

THE CATHOLICOS AND THE HIERARCHICAL SEES OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

Hratch Tchilingirian

The history of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church is intimately intertwined with the history of the Armenian people. Whenever Armenians faced political and social difficulties, and invasions by foreign rulers, the Armenian Church has been in the forefront of national life, at times serving as a 'surrogate government'.

From the Persian rule of Armenia (430-634) to Arab domination (654-851), from the establishment of the Bagratid kingdom in Armenia in the 9th century, to the establishment of the Cilician kingdom in the 12th century, the Church has been a guarding religious, political, educational and cultural institution and the champion of the preservation of the religious-cultural heritage of Armenians.

Starting with the demise of the last Armenian (Cilician) kingdom in 1375, Armenians have lived under foreign rulers and were geographically dispersed through mass immigration and resettlements. This is true in more recent history as well, whether under the Russian tsarist rule in the 19th century or the Ottoman empire, or under the Soviet rule starting in the 1920s.

In this background, the Church is the largest national institution after the Armenian state. It remains to be the most institutionalised Armenian establishment anywhere in the world. In the last 1,700 years, the Armenian Church has proven to be the most durable and continuously serving institution in the life of the Armenian people wherever they may have been, whether in historic Armenia or the diaspora.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the Armenian Apostolic Church is comprised of four Hierarchical Sees to which the overwhelming majority of Armenians belong, at least nominally. They are: the Catholicate of All Armenians in Ejmiatsin, the Catholicate of the Great House of Cilicia, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, and the Patriarchate of Constantinople. These Hierarchical Sees are not separate churches, but are part of the 'One, Holy, Apostolic Church' and are one in dogma, theology, liturgy and rendered services. Each hierarchical see has its own

religious order (brotherhood), ecclesiastical jurisdiction over a region with dioceses and parish churches, and internal administrative by-laws.

In 2001, there were over 350 parishes and churches in some 40 countries around the world,¹ and about 500 bishops and priests² serving an estimated 7 to 7.5 million Armenians living in Armenia, Nagorno Karabakh and the diaspora. However, the present number of churches and clergy represent a very small percentage of what the Armenian Church was at the end of the 19th century and early 20th century. For instance, as documented by the scribe Teotig, at least 1,054 Armenian priests were the victims of the World War I genocide in the Ottoman empire.³ Hundreds of churches were destroyed in the Ottoman empire, as well as the Soviet Union.

Throughout its 1,700-year history, the Holy See of the Armenian Church has moved frequently as a result of constant political disorder and unrest in Armenia. Over the course of some eleven hundred years—between 314 and 1441—the seat of the Catholicate of the Armenian Church has moved from one place to another ten times.⁴ A 13th century historian writes that the catholicoi wandered 'here and there with the Armenian kings'.⁵

Indeed, the catholicoi of the Armenian Church have a special place and role in the life of the Armenian nation. Therefore, we shall first

¹ According to my survey, based on various church calendars and directories, the list is as follows: Argentina 7 churches, Armenia 43, Australia 2, Austria 1, Belgium 1, Brazil 3, Bulgaria 9, Canada 19, Cyprus 3, Egypt 3, England 2, Ethiopia 1, France 16, Georgia 3, Germany 1, Greece 4, India 4, Iran 30, Iraq 2, Israel 7, Italy 1, Jordan 1, Karabakh 19, Latvia 1, Lebanon 15, Moldova 2, Netherlands 2, Romania 2, Russia 9, Swaziland 1 (private chapel), Sweden 1, Switzerland 1, Sudan 1, Syria 6, Turkey 38, UAE 1, Ukraine 2, Uruguay 2, USA 105, Venezuela 1.

² Bishops: 65 (Ejmiatsin 28; Cilicia 18; Jerusalem 14; Constantinople 4). Celibate priests (vardapets): 122 (Ejmiatsin 65; Cilicia 26; Jerusalem 31; Constantinople 4). Married priests: 300 (estimate); and 2 catholicoi. These figures are based on the rosters published at the end of the liturgical calendars of the four Hierarchical Sees for the years 1999 and 2000.

³ Teotig, *Golgotha of the Armenian Clergy* (in Armenian), 1921. For charts of victims and analysis, see *Window view of the Armenian Church* (a quarterly published in San Jose), 1 (3) 1990, 12-13.

⁴ Transferred from Ejmiatsin to Divn (484-931), then Aghtamar (931-944), Arghina (944-992), Ani (992-1065), Dzamendav (1066-1072), Shughri-Karmirvank (1105-1116), Dzovk (1116-1147), Hromkla (1147-1292), Sis (1293-1441), Ejmiatsin (1441-present).

⁵ Cited in Tiran Archbishop Nersoyan 'Problems and Exercise of Primacy in the Armenian Church', in Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, *Armenian Church Historical Studies*, ed. Nerses Vrej Nersessian, St Vartan Press, New York, 1996, 216.

focus on the office of the catholicos in the Armenian Church, and then present a brief discussion of the hierarchical sees of the Armenian Church.

