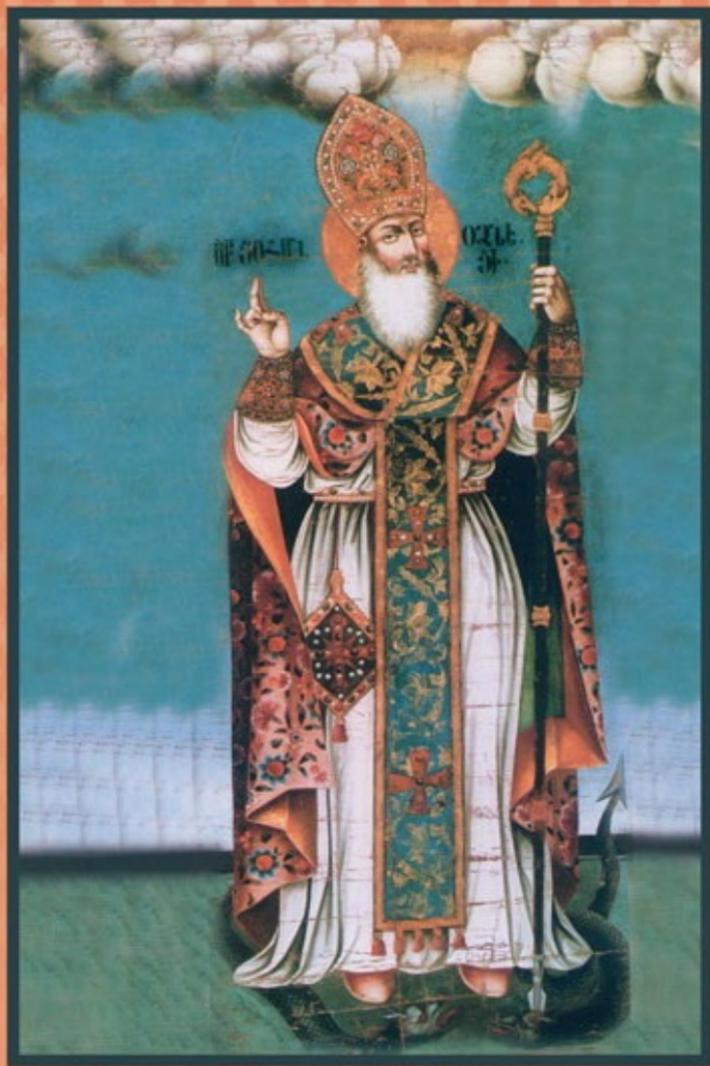


THE BOOK OF CANON LAW

«Կանոնագիրք Հայոց»



Catholicos Hovhannes Otsnetsi
(John of Otsoon)
(VIII Century)

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Edited by Vasken Hakobyan, PhD

Volume I and II



INTRODUCTION

By

Fr. Zaven Arzoumanian, PhD

**Publication of the Western Diocese
of the Armenian Church**

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DURING THE PONTIFICATE OF
HIS HOLINESS KAREKIN II

**SUPREME PATRIARCH AND CATHOLICOS
OF ALL ARMENIANS**

BY THE ORDER OF

**HIS EMINENCE ARCHBISHOP
HOVNAN DERDERIAN**

**PRIMATE OF THE WESTERN DIOCESE OF THE
ARMENIAN CHURCH OF NORTH AMERICA**

**THIS PUBLICATION WAS MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH
THE GENEROUS DONATION OF**

**DAVID AND MARGARET
MGRUBLIAN**

FOREWORD

The history of the Armenian Church Canon Law is rarely studied and most of the canons are probably unfamiliar to the clergy at large. I have attempted to introduce the 8th century **Catholicos Hovhannes Otsnetsi's** *Book of Canon Law of the Armenian Church*, focusing on the history of the compilation of the Canon Law throughout the Armenian Church Councils. We are truly indebted to **Dr. Vasken Hakobyan**, a highly qualified scholar in Canon Law, who was able to edit Catholicos Otsnetsi's compilation and publish the complete text of the Canons of the Armenian Church in two volumes, thus providing the conclusive and the final word on this very important subject.

For the first time in English I have simplified the unique work accomplished by Hakobyan in selecting from his two volumes the **Armenian Church Councils only**, historically and judicially, to present to our readers a general and yet consistent development of the *Book of Canon Law*. Certain individual canons are selectively listed in this survey for their importance, with an emphasis on the location and the participants, cleric and lay alike, namely, pontiffs, kings, princes, as well as religious and lay representatives, whose influence on the canons of the Armenian Church has been quite obvious.

