

Is the Armenian Church Apostolic, Catholic or Orthodox?

“Armenians are Orthodox, they just don’t know it.” These are the telling words of an elder Antiochian Orthodox bookstore owner which he often would express to his Armenian friends and clients. Is it true that Armenians are Orthodox and, if so, do they even know it? Some Armenians, even clergy, use the word Orthodox as a proper noun referring to a specific jurisdiction of Churches which they know are in some way separated from the Armenian Church (the relationship between these two jurisdiction of Churches will be discussed below). Yet the word Orthodox can also be used as an adjective. As such it refers to a specific spiritual and theological patrimony which certain ancient Churches have received and maintained. In this sense the Armenian Church must certainly be orthodox because she has received the specific eastern, orthodox tradition which esteems such things as the Eucharist and Divine Liturgy as the center of Christian life, the Canonical Hours as the main expression of our spirituality and prayer tradition and the early Councils and Church Fathers as the main expression of our theological doctrine. Specific Orthodox doctrines like: 1) the Eastern expression of the Holy Trinity (without the “filioque” -the teaching that the Holy Spirit originates from the Father “and the Son”) and 2) a particular emphasis on the Incarnation and its implications for man (e.g. its relation to Theosis as our main Christian Anthropology), are as much a part of the Armenian tradition as that of any other Orthodox Church.

Not only this, but the word “orthodox” was traditionally (and is even currently) used by the Armenian Church as its proper title. Hence, it is quite common to hear this church referred to as the “Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church.” While many simply call this church the “Armenian Apostolic Church” others prefer to refer to it as the “Armenian Orthodox Church.” The closest thing to an official name the Armenian Church has is “The Holy Apostolic Orthodox Church of Armenia.” This is important to note because while the Church is found among the various nations and peoples of the world, it does not belong to an ethnicity but rather to Jesus Christ. Thus it is more proper to refer to the “Church of Armenia” rather than the “Armenian Church.”

The Four Marks of the true Church of Jesus Christ:

While our Lord Jesus Christ simply gave the name, “Church,” to the collective body of His followers (Mt. chps. 16, 18), very early the Church had to adopt further descriptive words to distinguish it from schismatic and heretical groups (who also claimed to be Christ’s Church). Before AD 107, St. Ignatius was already on record of using the word “catholic” to refer to the Church. Historically there came to be four main adjectives used to describe the Church which were enshrined in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in AD 325. These are: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic.

One: This speaks to the fact that Christ established only one Church. When some Armenians pride themselves on being “the first independent Church” they should recall

this fact: Jesus Christ established only one Church and meant it to remain that way (i.e., one).

Holy: This speaks to the fact that the Church which Christ established is endowed with His power and holiness. This holiness is communicated to the faithful and the world via its authoritative teaching of the truth which He entrusted to His Church for our salvation. His power and holiness (also known as “grace”) is further communicated to His faithful via the Church’s Holy Mysteries or Sacraments.

Catholic: This means not only that the Church is universal and meant for all peoples but, in Greek, the word also connotes “fullness.” This indicates that the fullness of Christ’s truth is ever present solely in His Church. Nowhere else can one go to find this fullness of truth but Christ’s one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

Apostolic: This speaks to the fact that the Church was founded and established by the Apostles and remains in continuity with them through Apostolic Succession and the Sacramental Mystery of Holy Ordination. But apostolic has a further meaning for the Church. The word “apostolic” comes from the Greek word which means, “to be sent.” Thus, based on our Lord’s mandate to go out into all the world and preach the Gospel to all nations -and to Baptize them (Mt. 28), it is part of the Church’s very essence to be missionary. To lose this missionary aspect is to cease to be Christ’s Church in its fullest and truest sense.