The Catholicos

The title *catholicos* (Greek 'universal' or 'general') for the supreme head of the Church is used by a number of Eastern Churches, such as the Armenian, Georgian, Indian Malabar and others. The origins of the title *catholicos* goes back to the 5th century, when these Churches, located in territories east of the borders of the Byzantine empire, became autonomous from other ecclesiastical centres in the west, due to political developments between Persia and Byzantium. As Nersoyan argues: 'The very creation of the office of Catholicos was but an accommodation to the political realities obtaining between the two superpowers of the 5th and 6th centuries resulting in the development of the national autocephalous Churches.' And, as through the centuries, Armenia remained politically divided under various rulers, 'the king or the ruler of each section wanted to have an independent Catholicos under its own rule.'⁶

In Armenian history, the catholicos has also been referred to as Chief Priest (*K'ahanayapet*), Chief Bishop (*yepiskoposapet*), Patriarch (*hayrapet*), but most commonly as Catholicos of Armenians (*Kat'olikos Hayoc*). Starting in the 15th century, the Catholicos in Ejmiatsin acquired the title of Catholicos of All Armenians (*Amenayn hayoc*) to indicate his jurisdiction over new dioceses created in Armenian colonies spread outside Armenia. Subsequently, he also acquired the title *Supreme Patriarch* (*Cayraguyn Patriark*)⁷ in recognition of the 'supremacy' of the 'Mother See' of the Church over the Patriarchates of Jerusalem and Constantinople, as well as the Catholicates of Akhtamar, Gantsasar and Cilicia.

Unlike a patriarch, a catholicos is the chief bishop and head of a national Church, whose authority is not necessarily confined to a geographical area. 'The Catholicos is the ecclesiastical head of a *people*,' while a 'patriarch is an ecclesiastical head who occupies an apostolic see and claims jurisdiction over a geographical area. And, because the head

⁶ Nersoyan, 'Problems and Exercise', 223.

⁷ The origin of the use of the title 'patriarch' by Armenian Catholicos, as the equivalent of the title used in the Byzantine Church, goes back to the end of 10th century. However, in its unspecified sense (patriarch), the title had been used in the Armenian Church since the 5th century.

of the Armenian Church has both of [these] qualifications, he is called Patriarch-Catholicos.'⁸

The candidate for the office of chief bishop of the Church—according to the rubric found in the *Rite of Consecration of a Catholicos*—should have a 'virtuous, holy and spotless life', with a record of good deeds. He should further be learned and full of wisdom, capable of leading the people of God. He must profess the orthodox faith and uphold the holy tradition of the Church, 'because he is called to the Pontifical Throne of Ss Thaddeus and Bartholomew and the throne of the Confessor of Christ, St Gregory the Illuminator, and that he may be worthy to receive the Grace and Power from the Almighty Giver of All Goodness.'⁹

The late Catholicos Karekin I of All Armenians further explains that, 'Being the head of the Church, [the Catholicos] is the guardian of the faith. He must guarantee fidelity to traditions and to the orthodoxy of the faith. For the people, the Catholicos is the shepherd of the Church and the spiritual father of the nation. That is why he is elected for life.'¹⁰

The catholicos is the chief administrator of religious, spiritual, ecclesiastical and administrative matters and oversees the decision-making processes over dogmatic, liturgical and canonical issues. He has exclusive authority to bless the Holy Muron (chrism), consecrate bishops, approve the election of diocesan prelates, discipline clergymen, and other related matters. In the Middle Ages, the catholicos also anointed the kings of Cilician Armenia.

The catholicos is elected for life, by secret ballot, by the National Ecclesiastical Assembly—the highest legislative body of the Armenian Church, made up of two-thirds lay representatives of the Armenian nation and one-third clergymen.¹¹ The representatives to the Assembly are elected

⁸ Tiran Archbishop Nersoyan, 'The Administration and Governing Authority of the Armenian Church' in Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, *Armenian Church Historical Studies*, ed. Nerses Vrej Nersessian, St Vartan Press, New York, 1996, 271.

⁹ Cf. *Window view of the Armenian Church* 4, 2, 1995: 10. For the text of the Oath taken by Catholicos Karekin I in 1995, see *Window* 5, 1&2, 1995, 8.

¹⁰ Guaita, Giovanni, *Between Heaven and Earth. A conversation with His Holiness Karekin I*, St Vartan Press, New York, 2000, 163.

¹¹ The most recent official guidelines for 'Procedures for Convening the National Ecclesiastical Assembly' is the one prepared by the 1945 National Ecclesiastical Assembly and ratified by Catholicos Gevorg VI of All Armenians, who was elected catholicos by the same Assembly. The 1945 'Procedures' define the principle responsibilities of the Assembly as follows: a) Election of the Catholicos of All Armenians; b) Election of the members of

by their respective communities.¹²

The involvement of laymen in the affairs of the Armenian Church is one of her unique features. Unlike, for example, the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches of the Byzantine tradition, which maintain monarchical and aristocratic structures, lay people actively participate in the administrative, legislative and economic affairs of the Armenian Church.¹³ Indeed, the tradition of lay involvement in the election of bishops and catholicos goes back to ancient times.¹⁴ However, decisions concerning faith, dogma, liturgy or spirituality remain in the exclusive domain of the College of Bishops of the Church, through 'conciliarity'.

It should be noted, however, that history records instances where secular rulers have intervened in the life of the Church and imposed 'their own candidate for primacy over the territory of their sovereignty'. Such instances go back as far as the 4th century, when, for example, Emperor Constantius deposed elected Patriarch Paul and installed Eusebius of Nicomedia in his seat; or Emperor Honorius installing Boniface I on the throne of Rome. 'Interference by kings and princes

the Supreme Ecclesiastical Council; c) Establishment of the national ecclesiastical constitution; d) Examination and resolution of ecclesiastical and canonical issues; e) Stewardship of the church's financial affairs. It also specifies the categories and procedures for representation in the Assembly and the process by which the catholicos should be elected. For further details, see *Ejmiatsin* (Journal of the Catholicate of All Armenians) January 1944, 3; October-December 1944, 1-6; June-July 1945; August-October 1945, 17-18; November-December 1945, 38-39; December 1955, 9-15; October-November 1955, 9, 14-24, 40-67, 68-77.

