the sentiments of your people more than anyone. He gave voice to the cry, which became a prayer, of a sinful and sorrowful humanity, oppressed by the anguish of its powerlessness, but illuminated by the splendor of God’s love and open to the hope of his salvific intervention, which is capable of transforming all things.”
~ Pope Francis, April 12, 2015, Vatican

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[1] St. Gregory of Narek, *Speaking with God from the Depths of the Heart: The Armenian Prayer Book of St. Gregory of Narek*, tr. Thomas J. Samuelian, 3rd ed., Vem Press, Yerevan: 2005, p. vi; [2] Ibid., p. vii; [3] R.W. Thomson, *Corpus Christianorum, A Bibliography of Classical Armenian Literature to 1500 AD*, Brepols – Turnhout, 1995, pp. 129-130 (These festal works are currently being translated for a forthcoming book by Abraham Terian, PhD, Professor Emeritus of Armenian Theology and Patristics at St. Nersess Armenian Seminary. A sample of the translation was featured in the Spring 2015 issue of *The Treasury*); [4] St. Gregory of Narek, *Speaking with God from the Depths of the Heart: The Armenian Prayer Book of St. Gregory of Narek*, tr. Thomas J. Samuelian: a) All prayer excerpts in this article are taken from Thomas Samuelian’s translation as noted above. b) The number following each excerpt indicates which of the 95 prayers, or as St. Gregory called them, «Բա՛ն/Pan», and the letter indicates the section of the prayer as structured in Dr. Samuelian’s translation. c) The formation of the prayers has been altered in order to save space.; [5] Ibid., p. iii; [6] Ibid., p. ii; [7] St. Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, tr. John McGuckin, St. Vladimir’s Press, Crestwood: 1995, p. 79 [8] Dr. R. Jared Staudt, St. Gregory of Narek: Was the New Doctor of the Church a Catholic?, *The Catholic World Report*, February 26, 2015, citing J. Mecerian, *La Vierge Marie dans la Littérature médiévale de l’Arménie*, Beyrouth, 1954, p. 9 (<http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/3719> St_Gregory_of_Narek_Was_the_New_Doctor_of_the_Church_a_Catholic.aspx); [9] Ascertaining whether or not St. Gregory of Narek explicitly spells out his formulaic doctrinal position on the nature(s) of Christ in his other works is an endeavor this author has not undertaken.; [10] Rev. Fr. Michael Daniel Findikyan, *St. Gregory of Narek’s Book of Prayers and the Eucharist: Another Holy Communion*, *Revue Théologique De Kaslik*, No. 3-4, 2009-2010, p. 311

ԱՂ = AGH “SALT”

By Rev. Fr. Ghevond Ajamian

Salt can be an interesting ingredient when used for cooking. Too much and the meal is ruined; too little and the meal is bland. Salt not only gives flavor to meals, but can also be used for many other things.

Words that have the letter ‘L’ in Latin and Greek and are directly translated into Armenian are translated with the letter ‘Ղ’. Such examples can be found with names and words like Ղուկաս/Luke, Ղազարոս/Lazarus, and ղամբար/lamp. This is also true for the word *salt*. The English word ‘*salt*’ comes from the Latin word ‘*sal*’. The Armenian word, ‘*աղ*’ is connected to the Latin word, ‘*sal*’ and the Greek word for salt, ‘*hals*’, from which we get the English word halogen. This can be seen through the vowel ‘*ա/a*’ and the ‘*L*’ being translated into Armenian with the letter ‘*Ղ*’.

“*Աղ/salt*” was a prized commodity in Jesus’s time. So much so, that the Romans would sometimes use “*աղ/salt*” as a form of payment, giving us the English word ‘*salary*.’ Today we do not pay people with “*աղ/salt*” but we still hold it very dear to our hearts (and stomachs).

The uses for “*աղ/salt*” are numerous. “*Աղ/salt*” kills weeds, deodorizes, melts icy walkways, removes stains, preserves food and most importantly, adds taste to tasteless meals. In fact, a single grain of “*աղ/salt*” can change the taste of an entire meal. The next time you eat a meal (that has no “*աղ/salt*” in it, of course), take a single

grain of “*աղ/salt*” and sprinkle it on your meal without looking where it falls. It is guaranteed that while you eat your meal, you will sense when you have eaten that solitary grain of “*աղ/salt*”. That is how potent “*աղ/salt*” is.

