

The Apostolic Origin of the Church of Armenia

#1. That Christianity reached Armenia before St. Gregory:

The historian Archbishop Malachias Ormanian writes, “Moreover, Eusebius [the Father of Church history, A.D. 260-340] quotes a letter of the patriarch Dionysius of Alexandria, written in 254 A.D., to Mehroujan (Mitrozanos), bishop of Armenia..” (Ormanian, *The Church of Armenia*, p.7). This substantiates the existence of Christianity in Armenia before the advent of St. Gregory the Illuminator. St. Gregory did not introduce Christianity into Armenia but was rather the occasion of its triumph. A.D. 301 was not the establishment of the Church in Armenia but rather the embracing of that Church by the Armenian nation, including King St. Tiridates III and his royal court. This event established Armenia as the first nation in history to officially turn from idols to serve the living and true God.

#2. That North African Fathers recognized apostolic faith of Armenians:

Archbishop Ormanian records that very prominent early Church Fathers acknowledged the existence of Christianity in Armenia from the Apostolic era. These include Tertullian (A.D. 160-223) and the great St. Augustine (354-430). Archbishop Ormanian writes:

“To these facts must be added the passage in Tertullian, the well-known ecclesiastical writer of the second century, who, in quoting the text of the Acts of the Apostles (ii. 9), where the countries are enumerated whose languages were heard by the people on the day of Pentecost, makes mention of Armenia, lying between Mesopotamia and Cappadocia, in place of Judea, which is the one named in the text of the ordinary Bible. Judea could not have been included among foreign countries, and we know that it is not situated between Mesopotamia and Cappadocia. Logically speaking, the country indicated is no other than Armenia. St. Augustine likewise follows the reading of Tertullian. We thus see that the two fathers of the African Church were impressed with the conviction that Christianity was spread among the Armenians in the apostolic age” (*The Church of Armenia*, p.8).

#3. Evidence that St. Thaddaeus was in Edessa:

We know, based on very early traditions and writings, that St. Thaddaeus was in the region of Edessa. The tradition of the conversion of King Abgar of Edessa (who is a canonized Saint of our Church) by St. Thaddaeus has much historical data to support it (e.g. Christian -rather than pagan- symbols on Edessene coinage of that period, etc.). The evangelist, St. Matthew, writes that very early the Christian faith was widespread in Syria: “Then [Jesus’] fame went throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all sick people who were afflicted with various diseases and torments... and He healed them” (4:24). Besides the fact of Syria’s close geographical proximity to Armenia, Edessa itself

was a mixed population of Armenians and Syrians. Its population was commonly referred to in some ancient documents as “Armenosyrians” (cf. “Acts of the Holy Apostle Thaddaeus” A.D. 250). It was probably a Syrian population with a substantial Armenian minority. Some traditions even state that King Abgar himself was an Armenian.

The ancient document “The Acts of the Holy Apostle Thaddaeus” (c. A.D. 250), was a work of which Eusebius believed he had an original. It states the following:

”And after the passion, and the resurrection, and the ascension, Thaddaeus went to Abgarus [King Abgar]; and having found him in health, he gave him an account of the incarnation of Christ, and baptized him with all his house. And having instructed great multitudes, both of Hebrews and Greeks. Syrians and Armenians, he baptized them in the name of the Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit, having anointed them with the holy perfume; and he communicated to them of the undefiled mysteries of the sacred body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and delivered to them to keep and observe the law of Moses, and to give close heed to the things that had been said by the apostles in Jerusalem. For year by year they came together to the Passover, and again he imparted to them the Holy Spirit.”