¹² For example, in 1995 Catholicos Karekin I of All Armenians was elected by an Assembly made of 430 delegates from 32 countries (74 percent lay and 26 percent clergy), representing over 8.5 million Armenians living in Armenia, Karabakh and around the world. (The population figure is provided by *Ejmiatsin*.) In 1999, the same Assembly, made of 455 delegates from 43 countries, elected Catholicos Karekin II of All Armenians. For more details on the 1995 National Ecclesiastical Assembly, see *Window-view of the Armenian Church* 5 (1&2), 1995: 10-11. For a discussion of the 1999 catholic election, see Hratch Tchilingirian, 'A New Beginning', *Armenian International Magazine*, 10 (11), November 1999, 24-25.

¹³ The Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem is the exception, where the ordained members (monks) of the St James Brotherhood elect the patriarch and administer the affairs of the patriarchate without any lay involvement.

¹⁴ For an extensive and excellent discussion of this issue, see Fr Krikor Maksoudian, *Chosen of God: The Election of the Catholicos of All Armenians*, St Vartan Press, New York, 1995. Nersoyan observes that 'an exclusively clerical administration [is] not conducive to spiritual vitality in the Church,' cf. Tiran Archbishop Nersoyan, 'Laity in the Administration of the Armenian Church', in Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, *Armenian Church Historical Studies*, ed. Nerses Vrej Nersessian, St Vartan Press, New York, 1996, 266.

has been frequent in the Armenian Church' as well, 'not only by domestic rulers but also by external powers, who had political influence or domination over the country.'¹⁵

There are also instances where due to political circumstances and uncertainties, or in view of the ill health of the head of the Church, catholicos have appointed and consecrated their own successors as co-adjutors (*at'orakic'*), who would work alongside the incumbent catholicos and would succeed him after his death. At times 'the consent of princes and or bishops was obtained for such appointments.'¹⁶

Any celibate clergyman in the Armenian Church (*vardapet* or bishop) is eligible to be a candidate. There are only a few exceptional cases in history: Zacharia I (855-876) was a layman when elected catholicos, and Gregory III Bahlavuni was a 20-year-old bishop at the time of his election. His tenure lasted for 53 years (1113-1166), the longest in the Church's history.

Upon his election, the catholicos is ordained by twelve bishops and anointed with Holy Muron.¹⁷ The practice of consecrating or ordaining a catholicos was introduced in the Armenian Church in the 9th century in order to further 'validate' the primacy of the head of the Church. Nersoyan explains the introduction of this practice:

The transfer of primatial [catholic] authority to a bishop through the collective authority of the college of bishops of a Church, as through the successors of the Apostles, would

¹⁵ Nersoyan 'Problems and Exercise', 215. Cited examples of interference include: in 1058 Byzantine Emperor Isaac and his successor Constantine prevented the election of a catholicos of eight years; in 1220 Cilician princes blocked the election of a catholicos arguing that there was no king on the throne and therefore a catholicos cannot be elected without a king's consent.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 216. In 1268 a scribe wrote: 'Lord Jacob succeeded to the throne (of Catholicos) by the grace of God and by the order of King Het'um.'

¹⁷ The anointment of the catholicos follows the practice of the Armenian rite of ordination of priests and bishops, who, following the laying on of hands by the ordaining hierarch, are anointed on the forehead and palms of their hands. Thus, 'by the same token the anointing of the crown of the head and of the right hand of the ordained Catholicos became the custom probably some time during the twelfth century. A historian of the thirteenth century mentions the anointing of a Catholicos in as early as the tenth century. This unction was the sign of the invocation of the Holy Spirit over the ordained. During the late Middle Ages in order to complete the symbolism the number of bishops ordaining the Catholicos was raised to 12'. Nersoyan, 'Problems and Exercise', 219.

be a legitimate means of enabling the bishop to succeed to primatial office. In this way the continuity of apostolic succession in a Church would be safeguarded and its unity would be protected. However, in the absence of such regularity of form of succession the theory of primacy and the jurisdiction of its exercise would be clouded. It was perhaps such a concern that eventually gave rise in the Armenian Church, in the ninth century, to the practice of ordaining the candidate to the Catholicate even when he already had episcopal ordination. Through such ordination Catholicoi would acquire legitimacy for their office, something which the mode of their appointment often left in doubt. Thus the catholical ordination became the decisive act by which a bishop succeeding to primacy would be vested with proper authority by the Lord Christ and the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands of bishops, irrespective of the manner of his election or appointment.¹⁸

Historically, the nature and boundaries of the authority of the catholicos of the Armenian Church have never been defined, nor the extent of his jurisdiction clarified 'in any clear and systematic manner' until the 19th century, when state-imposed church 'constitutions' were established for the Armenian Church in tsarist Russia (1836) and the Ottoman empire (1863) respectively. Nersoyan adds that:

The presumption was and still is that a Catholicos would do whatever necessary to safeguard the unity and the cohesion of the Church and provide guidance and supervision in the conduct of its affairs as the chief of its bishops and the leader of its people. Thus by and large the authority of a Catholicos conforms to the general norms by which the head of a Church would exercise jurisdiction over his constituency.¹⁹

¹⁸ Nersoyan 'Problems and Exercise', 218.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 219.