Christ tells us that we “are the ‘*աղ/salt*’ of the earth” (Matthew 5:13), and Christians are supposed to be “*աղ/salt*.” Each person is like a single grain of “*աղ/salt*”. Our “*աղ/salt*” should be recognized immediately by those around us, like our taste buds recognize “*աղ/salt*” in a meal. Those around us should not have to guess if we are Christians, but should recognize our faith in Christ through our words and deeds. Similarly, our words and deeds should never make another question our Christian faith.

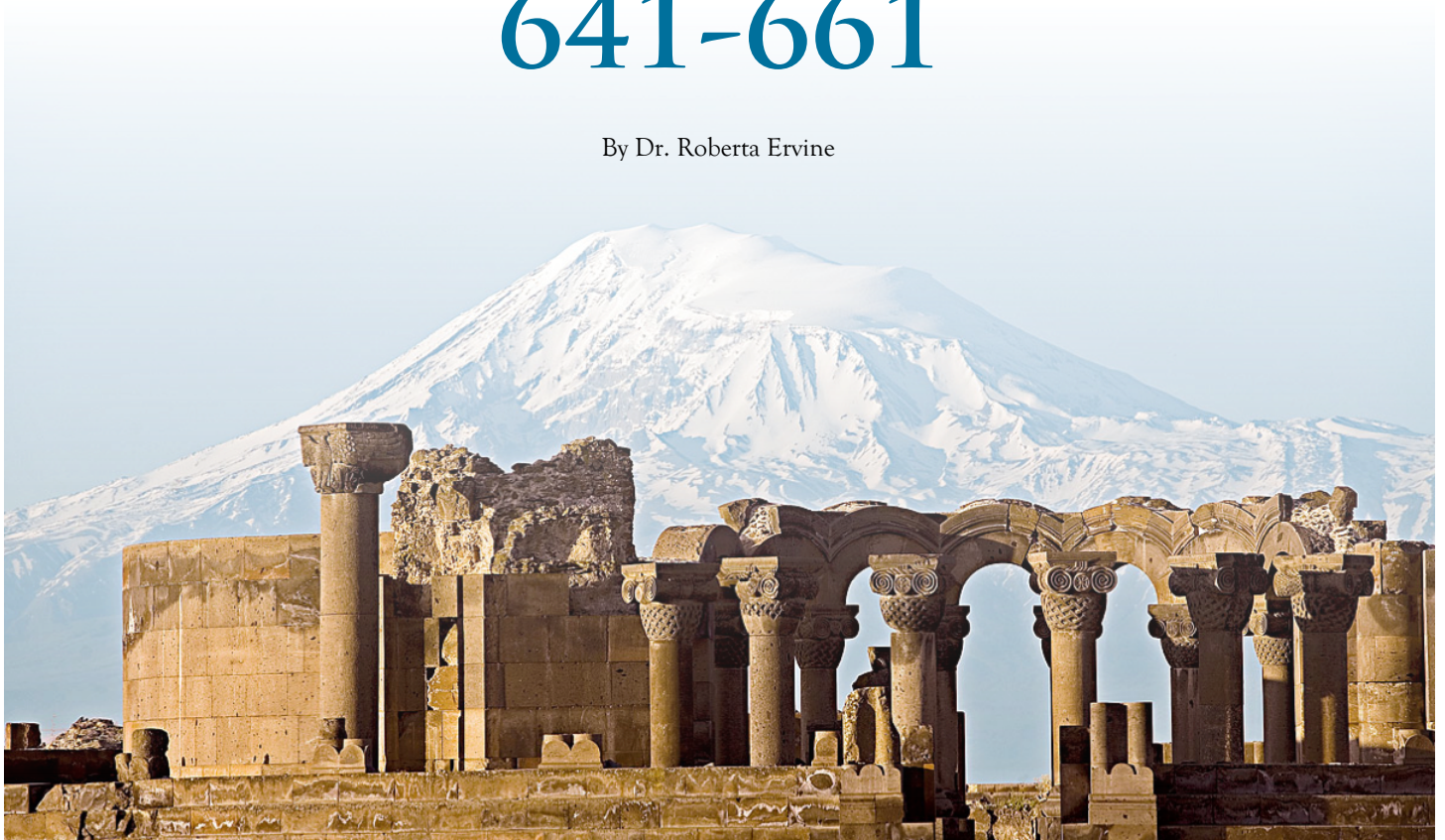
May we always be salt in a world that needs the flavor of Christ’s love and may we continue to give flavor to the lives of those with whom we come in contact.