Today, as explained in this study, a large number of manuscript texts since the 8th c. are extant because of the importance of the Canon Law, copied by subsequent scribes in their respective monasteries throughout the centuries. A considerable number of those manuscript texts are examined minutely by Vasken Hakobyan, and many different readings are annotated for accuracy. The canons of the General Councils of the Church, quite a few of them, such as the First Ecumenical Councils and their doctrines, are also included in the *Book*, making the collection a valid source for the Armenian Church and nation ecumenically.

In recent times various attempts were made to draft a set of the **Constitution**, or **Bylaws**, to govern the Armenian Church as the One Apostolic Church of Armenia, based on the *Book of Canon Law*. In view of the widespread Armenian Churches outside Armenia, such attempts proved unrealistic. Besides, the Hierarchic Sees of the Armenian Church and the dioceses in different countries had to draft in the past and periodically update their individual Constitutions, always subject to local civic mandates. In any event, the *Book of Canon Law* stands as the only fundamental source for further actions.

The Book of Canon Law of Armenia

«Կանոնագիրք Հայոց»

Edited by
Vasken Hakobyan, PhD

An Introduction

The Two Volumes (1964 and 1971)

Vasken Hakobyan, the only specialist in recent times to study Armenian Canon Law in depth, edited and published the two volumes of the *Book of Canon Law of Armenia* in Erevan, and classified the Canons of the Armenian Church most carefully and completely. The First Volume contains the Canons compiled by **Catholicos St. Hovhannes Otsnetsi (St. John of Otsoon)** (717-728), and Volume II has additional codes collected by later Pontiffs of the Armenian Church. Catholicos Otsnetsi included also the Canons of the Universal Church which he entered in the Canons of the Armenian Church. Later editors of the *Book* did the same. Our intention at this introductory stage is to select from the two volumes the **Canons of the Armenian Church Councils only** that are historically verifiable, and present them briefly.

Thus, during the Pontificate of **Catholicos Vasken I of All Armenians** (1955-1994), the *Book of Canon Law* by Otsnetsi had its final and scholarly edition published in 1964 and 1971 by Vasken Hakobyan, following tedious studies of the different readings of 47 manuscript texts of the original volume. Hakobyan classified the canon laws in 57 groups, with a total number of 1332 individual canon laws. For example, as shown below, the Council of Shahapivan in 444 adopted 20 canons purely under political circumstances, when in 428 the Armenian Arshakuni Kingdom fell, and the Armenian princes quarreled among themselves. It was the first Council to react to the situation by ruling those canons.

History

From the times of St. Gregory the Illuminator, the Armenian Church was governed by periodic codes emerging from periodic Church Councils. The most ancient groups of the canons are ascribed to **Catholicos St. Gregory the Illuminator** (301-325), **Catholicos St. Nersess the Great** (353-373), **Catholicos St. Sahak Barthev** (387-439), **St. Mesrob Mashtots** (362-440), the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, **Catholicos St. Hovsep Hoghotsmetsi** (440-452), **Catholicos St. Hovhan Mandakuni** (478-490), **Tavit Alavka Vorti**, (died in 1129), and others. Tavit Alavka Vorti was a distinguished law teacher who authored his *Canonical Code of Laws* with 97 articles.

Those early canons determined that as a necessary alternate the Armenian Church possessed the "*Eminent function of Court of Justice*" (*medzi datavorutyanyan*) along with the power of both law making and court hearing as reported by one of our first historians of the 5th century Bavstos Biuzand. This function bestowed on the person of the Catholicos the power of the *Magistrate*, and by extension, the Armenian Church became the Court of Justice, whenever Armenia lost its kingdom and its political power, being unable to govern the country as a state. This "civic" function of the church, nonetheless, was based on the Christian faith and doctrine the end result of which was the most brilliant and most essential compilation of the *Book of Canon Law* by Catholicos Hovhannes Otsnetsi.

In V. Hakobyan's words "*The Book of Canon Law of Armenia is the first collection of legislative documents, forming the Armenian Corpus Juris Canonici,*" by Catholicos Otsnetsi, "*which was not created or compiled haphazardly. On the contrary, it was the result of political conflicts of his time between the Byzantines and the Arabs, as well as of doctrinal pressures from the Greeks on the Armenians.*" At the Council of Dvin in 720 Otsnetsi had raised his deep concern while addressing the meeting on matters of the lack of discipline among the people and the clergy,

especially regarding the Chalcedonian doctrine which resulted always in confusion and disunity. The following are the listings of the canon laws of the **Armenian Church Councils** recorded in each volume.

Volume I by V. Hakobyan (1964)

Volume I contains 30 canon laws ascribed to St. Gregory the Illuminator (pp. 243-249); 55 canon laws to St. Sahak Barthev Catholicos (pp. 363-421); 20 canon laws were adopted by the Council of Shahapivan (pp. 422-466); 37 canon laws were established by Catholicos Nersess III and Bishop Nershapuh Mamikonian (pp. 475-490); 9 canon laws by Catholicos Hovhan Mandakuni (Vol. I, 491-500); 3 canons by Bishop Abraham Mamikonian addressed to King Vachakan of Albania (pp. 501-505); 15 canon laws by Catholicos Sahak Dzoraporetsi (pp. 505-513); 32 canon laws by Catholicos Hovhannes Otsnetsi (pp. 514-537).

