

The Office of Bishop

in the Armenian and Orthodox Tradition

“Surely all those that belong to God and Jesus Christ are the very ones that side with the bishop.”

“You must follow the lead of the bishop, as Jesus Christ followed that of the Father...”

“Where the bishop appears there let the people be, just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”

-St. Ignatius of Antioch, A.D. 107

In the Armenian and Eastern Christian Tradition the priestly office encompasses all in holy orders from reader (which is the first degree), to sub-deacon, deacon and presbyter. Thus the *Rudder of the Catholic Orthodox Church*, commenting on Canon 2 of the Apostolic Canons, states that, “Clergymen, ordinarily and generally, are those who have been admitted to a priestly and ecclesiastical office by the laying on of hands of a bishop in any ecclesiastical rank from bishop on down to reader and cantor.” The *Rudder* also adds, “Although bishops, presbyters, deacons and sub-deacons are properly spoken of as being ordained, readers and cantors are said to be sealed” (p. 4).

But the bishop has the fullness of the priestly office. This is why he is called an “hierarchy” -from the Greek *archiereus* which connotes “principle-sacrificer.” Thus when St. John Chrysostom wrote his famous book *On the Priesthood*, he was in fact writing about the office and ministry of the bishop. In considering the office of the bishop, let us look at some relevant passages from the Holy Bible (which Armenians refer to as “The Breath of God”) and the words of some prominent Church Fathers to gain a better understanding of the bishop’s role in the Armenian and Eastern Churches.

I. Holy Scripture (Asdvadzashunch - The Breath of God)

SAINT PAUL writes in the Bible that “if a man desireth the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work” (1 Tim 3:1). It is a historical fact that the bishops of the Catholic and Orthodox Church are the continual successors to the apostles. The first bishops were chosen and ordained by the holy apostles in order to maintain their ministry of shepherding the faithful of Christ’s Church. In the “Acts of the Apostles” (1:15-26) the Apostles ordain St. Matthias to take the place of Judas Iscariot as one of the Twelve. In so doing St. Peter stated, “his bishopric [meaning Judas’] let another take.” And so following this same pattern, the Apostolic Succession has been maintained through the Holy Mystery of Ordination down to our day in the Orthodox and Catholic Churches alone. It was understood from the beginning that the Bishops were to succeed the Apostles as shepherds of the Church. The holy apostle Paul wrote, “Take heed to yourselves, and to the whole flock, wherein the Holy Ghost hath placed you bishops, to rule the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

II. Armenian Church Fathers

First we have the teaching of our Holy Illuminator, St. Gregory (AD 265-327). In the catechism produced from his instructions to King St. Tiridates, called “*The Teaching of St. Gregory*,” he is recorded as teaching:

“The apostles became the foundations [Eph 2:20], and received the grace of priesthood and prophecy and apostleship and knowledge of the heavenly mystery which came in the seed of Abraham, which John [the Baptist], the keeper of the tradition of the inheritance, gave to the Lord, and the Lord gave to the apostles. And He gave the keys of the kingdom into their hands [Mt 16:19], because the Son of God Himself was the gate for those who enter [Jn 10:7, 9]; concerning whom the prophet declared: ‘This is the gate of the Lord, and the just enter through it [Ps 117:20].’ So John [the Baptist] gave the priesthood and the anointing and the prophecy and the kingship to our Savior Christ: and Christ gave them to the apostles, and the apostles to the clergy” (*The Teaching of St. Gregory*, Thomson, par. 468).

Another prime example of the Armenian Church Father’s belief regarding the office of bishop is manifested by our holy father St. Nerses the Grace-Filled (AD 1101-1173). In his “*General Epistle*” he described the origin of the office of bishop in these terms:

“The institution of the office of bishop came about through Him, who by an oath received His priesthood from the Father in the manner of Melchisedek, not in a human, but divine way, not by offering material sacrifices of words in the manner of the priesthood of Aaron, but by offering Himself willingly as a sacrifice upon the Cross to the Father for the sake of our reconciliation. And by His Grace He granted to his disciples the same high-priesthood, which He Himself received from the Father by dying upon the cross, over those whom He redeemed with His blood when He ascended into heaven, according to the Gospel by Luke: ‘And lifting up His hands He blessed them and while He blessed them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven’ [Luke 24:50-51].

“He demanded the same example from them: ‘As I did not accept the priesthood over mankind with ease, but with suffering and death, so you in the same way should sacrifice yourselves even unto death for the sheep of My flock, which I received by My blood.’ And they acted according to the commandment, dying for the people who were entrusted to them by the Lord. And when the Apostles of Christ were preparing to leave the world, they chose God-fearing and wise men from the believers, appointed them in their place at the head of the people in the cities and in the country and called them bishops, which is translated ‘overseer.’

“Now we have told you how the office of bishop was initiated. It is also necessary to know for what reason the work of the office of bishop was established by Christ and the Apostles. It is evident that the primary purpose is to be the head and commander of the priests and people and to watch over everyone like an unsleeping sentinel and to straighten the crooked and to keep the straight firm in their rectitude” (*General Epistle*).

III. Orthodox Church teaching:

Protopresbyter Fr. Thomas Hopko writes:

The bishops are the leading members of the clergy in the sense that they have the responsibility and the service of maintaining the unity of the Church throughout the world by insuring the truth and unity of the faith and practice of their respective churches with all of the others. Thus, the bishops represent their particular churches or dioceses to the other churches or dioceses, just as they represent the Universal Church to their own particular priests, deacons, and people. In the Orthodox Church, the office of bishop is the leading Church ministry. The word bishop (*episkopos*, in Greek) means overseer. Each of the bishops has exactly the same service to perform. No bishop is “over any other bishop in the Church” and, indeed, the bishop himself is not “over” his church, but is himself within and of the Church as one of its members. He is the one who is responsible and answerable before God and man for the life of his particular church community.

–The Orthodox Faith / Volume II – Worship / Sacraments / Holy Orders.

IV. Conclusion

We will conclude just as we began, with the words of the great martyr and Apostolic Father, St. Ignatius of Antioch who wrote on the on the solemn authority of the bishop. The following words, like those quoted above, were penned to the Church in Smyrna in A.D. 107. He wrote these while *en route* to Rome where, for his faith in Christ, he would be torn apart by lions in the arena.

“A valid Eucharist is to be defined as one celebrated by the bishop or by a representative of his.”

“It is not right either to baptize or to celebrate the *agape* [Eucharist] apart from the bishop; but whatever he approves is also pleasing to God -so that everything you do may be secure and valid.”

“Apart from the bishop no one is to do anything pertaining to the Church.”

Trusting in Christ’s Inextinguishable Light,
Lazarus W. Der Ghazarian
1-5-01 (revised Dec. 7, 2003)
(2nd Revision 3/8/18)