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CATHOLICOS NERSES III OF ISHKHAN (THE BUILDER) 641-661

By Dr. Roberta Ervine



The seventh century was one of the most tumultuous eras in the Armenian Church's history. Armenia as a political unit did not exist. Having divided Armenia between them, the Byzantine and Persian empires became locked in a protracted and futile struggle for dominance. Armenians were used to the Persian-Byzantine power

dynamic and had learned how to live with it, even profit from it. But in 632 the world order as they knew it began to change with lightning speed. While the two superpowers had their eyes fixed on one another, the Prophet Muhammad died and his followers erupted onto the world stage in a relentless surge of fervor and conquest that swept the

ancient power of Persia from the map and threatened to eradicate Byzantium as well.

Nerses III is one of the nine catholicoses called to lead the Church through that century of unpredictable change. History has seen him as an ambiguous figure. Yet the very ambiguity — indeed, the irony — of his catholicosate

speaks to anyone called to lead in a time and place of divided cultural influences and loyalties.

When Nerses was chosen catholicos early in 641, he hit the ground running. The catholicosal residence at Duin had been sacked by an Islamic army a few weeks before, and a large portion of the city's population had been killed or taken captive. As the historian Sebeos dramatically described it, Nerses came to the throne "amid smoking ruins, the blood not yet dry on the ground."⁽¹⁾ His first act as chief pastor was to gather up the corpses of the city's slain and lay them to rest with a solemn burial service. He declared them martyrs for the faith, named their gravesite a martyrium, and erected a church above it.

In the decade of relative peace that followed these horrific days, Nerses turned energetically to the care of the living. The people needed to be gathered, knit together and revitalized in their faith.

What are the things that join a faithful people together effectively? Nerses and his colleagues identified three: 1) clergy and lay leadership with integrity 2) worship that reflects the unity of the faith and 3) shrines that express the deep roots of both leadership and faith. The Catholicos lost no time in pursuing all three.

In 645 he convened a council of fifteen bishops at Duin to work towards exemplary leadership and unified worship. The council's twelve decisions underscored the respect and harmony bishops should maintain with one another and with their clergy, the importance of educating future priests, deacons and church leaders, and the necessity of performing

liturgy in a manner befitting its celestial significance.

The council also regularized the worship experience of liturgical music. Until Nerses' time, it seems, musicians had the freedom to interpret sacred hymns to suit the tastes and talents of their choirs and congregations. The downside of their artistic license became painfully apparent during a hymn sung for a pontifical celebration of the Transfiguration: "the choirs sang eight separate versions; no choir was able to respond to another using the same melody." Clearly, what was beautiful when celebrated alone became cacophony when celebrated together. The council appointed the learned monastic musician Barsegh Jon to select the best hymns, create a uniform Hymnary, and teach it Church-wide.

Meanwhile, Nerses was building and restoring churches at critical sites of Armenian Christian identity, including Khor Virap, where he built a church over St. Gregory's pit.

Nerses also enriched the complex of structures in and around Ejmiatzin. On the spot where King Trdat awaited Gregory's return to Armenia as consecrated head of the Church, he built the Church of St. Gregory to house a famous relic of the saint's skull. Posterity called this grand church Zuartnots – Church of the Angels – honoring the angels in the Illuminator's vision of the Descent of the Only-Begotten. A sophisticated and ambitious piece of architecture, Zuartnots successfully combined a round floor plan and unsupported dome with unusual height. It was a feat of engineering



Column capital from Zuartnots
with the monogram of Catholicos Nerses



Ruins of Zuartnoc at dusk

“ It was a feat of engineering as well as a work of art. Captivated by the church’s unusual beauty, the Byzantine emperor wanted its architect to erect a similar building for him in Constantinople. ”

as well as a work of art. Captivated by the church’s unusual beauty, the Byzantine emperor wanted its architect to erect a similar building for him in Constantinople. The architect died before this plan could be carried out, but the

structure was copied elsewhere (the cathedral of Bana is one example).

Many centuries later, it became the prototype for the depiction of Noah’s ark on the doorway of La Sainte Chapelle, in Paris.