Volume II by V. Hakobyan (1971)

Volume II contains 23 canon laws by Catholicos Sion Bavonetsi (pp. 3-18); 21 canons by King Vachakan of Albania (pp. 91-100); 12 canon laws by Catholicos Nersess III Ishkhantsi (pp. 201-215); 10 canon laws by Bishop Makarius of Jerusalem addressed to the Armenians (pp. 216- 229); one canon law by St. Sahak Barthev Catholicos (pp. 230-238); one canon law by Catholicos Hovhan Mandakuni (pp. 239-243); 9 canon laws of the Council at Karin (pp. 244-257); 43 canons by Catholicos St. Nersess I the Great (pp. 258-263); 7 canons by Catholicos Hovhan Mandakuni (pp. 264-266); 7 canons by Catholicos Hovhan Mandakuni on Repentance (pp. 296-304).

Both volumes include a series of canons adopted at the **Three Ecumenical Councils, Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), and Ephesus (431)**, and many other non-Armenian local churches. In total, 16 such codes are included in Vol. I, and 20 codes in Vol.

II. At the end of the second volume V. Hakobyan has provided a comprehensive list of all the canons emerged from all the councils, Armenian or non-Armenian alike (pp. 306-395).

Additional Canon Laws in Vol. II Ascribed to the Same Armenian Pontiffs

In comparing the two volumes it becomes evident that additional codes and canons are listed in Vol. II under the same Pontiffs as they appear in Vol. I.

For example, Catholicos Hovhan Mandakuni has 9 (nine) canon laws in Vol. I, and later 15 additional canons in Vol. II, totally independent from the first ones. They were ascribed to the same Catholicos Mandakuni: 1+7+7, a total of 24 canon laws. Other examples are the following. To St. Sahak Barthev Catholicos one (1) canon is included in Vol. II, in addition to the 55 canons found in Vol. I. The three (3) canons of King Vachakan in Vol. I were added by 21 canons in Vol. II. The same with Catholicos Nersess III Ishkhantsi, to whom 43 canons are ascribed and recorded in Vol. II, in addition to the 37 canons found in Vol. I.

Given the content of those additional canons, which are not duplications for sure but entirely different canons, it simply meant that after Catholicos Otsnetsi, new editions of the *Book of Canon Law* in the 10th and the 11th centuries by scribes and compilers of the Canon Law made those additions with some unknown "authorization" and enriched the *Book*.

Text

It was not until the 8th century when for the first time **Catholicos Hovhannes Otsnetsi** collected all the scattered canons of the Armenian Church Councils of the previous centuries, classified them in groups, and established the first standard *Book of Canon Law of Armenia* in one volume, including some of the canons of the Christian Church in general.

Catholicos Otsnetsi classified the church laws of the Councils of Shahapivan (5th c.), Dvin I (6th c.), Dvin II (7th c.), Karin (633) and Partav (8th c.). Later, additions were made to the *Book of Canon Law*, issued by the actions taken at the Councils of Sis in 1243, of Dzagavan in 1268, in the town of Dzag, where a monastery from the 7th century was known as Dzagavank, in the district of Kotayk in the province of Ararat. Later the monastery had a two-storey church added in 1268. The last Council was that of 1652 convened in Jerusalem.

Even though not finalized during the centuries under consideration, the Armenian Church *Sharagans* (Hymns), had their origin as early as in the fifth century, even some of them authored by St. Sahak and St. Mesrob. They contained a variety of hymns related to the fundamental theological and national issues, all of them eventually forming an impressive collection of religious songs with their proper music. Undoubtedly, they contributed considerably to the formation of the worship and liturgy of the Armenian Church.

The *Book of Canon Law of Armenia*, which includes the Apostolic Canons, and those of the Universal Church of Christ as well, emerged from the respective Councils of the Universal Church, drew the line and controlled the discipline of the Armenian Church as an established institution beginning from the 4th century, culminating into its final compilation as a code in the 8th century. Catholicos John Otsnetsi himself convened the Church Council of Manazkert in 726 and established additional canons concerning the natures of the Person of Jesus Christ.

