

Part II: The Armenian Rite by Nicolas LaBanca

When we proclaim the Nicene Creed every Sunday, we find ourselves recalling the four marks of the Church. We remember that she is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Turning our attention to the “oneness” of the Catholic Church, we must also realize that there is great diversity within that oneness. The popes have acknowledged this time and time again. In September of 2000, Pope St. John Paul II sent a message to his brother bishops from Armenia who were holding a synod in Rome:

“Rejoice, Holy Church, for today Christ, King of heaven, has crowned you with his Cross and adorned your walls with the splendour of his glory’. “Your liturgy sings these words on many occasions, dear brothers and sisters of the Armenian people who have come here to celebrate your Jubilee. The Bishop of Rome extends his cordial greeting to you all and gives you a fatherly embrace. I exchange a holy kiss of brotherhood with His Beatitude Nerses Bedros XIX, Patriarch of Cilicia for Armenian Catholics, and the Bishops who accompany him. On this happy occasion, I express my best wishes for the Synod which in a few days will begin in this city of Rome... “The Armenian people know the Cross well: they bear it engraved upon their hearts. It is the symbol of their identity, of the tragedies of their history and of the glory of their recovery after every adverse event. In all epochs, the blood of your martyrs has mingled with that of the crucified One.”

What We Need to Know: The pope was of course referencing the Armenian Genocide which was carried out by the Ottoman Empire shortly before World War I. An estimated 1.5 million Armenians were wiped out during the persecutions, most of whom were Christians. Many of these Armenians who were martyred professed the Catholic Faith. As we explored recently, one need not be “Roman” to be Catholic. In the second part of this series, we will become better acquainted with the twenty-four particular Churches that make up the universal Catholic Church. Twenty-three of those Churches are what we call the Eastern Catholic Churches, and each of those twenty-three Churches utilize one of five liturgical traditions or rites. The first of these we’ll become more acquainted with is the Armenian Rite.

Reunited with Rome: Unlike the other particular Eastern Catholic Churches, the liturgical tradition of the Armenian Rite is practiced by only one *sui iuris* Church, the Armenian Catholic Church. As many know, one of many titles Pope Francis has is “Bishop of Rome”. Not only is he the Supreme Pontiff, but he is also the bishop for Latin Catholics in the Diocese of Rome. Armenian Catholics are also led by a bishop or patriarch. With the official title of “Catholicos Patriarch of Cilicia of Armenian Catholics”, Gregory Petros XX Gabroyan is the head of the Armenian Catholic Church. He was enthroned as patriarch on August 9, 2015, and Pope Francis himself concelebrated Holy Mass with him a month later as a sign of ecclesial communion. As we mentioned in the first part of this series, the Church splintered at certain points of history, most notably with the Great Schism of East and West in 1054. But since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as Fr. Thomas Loya deftly explains in this video, “parts of the Eastern Church reunited with the Western Church... That part that reunited with Rome, and Rome with them, is what we call the Eastern Catholic Churches.”

The Armenian Kingdom: Following the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451, some Christians, including the Armenians, did not recognize certain Christological definitions that were formulated. This sadly led to a split with Christians in Rome and Constantinople. Reunion was attempted during the Crusades in the twelfth century, as well as during the Council of Florence in 1439. Fr. Ronald Robertson expounds on this in “The Eastern Christian Churches”: *“An alliance between the Crusaders and the Armenian King contributed to the establishment of a union between the [Catholic Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church] in Cilicia in 1198. This union, which was not accepted by Armenians outside Cilicia, ended with the conquest of the Armenian kingdom by the Tatars in 1375.”*