With all these positive actions to his credit, why has Nerses been seen as an ambiguous figure? Ironically, it is because of his unambiguous Christian loyalty.

Nerses’s home village of Ishkhan, in the province of Tayk’, fell within the region of Armenia governed by Byzantium. Whereas the center of Islamic power was far to the south, Byzantium was nearby, a Christian friend in proximity. Like other young

men of his area, Nerses studied in Byzantium, learned Greek, and served in the Byzantine military. Probably from a princely family himself, he was raised on stories of the Mamikonian heroes, staunch believers from his own region and strong allies of the Byzantine Empire.

Thus Nerses had no doubts about where the Armenian Church’s loyalties should lie relative to the rising Islamic power: she should stand with her Christian Byzantine brethren. Hitching Armenia’s wagon to the rising star of Islam was not an option.

Over and above his upbringing, Nerses had reason to think that even if an alliance with Islam were possible, it would be unwise. The devastation caused to Duin by the Islamic army was all too fresh in his memory. Leading up to that attack, Islamic forces in Armenia had pillaged ancient Armenian shrines consecrated by St. Gregory the Illuminator himself. How could Christian Armenians willingly submit to a non-Christian power capable of such barbaric disregard for the sacred?

Nerses’s pro-Byzantine stance was not shared by all. Political figures in southern and

eastern provinces had a more pragmatic, secular political vision. To them Islam was powerful, and it is better to ally with power than make it an enemy. On the other hand, infighting amongst the Armenian nobility, aided and abetted by the Byzantines, had devastated northern Armenia's clans. Would a Muslim ally be any worse than a Christian ally with unchristian policies?

Thus for many Armenian princes a distant Islamic overlord was preferable to a nefarious and interfering Christian neighbor. The Muslims were not Christian, certainly, but their religious tolerance seemed a far cry from Byzantium's insistence on Chalcedonian theology and Imperial traditions of worship.

In his heartfelt desire to keep the Armenians within the Byzantine Christian fold, Nerses walked a tightrope between fraternal Christian openness to compromise with the Byzantines, and sacrificing the Armenian Church's ancient tenets to the Empire's vision of a Byzantine-led Church unity.

In 648 Nerses' tightrope walking skills were severely tested. The Byzantines sent an Armenian Chalcedonian intellectual named David to Duin. His mission was to persuade the Catholicos to implement a unity agreement made by his predecessor. The Byzantines interpreted the old agreement to mean that the Armenian Church would submit to the Byzantine patriarchate and adopt her liturgical and theological ways. Rather than debate the interpretation, Nerses promised to convene a synod of bishops to draft an Armenian response, and then waited for David to leave for Constantinople.

Once he left, the synod met. Its response was a heartfelt defense of Armenian orthodoxy, and an impassioned reminder that Armenians had been true to the faith despite fierce Persian coercion. The implication was that if Armenians had shed their blood for a faith that was in no way contrary to the Universal Church counsels or the Gospel, they would not change that faith simply to comply with an imperial edict. The synod's written response was preserved at the catholicosate until such time as the Byzantines might send a representative to receive it.

Despite the Catholicos's strong convictions and best efforts, Armenia's princely leadership ultimately chose to ally themselves with the Islamic power. The treaty brokered between T'eodoros Rshtuni and the Islamic leader Muawiyye in 651 was generous. For Nerses, however, it was nothing less than "a covenant with death, and a treaty with hell." Wanting to save the princes from themselves, he had no qualms about encouraging the Byzantines to invade Armenian territory in 651 and reclaim it from Islamic influence.

The Catholicos's decision to take politics into his own hands precipitated a two-year civil war. Flexing their victorious muscles, the Byzantines resumed their insistence that Armenians toe the imperial religious line. The emperor came in person to Duin. There in the Catholicosal church the Divine Liturgy was celebrated in Greek, by a Byzantine cleric; Nerses and his bishops took communion together with the emperor and his entourage.

Was this a show of Byzantine

dominance, or was it a demonstration of the Armenian Church's vast spirit of tolerance and openhearted fraternity? Perhaps each side saw the event differently. In any case, it soon became awkward. One of Nerses' bishops did not take communion with the rest of the clergy; instead, he slipped out, "melting into the assembled crowd." When the emperor took the bishop to task, the cleric replied that he did not feel right taking communion during a service where Chalcedon was remembered as a blessed council, when just a few years earlier he had signed the Armenian synod's statement formally refusing to recognize the authority of Chalcedon. This embarrassing revelation of the failure in communication undermined the emperor's trust in Nerses's sincerity.