The initial author of this unique volume is undoubtedly Catholicos Hovhannes (John) Otsnetsi, also known as *Imastaser* (Philosopher), a highly learned and distinguished theologian among the hierarchs of the Armenian Church, who is the sole responsible for the original classification and compilation of the *Book of Canon Law*. He has made the following historical evaluation. “*The Holy Fathers provided the church laws, and*

because those laws were scattered and not classified, I deemed it necessary to codify them all in one volume and establish the Book of Canon Law in our Patriarchal Seat.” The eighth century Catholicos John Otsnetsi resided in the **Armenian Patriarchate at Dvin**, the capital of Armenia, where the Seat of the Catholicos was transferred from 485 to 927. Catholicos Otsnetsi died in 728.

It is understandable that the original *Book of Canon Law* so formed and established by Otsnetsi could not have reached us intact. Because of its importance, in various monasteries scribes copied from the original version extensively. Eventually many variants emerged from those duplications, with unwarranted additions and deletions, due to possible inaccurate readings on the part of the scribes. Later editions created additional codes of the church laws that have reached us during subsequent centuries.

Whereas in the long run the original text went through numerous editing and changes, the *Book* remained always under the authorship of Catholicos John Otsnetsi. Presently scholars have identified over 200 survived Manuscript texts of the *Book* with diverse copies written during distant periods from each other. V. Hakobyan has accomplished a remarkable task in editing each of the 47 manuscripts and adding on each page the different readings from those 47 texts.

It is interesting to note that the laws adopted at Shahapivan were enforced by a Church Council to judge political leaders of Armenia in times of crises. Also, the Church Council of Dvin in 648, presided over by Catholicos Nersess III Ishkhantsi (641-661) with 17 bishops participating, adopted 12 canons to resist the invasions of the Arabs in defense of the Armenian princes. The Council set also rules to resist Byzantine pressures regarding doctrinal issues.

At the end of the 10th century the *Book of Canon Law* was further developed with additional canons, totaling 40 canon laws. This means that until Catholicos Otsnetsi (*Hakobyan Vol. I*) the

Book was endowed with 24 codes, and later, (*Vol. II*) it was increased by an additional 15 codes. Chronologically the closest addition to Otsnetsi was made by **Catholicos Sion Bavonetsi** at the Church Council of Partav in 768, as shown later in this study.

Two Codes of Laws

***Datastanageerk* of Mkhitar Vardapet Gosh**

In our ancient literature there are two additional *Codes*, the more important being the ***Datastanageerk*** by **Mkhitar Vardapet Gosh** (12th c.). The other is the ***Code of Laws*** written by **Smbat the Constable** (13th c.). Unlike these later codes, *The Canon Law* of Catholicos Otsnetsi remains the official collection, since the other two were not officially and legally authorized by Church Councils. They represented personal compilations and undoubtedly are regarded as valuable and trustworthy sources. Mkhitar Vardapet, nicknamed *Gosh*, meaning with a short beard, was born around 1120, and died in 1213. He was ordained an archimandrite (*vardapet*), studied under the famous teacher Hovhanned Vardapet Tavushetsi, and later at the school of Getik. He wrote his famous work in 1184. It contained mainly two parts: 124 Church canons and 130 Canons for the laity.

Next to the *Book of Canon Law*, the work of Mkhitar Vardapet stands the outstanding work in the history of the Armenian people. Even though not endorsed by the church and civil authorities, the *Datastanageerk (Book of Justice)* stands as an important reference Book of Canon Law for the history of the Armenian Church and nation. He wrote his *Book* to keep up with the standard law and justice and hold high the Armenian national pride, and in his words, "*so that because for the lack of it, not to apply to the courts of other people for justice, but to show other nations that we also treat our people by our own canons and courts; otherwise they shall always intimidate us.*" In part, the *Book* includes:

- *Canons referring to the daily life, possessions and the Dealing with those possessions by individuals*
- *Canons referring to philanthropic works*
- *Laws defining the relationship and the responsibilities of the slaves and their lords*
- *Canons referring to defend the slaves and the peasants for the protection of their rights*
- *Rules to revoke actions of unmerciful conduct on behalf of the lords along with penal measures by the courts*
- *Canons to safeguard justice and peace among the people.*

Mkhitar's *Datastanageerk* has reached us in three different editions, all in manuscript forms, written from 1184-1265. There are two published editions, in Armenian and in English. The first edition by Vahan Dz. Vardapet Pastamians, Vagharshapat, 1883, and the second edition by Khosrov Torossian, Erevan, 1975.

Content of Catholicos Otsnetsi's *Book of Canon Law*

In the *Book of Canon Law* the codes include laws pertaining basically to the dogma and the worship of the Armenian Church. In addition, laws on marriage, family life, and on the discipline of the clergy are strict and predominant. Variably, by necessity and being contemporary to its compilation, the *Book of Canon Law* was needed at the time of political and social unrest. During the 7th century, the Byzantines and the Arabs were forcing Armenia to submit, thus endangering the independence and destroying the economy of our country. It was Catholicos Hovhannes Otsnetsi himself who was able to personally meet with the Arab Caliph Umar II (717-720) in Damascus, just before 720, to rescue the imprisoned Armenian princes, as reported by contemporary historians.

