

HISTORICAL ESSAYS

*About the Armenian Catholic Community in Armenia, Georgia and Oriental Europe.
Written by S. E. Archbishop Nerses Der-Nersessian*

1. ORIGIN OF CATHOLICS IN ARMENIA

The story of Armenian Catholics in Armenia and the Caucasus is long. There is no doubt that their roots go back many centuries and involve an interminable and controversial Christology concerning the Chalcedonies tradition.

Historically, the Armenian Catholic community was characterized by migrations, which took place in the first quarter of the nineteenth century after the Russian-Turkish Adrianupol Alliance (1829). Seeking to escape the brutal conditions of the Ottoman Empire, Armenian Catholics left cities such as Karin-Erzerum, Alashkert and Mush and found sanctuary within the Russian Empire. New villages were created and the church was stabilized in the Shirak, Tashir and Lori regions of modern day Armenia, as well as in Javakhk, currently the Georgian provinces of Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalaki and Ninodzminda (formerly Bogdanovka).

Churches, schools and hospitals were built, organized by clergies and priests. They contributed to the Armenian Catholic Hierarchy with diocesan members and prominent monks educated in Mechitarist Congregation of Venice and Vienna and in Patriarchal Convent of Bzommar in Lebanon. The Armenian Catholic Church enjoyed a glorious century.

Near the end of the nineteenth century, the Holy Seat of Rome created an ecclesiastical organization, and with the blessing of Russia's imperial czarist government, designated the city of Saratov as the Armenian Catholics' center. In 1909, Reverend Sarghis Der-Abrahamian [born Alexandrapol (currently Gümri) 1868, died Rome as an Archbishop 1952] was nominated Apostolic Administrator for Armenian Catholics in the Caucasus. Rev. Der-Abrahamian achieved much success until the rise of the Soviet atheist regime. An archival document dated 1923 confirms the presence of Armenian Catholics in Yerevan and its environs for 250 years under Rev. Der-Abrahamian, seated in Tbilisi, and includes a special statute for the Armenian Catholic Church in Armenia.

2. STATISTICAL DATA OF PRE-SOVIET ERA

In our hands we have an Annual-Calendar of 1916, published in Tbilisi and perhaps reproduced in 1918 and 1920, authorizing the Apostolic Administration to use existing Armenian Catholic Churches of the Russian Empire. The calendar offers a general picture of the structure, including names, titles, cities, villages, churches, diocesans, ages and other statistical data.

Besides Tbilisi and the provinces in its neighborhood, it mentions seven large ecclesiastical regions [Alexandrapol (now Shirak), Lori, Akhalkalak, Akhaltsikhe, Ardivin, Karin and Crimea] with 86 dioceses and 71 diocesans, distributed over 172 localities. The number of believers is 61,240.

Now, with our more precise calculations we have verified 27 villages and 8 cities in Georgia and in Armenia that include a noticeable presence of Armenian Catholics, some 220,000 believers, including those in the Russian cities of Sochy, Adler, Krasnodar, Rostov, Moscow, and St. Petersburg, as well as in the remote oriental zones up to Vladivostok. All together in these territories there exist 70 beautiful churches with solid construction, dedicated to Christ the Savior, the Holy Cross, the Virgin Mary Mother of God and other Saints.

Forty clergies from these churches were killed or banished during Stalin's terrible persecutions of 1936–39. Many churches and chapels were confiscated, demolished or half ruined and allocated to sacrilegious use. Honor is given to those numerous ecclesiastics who sacrificed in the name of the Gospel as their bereaved families bless their memory.

3. RENOVATION INAUGURATED IN 1991.

In the days of the collapse of the Soviet regime, the current Pope of Rome, S.S. John Paul II, in 1991 reconstituted the catholic Hierarchy of Armenia, Georgia and Oriental Europe (Russia and Ukraine), nominating as head Rev. Father Nerses Der-Nersessian, Mechitarista of Venice, consecrating him Bishop on November 17, 1992.

The Redemptory Mater hospital of Ashotsk was dedicated October 6, 1991, a solemn gift from Pope John Paul II to the Armenian people in response to the terrible earthquake of December 7, 1988. The Pope led Armenians in a pontifical document which was composed for the first time in the Armenian language. This document officially inaugurated the Ordinariate of Armenian Catholics of Oriental Europe and nominated the first Reverend Father Nerses Der-Nersessian, a member of the Congregation Mekhitarist of Venice.