#4. Evidence that St. Bartholomew preached in Armenia:

The Roman Catholic book, “Lives of the Saints Illustrated,” records that St. Bartholomew, “according to Eusebius [A.D. 260-341] and other ancient writers, ... preached the Gospel in the most barbarous countries of the East, penetrating as far as India”(Catholic Book Publishing Co.). According to the Roman Catholic writer, C. Bernard Ruffin, numerous Church Fathers knew of St. Bartholomew’s mission to the regions of Lycaonia, Armenia, Persia and India. Ruffin records that St. Bartholomew’s evangelization of Armenia is attested to by the great Latin biblical scholar and Doctor of the Church St. Jerome [A.D. 340-420] and also by the illustrious Antiochene Doctor of the Church, St. John Chrysostom [A.D. 347-407], Patriarch of Constantinople. These two great fathers can rightly be seen as faithfully transmitting the tradition of both Eastern and Western Christianity. Other Church Fathers include the Church historian, St. Gregory of Tours (A.D. 538-593), St. Isidore of Seville [A.D. 560-636] and his contemporary, Sophronius, who all attested to the tradition that St. Bartholomew preached the faith in Armenia (The Twelve, C. Bernard Ruffin, p. 114).

#5. Evidence of persecutions and saints from the apostolic era:

The Armenian Church remembers in her liturgical calendar saints and persecutions connected with the early Armenian Church. These include in addition to the Holy Apostles St. Thaddaeus and St. Bartholomew (1st century), St. Abgar the King (1st c.), St. Atteh the Bishop (1st c.), St. Santookhd the Princess (1st c.), the Holy Vosgeyan Priests (107 A.D.), the Holy Sookiasians (130 A.D.), the Virgins St. Hreepsemeh, St. Gayaneh and their Companions (265 A.D.).

#6. The Maxim: Lex orandi, lex credendi

We believe “lex orandi, lex credendi,” i.e., the law of prayer is the law of faith. In other words, we pray what we believe. Our own Divine Liturgy teaches us that St. Thaddaeus and St. Bartholomew are our “First Enlighteners.” Thus, in the intercessions, we pray: “Let our leaders and first enlighteners the holy apostles Thaddaeus and Bartholomew...and all pastors and chief shepherds of Armenia be remembered in this holy sacrifice...”

#7. Universal recognition of tradition:

All of the historic Churches which comprise the catholic Church recognizes this tradition of St. Thaddaeus and St. Bartholomew being first enlighteners of Armenia. These ancient Churches include: Eastern Orthodox (Greek, Russian, Slavic and other Churches), Oriental Orthodox (Coptic, Ethiopian, Syrian, and Indian), and the Latin-Roman Catholic Church. The tradition about Sts. Thaddaeus’ and Bartholomew’s evangelization of Armenia is maintained by them all. For example, some well known, popular Roman Catholic sources include: “Lives of the Saints Illustrated,” Butler’s “Lives of the Saints,” and “The Twelve” (mentioned above). The popular Eastern Orthodox series “Saints for All Ages” by Valerie G. Zahirsky, states “Christianity was not new in the land [of Armenia]; it had come very early through the preaching of the apostles Thaddaeus and Bartholomew” (Bk. 2, Enlighteners of Ancient Kingdoms, p. 14).

Many of the Patriarchs of these Churches have specifically recognized this tradition as well. For instance, the Pope of Rome, John Paul II, has several times acknowledged this, manifesting that he is not ignorant of all that has been listed above. In fact, His Holiness Pope John Paul II confirmed the tradition in a letter addressed to Armenian Orthodox Church’s Catholicos-Patriarch Karekin I (of blessed memory). The Pope stated,

“I have greatly desired to visit Armenia, where in the shadow of Mount Ararat the Christian faith has taken deep root and flourished. Brought by the Apostles Bartholomew and Thaddaeus, and nourished also by the contribution of the Churches of Cappadocia, Edessa and Antioch, the Christian faith has shaped Armenian culture, just as Armenian culture has contributed to enriching the understanding of the Christian faith in new and unique ways.” (John Paul II, *May We Rediscover Our Full Communion*, *L’Osservatore Romano* pg. 4 Publisher & Date: Vatican, July 21, 1999.)