Primarily the autonomy of the Armenian Church was at stake, especially when the Byzantine Greek Orthodox Church exercised pressure to submit the Armenians to their faith, demanding the

acceptance of the doctrine adopted at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, in order to consolidate the Eastern front of the Empire against the Arabs. The Byzantines were always intolerant trying to reduce Armenia into one of the eastern provinces of the Empire. The "weakening" of the Armenian Church in the attempt of submitting it to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in matters of doctrine warranted the Armenians to convene Church Councils as needed, and take immediate measures by establishing sets of canon laws in defense of the independence and the autonomy of the Armenian Church.

According to Patriarch Malachia Ormanian, Catholicos Otsnetsi was determined to alleviate religious pressures exerted on the Armenian Church by the Greeks, oddly "*relying on the policy of the Arab Caliphate.*" The Catholicos "*forcefully kept a distance between the Armenian Church and the Greek Church regarding the Chalcedonian doctrine which had found ground during Catholicos Eyr of Partajnakert, one of his predecessors.*"

Ormanian has based his views on the fact that Catholicos Otsnetsi is also believed to be the author of another theological writing, known as *Saks Jzoghovots (Concerning [Church] Councils)*, where he has adjusted the Christological views of his six predecessors, from **Catholicos Eyr** (630-641) to **Catholicos Eghia** (703-717), who were blamed to have consented to the Chalcedonian doctrine. Ormanian, our church historian, observes that "*those deviations were simply because of weaknesses due to political pressures.*"

Over all the main trend of the compilation of the *Book of Canon Law* by Catholicos John of Otsoon was to safeguard the traditional and legitimate law and order, bearing in mind the political stability of the country. Those steps could have only been taken through the Armenian Church Councils with the presidency of the Catholicos, and with the participation of the bishops, clergy, and lay representatives, headed variably by Kings and Princes, whenever applicable, thus forming from the outset

the democratic and the more powerful nature of the councils. As said earlier, the Catholicos and the Church were given the power as an alternate to overtake the governance of the nation while the kingdom dwindled and the political power failed.

The Armenian Church Councils Chronology and Classification

Between the 4th and 17th centuries, a total of **23 Armenian Church Councils** convened, almost one during each century on the average. Historians have recorded one Council in the IV century, two in the V century, two in the VI century, four in the VII century, three in the VIII century, one in the IX century, one in the X century, three in the XII century, one in the XIII century, three in the XIV century, one in the XV, and one in the XVII century. On the average, more than half the Councils were called by the pontiffs of the Armenian Church, the Catholicos himself, and the rest by the Armenian Kings and/or Princes as needed. They represent the following groupings:

a) Fourteen (14) Church Councils were called by the Supreme Patriarchs of the Armenian Church as follows: Ashtishat in 354 by **Catholicos Nersess I Great**; Shahapivan in 444 by "**a group of spiritual brothers**"; Artashat in 449 by **Catholicos Hovsep Hoghotsmetsi**; Dvin I in 506 by **Catholicos Babken of Othmus**; Dvin II in 554 by **Catholicos Nersess II of Bagrevand**; Dvin III in 645 by **Catholicos Nersess III Ishkhantsi**; Dvin IV in 720 by **Catholicos Hovhannes Otsnetsi**; Manazkert in 726 by **Catholicos Hovhannes Otsnetsi**; Partav in 768 by **Catholicos Sion Bavonetsi**; Kesoun (Karmir Vank) in 1113 by **Catholicos Krikor III Pahlavouni**; Hromkla in 1179 by **Catholicos Krikor Tgha**; Adana in 1317 by **Catholicos Constantine III Gesaratsi**; Jerusalem in 1652 by **Catholicos Philibos Aghbaketsi**.

The General Assembly of 1441 in Vagharshapat was called by **Hovhannes Vardapet Hermonetsi**, the most influential leader of the Armenian Church at the time and the head of the famous

University of Datev, to transfer the Seat of the Armenian Catholicos from Sis to Vagharshapat-Etchmiadzin once and for all. The Assembly elected **Catholicos Kirakos Virabetsi of All Armenians** to succeed **Catholicos Krikor Musabekian** who remained in Sis and started the second, and limited, branch of the Armenian hierarchy in Cilicia.

b) Nine (9) Church Councils were called by secular leaders of Armenia as follows: Council of Dvin III in 607 by **Armenian Princes**, Karin I in 633; Council of Karin II in 680; Council of Yernchak in 841 by **Armenian Princes**, given the fact that in the Council of 607 in Dvin the election of **Catholicos Abraham Aghbatanetsi** (607-615) was held, and in the Council of 841 in Yernchak the accusation against the ousted Catholicos was resolved.