Armenian Catholics Around the World: A few centuries later, Abraham Petros I Ardzivian, was instrumental for bringing lasting communion with Rome in the year 1740. After being received into the Catholic Church, he was ordained a bishop and consecrated as the first patriarch of the Armenian Catholic Church on November 26, 1740. Ardzivian then traveled to Rome with his vicar and clergymen to have his election as patriarch ratified by the pope. On December 8, 1742, Ardzivian’s election was recognized, and he was given the pallium by Pope Benedict XIV, affirming the unity between the Latin and Armenian Catholic Churches, a union that has continued to this very day. Since then, each patriarch

has taken the name “Petros” in their ecclesial title. Since then, the Armenian Catholic Church has grown significantly, crossing the globe throughout four archeparchies (the Eastern equivalent of an archdiocese), six eparchies, and several smaller exarchates and ordinariates throughout the world. This growth has continued despite the Armenian Genocide in the early twentieth century. Communism also played a major role in the suppression of the Armenian Catholic Church, but Catholics in those regions began to reemerge in the early 1990’s. Today, most of the Armenian Catholic population is currently in Canada, the United States, and France, while the patriarch’s seat is currently in Beirut, Lebanon with around 12,500 faithful living there according to the 2017 *Annuario Pontificio*.

Veneration and Reverence: Regarding the sacred liturgy, the Armenian Catholic Church uses the Liturgy of St. Gregory the Illuminator. While some of the prayers are different from what you may hear in the Latin Rite, the structure of the Divine Liturgy (which is what Latin Catholics would refer to as the Mass), is basically the same with readings from Scripture, prayers of the faithful, the consecration, etcetera. St. Gregory, the patron saint of the Armenian Church, lived in the early fourth century and first composed the liturgy in the Syriac language. It wasn’t until the fifth century when St. Mesrob Mashdotz translated the liturgy into the Armenian alphabet that he had composed. This language differs from modern-day Armenian, and thus remains one of the oldest liturgies still said today in the Catholic Church. Similar to what is done in the Byzantine tradition, the Armenians will sometimes have an excess of bread that is not consecrated during the Divine Liturgy, and this “blessed bread” (called *antidoron*) is given to the people after the liturgy has ended as a sign of fellowship following veneration of the Cross. But as the Latin Church does, the Armenian Church reserves the excess consecrated Hosts in a tabernacle on the altar.

Liturgical Traditions: Another difference between the Armenians and their Latin and Byzantine counterparts, is that instead of using an altar rail, rood screen, or iconostasis to separate the laity from the altar, two curtains are used in front of the sanctuary, concealing the priests and deacons at certain points during the Liturgy. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, following the ordinary recitation of the Creed, a sentence pronounced by the First Council of Nicaea is said: *“Those who say there was a time when the Son was not, or when the Holy Ghost was not; or that they were created out of nothing; or that the Son of God and the Holy Ghost are of another substance or that they are mutable; the Catholic and Apostolic church condemns.”* Again, some of the prayers and parts of the liturgy may differ from what you experience at your local Latin Catholic parish, but the true oneness of the Church is recognized through the diversity of these liturgical traditions as they developed in different regions of the world.

The Armenian Sacraments: As far as the sacraments are concerned, the sacraments of initiation are given together, as is typical with many of the other Eastern Catholic Churches. Immediately following the Armenian Catholic child’s baptism, confirmation (or chrismation, as it is called in the East) is administered by the priest as he anoints with the holy chrism on the child’s forehead, eyes, ears, nose, mouth, palms, heart, spine and feet, each time with a reference to the seal of the Holy Spirit. Then, the priest or bishop lays his hands on the child and makes the Sign of the Cross. Following this, Holy Communion may be given to the child. In some areas, the first reception of Holy Communion is postponed until the child turns seven or eight, as we see in the Latin Catholic Church.

The Armenian Calendar; The liturgical calendar also differs from the Latin and Byzantine Calendars. For instance, most Holy Days are moved to the following Sunday, except for a few feasts including Christmas, Epiphany, and the Ascension of our Lord. Holy Days of Obligation which are specific to the Armenian Catholic Calendar include the Exaltation of the Holy Cross and the feast of St. Gregory the Illuminator. The seasons also differ from the Latin calendar. The equivalent of the Latin season of Advent, which is called *Aratchavorats*, lasts six to eight weeks, and begins on the feast of Christ the King. The Armenians also have a special season of preparation between the Epiphany season and *Bahots* (what the Latin Church calls Lent), which includes the ancient Fast of Nineveh, lasting for two weeks. This Lenten preparation is somewhat analogous to the season of Septuagesima, or Shrovetide, which was seen in the Latin Rite before the new calendar was issued in 1969. But unlike Septuagesima, fasting obviously takes place during these two weeks.