On the Armenian use of the title Apostolic:

A favored title of recent times for the Armenian Church is the “Armenian Apostolic Church,” mentioned above. According to the former Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople, Maghakia Ormanian (writing in the 19th century), this is a very recent title. It became popular as a result of the Russian Government’s attempt to stigmatize the Armenian Church as “Gregorian” or coming solely from St. Gregory the Illuminator. In reaction to this, the 19th century Armenian Church hierarchy latched on to the title “Apostolic” to emphasize their claim to apostolic establishment via the apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew. The Patriarch goes on to argue that the title “Orthodox” (or its Armenian equivalent “Oughapar”) is more historic and thus more fitting for the Armenian Church than is the title “Apostolic.” The great 20th century Armenian churchman and theologian Tiran Archbishop Nersoyan makes the same argument in his writings. Indeed in medieval times there is evidence that this was the preferred title of the Armenian Church Fathers like St. Nerses Shnorhali. Thus the word “orthodox” not only accurately describes our theological and spiritual heritage, it has long been used as a proper title of the Armenian Church. Not only this, but it is also used for the communion of Churches to which the Armenian Church belongs. Collectively the communion is known as the Oriental Orthodox Churches, or the Ancient Orthodox Churches or the non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches (because traditionally we did not recognize the Council of Chalcedon as Ecumenical).

The Relationship with the other Orthodox Churches

Thus, as hinted to above, there are in effect two Communion of Orthodox Churches. These are often distinguished by whether they accepted the Council of Chalcedon or not. Thus they are often called Chalcedonian or non-Chalcedonian Orthodox. A more accurate description perhaps is “Byzantine Orthodox” (those who stem from the East Roman Empire) and “Oriental Orthodox” (those Churches in the Near East which ultimately fell outside the Roman Empire). There are many other ways to classify or distinguish the two communions but what are the real differences? The difference boils down to one thing: our Christological terminology. The Church has always struggled to use frail human languages to accurately describe the ineffable relationship between the human and divine in our Lord Jesus Christ. At the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) it was defined that Christ had two natures joined together, a human nature and a divine nature. Yet the word “nature” can be used in different ways and historically was used differently. One of the ancient understandings of the Greek word for nature (physis) meant the total summation of a thing. To say Christ had two natures, according to this understanding then, was tantamount to saying he was two beings conjoined together. Thus the Chalcedonian Council, because of its potential for misinterpretation and possible confusion, was rejected by a third of the ancient Church, including the majority (but not all) of the Armenian Church. This group included the Churches which fell more in the Semitic region of the world: i.e., the Coptic Church and its daughter Church in Ethiopia, the Syriac Church and its daughter Church in India and the Armenian Church. These Churches preferred to maintain the terminology employed by the great Father of the Third Ecumenical Council, St. Cyril of Alexandria, who taught the one incarnate nature of God the Word, (in Gk. “*he mia hypostasis tou Theou Logou sesarkomene*”). Thus, in distinction with the Chalcedonian definition, Oriental Orthodox use the Christological terminology that Christ has one composite nature which is fully human and fully divine. This is why it is incorrect to refer to these Churches as “Monophysite” (which was a heretical 4th century group). They are correctly called “Miaphysites.” Whereas the prefix “mono” connotes numerical oneness, “mia” conveys our doctrine of Christ's composite oneness.

This lack of agreement over Chalcedon led to two jurisdictions of Orthodox Churches. In addition there was much controversy and political intrigue which solidified the division. In modern times there has been much progress towards reunion. Much of the “bad blood” has been set aside in order to honestly compare the true teachings. The fruit of these many meetings has been an official “Agreed Statement on Christology” produced by both jurisdictions which affirms we are in essence confessing the same Jesus Christ -just using different terminology. As it states: “We have now clearly understood that both families have always loyally maintained the same authentic Orthodox Christological faith, and the unbroken continuity of the apostolic tradition, though they have used Christological terms in different ways. It is this common faith and continuous loyalty to the Apostolic Tradition that should be the basis for our unity and communion.”

This declaration, signed by all of the major Orthodox Churches of both sides, also encourages continued work and mutual sharing. Thus it has become clear to today's hierarchs (and should be equally clear to today's faithful) that all are Orthodox Churches

of Jesus Christ. As a result they should recognize this and begin viewing each other this way. Both Churches could benefit much from one another by using each other's biblical and theological scholarship, partaking of each Church's vast spiritual treasures and even worshipping together as members of the same Orthodox Church of Jesus Christ.

Trusting in Christ's Inextinguishable Light,
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