Meanwhile, Byzantine forces vigorously pursued and persecuted Armenian princes who remained loyal to their oath with Islam. As a sponsor of the Byzantine incursion, Nerses was tarred with the brush of Byzantine violence against his compatriots.

And then, suddenly, the Byzantine army withdrew, sucking the air out of their allies' sails. They left behind a vacuum that Islamic forces hastened to fill. Foreseeing retaliation against him by the pro-Islamic princes, Nerses left the area together with the Byzantines. Hoping for new military support, he lobbied the rich and powerful in Constantinople, but to no avail. Unable to return to Duin, Nerses continued his catholicosate from the relative safety of his home village, enduring a six year exile from his building project at Zuartnots and conceding the

political field to T'eodoros and the pro-Islamic nobility.

But Nerses had not changed his opinions. As Islam floundered towards real political statehood, Nerses' nemesis T'eodoros died. The Catholicos returned to Duin and once again spearheaded a pro-Byzantine resurgence. This second attempt to re-align Armenians with the Empire proved more short-lived than the previous one. In its wake came Islamic reprisals. Islamic forces inflicted heavy damage on the area, and more than 1,700 influential Armenians were carried away hostage.

The Islamic hold on the Armenian provinces was definitively consolidated. In the politically capable hands of the Caliph Muawiyye, the Islamic empire settled into its new capital at Damascus and worked to conciliate the Armenians. In 661, the last year of his reign, Nerses finally allowed himself to be persuaded that alliance with Islam was indeed the only possible way forward. Perhaps he also conceded, at least to himself, that his resistance to the inevitable had only strengthened Islam's hold on the region.

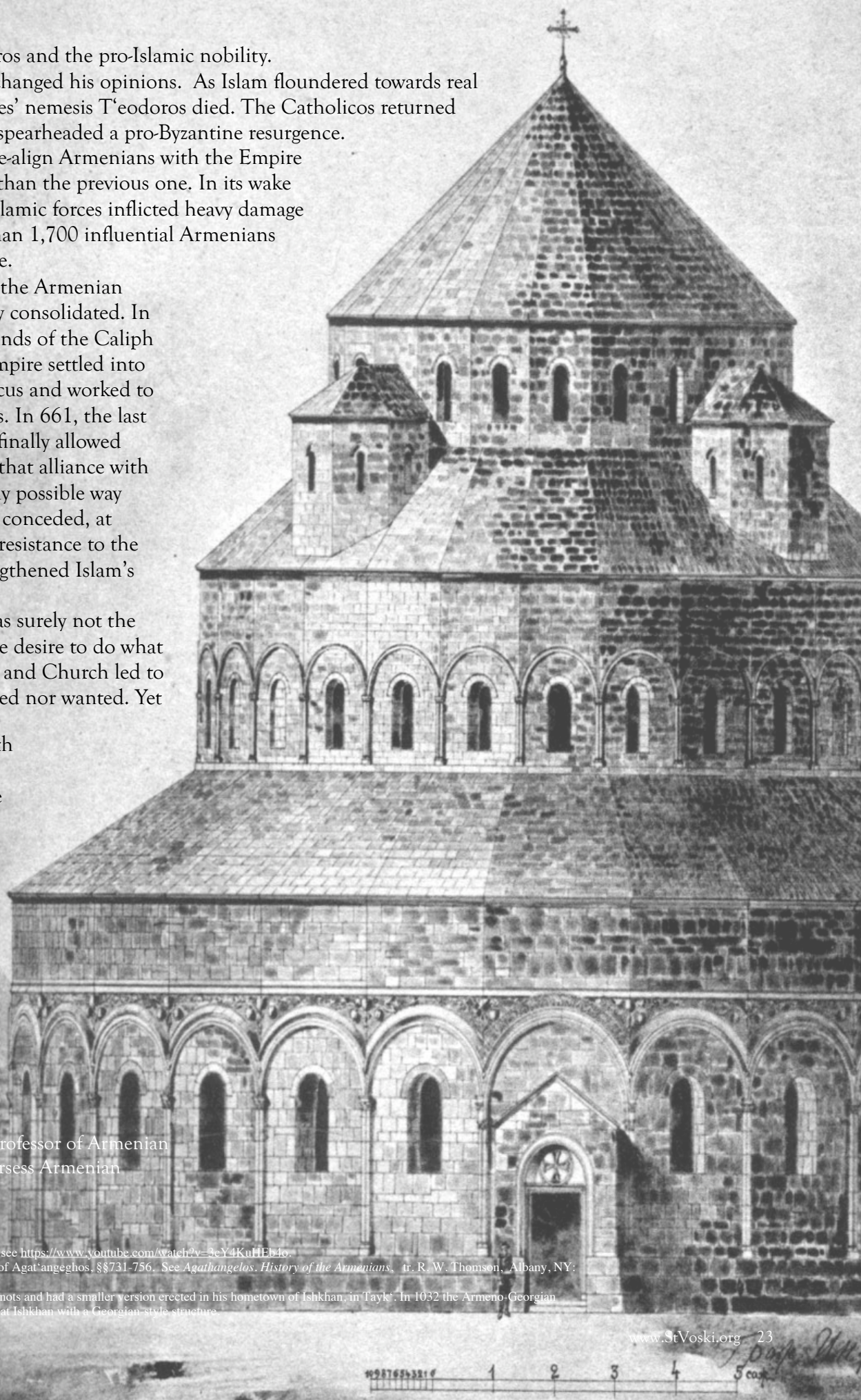
Catholicos Nerses was surely not the first person whose sincere desire to do what he thought best for faith and Church led to results he neither intended nor wanted. Yet the same desire led him to adorn the Church with liturgical dignity and integrity. Islam has come and gone from Armenia, but Khor Virab remains, and even in ruins Zuartnots inspires new generations with admiration for the faith that built it.

