

## ***OUR CHURCH AND ITS PLACE IN CHRISTENDOM***

### **The Armenian Church**

#### *Founding*

- Two of Jesus' 12 Disciples, Sts. Thaddeus and Bartholomew, evangelized Armenia in the years following Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD
- Christianity spread, but was not officially recognized and was often persecuted until 301.
- St. Grigor (St. Gregory the Illuminator), along with Armenia's king and queen, Sts. Trdat and Ashkhen, made Armenia the first Christian state, by proclaiming Christianity as Armenia's state religion in 301.
- The Holy See of Etchmiadzin (meaning 'where the Only-Begotten descended') is the center of the Armenian Church. It is built in view of the Biblical Mt. Ararat, where Noah's ark came to rest after the flood (Gen. 8:4) on the place that Christ, descending from heaven, designated to St. Grigor in a vision.

#### *Doctrine*

- The faith, doctrine and dogma of the Armenian Church are based upon the Apostolic teachings, Holy Tradition and the written Word of God.
- The Nicene Creed is the main statement of faith, professing the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- Only the first three church councils are accepted as fully ecumenical: Nicea in 325, Constantinople in 381, and Ephesus in 431.
- Most the doctrine of the Armenian Church is collected in the Book of Letters (*Girk Tghtots*) and the Canonbook of the Armenian Church (*Kanonagirk Hayots*)

#### *Worship*

- There are major sacraments administered and celebrated by the clergy.
- Baptism by immersion into water constitutes one's entry into the Church.
- The Holy Eucharist, the *Badarak*, also known as the Divine Liturgy, is the central sacrament and is offered to the faithful at Holy Communion in the form of unleavened bread and wine that become truly the Body and Blood of Christ.
- The Virgin Mary is venerated as the Mother of God and the image of her holding Jesus is required to be placed above the main altar of every Church, and her life and model of humble service celebrated through many holy days throughout the year.
- The Holy Cross is venerated and honored and its life-giving power remembered in holy days throughout the year.
- Salvation is achieved through faith and works and is a life-long process.

#### *Governance*

- The Foundation, Head and High Priest of the Church is Jesus Christ.
- The Armenian Church is one of Apostolic Succession and was established by the Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew.

- Holy Orders – Bishop, Priest and Deacon – are reserved for men; there is a tradition of Deaconesses in the Armenian Church as well.
- The successor of the Apostles is the head of the Church called the Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians who resides in Armenia at the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin.
- Bishops and priests are the ordained leaders of the church.
- Bishops oversee dioceses, formed of parishes in a particular territory. Priests serve as pastors of churches. Both Diocese and Parish have elected councils, majority of whose members are lay people. As of 2008, there are over 25 dioceses of the Armenian Church covering North and South America, Europe, Armenia, Russia, the Mid-East, Africa, the Far East and Australia.
- There are two classes of priests: married and celibate, only celibate priests may be ordained *vardapet* and rise into the church hierarchy as bishops, patriarchs or catholicoi.
- The laity and clergy together govern the church through elective church councils and assemblies and participate in decisions that affect the faith and life of the church.

#### Hierarchical Sees

- The Armenian Church has 4 hierarchical sees, in order of pre-eminence and honor:
  - Holy Etchmiadzin, in Armenia, founded in 301, the Mother See and seat of the Catholicos of All Armenians, elected by a conclave of clergy and laity from the dioceses under its jurisdiction. During successive centuries, the Catholicosate moved to the place where the central secular authority was located at the time, to cities such as Dvin, Ani, Van, Hromkla, and Sis. In 1441, the seat of the Catholicosate of All Armenians returned back to its original place in Holy Etchmiadzin. For more about Holy Etchmiadzin, refer to the timeline and biographies of St. Gregory, King Trdat, Queen Ashkhen, St. Khosrovidookhd, Catholicos Komitas.
  - The Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, now in Antelias, Lebanon, began in 1446 as a separate and regional entity, with its jurisdiction being mainly in Cilicia. In 1921, in the aftermath of the Genocide, the last Catholicos Sahak Khabaian, with his flock, left Cilicia once and for all. In 1929, through the agreement of Catholicos of All Armenians Khoren V, and the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Abp. Yeghishe Tourian, a new jurisdiction was agreed upon for the seat of the Great House of Cilicia – Syria, Lebanon, and Cyprus.
  - The Patriarchate of Jerusalem was founded in 638. The Patriarch is elected by the brotherhood of Sts. James (named for the disciple James and the brother of Our Lord, first Bishop of Jerusalem, whose heads, according to tradition, are buried in the chapel of the Armenian Cathedral). The Armenian presence in the Holy Land began with Tigran the Great (95-55 BC) and increased during the life of Christ and thereafter, with frequent pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Mt. Sinai, as well as numerous monastic communities. The Patriarchate has jurisdiction over Armenian