And, in the official “Joint Communiqué” of the current Catholicos Karekin II and Pope John Paul II, the Patriarchs explicitly invoke the Patron Saints of their respective Churches, stating:

“We seek the intercession of the Apostles Peter and Paul, Thaddaeus and Bartholomew, of St. Gregory the Illuminator and all Saintly Pastors of the Catholic Church and the Armenian Church...”

His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Karekin II, during his visit to Rome, summed up the significance of the tradition of our first enlighteners in a speech he made in the presence of Pope John Paul II:

“May our encounter today serve as a testimony to the kinship between the apostolic thrones of St. Peter and St. Thaddaeus.”

Thus, this tradition is well established, historic and recognized by the entire catholic Church.

In the jubilee year of the 1700th anniversary of the conversion of Armenia by St. Gregory the Illuminator (A.D. 301).

Trusting in Christ's Light,
Sub-Deacon Lazarus Der-Ghazarian
(6-6-01)

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Appendix: Catholicos-Patriarch (then, in 1960, a Vartabed) Karekin Sarkissian wrote the following in his work “A Brief Introduction to Armenian Christian Literature”

Christianity had been spread in Armenia before this official conversion [of A.D. 301] which was the work of St. Gregory called 'the Illuminator,' the greatest Apostle of Armenia, and of King Tiridates III, one of the most eminent figures of Armenian political history. Actually the Armenian tradition traces the preaching of the Gospel in Armenia back to the Apostolic Age. St. Thaddeus (John 14:22-4) and St. Bartholomew (John I: 43-51) have been always regarded as the founders of the Armenian Church, which has been always called 'Apostolic.' All the historical evidence at hand points to an early expansion of Christianity in Armenia. The best documentary account of this early Christianity may be found in Fr. Tournebize, *Histoire Politique et Religiense de l'Arménie* - a special chapter, 'Etude sur la conversion de l'Arménie au Christianisme,' pp.401-552, particularly pp.402-21, Paris, 1920; cf. Simon Vailh?, 'Formation de l'eglise Arménienne' in *Echos d'Orient*, t. XVI (1913). pp. 209-22, 193-211; Simon Weber, *Die Katholische Kirche in Armenien*, pp. 55-86, Freiburg in Breisgau, 1903.

All these three scholars are Roman Catholics. It must be noted that there has been a constant tendency with Roman Catholic writers on the origins of Armenian Christianity to overlook the pre-Gregorian period of Armenian Christianity and to represent - under the influence of Armenian uniates - the Armenian Church as being founded by St. Gregory the Illuminator. The above mentioned authors have tried to give an account as complete as possible and as impartial as permissible. See a summary of this early history in Mgr. Malachia Ormanian, *The Church of Armenia*, first two chapters, pp. 3-7, 2nd edition revised by Bishop T. Poladian, London, 1955; cf. Erwand Ter-Minassiantz, *Die Armenische Kirche in ihren Beziehungen zu den Syrischen Kirchen*, ch. I, pp. 1-29, in the series *Texte und Untersuchungen*, vol. 26, Leipzig, 1904; P. Bedros Kassardjian, *L'eglise Apostolique Arménienne et sa Doctrine*, pp. 18-29, Paris, 1943.

For the life and the work of St. Gregory the Illuminator, as related traditionally, see S. C. Malan, *The Life and Times of St. Gregory the Illuminator, The Patron Saint of the Armenian Church*, translated from the Armenian, Rivingtons, 1868. See the French translation of Agathangelos, the historian of the conversion of Armenia, in V. Langlois, *Collection d'Historiens Anciens et Modernes de l'Arménie*, vol. I, pp. 105-94; cf. G. Garitte, *Documents pour l'étude du livre d'Agathange*, in the series of *Studi et Testi*, No. 127 (1946), Rome. A schematic survey on the life and the work of S. Gregory is given in Butler's *Lives of the Saints*, edited, revised and supplemented by H. Thurston, S.J., and D. Attwater, vol. III, pp.693-5, London, 1956.