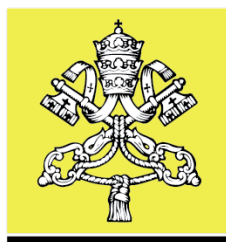


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A brief history of the Church in Armenia

On the occasion of the Holy Father's upcoming apostolic trip to Armenia, beginning tomorrow, we offer a brief history of the Church in this country.

A biblical land, Armenia is cited in the Old Testament by the name "Kingdom of Urartu" (Ararat). In the foothills of its mountains, Noah would have cultivated vines and become inebriated drinking the wine he produced. Thanks to the Armenian translation of an apocryphal gospel, we know the names of the three Magi: Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar. Although according to tradition the apostles Bartholomew and Jude Thaddaeus were the evangelisers of Armenia, it is likely that it was instead the work of missionaries from Syria and Cappadocia. In any case, it was so successful that in 301, thanks to the apostolate of St. Gregory the Illuminator, Armenia became the first nation that embraced Christianity and proclaimed it a state religion, even before the Edict of Milan of 313, by which the Roman Empire tolerated Christianity, and the Edict of Theodosius by which in 380 the Empire recognised Christianity as a state religion.

Initially grouped with the Metropolitan Church of Caesaria of Cappadocia, in Roman territory, the Armenian Church proclaimed its autonomy in the early fifth century, under the jurisdiction of a patriarch who assumed the title of Catholicos, originally attributed to the head of a Christian community outside the confines of the Roman-Byzantine Empire – or rather, outside the jurisdiction of the patriarchs. The heads of the Armenian, Nestorian and Georgian Churches conserve this title. From the 4th century onwards the Armenian ecclesiastical institutions were consolidated and the liturgy assumed its form, strongly influenced by the ancient rite of Jerusalem. At the same time the Armenian alphabet was born, traditionally attributed to the monk Mesrop (360.440), which made it possible to translate into the national language the liturgical texts previously written only in Greek and Syrian.

The Armenian and Catholic Churches separated after the Council of Chalcedon (451), which established the dual nature, human and divine, of Christ. The adherence to monophysitism (one nature) of the Armenian Church was confirmed in two successive national councils held in 506 and 551.

The golden age of Armenian religious architecture began in the sixth and seventh centuries, when a number of monasteries were built in the mountains, and great religious and cultural centres were created. An example of the Armenian religious aesthetic exists nowadays in the form of the large stone crosses (Khatch'kar) formed of a

large stone or limestone stele with an enormous cross at its centre, with a variety of rich decorations.

In the eleventh century, openness towards Rome began. The Catholicos Gregory II made a pilgrimage to Rome to honour the relics of the apostles Peter and Paul, and in the subsequent years the various Catholicos acknowledged the Pontiff as Peter's Successor. From 1205, a number of Catholicos received the pallium in Rome. In the fourteenth century Franciscan and Dominican missionaries arrived in Armenia and established religious centres, but problems with the local hierarchies led to a fracture in 1441, the year in which the Armenian hierarchy split into two branches, Sis and Etchmiadzin. In the eighteenth century there was a religious and cultural reawakening thanks to the priest Mekhit'ar who, after converting to Catholicism, founded a congregation in Constantinople but was persecuted and sought refuge in the island of St. Lazarus in Venice. In 1740 a synod of Armenian bishops gathered in Rome to elect the first Catholic patriarch of Armenian rite, established provisionally in Kraim, Lebanon; in 1742 a new seat of the Armenian Catholic patriarchate was instituted in Bzommar, Lebanon. It transferred to Constantinople in 1866 but returned to Bzommar in 1925, where it remains to this day. The current Catholicos is Grégoire Pierre XX Ghabroyan, and his jurisdiction extends to all the Armenian Catholics of the East and the diaspora.

The Armenian Church is independent and autocephalous, and defines itself as apostolic since it traces its origins to the apostles Thaddaeus and Bartholomew. It maintains good relations in an ecumenical spirit with the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Churches, and has its own leader, the Catholicos, entirely independent of the ecclesiastical hierarchies of the other confessions. Its origin dates back to the schism of the Ecumenical Council of 451. The Armenian Church defines itself as both Orthodox and Catholic, inasmuch as it regards itself to be an expression of true Christian faith and of the universality of the Church. In December 1996, St. John Paul II and His Holiness the Catholicos of All the Armenians, Karekin II, signed a joint declaration in which they affirmed the common origin of the Armenian Church and the Roman Catholic Church.