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1. For a sample of Barsegh Jon's hymns, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3cY4KnHEb4o>.

2. The vision is described in the History of Agat'angelos, §§731-756. See *Agathangelos. History of the Armenians*, tr. R. W. Thomson, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1976.

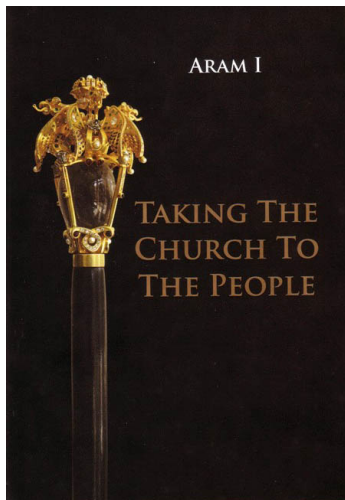
3. Nerses himself loved the plan of Zuartnots and had a smaller version erected in his hometown of Ishkhan, in Tayk'. In 1032 the Armeno-Georgian ruler Bagarat IV replaced Nerses' church at Ishkhan with a Georgian-style structure.



CATHOLICOS ARAM I

TAKING THE CHURCH TO THE PEOPLE

By André Markarian



Some books are known for their creativity, others for their informational content. *Taking the Church to the People*, published by the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia in 2011, will be remembered for its wisdom and candor. Its author, His Holiness Catholicos Aram I of the Great

House of Cilicia, has long been regarded as a gifted writer, educator, and ecclesial leader. *Taking the Church to the People* provides not only an honest assessment of the current state of the global Armenian Orthodox Church, but it also outlines a comprehensive and practical action-plan to address its most pressing issues as it moves into the 21st century.

The book is divided into three parts. The first section acts mostly as a preface, where Aram Vehapar describes the general activities of the church, referred to as “inreach and outreach” ministry. (30) Special attention is given to understanding the role and responsibility of the individual community parish. The second section deals with what the author believes to be the most urgent core issues and major challenges for the church, with material drawn from several of his previous pontifical messages from 2003-2011. In the third part of the book, which he entitles “Dialogue with the Youth,” ten short articles on very relevant and thought provoking Christian topics are included to supplement his overall message to the future stewards of the Armenian Church.