The ceremony concluded with a solemn Mass celebrated by the new Ordinary in the yard of the newly built hospital, presided over by His Eminence Rev. Il Sig. Card. Achille Silvestrini, Prefect of Vatican Congregation for the Oriental Churches, accompanied by other Latin and Armenian catholic eminent prelates, with the presence of Armenian Apostolic Bishop of Gümri S. E. Grigoris Buniatyan, the representative of S. S. Vazken I Katholicos of all Armenians, the Minister of Welfare of the Republic of Armenia and the Prime Secretary of Ashotsk region Mr. Seyran Petrossyan, and many Armenian Catholic believers who came from as far away as the remote regions of Georgia.

The Armenian Catholic Community was officially registered in Armenia beginning in 1992, with a proper constitution recognized by the state, based on the human rights of liberty, religion and conscious. And in Gümri, during September 1993, was established the official Seat of Ordinary at rue Atarbekian 82.

A second registration, having been revised for juridical precision, was effected on March 30, 2000.

In the Shirak region necessary restorations were concluded in the churches of the villages Panik, Arevik, Lantchik, Azatan, Tzithhankov and Medz-Sepasar. These churches operate legally, regularly celebrating Eucharistic liturgies.

Many churches, especially those of the Tashir an Ashotsk regions, remain in need of renovation. Some villages have no church, requiring construction of churches from the ground up.

4. ORDINARIATE AND ITS COLLABORATORS

The Ordinary has several priests assisting him in pastoral work, four in Armenia and four in Georgia. Groups of Sisters include eight at the Armenian Congregation of Immaculate Conception, three at Eucharistines, six at Salesianes, and six at the Institute of Caritas of Mother Teresa of Calcutta in Armenia and Georgia. These sisters are dedicated to Christian education of girls from catholic families, organization of summer camps, caring treatment of disabled orphans and the creation of small centers for manual works. The Daughters of Mother Teresa of Calcutta have worked with disabled children in Armenia since 1989, first in Yerevan, now in Spitak. Two Small Sisters of Jesus, working in the Hospital of Ashotsk, are exemplars of

Christian compassion. Catholic education in Armenia is aimed at producing future candidates for priesthood. For this purpose, a small seminary was inaugurated in Gümri in 1994 and currently has approximately ten aspirants. Others study philosophy and theology in Rome, accepted generously in Armenian Pontifical College.

5. ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

In the time of Katholikos Vazken I, of venerated memorial (died 1994), the relations of our Armenian Catholic Community with Heads and members of the sister Apostolic Church, had a friendly and respectful character. In January of 1992, our Ordinary Mgr. N. Der-Nersessian, who definitively reentered Armenia without having an official Seat yet, found fraternal hospitality in the monastery of S. Etchmiadzin for 40 days.

And I have to emphasize here that S. S. Katholikos Vazken I, in the Parliament of the new Armenian Government brought up the discussion about the question of liberty of religion and of conscience (November 1991). In his lengthy official speech speaking about the Armenian Apostolic Church, he mentioned “the presence of Armenian Catholic Church in Armenia, from ancient times, with proper Community and holy places.” Similar sentiments were also expressed by S. S. Karekin I during the election in 1995.

I would like also to underline that the first Armenian Catholic priest, the Mekhitarist Rev. Komitas Manoukian, (invited from Venice in March of 1991 which was previously arranged between Katholikos Vazken I and Superiors of Mekhitarist Congregation) also found initial hospitality in the monastery of Etchmiadzin. The same Katholikos appointed him a diocesan and sent him to Panik, an Armenian Catholic village, currently in the Artik region. There Rev. Komitas started an intensive pastoral activity with apostolic zeal and youthful spirit which was unfortunately interrupted by his death September 2, 1997 during the summer of his 75th year.

Our diocesans and collaborator Sisters in Armenia and in Georgia, are dedicated to the work of Christian evangelism, in consolidation of Holy Faith, to the teaching of Christian doctrine in schools, to the administration of Sacraments, in our Armenian Catholic community, never following the intention of proselytism, with fraternal spirit authentically ecumenical.

