

# Celebration

The Armenian Church Celebrates

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Imagine a giant organization with over 350 offices and branches in some 40 countries, with 500 top executives, thousands of full- and part-time employees, tens of thousands of volunteers, serving millions of people. That's the Armenian Apostolic Church today and, this year, it's celebrating the 1700th anniversary of its founding.

The Church is the largest national structure – historically, even older than the state – and almost inarguably, the most institutionalized Armenian establishment anywhere in the world. In the last 1,700 years, the Armenian Church has proven to be the most durable and continuous institution in the life of Armenians wherever they may be – from Armenia to cities and towns as far as the Far East.

Today, the Armenian Church is comprised of four Hierarchical Sees (four main “headquarters”) to which the overwhelming majority of Armenians belong – at least nominally. The largest is the Catholicosate of All Armenians in Ejmiatsin, established in the fourth century. The Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia (established in Antelias, Lebanon in 1930) has roots which go back to the 13th century. The Patriarchate of Jerusalem and Constantinople are almost as old, with the first established in the 14th century by the St. James Brotherhood and the second established in 1461. Each hierarchical See has its own religious order (brotherhood) has ecclesiastical jurisdiction (with dioceses and parish churches) over a specific region, and internal administrative by-laws. They are not separate churches, but part of the “One, Holy, Apostolic Church” and are one in dogma, theology, liturgy and rendered services.

## 1700 Years Ago

This year also marks the 1700th anniversary of adoption of Christianity as the state religion in Armenia.

It is believed that Christianity was introduced to Armenia as early as the second half of the first century through the evangelical activities of two of Christ's disciples, Thaddeus

and Bartholomew. However, it was in the fourth century that Christianity became the official state religion of Armenia, when St. Gregory the Illuminator (c. 240-325) – a descendant of a noble house in Parthia and brought up as a Christian in Cappadocia (currently Turkey) – baptized Armenia's King Tiridates III. St. Gregory became the first bishop (catholicos) of Armenia after his consecration in Caesarea and established the nation's Holy See in Vagharshapat, Ejmiatsin. Ejmiatsin, literally means “the only begotten descended”, based on the legend that Christ came to Gregory in a vision and indicated to him where to build the first Armenian Church.

Following the adoption of Christianity and establishment of the Church, the invention of the Armenian alphabet by Mesrop Mashtots made the Christian faith accessible to the people in a written form. Until then, Greek and Syriac were the languages used in church services. Soon after the invention of the alphabet, a group of monks, headed by Mashdots and Catholicos Sahak, translated into Armenian the Holy Scriptures followed by other biblical, theological and liturgical literature. “The missionary and literary labors [of this period] shaped the destiny of the Armenian people and Church for succeeding generations,” says church scholar Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan. “This period was one of intense activity and rapid development for the Church, and was decisive in its consolidation and nationalization.”

Throughout history, whenever Armenians faced political and social difficulties or challenges, the Armenian Church was at the forefront of national life, at times serving as a surrogate government. But what makes the Armenian Church different from any other institution is its primary *raison d'être*: “the salvation of people's souls,” as articulated by Catholicos Karekin II of All Armenians; or what Catholicos Aram I of Cilicia describes as a “community of faith sustained by the Holy Spirit.” Still, when people speak about the Armenian Church and its history, very little is said about its “religious” or “spiritual” dimension. It is the church's cultural, ethnic

and political role that is easier to understand and explain.

It may be the Armenian Church's “spiritual liberalism” that makes it harder to grasp its religious function.

Unlike, for example, the Roman Catholic Church, the doctrines, theology, and canons of the Armenian Church are guidelines, rather than legal documents by which a believer is judged. Pastoral theology, rather than dogmatic theology, has been the basis of the relationship between the Church and its



# of Faith

## 1700th Anniversary of its Establishment and Adoption of State Religion in Armenia

faithful. Issues of a private nature, such as abortion or homosexuality that pertain to one's personal relationship with God are left to the individual believer to discern what is right and what is wrong. While providing basic "moral principles," the Church has not "legislated" in a legal sense, the depth and extent of an individual's relationship to such complex moral and social issues.

Indeed, for Armenians, religion is not a coherent set of dogmas and practices, but an eclectic set of beliefs. Like the Jews, religion

is incorporated into the national ethos of Armenians. This "belief system" is preserved and transmitted primarily through the family and its extended network of relationships rather than directly through the Church. The practice of *madagh* or animal sacrifice, for example, is a traditional ceremony in the Armenian Church, with roots in pre-Christian Armenian history, and one that continues to be widely accepted, especially in Armenia and throughout the Middle East.

Through such practices, the Armenian

Church, as a significant, historical, national institution, enjoys widespread respect by those who view their Church – and religion – as a fusion of beliefs, language, land and history, or a source of affirmation and validation of Armenian collective identity regardless of one's personal views.