It was in Ani, capital of the Kingdom that **King Ashot III of the Bagratuni Kingdom** called the first church council in 969. Later councils were held in Tarsus in 1197 by **King Levon I of Cilicia**, Council of Sis I in 1208 by **King Levon I of Cilicia**, Council of Sis II in 1307 by **King Levon III of Cilicia**, and again Council of Sis III in 1343 by **King Constantine of Cilicia**.

General Agenda of the Church Councils

Six of the Church Councils, as described below, dealt with matters of **reformation within the Church**, four of which established specific canon laws that have entered in the two-volume edition of the *Book of Canon Law of Armenia* by Vasken Hakobyan.

The other five Councils convened to respond to the official correspondences addressed to the Armenian Church. One Council aimed at establishing relationship between the Armenian and the Syrian Orthodox Churches, and another to improve the relationship of the Mother See and the See of Cilicia. One of the Church Councils discussed attempts to unity between the

Armenian and the Greek Churches, and the remaining three Councils aimed at "unity" with the Catholic Church while the Armenian Kingdom was in Cilicia (Lesser Armenia), in the territories of the north-eastern tip of the Mediterranean Sea.

Participation of the Secular Authorities

Armenian Kings and Princes (*Ishkhank*), as well as laity, were involved in some of the Church Councils. Seven of the Councils were definitely attended by Kings and/or Princes of Armenia with specified numbers. Ten Councils show no indication of secular representations, meaning that none of the Princes of Armenia attended those Councils.

History testifies that church and state in Armenia were united, and that secular heads of our nation attended the Councils so that religious canon laws might have the advantage of state endorsement. Both, Church and State, were mutually supportive with the understanding that the religious heads of the national church of Armenia reached resolutions at the Councils, and that the secular authorities executed them in their respective regions and districts. By the same token the church sometimes had to step in to resolve political conflicts among the secular authorities by virtue of her judiciary power.

Canon Laws of St. Gregory the Illuminator The First Catholicos of Armenia (303-325)

(Vol. I, pp. 243-249, 594-595)

Thirty (30) canon laws are traditionally established by **St. Gregory the Illuminator, the first Catholicos of Armenia** (303-330). They refer to the priests and their lifestyle, to the second marriage of a Christian believer, to those who have dedicated their lives to God but later renounced their vows, to the relics of the Saints, and others. From those 30 canons the following are essential in view of the inauguration of Christianity in Armenia, beginning 303 AD.

1) Canons for priests who [after committing sinful acts] shall repent: *"Such priests shall repent for 10 years in praying and giving fines to the poor; then shall receive Holy Communion."*

2) Canons for those priests who take wives: *"Such priests shall repent staying out of the church for 5 years, and then inside the church for 2 years, followed by 2 years denial from receiving Holy Communion, and only then to receive the Holy Sacrament."*

3) Canons for priests who receive bribes: *"Priests who lend money for personal profit shall be expelled from the church."*

4) Canons for members of the church who divorce their second wives and return back to their first wives: *"Such members shall repent 7 years staying outside the church, and then for one more year inside the church."*

5) Canons for priests who bless marriages secretly: *"Such priests shall be defrocked."*

6) Canons for those who fool around with women: *"They shall repent for 3 years outside the church, and one more year inside the church, and then receive the Holy Sacrament."*

7) Canons for those who live celibate life to devote themselves to God but later renounce their vows: *"Such people shall repent for 7 years before entering church for the Sacraments."*

8) Canons for infants who die before being christened with Holy Miuron (oil): *"If any infant dies because of neglect of the parents, parents shall repent for 5 years. The same applies for the godfathers and to the priests who have been found neglectful in their task."*

9) Canons relating to the relics of the Saints: *"It is forbidden to celebrate Holy Mass on the [places] where relics of Saints are buried."*

10) Canons for those who divorce their wives: *"A man who divorces his wife for cause of adultery, may do so, and after one year is found clear [for re-marriage]."*

The Council of Ashtishat (354)

The first recorded Armenian Church Council is the one convened by **St. Nersess the Great in 354 in Ashtishat**, in the province of Taron-Vaspurakan, according to the 5th century Armenian historian Faustus Biuzant. The historian refers to the Council called by Catholicos Nersess who “*called the entire bishops of the land of Armenia, in the village of Ashtishat.*”

Although no significant action is recorded by our historians on the outcome of the Council, but many philanthropic reformations were achieved by Catholicos Nersess, similar to the Byzantine churches and their social institutions. Nersess the Great opened hospitals for the lepers and convents for the monastic orders, thus prohibiting the lodgings of the bishops and monks with families as they wished. The Catholicos ordered uniformity to be established in convents and life style among the brotherhood of the clergy to be improved. These obviously reflected actions taken by the Council of Ashtishat.