6. REVIVED ANCIENT FAITH – SOLEMN CELEBRATIONS

The faith is still living in the hearts of our Catholic population. The older generation always speaks with tears of the terrible memories of the past and of the bitter fruits of atheistic regime. They thank God that finally, after 70 years of persecution, the churches were reopened, and children can now listen and study, not only our traditional story of heroic exploit, but also the sacred teaching of Christian religion and the voice of evangelism.

Many of them tell that during the obscure years of Soviet domination, every morning, before the sunrise, the old people of the villages gathered together, very carefully and with tears in their eyes, near the walls of their confiscated Church. They kissed the walls, lit candles, said Rosary and long prayers. They shared their faith in secret with succeeding generations.

In September of 1996 we celebrated the first centenary of birth of Celebrant Cardinal S. Em. Gregorio-Pietro Aghagianian, the ex Patriarch Catholic Armenians and the Prefect of Congregation of Propaganda Fide, with solemnity, in his native city Akhaltsike, in Georgia, and then in the close by Armenian Catholic village Skhvilisi, with the participation of many believers. The next year Gümri honored the memory of

this insigne prelate of international fame with a second solemn celebration in the academic—cultural level in the big hall of the public theater. It was the first time Card. Aghagianian was publicly venerated, after being desperately damned in journals, newspapers and in encyclopedias in the period of atheist domination.

Near the end of 1997, a celebration was held in the same hall for the 50th anniversary of religious and spiritual activities and philological—literary of the Ordinary Archbishop of Catholic Armenians, Mgr. Nerses Der-Nersessian, who received official congratulations and the letter of benediction of S. S. Pope John Paul II and of Catholicos of all Armenians S. S. Karekin I, among the joyful applauds of presents. Many people of culture also gave sincere wishes, as renowned academic Prof. Sen Arevshatyan, director of National Library of manuscripts (Matenadaran) in Yerevan, gave an official discourse on the name of the Institute.

November 16, 2000 was celebrated privately, the 80th birthday of Archbishop Ordinary, who received a goodwill letter from the Armenian Catholicos S. S. Karekin II which praised his cultural, literary and ecclesiastical activities. For this occasion, the small choir of the Chapel of the Ordinariate in Gümri organized a graduate festivity with holy and patriotic songs and with poems.

7. AURORA OF THIRD MILLENNIUM

The Catholic Armenians in Armenia, Georgia and Oriental Europe greeted the Holy Year with the Pope of Rome, every Sunday, during the liturgical celebration, reciting the inspirited prayer leaded on Eternal Father, translated into Armenian.

A group of young believers were invited for pilgrimage to visit the holy places of Rome, to kiss the Holy Door, participate in long prayers, gathering around the Holy Father, who became the Lord of Indulgence of Jubilee and the auspicious Apostolic benediction.

For the disposition of the Ordinary, also in Armenia and Georgia became possible to receive the Indulgence of Holy Year, in occasion of major feasts, in some principal churches, accomplishing the conditions requested.

The group of our pilgrims also visited Venice, looking for the trace of Armenian Memories which are there beginning at the end of the 15th century, especially to greet so called “Small Armenia”, the famous Ireland of San Lazar, the big religious—cultural center, three hundred years old. These people also visited the holy places of Padova, Assisi and Cascia.

And with the new millennium the new luminous horizons of life were opened all over Armenia, to celebrate solemnly the 1700th anniversary of conversion and baptism of Armenia, for the opera of S. George Illuminator, the first Patriarch—Catholicos of all Armenians, and for the proclamation of Christian religion as a State religion of Armenia, with the generous collaboration of the king Holy Tiridate III, which for the first time appeared in the history of the Church of Christ in the year 301.

It was a big Jubilee of Armenians, who irradiated endless graces of heaven, near the biblical mountain Ararat, refilling with the joy the spirits of Armenians spread all over the world. From the Vatican, the Holy Father has sent to Armenia the relic of Holy George the Illuminator, anxiously preserved in Napoli for another 500 years and the light of Holy George shares out from Khor—Virap to all Armenians in Armenia and Diaspora. New Millennium, new light, new life, new graces and benedictions.