Straightaway Aram Vehapar defines the mission and guiding principle of the Armenian Church: “to take Christ, namely His church, to the world” thereby making its message a living reality in the lives of our people. (11) He notes that because of new local and global challenges and crises, the church is being called “to revitalize its missionary outreach, evangelistic witness, educational task and diaconal action.”(17) Citing a 2007 survey on religious beliefs in America (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2007/fall/1.19.html>), Aram Vehapar brings attention to three critical issues: 1) the institutional church is no longer considered the only place for spiritual growth; 2) the church must develop community-oriented outreach programs; 3) members of the parish have to be better equipped with Gospel truths and values.(19) Using these findings as his springboard, and noting that the Church has become too institutionalized and not “local” enough, he then issues his bold call-to-action: “I believe we must engage in the renewal of the church and re-energize its missionary outreach in order to restore its spiritual strength, moral authority and organizational dynamism.”(20) To accomplish this, he urges that the local parish needs to become the “epicenter” of the church, where “proclaiming the Gospel to those within as well as beyond the Church’s boundaries” becomes the urgent task before us.(23)

One of my most favorite terms that Aram Vehapar uses is “evangelistic inreach,” the goal of which is to inject new vitality into the church’s own spiritual depth and where the missionary field becomes our own people.(24) Special attention is given to three dimensions of missionary engagement: service, education and community building. He

believes that by addressing these most foundational arenas, a sound strategy is formed to breathe new life into our parishes. In this first section, there is no shortage of challenging statements to us as individuals: “Although Armenians who profess the faith of the Armenian Church are *ipso facto* members of the church, and paying dues is one criteria for membership, *we express our membership fully only by actively participating in the total life and mission of the church* (emphasis added).”(31) We are reminded of the timeless wisdom that the effectiveness of a parish church is a product of healthy relationships: between parishioners, pastor, prelate and community. This section concludes with a summary of the paramount issues confronting the Armenian Church which Aram Vehapar believes must be addressed: the over-institutionalization of the Armenian Church, re-energizing the clergy and diaconate, confronting the charismatic movement, confronting ethical and moral issues, and addressing the gap between the institutional church and the people. (37-43)

Section two, perhaps the most practical of all three sections, outlines Aram Vehapar’s strategic approach to addressing the aforementioned concerns. He first cautions that we must “study its (the Armenian Church’s) environment in order to identify its people’s problems and needs so that it may respond responsibly and effectively.”(49) Using this approach, he systematically works through each issue and provides his own recommendations for creating solutions and building a more spiritually relevant and effective church for the future. Some of the highlights include: 1) re-emphasis on studying and using the Bible as the foundation for spiritual development and guidance; 2) restoring the family’s central role as educator, faith developer, and nation builder; 3) renewing a commitment to support the local

Armenian school; 4) recognition of the pivotal role the Armenian language plays for survival of identity and culture; 5) reorganization of Christian education for spiritual building in the community; 6) redirected attention towards promoting greater participation of the youth and women in the life of the church.

The book concludes its candid assessment of the Armenian Church with a series of short articles which individually complement many of the issues raised in its greater part. Because of their particular relevance to the Armenian-American community, I found “Diversity is God’s Gift and Call” (190) and “Changing Stereotypes: Blending Tradition and Modernity” (203) to be most interesting and insightful.

Not a bit outdated, *Taking the Church to the People* is Aram Vehapar’s clarion call to this generation to “reorganize, revitalize, and renew the Church.”(43) By asking provocative questions like “What kind of Armenian do we want to form in the context of the present day world?”, Aram Vehapar allows for a candid dialogue with his audience.(81) Although at the time of its writing Vehapar recommended a 3-year action plan, perhaps an extension on this timeline is in order. Providing an honest and authoritative assessment of the serious issues confronting the Armenian Church today, *Taking the Church to the People* also offers realistic and effective strategies to achieving its stated goals. Personally, this book has been a great inspiration and motivating force in my own service to the church, and I strongly recommend that it be a much-used reference on the desk of every parent, pastor, educator and leader in the Armenian community.

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ATTENTION: In Vol 1/Num 2 of The Treasury, in the article entitled *Book Summary: Commentary on the Nicene Creed*, Archbishop Zareh Aznavorian was incorrectly referred to as Bishop. We apologize for this error.

Fellowship of St. Voski
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Stonecrosses (Khatchkars/խաչքար) – these almost 800 year old gravestones are stained with beetle dye and still dazzle our eyes with their beautiful color and amazingly detailed structure.

The image of the Armenian blooming cross originates from the pre-Christian tree of life symbol.