Still, in addition to the general trends of secularization and globalization that are redefining society and religion everywhere, the Armenian Church has other short and long-term challenges, the least of which is the jurisdictional disputes started almost half a century ago between the Sees of Ejmiatsin and Cilicia. Major church leadership changes in the last decade did not resolve what is seen as a painful chapter in the modern history of the church, especially in the Diaspora.

Since Armenia's independence, on the other hand, the Church's role in Armenian society is still not clear. How does it address the problem of corruption in Armenia, especially after long years of moral dislocation of society? Teaching basic moral and ethical values and their relevance to everyday life is a significant responsibility of the Church in Armenia and in the Diaspora, and one that it has not yet found a way to meet.

Indeed, the challenges facing the Armenian Church are many (see AIM July 1999 and November 1999), but, perhaps, the most dire is the recruitment and training of new cadre of clergy and lay leaders, who would carry out the mission of the Church in the 21st century. Instead of producing only liturgical functionaries in the existing handful of seminaries, the Church needs scholars, theologians and professionals who would make Armenian Christianity relevant to increasingly sophisticated congregations. Other than hagiographic literature and translations of ancient writings of church fathers, there's virtually no literature or discourse produced by the Church that addresses the thinking and feelings of the contemporary member of the Armenian Church. The question is whether to continue the slow-moving status quo, or to create a new mission for the Church carried out by a highly qualified



corps of workers.

The hierarchs of the Armenian Church characterized the 1700th anniversary of Christianity in Armenia as an opportunity to re-evangelize, re-Christianize Armenia after 70 years of communism, and as an opportu-

nity for renewal for all Armenians around the world. While the celebrations and festivities taking place this year would highlight what the Church has been in the past, in the coming decades the Church and its leadership will have to articulate what the Church is

and will be for Armenians, both collectively and individually. If "faith, hope, love and charity" are the fundamental tenets of the Church's teaching, how are they taught, practiced, translated and made relevant to everyday life? ■

### **On the Armenian Church's two greatest accomplishments over the past 1700 years.**

**I would phrase the question differently, since the Church is a mission whose purpose is not accomplishments but a process of enlightenment and salvation of the faithful.**

**The Armenian Church is the good shepherd of the Armenian nation. The alphabet, literature, scholarship, architecture, art and music have all grown under the care of the Church. The Armenian Church has led and sustained the Armenian people through centuries of adversity. Armenian theology and liturgy are among the world's great spiritual treasures, our unique witness to Christianity. The stewardship of our nation is our Church's greatest accomplishment and our continuing mission.**

—Archbishop Hovnan Derderian

Primate of the Armenian Church of Canada, and Executive Secretary of the Ecclesiastical Commission for the Celebration of the 1700th Anniversary of Christianity in Armenia

**First and foremost the Armenian Church became the unifying force for the Armenian nation. Because of political, geographical and social realities, the church became the common denominator which gave our people a distinct character, identifying and separating us from surrounding nations. Second, after unifying the people, the religious and secular leaders were able to further define the identity of the people through the creation of our alphabet which inspired the rich creative output of the nation in literature, arts, music, and architecture.**

—Archbishop Oshagan Choloyan

Prelate, Armenian Apostolic Church, Eastern Prelacy



### **On the challenges and problems ahead.**

**The events of the past century and especially the past decade have been momentous for the Armenian people.**

**Not unlike the world 1700 years ago, when St. Gregory enlightened Armenia and guided King Trdat to proclaim Christianity as the basis of our national life, we live in a world that demands deep rooted faith and the gathering of the faithful. If this 1700th jubilee comes and goes without giving a new impulse to St. Gregory's mission, then this celebration will have been like a clanging cymbal. Our greatest challenge to live up to our responsibility as Christians and as the first Christian nation. It is a heavy responsibility and I pray each day that we will be worthy of it.**

**One of the greatest problems facing the Church in the next century is overcoming the effects of the Genocide and dispersion. Ours is a worldwide church, dedicated to the aim of one church, one nation. The unity and continuity of our people was forever shattered by centuries of oppression culminating in the Genocide. We no longer live side by side on our ancestral lands, next to the sacred places where our forefathers created our Christian life and national culture. Through the centuries, our people have grown apart. Our Church is one of the ties that binds us together. This year's jubilee celebrations are an occasion for re-gathering the flock, especially our youth. The bonds established by youth are direct, spontaneous and lasting. With God's help, we will begin to bind up our wounds and find the inspiration to continue the mission entrusted to us so many centuries ago.**

—Archbishop Hovnan Derderian

**The greatest challenge is the renewal of our church. The existence of a church is justified by its mission; a church without a mission is not a church. We must not be afraid of change, not for the sake of change, but so that the church can properly serve the people. We must be the people's church, a living church, loved and understood by the people. We are not a living church now; we do not have the answers to many modern questions be they theological, social, moral, or ethical. Furthermore, we live in an ecumenical age. We cannot remain isolated, but must consider ourselves to be a part of the universal church. Our true maturity as a religious people will be measured through our approach to ecumenism.**

—Archbishop Oshagan Choloyan