Some of the specific rules included:

1) *To exert efforts on the princes of Armenia to alleviate the taxes imposed on the peasants.*

2) *To expect obedience from the slaves toward their lords as their subjects.*

3) *To establish Greek and Syrian schools in all the districts in Armenia in order to make the foundations of Christianity firm, since those scripts were available in the country at the time.*

4) *To forbid pagan ways of life style, including marriages of close relations and excessive laments on the dead.*

Canon Laws of

Catholicos St. Sahak Barthev (387-349)

(Vol. I, pp. 363-421; Vol. II, pp. 230-238)

In Volume I of V. Hakobyan's study there are numerous canon laws ascribed to **St. Sahak Catholicos** whose fifty-year pontifi-

cate yielded the true revival of the Armenian Church. Spread over 363-421 pages, fifty-five canons are shown pertaining to the bishops, priests and deacons, with strict orders of pastoral duties. Some of those laws are important to report herewith, since they refer to the preparation of the clergy, to the churches and monasteries, as early as the 5th century. They are:

- 1) *The educated only to be ordained bishops.*
- 2) *The Holy Altar to be kept in good order and properly ornate.*
- 3) *To sing Psalms with devotion and with no excuses.*
- 4) *To deny Holy Communion to the adulterous and to the homosexuals.*
- 5) *To establish faculties in the monasteries.*
- 6) *To have resident archpriests attending church all the time.*
- 7) *Deacons are not allowed to administer the Sacraments of Baptism and the Holy Communion.*
- 8) *Priests are ordered to refuse burials in the church yards.*
- 9) *To forbid priests to take the Holy Eucharist to homes.*
- 10) *To instruct abbots to keep monasteries in good order and make no discrimination between churches and monasteries, keeping the true faith as the foundation of both institutions.*

Hakobyan observes that as early as the 5th, even the 4th centuries the above canons were enforced concurrent with the newly translated Holy Scriptures headed by Catholicos Sahak himself. Both, the Holy Bible and the Canon Law established the true foundations of the earliest Armenian Church soon after the revival of the Armenian written tradition which resulted in the opening of the first schools of learning in Armenia.

Later historians, Sebeos (7th c.) and Ghevond the Priest (8th c.), have confirmed the loss of our religious assets as invasions from non-Christian hordes came to demolish our churches and the leaders of our religion. This indicated the "good order" enforced by Catholicos Sahak and Priest Mesrob Mashtots and their first schools soon after the invention of the Armenian alphabet and the

translation of the Holy Bible into Armenian, followed by a set of canon laws that prevailed in the immediate past centuries.

Sebeos states: *"Enemies invaded to destroy our religion and worship in our land. They abolished the Testaments of Christianity and those who preached the Word to such a degree where not even a copy of the Gospel or a single teacher remained in our land."* Ghevond laments: *"Who can endure without tears the unimaginable tragedies that befell them? The holy church suffered from the loss of the beauty and from the good order of its pulpit, and the voice of divine praise was silenced."*

The Council of Shahapivan (444)

The second Church Council in Armenian history is known as the **Council of Shahapivan in 444**. It is the first one entered in the *Book of Canon Law* by Catholicos Otsnetsi. The Armenian historians have specified that *"Forty bishops, plus priests and deacons, along with officials and the entire faithful of the church, all the princes, heads of districts and provinces came to meet"* in Shahapivan. The purpose of this Council was to confirm the orders set by St. Gregory the Illuminator, St. Nersess The Great, St. Sahak Barthev, and St. Mesrob Mashtots, and in view of the lack of credibility in the nation at large, to warn the clergy and those responsible under the threat of fines and penalties.

It is curious to know that at Shahapivan two "groups" are addressing each other: "You" and "Us". Patriarch Shnork Kaloustian, in his *Brief Review on the Armenian Church Council* (1986), reveals that the former group represented the 40 bishops, who *"shall establish law and order, and the latter group "shall obey and keep them firm; otherwise, those not abiding by the orders, whether bishops, priests, or deacons, shall be subject to fine."*

Subsequently, the attending bishops established 20 strict canon laws to control the shortcomings of the clergy. Most of those canons referred to the clergy, starting from the bishops, to the

extend that fines were even specified at the Council of Shahapivan, saying,

“If a bishop is found guilty due to sinful acts, he shall lose his apostolic honor because he has dishonored his Episcopal Seat,” and, *“if his sinful behavior is confirmed by witnesses, he shall be deposed from his priestly ranks, paying fines to the church which in turn shall be distributed to the poor.”* (Cf. Hakobyan, Vol. I, 422-466).

The Council of Artashat (449)

The third Church Council convened in 449 in **Artashat** to respond to the threat of Sassanid Persia. King Yazdgerd II of Persia had forced Armenia to abandon Christianity and adopt fire worship instead. The Council which was presided over by **Catholicos Hovsep Hoghotsmetsi** responded officially rejecting such conversion.