The Hierarchical Sees of the Armenian Church

The Catholicate of All Armenians, the 'Mother See' of Holy Ejmiatsin,²⁰ is the supreme ecclesiastical centre of the Armenian Church, established in the early 4th century by the patron saint of the Armenian Church, Gregory the Illuminator (c. 240-325) in the city of Vagharshapat (Ejmiatsin). The Catholicate of All Armenians is recognised as the 'pre-eminent' See (*Naxamecar Atoŕ*) among the four Hierarchical Sees of the Church.

The patriarchs of Jerusalem and Constantinople have the rank of archbishop. They are autonomous in the internal affairs of their Patriarchate and pledge canonical allegiance to the Catholicate of All Armenians.

The Catholicos of Cilicia is equal in rank, but not in honour, to the Catholicos of All Armenians. Both are consecrated by the same rite of the Church and enjoy the same privileges of a catholicos, namely, the consecration of bishops and blessing of Holy Muron. However, as always, the Catholicos of Cilicia recognizes the primacy of honour of the Catholicos of All Armenians in Ejmiatsin.

Another see that functioned under the jurisdiction of the Catholicate of All Armenians is the Catholicate of Aghuank (or the Catholicate of Gantsasar) in Karabagh (552-1815), which was turned into a diocese of Ejmiatsin in the early 19th century.²¹

²⁰ *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.

²¹ The Catholicate of Aghuank (or Gantsasar).

In the 4th century, soon after Armenia's conversion to Christianity, the Kingdom of Albania (not to be confused with Albania in the Balkans), which included the provinces of Artsakh (the future Karabagh) and Utik, converted to Christianity through the efforts of St Gregory the Illuminator, the evangeliser of Armenia. Grigoris, the grandson of St Gregory, was appointed the head of the Albanian Church around 330 AD. He was martyred in 338 while evangelising in the northeast region of the country near Derbend (currently Daghestan). His body was brought to Artsakh and buried in a church in Amaras (Martuni region). In 489, King Vachakan the Pious renovated the complex and built a special chapel dedicated to Grigoris. Until today, the monastery of Amaras is one of the most important shrines in Karabagh and is considered a holy site for pilgrims. Karabaghtsis are also proud of the fact that Mesrop Mashtotz, the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, established the first Armenian school in Amaras.

The Albanian Church, like that of Iberia (until 608), having been established by the Armenian missionaries, pledged canonical allegiance to the Armenian Church. In the wake of the controversy over the 'dyophysite' Christology of the Council of Chalcedon, the three churches jointly convened the Council of Dwin in the 6th century and

But, in the background of a long list of foreign domination of Armenia, the Armenian Church has witnessed jurisdictional divisions and schisms in her 1,700-year history.

The first division took place in 590 when bishops of Armenia, by the order of Emperor Maurice, elected a catholicos for the part of the country that was under Byzantine rule. However, the church was reunited two decades later when Persia defeated the Byzantines.

Another long-lasting rival see developed in 1113 when a schismatic bishop declared himself the Catholicos of the Armenian Church

refuted the decision of Chalcedon.

In 552 the seat of the head of the Albanian Church was moved from Derbend to Partav and an Albanian Catholicate was established. The patriarch of the Albanian Church was given the title 'Catholicos of Aghuank' (Artsakh and Utik) and received his ordination and canonical authority from the Catholicos of Armenia.

From the 11th to the 13th century, more than forty monasteries and major religious centres were built in Karabagh through the patronage and efforts of the Armenian princes of Artsakh. In time, as historian Parkhoudaryants puts it, these monasteries became: 'chimneys of enlightenment and a warm hearth of Christianity, incense-full houses of worship, protectors of faith, hope and love, defenders of nationality, language, literature, and holy places that unwaveringly defended the unique and orthodox doctrines of the Armenian Church.'

Starting in 1240, the headquarters of the Albanian Church was transferred to the monastery of Gantsasar, whose bishops inherited the office by virtue of being members of the Hassan Jalalyan family. The Jalalyan clan contributed to the revival of the Church and piety in Karabagh, most significantly, building of the famous monastery of Gantsasar.

The existence of a separate Catholicate in Karabagh, with its own autonomous religious institutions, attests to the importance of the region as a religious centre.

In the 19th century, the status of the native Catholicate was drastically reduced. When tsarist Russia liberated Karabagh from Persian domination, Catholicos Sarkis of Karabagh, upon his return from exile, was demoted to the rank of Metropolitan, by a decision of the imperial authorities in 1815. The Catholicate of Gantsasar turned into two dioceses and various parishes under the authority of the Catholicate of Ejmiatsin.

Metropolitan Sarkis headed the see until his death in 1828. After his death, upon the request of the Meliks (princes) and the people of Karabagh, Catholicos Yeprem of Ejmiatsin, in 1830, ordained Baghdassar, a nephew of Sarkis, Primate of the Diocese of Karabagh. He was ordained in the Cathedral of Ejmiatsin. Thus, the Catholicate of Karabagh was reduced, first to a Metropolitan seat and then to a diocese of the Armenian Church.