Churches and sacred sites throughout the Holy Land, including the Holy Sepulchre, where Jesus was crucified; Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, where Jesus was born; the Mount of Olives, where Jesus ascended into heaven 40 days after Easter; and Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus was arrested while praying on Holy Thursday after the Last Supper and where the Tomb of St. Mary is located, from which she was taken up into heaven at Assumption (celebrated in mid-August, along with the Blessing of the Grapes, harvest blessing). The Armenian presence in the Holy Land is very ancient. There are hundreds of Armenian holy places, pilgrimage routes, and monasteries from the Sinai to north of the Sea of Galilee. Stewards of the quarter of Old Jerusalem on Mt. Zion, believed to be location of the Upper Room where the Last Supper and Pentecost, the Armenians have had an honored place in the Holy Land, from the apostolic period, through the Arab, Saracen and Crusader times and into the modern era. For more information about the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, refer to the timeline, 1717, Patriarch Grigor Shghtayakir (the "Chainbearer").

- The Patriarchate of Constantinople was founded in 1461. The Patriarch is elected by a representative assembly of clergy and laity and has jurisdiction over the Armenian faithful, churches, schools, monasteries and holy places in Turkey and Western Armenia and Crete. Under the Ottoman Empire, with its *millet* (ethno-religious community) governance system, the Patriarch had religious and temporal responsibility for the Armenian population of the Empire. The Patriarch's role was formalized under the National (Armenian) Constitution in the Ottoman Empire (1863), which created a National Assembly to assist in governing the millet. For more information about the Patriarchate of Constantinople, refer to the timeline 1715, Patriarch Hovhannes Kolot.

## **Its Place in Christendom**

### **The Armenian Church and Oriental Orthodox Churches**

As an ancient Christian church, the Armenian Church has affinities with the other ancient churches, including the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. Not surprisingly, it is most similar to other ancient Christian churches of the Near East, such as the Copts (Egypt), Ethiopians, Syrians, Malabars (India), which, like the Armenian Church accept only the first three ecumenical councils (Nicea in 325, Constantinople in 381, Ephesus in 431). Though quite different in their outward forms of rite, ritual, worship styles, cultural tradition and language, these churches are in full communion with the Armenian Church, which means that their members may receive all sacramental blessings in the Armenian Church and vice versa.

Unlike the churches further West, including the Eastern Orthodox (Greek, Byzantine, Antiochian Greek, and later Russian, Ukrainian, etc.) and Roman Catholic Churches, the Armenian Church and these other ancient Christian Churches of the Near East did not take part in further efforts at doctrinal clarification at the later ecumenical councils. Nevertheless, the Armenian Church services, for example, Holy Communion, are quite

similar to those of the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, as they draw on a common base of early church practices. Recall that St. Gregory the Illuminator was ordained bishop in Caesarea, which was at the time (before the ecumenical councils united and later divided the holy, catholic and apostolic church) an important center of Greek Christianity.

### **Other Armenian Denominations:**

- The Armenian Church has no direct hierarchical tie with the Armenian Catholic Church, founded in 1742, (sometimes called uniates, since they unified with the Roman Catholic Church), which is subordinate to the Pope, or to the religious orders, such as the Mekhitarists (1701 Constantinople, then Venice and Vienna) or Sisters of the Immaculate Conception (1847 Constantinople, then Rome). The Armenian Catholic Church is headed by a Patriarch, elected by the Synod of Bishops and subordinate to the Pope, whose see is in Beirut, Lebanon. Armenian Catholics generally use a slightly modified version of the Armenian Divine Liturgy for Holy Communion, and otherwise, follow Roman Catholic practices, such as confirmation and individual confession. In 1996, Pope John Paul II and Catholicos Karekin I made a common declaration that the Roman Catholic and Armenian Churches share a deep spiritual communion that transcends their historic differences.
- The Armenian Church has no direct hierarchical tie with Armenian Protestant denominations, which follow a range of worship practices and doctrines. While there were protestant movements in earlier times, present-day Armenian Protestantism is the outgrowth of evangelical activities by American Board of Missions in the mid- to late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Ottoman Empire. They use a Protestant order of worship; some incorporate certain Armenian Church hymns into their services and honor saints and holidays of the Armenian Church, some do not.

*More information on Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches in relation to the Armenian Church can be found in The Armenian Church in the World Today by Fr. Garabed Kochakian, or in Welcome to the Armenian Church, available in the St. Vartan Bookstore.*