St. Gregory of Narek: Since the Church provides us examples to venerate and imitate in the saints, we shouldn't be surprised that several of these saints are Armenian. As was already mentioned, St. Gregory the Illuminator is one of the foremost among these saints. But perhaps the greatest of the Armenian Catholic saints would be St. Gregory of Narek, who was declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope Francis in February of 2015. St. Gregory of Narek was born in 950, and lived in the Narek monastery on the south-east shore of Lake Van in present day Turkey. His writings are numerous and have been translated into several languages. His most popular work entitled "The Book of Prayers" has been called an encyclopedia of prayers for all Christians. He has been included in the Roman Martyrology since at least 2005 with a feast day of February 27 (October 13 in the East) where he is listed as: "monk, doctor of the Armenians, distinguished for his writings and mystic science". He was even quoted by name in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in Article 2678 on the section entitled "The Way of Prayer". In addition, this great Doctor of the Church was also mentioned by Pope St. John Paul II in his 1987 encyclical, *Redemptoris Mater*, where he observes the following: *"In his panegyric of the Theotokos, Saint Gregory of Narek, one of the outstanding glories of Armenia, with powerful poetic inspiration ponders the different aspects of the mystery of the Incarnation, and each of them is for him an occasion to sing and extol the extraordinary dignity and magnificent beauty of the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Word made flesh (RM 31)."*

Holy and Blessed Armenians: Other saints like St. Nerses Klaietsi and Blessed Gomidas Keumurgian lived before the eighteenth century reunion, and have been venerated as saints for quite some time in the Catholic Church, with both appearing in *Butler's Lives of the Saints*. Regarding St. Nerses, Butler writes that this patriarch, who died in 1173, "worked for the reconciliation of the Orthodox Greeks; and writing to the Emperor Manuek Comnenos he refers to the pope as 'the first of all the archbishops and successor of the apostle Peter.'" Bl. Gomidas, martyred in the early eighteenth century, was beatified by Pope Pius XI in 1929. Another recent Armenian Catholic saint beatified by the Church is martyr Blessed Ignatius Shoukrallah Maloyan. Bl. Ignatius was the Armenian Catholic bishop of Mardin from 1911-1915, and was especially devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. During the Armenian Genocide in the summer of 1915, Bl. Ignatius, along with most of his flock, was forced to march into the desert where he was made to watch his clergy and flock murdered before his eyes. Before Bl. Ignatius was executed he was asked if he would convert to Islam, to which he refused. He was subsequently shot, and then attained the martyr's crown. On the day of his beatification, St. John Paul II said the following in his homily:

Let's Show Our Gratitude: *"Archbishop Ignatius Maloyan, who died a martyr when he was 46, reminds us of every Christian's spiritual combat, whose faith is exposed to the attacks of evil. It is in the Eucharist that he drew, day by day, the force necessary to accomplish his priestly ministry with generosity and passion, dedicating himself to preaching, to a pastoral life connected with the celebration of the sacraments and to the service of the neediest. Throughout his existence, he fully lived the words of St Paul: 'God has not given us a spirit of fear but a spirit of courage, of love and self-control' (2 Tim. 1:14). Before the dangers of persecution, Bl. Ignatius did not accept any compromise, declaring to those who were putting pressure on him, 'It does not please God that I should deny Jesus my Savior. To shed my blood for my faith is the strongest desire of my heart'. May his example enlighten all those who today wish to be witnesses of the Gospel for the glory of God and for the salvation of their neighbor."*

Catholics across the universal Church would benefit greatly from venerating these great men, asking for their intercession before God in our lives, as we can see from the example of several popes.

Additionally, the patrimony of the Armenian Catholic Church is a great treasure to the Church as a whole. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church, and many great witnesses have come from this beautiful tradition, with their lives and writings still inspiring us to this day. If you live nearby an Armenian Catholic parish, it would certainly be worthwhile to stop in. Visit the Armenian Catholic Eparchy of Our Lady of Nareg's website for a list of parishes in North America.

As St. John Paul exhorted, Latin Catholics should: *"[A]ccept gratefully the spiritual treasures of which the Eastern Catholic Churches are the bearers."*

To worship alongside our brothers and sisters would be an excellent way to show our gratitude.