Between 1820 and 1930, Karabagh was a hub of vibrant religious and cultural life. However, with the establishment of a Soviet regime in the region, the Church was one of the first institutions to be persecuted. Churches were closed, the majority of the clergy were exiled or banned from practising their ministry and the Diocese of Karabagh was closed. It was reopened again by the Catholicate of Holy Ejmiatsin at the end of the Soviet period in 1989.

For further discussion of the history and return of the Armenian Church in Karabagh, see Hratch Tchilingirian, 'Religious Discourse and the Church in Mountainous Karabagh 198-1995', *Revue du monde arménien moderne et contemporain* 3, 1997.

on the island of Aghtamar in the province of Van (in Turkey today). The see became known as the Catholicate of Akhtamar.²² However, the schismatic catholicate ended in 1895 when the incumbent died without a successor. Its ecclesiastical jurisdictions and assets were transferred to the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

The Catholicate of Cilicia

A longer lasting division, which has not been resolved and healed until today, developed in 1441, when a Church Assembly decided to return the Catholicate of All Armenians from Cilicia to Ejmiatsin, its original place of foundation.

The Holy See was moved to Cilicia in 1116 as a result of Seljuk invasion of Armenia beginning in the 11th century. In 1292, it was moved to Sis, the capital of Cilicia, as an Armenian Kingdom (1198-1375) was established there on the shores of the Mediterranean (currently in south-central Turkey, the Adana region).

²² The Catholicate of Akhtamar (1113-1895).

In 1113, Bishop David (Tavid), related to the princely family of the Ardzrunis of Vaspurakan, declared himself Catholicos of All Armenians, arguing that Catholicos Gregory III Bahlavuni was too young to be pontiff. The following year, a Church council assembled in a Sev Ler monastery rejected the Catholicate of David. However, the latter did not heed to the decision of the council and declared the Catholicate of Akhtamar an autonomous see. Its jurisdiction extended only to a part of the province of Vaspurakan.

Until the late 13th century, the incumbents of the Akhtamar See inherited the office by virtue of belonging to the same family. However, from 1272 to the 16th century, the incumbents were from the Sefetinian feudal family of the island of Akhtamar and the surrounding villages across it. The Sefetinians considered themselves decedents of the Ardzrunis.

Catholicos Zacharia III (1434-1464), with the help of Ghara-Goyunlu Ch'hanshah Khan, extended his jurisdiction over the Catholicate of Ejmiatsin as well, in addition to the Catholicate of Akhtamar, whose incumbents were confirmed by the Muslim rulers of the region.

In the 17th century, jurisdictional disputes between Ejmiatsin and Akhtamar reached their height. But it was only in the late 18th century that Akhtamar recognized the supremacy of Ejmiatsin as the Catholicos of All Armenians.

By the 19th century, the Catholicate of Akhtamar had only 2 dioceses under its jurisdiction, comprising of Armenian villages in the region of Lake Van, some 100,000 people, 302 churches, and 58 monasteries.

While the jurisdictional disputes with the Catholicate of Ejmiatsin continued, political developments in the region took another turn. The attempts of Akhtamar clerics to preserve their domain through bribery and intrigues failed. In 1895 the dioceses of the Catholicate of Akhtamar were finally transferred to the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Catholicate dissolved.

The decision to transfer the Holy See back to Ejmiatsin was due to the fact that the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia had already been conquered by the Mamluks of Egypt in 1375 and there was no plausible reason to keep the headquarters of the Church in Cilicia.

But the incumbent of the see in Sis, Catholicos Grigor Moussapegiants (1439–1446), refused to accept the decision of the Church Assembly and travel to Ejmiatsin. Thus, the Assembly elected and installed Kirakos Virapetsi as the new catholicos in Ejmiatsin. However, Moussapegiants and his successors perpetuated the Catholicate of Cilicia in Sis until World War I, when it was transferred to Lebanon.

In 1921, the Catholicos of Cilicia, along with his clergy and 130,000 surviving Armenians, were evacuated from Cilicia by the French forces and brought to Syria and Lebanon. Armenians in Cilicia had become the victims of a wave of massacres in Kemalist Turkey. Some 300,000 people lost their lives.

The last Catholicos of Sis, Sahak II Khabayan (1902–1939), relocated and restored the Catholicate of Cilicia in Antelias, a suburb of Beirut, Lebanon in 1930. The property was purchased from the American Near East Relief, which ran an Armenian orphanage there from 1922–1928. Eventually, a large cathedral, a theological seminary, a printing house and administrative buildings were built, enhancing the mission and functioning of the catholicate.

The re-established Catholicate of Cilicia received a number of churches in Lebanon and Syria from the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, with the consent of the Catholicos of All Armenians. But its jurisdiction extended only over Syria, Lebanon and Cyprus.

Since its establishment in Lebanon, cordial relations were maintained between the two catholicates. They also participated in the elections of the catholicos of each respective see, through two representatives. A practice that continues until today.

However, at the height of the Cold War, the administrative schism between the Catholicate of Cilicia and Ejmiatsin took a political slant, and the Catholicos in Ejmiatsin became known as ‘pro-Soviet’ and the one in Antelias ‘anti-Soviet’. In the late 1950s, the Cilician See, under the influence of a political party in the diaspora, stepped out of its historical area of influence and established dioceses in the United States, Iran and Greece, thus putting the ‘division’ in the church on diocesan and jurisdictional levels.