8. JUBILEE AFTER JUBILEE – THE POPE’S VISIT IN ARMENIA

Right after the celebration of Holy Year 2000, in Armenia they initiated the celebrations of Second Grand Jubilee - the 1700th anniversary of the official

proclamation of Christianity as a State religion in Armenia (301-2001). Various religious and civil manifestations took place throughout the year. Though the best celebrations were reserved for the month of September, to coincide with the introductory preparation of the Pastoral Visit of Holy Pope John Paul 2nd in Armenia, which sculpted golden characters in the annals of history of Armenian people. These were truly days of spiritual joy and abundant celestial graces spread all over the countries and particularly, the hearts of Armenian Catholics in Armenia and Georgia.

A solemn academic session of the opening, announced the beginning of the official celebrations in Yerevan (21.09.2001). They were followed by the solemn benediction of the Holy Chrism (Holy Myron) in Holy Etchmiadzin and the inauguration of the newly built Mother Church of Yerevan dedicated to Saint Gregory Illuminator. Many Patriarchs of Sister Churches—among which was also the Katholikos—Patriarch of Armenian Catholics accompanied by some of his Archbishops - participated in these sacred celebrations.

And here was the culmination of festive celebrations of second Jubilee: Invited by President of the Republic and Holy Katholikos of all Armenians, Pope in the moment of his arrival to Zvartnots airport of Yerevan (25.09.2001), was met with the solemn ceremonies by supreme civil Authorities and religious people, and was an object of particular attention and extraordinary honor, up to the end of the touching going-away evening (27.09.2001).

Holy Father coming from Kazakhstan, getting out of the plane, accompanied by a large group, first kissed the sacred land of Armenia as a token veneration to numerous martyrs of faith.

After the welcoming speeches and greetings to each other, a long retinue moved, under the beautiful sun of midday, to the Holy Etchmiadzin, where in the Cathedral which is in the Seat of Katholikos (Veharan) took place fraternal and cordial manifestations, with prayer, sacred hymns and discourses, in a nice and hospitable atmosphere, in which participated Cardinals, Bishops, Latin, Apostolic and Catholic Armenian prelates. Nice gifts were passed to each other.

Holy Father's visit to the President of the Republic was particularly confidential (26.09.2001), the moment of prayer was exciting in Dzidzernakaberd - the monument of victims in 1915-1922; a small tree was planted and blessed by the Roman Pontific to their memory. The official dinner offered in the palace of Katholikos in Holy Etchmiadzin, concluded the first part of second day of Papal Visit.

In the evening with intense devotion was celebrated the ecumenical meeting of prayer for the Unity of Churches, concluded by the veneration of relics of Holy Gregorio Illuminator, in the newly built Mother Church of Yerevan. A large number of believers participated it; groups of Catholic Armenians from Yerevan, Armenian Sisters with their orphans and the choir.

The last day of the visit (27.09.2001) was truly the apotheosis of the festivities, with solemn Papal Mass, celebrated by Latin rite, on the newly built open altar in Holy Etchmiadzin. Near the Holy Father was the Ordinary Archbishop Nerses Der-Nersessian, surrounded by numerous clergies, deacons and Catholic Armenian clericals, with typically sacred national outfits, following the eucharistic rite with solemnity, spreading around the perfumed incense in slow dandelions of winged fly-flaps. The Academic Choir of Yerevan intervened with sacred scraps of Armenian liturgy, according to various moments of celebration.

Holy Katholikos Karekin II, present with some Bishops, opened the ceremony with a vibrant and warm greeting speech, in the honor of Augusto Celebrant. His speech was followed by the sermon of Ordinary N. Der-Nersessian, which was telling the chronological events, regarding the secular links between the Holy Seat of Rome and the Katholikos of all Armenians. With excitement and appreciation he thanked the

Pope for the presents given to Armenia (foundation of the Hospital "Redemptoris Mater" of Ashotsk and establishment of Ordinariate) and the encouragement in the last decennia.