Catholicos Karekin I, the late incumbent of the Catholicate of Ejmiatsin (1995–1999) and former Catholicos of Cilicia (1977–1995) explains this painful period in the life of the Church:

In 1956, there were attempts by the Soviet state to control the See of Cilicia and to exploit it for ideological propaganda; to that end, the Communists used the name and prestige of the Mother See of Ejmiatsin. The Catholicate of Cilicia opposed those attempts, and, as a young priest, I defended the administrative independence of that [Cilician] See ... Faced with this conflict, some communities of the diaspora, not wanting to stay under the jurisdiction of an ecclesiastical see that was being used by the Soviets to promote political objectives, asked the Catholicate of Cilicia to be taken under its jurisdiction. That was the case for Iran and Greece.

It was a little different in America. During the Cold War between the two great powers, and in particular after the odious assassination of the Armenian archbishop of New York in 1933, a part of the Armenian community of America formed an autonomous prelate that was not recognized by any of the patriarchal sees. But in 1957, those American communities joined the See of Cilicia.²³

Hopes to resolve the jurisdictional rift in the Armenian Church were raised when Karekin I was elected Catholicos of All Armenians in April 1995. He was the first Catholicos of Cilicia to be elected Catholicos of All Armenians in Ejmiatsin and in the newly independent Republic of Armenia. Indeed, the entire process of his nomination and eventual election was eclipsed by the issue of church unity. Many thought—including the government of Armenia—that Karekin I’s move to Ejmiatsin would bring a *de facto* unity in the Armenian church. But that did not happen. In June 1995, Aram I was elected Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia in Antelias. Even as both catholicos considered church unity a most pressing national issue and pledged their commitment for a new *modus operandi*, diocesan divisions, particularly in North America, remain unresolved.

²³ Giovanni Guaita, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 107.

Contrary to popular perception, church unity in the Armenian Church is not likely to involve the merging of the Sees of Ejmiatsin and Cilicia. The Catholicate of Cilicia has existed for 700 years and, since 1441, the activities and mission of the Catholicate of Cilicia have been intertwined with the history of Armenians in dispersion.

In the last 50 years, the Catholicate of Cilicia in Lebanon has significantly contributed to the development of the post-genocide diaspora. It has graduated four catholicos from its theological seminary, hundreds of clergymen, teachers, intellectuals, and community leaders. It is difficult to imagine that such a national institution will dissolve any time soon or, as some circles suggest, be demoted to a patriarchate, as the ones in Jerusalem and Istanbul.

The Catholicate of Cilicia has also been very active in the ecumenical movement and is a founding member of the Middle East Council of Churches. The current incumbent of the see, Catholicos Aram I, is serving his second seven-year term as the Moderator of the World Council of Churches.

In essence, 'church unity' means going back to the pre-1956 diocesan boundaries—when Antelias's 'historical areas of jurisdiction' included Lebanon, Syria, Cyprus and, more recently, the Arab states of the Gulf—and the forging of a new, more dynamic relationship between the Sees of Cilicia and Ejmiatsin.

One of the major issues facing the Catholicate of Cilicia and the Christian Churches in the Middle East is the growing emigration of Christians from Lebanon and other Arab countries. Already, due to the 17-year civil war in Lebanon, the Armenian community has been reduced to less than 100,000 from the pre-war number of over 250,000.

The Patriarchate of Jerusalem

The Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, established in the 14th century, is one of the three principal custodians—along with the Latin and Greek Orthodox Patriarchates—of the Holy Places and shrines in the Holy Land, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (the tomb of Christ) being among the most important.

In addition to the Holy Places, the precious treasures, artefacts, ancient manuscripts, and vast assets accumulated over the centuries make the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem the richest and, historically, the most important living Armenian institution in the world.

Unlike other Hierarchical Sees, the patriarch of Jerusalem is elected by the members of the St James Brotherhood, without the involvement of lay representatives of the community.

The roots of the Armenian community in Jerusalem, which is the oldest living 'diaspora' community outside the Armenian homeland, go back to the early centuries of the first millennium.

The first Armenians reached Palestine in the wake of the Roman legions, as legionaries, administrators, traders and artisans. More came in the middle of the 1st century BC, when the Armenian King Tigranes reached as far as Acre on the Mediterranean in his conquest of the region. But it was during the Christian era that the Armenians in the Holy Land established permanent roots. Armenian monks were among the first founders of desert monasticism in Palestine.

During the crusades (1187-1291), Queens Arda, Morphia and Melisend of Armenian princely families were the first three Crusader queens of Jerusalem.

In 1311, Bishop Sargis of Jerusalem, an opponent of the latinizing tendencies of the Catholicate in Cilicia, 'declared himself patriarch and was recognized as autonomous patriarch by the sultan of Egypt with jurisdiction over the Armenians in territories under Egyptian rule, including Palestine.' However, Sargis and successive patriarchs of Jerusalem 'remained united *in sacris* with the Catholicate of All Armenians in Sis, Cilicia,' until the transfer of the Holy See to Ejmiatsin in 1441.²⁴

The Armenian Quarter—which houses the patriarchate, adjacent properties and residential dwellings, and makes up one-sixth of the Old City—is a small 'enclave' within the south-western corner of the Old City of Jerusalem. Besides residential homes, it has an infirmary, a 150-student high school, an 80,000-book library, a printing house since 1833, a museum, and other facilities. These are situated in a compound enclosed within three-foot thick walls. The central building inside the Armenian Quarter is the 12th-century St James Cathedral.