The homily of Holy Father, read in Armenian by a member of Papal Group, moved everyone who was present, encouraging them to live a profoundly renovated Christian life, to live it with fraternal love and sincere ecumenical sentiments, base for the secure and solid future and lasting peace, for the best religious, moral and social life. The memories about the ancient and new Armenian martyrs, as well as the generous personages invited to Armenia by him during the last years of His Pontificate, illuminating the paternal and emotional words of Roman Pontific, who distributed his Apostolic benediction, through the long applause of believers.

About 8,000 Catholic Armenians, coming from more than 37 localities of Armenia and Georgia, even from the most remote regions that traveled the entire night, and before sunrise got to the yard of Holy Etchmiadzin, religious center of all Armenians, to participate devotedly to the unrepeatable ceremony. Hundreds of flags waved filial welcome to the Holy Father, with spiritual joy. Twenty Catholic Armenian Priests distributed the Holy Communion sotto le specie of Bread and Wine consecrated to the long line of believers.

A nice pause in Kanaker (district in Yerevan, 15 minuets far from the center) filled with a new light the Seat of Armenian Catholic Center. At 1:30 the Papal Group stopped in front of the gates designed by flags, under the applause of enthusiastic believers. Two children in national outfits, on the entrance presented the traditional bread and salt, which the Pope shared blessing it. In chapel, in the moment of devoted prayer, the Holy Father offered to the Ordinary Archbishop a gilt chalice. At the dinner offered in honor of the Pope participated S.S. the Katholikos of all Armenians accompanied with two Archbishops, Cardinals and Bishops of Papal Group, the Catholikos-Patriarch of Catholic Armenians with his Bishops, and about 25 Catholic Armenian clergies from Armenian Ordinariate and from Diaspora.

In the beginning, the Ordinary Archbishop with a brief discourse, saluted obediently the Roman Pontific, with emotional words of Elisabeth, honored in Ayin Karim, by the unexpected Visit of Virgin Mary. It was offered an artistic ceramic vase, refiguring the scene of Annunciation, with alto and basso relieve colors. At the end, from the small balcony of the building, Pope blessed Armenian Sisters working in Ordinariate while children and orphans cheerfully exclaimed hurrahs.

The Group departed to Holy Etchmiadzin, where in the evening was celebrated a brief rite of parting or farewell. At the end of the ceremony, a declaration was signed by Pope and Catholikos, commemorating the Jubilee Year of 2001, the glorious history of Armenians ensanguined by the tragic events of the 1915, illuminated now by grateful visit of the Roman Pontific.

In Khor-Virap, while the hymns and prayers were sounding for the last time, a votive lamp was burning in the place of Holy Gregorio Illuminator's sufferings, which Holy Father offered to S.S. the Catholikos. In the airport, after the farewell speech, under the last sotto the last beams of afterglow, the Roman Pontific walked slowly up the stairs of the airplane, while the fire of votive lamp was incessantly burning. Holy Light that unites the Orient with the Eternal City.

The trembling of the fire of that lamp burned to the memory of Armenians in the luminous verses of famous poem written in the year of 1144 by the Catholikos of Armenians Nerses IV, named Shnorhali (the Gracious):

And you, Rome, illustrated and honored metropolis,
Seat of the Great Peter, Principal of Apostles;
You, the Church irremovable,
Constructed on the Kefa mountain,

Invincible from the doors of inferior,
And those from heaven open the sigil
(Elegy of Edessa, ed. Venice, 1928, beginning).

9. THE LAST EVENTS OF 2001

His Excellency Father Vardan Keshishyan was nominated in 2001, an Archbishop-Coadjutor to our Ordinariate. He participated all celebrations organized for the Visit of Holy Father in Armenia with undersigned and became the special gift of the year.

The Apostolic Nuncio His Excellency Mgr. Peter Zurbriggen, organized an official reunion of Bishops, clergies, Sisters and members of Caritas Georgia (Salesians, Camillians, Armenians, Georgians) on November 20-22, in Tbilisi. A solemn Mass, in Armenian rite, was celebrated by Archbishop Nerses Der-Nersessian, with the participation of numerous Armenian believers, in the Church of Holy Peter and Paul. Apostolic, Angelican and Sirian orthodox prelates participated as well. At the end of the celebration, the Nuncio announced to the public the nominees of Episcopal Syncelus of Rev. Father Emmanuele Dabbaghian, for the Armenian Catholic Community of Georgia.

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