After the genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman empire during World War I and later the Arab-Israeli wars in the 1960s, some 8,000 Armenians lived in the Armenian Quarter. At its peak the Armenian community in the Holy Land was about 20,000 living mainly in

²⁴ Nersoyan, 'Summary Topics of Armenian Church History', in Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, *Armenian Church Historical Studies*, ed. Nerses Vrej Nersessian. St Vartan Press, New York, 1996, 84-85.

Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa and what is now the West Bank (Bethlehem, Ramallah and Gaza).

Since 1999, the Armenian Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem has become one of the most talked about topics in the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It has been discussed during negotiations over the final status of the city that is sacred to Christians, Jews and Muslims.

The legal status of the Armenian Quarter became topical, especially after the failed Camp David II talks in the United States. Reportedly, a proposal for Israeli annexation of the Armenian section was discussed at Camp David.

Armenian interest in Jerusalem is not only spiritual. The patriarchate and the Armenian community have important assets and properties. In the continuing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Armenian patriarchate, together with the other Christian Churches of the Holy Land, have clung to their 'internationally guaranteed' rights,²⁵ and insist their rights should be respected by all parties to the conflict. As such, in all church-state matters and politics, there is coordination among the churches, whose centuries-old presence in the city precedes Israeli and Palestinian rules.

The Patriarchate of Constantinople

The Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople (locally referred to as the Patriarchate of Istanbul and all Turkey) was established in 1461 by a decree of Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II, the Conqueror of Constantinople, who installed Bishop Hovagim of Bursa as the first Armenian patriarch of the historic city. The Armenian patriarchate was vested with equal rights and privileges as the Greek patriarchate.

In over five centuries since its establishment, 84 patriarchs have served the see. The patriarch is elected by the members of the Armenian community in Turkey, which currently counts about 80,000, the largest Christian community in Turkey.²⁶

²⁵ As throughout the Ottoman period, the rights of the Christian churches are confirmed in the Paris Peace Conference in 1856, then in the Congress of Berlin in 1878, and later in Versailles in 1919. These rights are supported by all international conventions. For a more detailed discussion of these matters, see Hratch Tchilingirian, 'Dividing Jerusalem: Armenians on the line of confrontation', *Armenian International Magazine (AIM)* October 2000, 40-44.

²⁶ For a discussion of the election of the current patriarch, see Hratch Tchilingirian, 'The People's Choice', *Armenian International Magazine*, December 1998, 52; on the problems

Since the founding of Constantinople Armenian merchants and mercenaries have lived in the city throughout the Roman and Byzantine periods. Indeed, as a major political, church and educational centre, a host of eminent Armenian Church fathers have had connections with Constantinople. St Mesrob Mashtots, the inventor of the Armenian alphabet in the 5th century, visited the imperial city and asked Emperor Theodosios and Patriarch Atticus in Constantinople to allow the teaching of the new script to the Armenian communities living west of the River Euphrates, c. 420. Other visitors to the imperial court in the city include Catholicos St Nersess in 358 AD and his subsequent exile to the Princes' Islands by Emperor Valens. Another Armenian monk, Abbot Sahak, established a monastery by the Sea of Marmara in the same period, but was subsequently persecuted.

In the Byzantine period, a number of emperors were of Armenian descent or partially Armenian. Also, scribes and students from Armenia came to study in the prominent schools and scriptoria of Constantinople.

A sizeable Armenian community gradually took roots outside the city walls, in the district of Galata, especially during the Latin Kingdom of Constantinople. In the 12th century, the community in Galata had its own bishop, under the jurisdiction of the Armenian prelate in Bursa, who was later made patriarch.

In 1517 when the Ottomans conquered Egypt, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Catholicate of Sis, Cilicia, came under the jurisdiction and political control of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. (Ejmiatsin remained under Persian rule).²⁷

The Armenian Patriarchate was moved to its current location in the Kumkapi neighbourhood of Istanbul in 1641.

In the 19th century, the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople became the most powerful Hierarchical See in the Armenian Church, as the patriarch was made the head (ethnarch) of the Armenian 'nation' (millet) under the National Constitution of the Armenian Church,²⁸

related to the election, see Hratch Tchilingirian, 'Election of Patriarch Postponed Indefinitely by Turkish Government', *Armenian International Magazine*, September 1998, 13, and Hratch Tchilingirian, 'Istanbul's Patriarch Kazanjian's Death Reawakens Old Issues of Church Rights', *Armenian International Magazine*, April-May 1998, 38.

²⁷ Nersoyan, 'Summary Topics', 85.

²⁸ For the English text see H F B Lynch, *Armenia: Travels and Studies*, London, 1901, Appendix I, National Constitution of the Armenians in the Turkish Empire, 445-67. The Armenian text in *Azgayin Sahmanadrut'ivni*, Constantinople, 1914.

ratified by the Ottoman sultan in 1863. The millet system was set up by Ottoman sultans, which organized non-Muslim subjects of the empire as distinct and internally autonomous civil religious entities. The system controlled and governed the non-Muslim communities through elected representatives and administrative organs of the communities under the leadership of their clergy.

According to the constitution, the Armenian patriarch was the chief executive of the 'national administration' and the intermediary between the Ottoman state and the 'Armenian nation' living in the vast Ottoman territories. As mandated by the constitution, the National Assembly, headed by the patriarch as its elected president, was in effect a 'parliament' of the Armenian community. It had power to legislate the affairs of the community, it oversaw the work of its executive organs, elected the patriarch, controlled the elections of the Patriarch of Jerusalem and the Catholicos of Sis in Cilicia and participated in the election of the Catholicos of Ejmiatsin through its delegates.²⁹

The provisions of the Constitution became defunct to a large extent in the 1930s, with the establishment of a new Civic Code of the Turkish Republic. However, some of its provisions are guaranteed by the international treaty of Lausanne, signed in 1923 by the Allied countries. The Patriarchate of Constantinople ceased to have a prominent place and role in the life of the Armenian Church and nation, especially after what it suffered during and in the aftermath of World War I.

Until the beginning of the 20th century, the patriarchate had over 45 dioceses made of hundreds of churches, extending from Kars to the United States. Today, it oversees only the Armenian Church communities in Turkey and the island of Crete in Greece (42 churches in all).

Members of the Armenian community, individually, live in harmony in Turkey, with all rights and privileges of citizenship. But the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Armenian community, collectively, experience perennial legal difficulties. The assurances given by the Turkish government to resolve these legal and administrative issues have remained simply promises. The preservation of an Armenian Christian heritage in Turkey is a daily challenge of the Armenian patriarchate.

²⁹ Cf. Malachia Ormanian, *Azgapatum*, §§ 3020-22. For a discussion and analysis of the constitution see Nersoyan 'Laity in the Administration of the Armenian Church', in Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, *Armenian Church Historical Studies*, ed. Nerses Vrej Nersessian, St Vartan Press, New York, 1996, 235-67.

Challenges facing the Armenian Church

The last decade of the 20th century was an extraordinary period in the life of the Armenian Church and people. The independence of Armenia after 70 years under a Soviet regime, not only restored the long-lost Armenian statehood, but also changed the way Armenians think about themselves. The independence of Armenia has also had a major impact on the Armenian diaspora, where more Armenians live than in Armenia itself.

In this background, the Church also saw major changes: new leaders were elected in all four Hierarchical Sees of the Armenian Church. The Catholicates of Ejmiatsin and Cilicia had their first native-born pontiffs (Armenia and Lebanon respectively).

In recent years, several key issues have been discussed in the Church and continue to be the topic of passionate debates.

While the Armenian Church faces many challenges in the post-independence era—such as the 're-evangelisation' of Armenia after seventy years of Communism, the training of a new cadre of priests and church workers, restoration of churches, and so on—here we shall mention only some of the main issues that have implications for all the Hierarchical Sees of the Armenian Church and their relations with each other.

The reinstatement of the College of Bishops

Just as the National Ecclesiastical Assembly is the highest legislative body of the Church, the College of Bishops is the highest spiritual authority. One of the important functions of the College of Bishops is to clarify the Church's position on dogmatic, theological, liturgical, social and moral issues and make deliberations on the 'mission' of the Church.

However, for decades, successive catholicos, due to political circumstances and personal leadership styles, have single-handedly dictated and administered the affairs of the Armenian Church, all along reducing the authority and ecclesiastical function of the College of Bishops to mere formality. At best, the college has been a 'consultative' rather than an 'authoritative' body.

Debates, even controversies, continue over the method and process of making the College of Bishops a functioning body again.

Restoration of diocesan unity in the diaspora

The church in the diaspora, especially in the United States and Canada,

has been divided for decades into two diocesan jurisdictions, one affiliated with the Holy See of Ejmiatsin, the other with the See of Cilicia. Although for decades attempts have been made to resolve the differences, at the beginning of the 21st century the prospects of diocesan unity in North America remain negative, and, most probably, the existing *status quo* will not change in the foreseeable future.

'Reforms'

Both clergymen and lay members of the Armenian Church have pointed to a number of administrative, organizational and liturgical areas in need of 'reform'. For example, the length, language and methodology of performance of the Church's liturgies are among the long-debated issues in need of serious attention.

But the most controversial and difficult issue has been the preparation of an all-encompassing 'Church Constitution' for the entire Armenian Church. For decades, the Armenian Church has lacked a clear, uniform and cohesive administrative rules and regulation. A draft constitution has been prepared and submitted for review by a commission set up by the Catholicos of All Armenians.

However, the three hierarchical sees and a number of scholars and observers have expressed reservations about some of the key points of the new by-laws—for example, concerning the sweeping powers granted to the Catholicos of All Armenians. Others point out that it is virtually impossible to prepare a Church 'constitution' that would be applicable and practical for Armenian churches and dioceses that exist in some forty countries. In each country they are subject to local laws, regulations and socio-political conditions.³⁰ Meanwhile, the review process continues indefinitely.

The celebration of the 1700th anniversary of Christianity in Armenia in 2001 offered new opportunities and challenges to the Armenian Church. Indeed, the festivities that took place highlighted what the Church has been in the past. But in the coming decades the Church will have to articulate what the Church *is* and will be for Armenians, both collectively and individually. The greatest challenge is to make the fundamental tenets

³⁰ For an excellent discussion of the main problems of the proposed new Constitution, see Hagop Nersoyan, *Ditolutyunner 'Kanonadrut' iwn Hayasdaneyc' Yekelec'u' Naxagicin masin* ('Remarks on a proposed constitution for the Armenian Church'), Jerusalem, 2001.

Tchilingirian—The Catholicos and the Hierarchical Sees of the Armenian Church of the Church—'faith, hope, love and charity'—relevant to everyday life in an increasingly global and secular world.

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