The conflict ended up with the **Vartanants War in 451** between Armenia and Persia in Avarair, headed by **General Vartan Mamikonian**. According to both contemporary historians of the Battle of Avarair, Yeghishe *Vardapet* and Ghazar Parbetsi, the Council of Artashat was called *“after the orders of the lords, and the distinguished nakharars (princes) of Armenia.”* Both historians attest to the number of the attending bishops as 17, giving their names individually, headed by Catholicos Hovsep. In addition, Parbetsi provides the names of the 18 *nakharars* who participated in the Council of Artashat.

Canons of Catholicos Hovhan Mandakuni (478-490)

(Volume II, pp. 264-266)

Even though Catholicos Hovhan Mandakuni has not called any Church Council that we know of, he has nonetheless established church canons largely on liturgical matters. After St. Gregory he is the first one to confirm the fasting days and the feast days as we

read in the Armenian Church Calendar. He has specified Saturdays and Sundays not to be included in the fasting days of the year, except for those during the Great Lent. He has also designated the wine, the olive oil, and the fish to be included in the food for the non-fasting days, while excluding the observance of the feasts dedicated to the martyrs on Wednesdays and Fridays.

Catholicos Mandakuni has specified the joint commemoration of the **Holy Nativity of Jesus** and the **Revelation of God**, thus reaffirming the important theological doctrine of the Incarnation.

Some of the canon laws of Hovhan Mandakuni incorporated in the *Book of Canon Law* of John Otsnetsi are the following:

- 1) *Priests shall retire at age 60, literally "shall stop performing Liturgy," unless still healthy.*
- 2) *Priests who perform Badarak twice in one day shall be counted with the robbers crucified with Jesus.*
- 3) *Priests who do business and collect taxes secretly shall be defrocked as those who deceive God (asdvadzakhapk). The church shall reject the sacraments performed by such priests, unless they repent for 10 years by attending church among the people, and not with the priests where they belong.*
- 4) *Priests who 'shed the blood of Christ during the Liturgy' shall not attempt to kill animals for sacrifice which is considered 'dead carcass'. After repentance for a period of two years and donating three oxen to the church they may be cleaned.*
- 5) *Those who speak evil are cursing against the Holy Spirit, thus being the trumpet of Satan and persecutors of the guardian angels.*
- 6) *Be merciful to those who confess their sins after inflicting on them strict measures, following the words of the Lord saying, 'you should forgive seventy times seven'.*

The Council of Dvin I (506)

The fourth Church Council convened in 506 in **Dvin**, the capital of Armenia since 485 AD. Dvin was founded by Arshakuni King Khosrov II (330-338), in the plain near the River Azat, a tributary of Araxes. Following the fall of the Arshakuni kingdom in 428, Dvin remained the capital of Armenia and, during the pontificate of Catholicos Hovhan Mandakuni and Governor (*Marzban*) Vahan Mamikonian of Armenia, the Patriarchal Seat of Armenia was transferred in 485 from Vagharshapat to Dvin, where it remained until 927.

This was the First Council of Dvin presided over by **Catholicos Babken I of Othmus** (490-516), attended by 20 bishops and 14 *nakharars* all identified by their names, including bishops of Caucasian Albania and Siunik. **Catholicos Gabriel of Georgia** also attended the Council with his bishops.

They signed "*The Agreement of Unity*" as reported by historian *Ukhtanes of Sebastia, Book II*, which "*still exists in writing*," as says the historian. It refers to the Letter of Catholicos Babken, known as *payman namak (Letter of Agreement)* in which the Armenian and the Georgian churches agreed to reject the **Council of Chalcedon** of 451, and the *Tome* of Pope Leo, stating their unity of faith on the Christological position regarding the two natures of Jesus Christ, divine and human, already adopted at the **Ecumenical Council of Ephesus** in 431, advocated by Patriarch Cyril of Alexandria.

According to Patriarch Ormanian, Catholicos Babgen's Letter represents "*the most ancient doctrinal document of the Armenian Church.*" (AZG. 508).

The Council of Dvin II (554)

The Second Council of Dvin was summoned by **Catholicos Nersess II of Bagrevand** (548-557) to condemn the Nestorian

heresy and dismiss the Council of Chalcedon. It adopted 87 canons to reform the life within the Armenian Church. The Council confirmed the national identity of the Armenian Church, and adopted officially the Armenian Calendar, starting in the year 551 AD. The Armenian Calendar was in use during the times of our historians who established the events of their chronology beginning from the year 551, using the Armenian alphabet to replace the Arabic numerals. Thus, to obtain the Date of our Lord, it is required to add 551 to the date given by the historians.

The Council of Dvin III (607)

The first session of this Church Council, called by **Vrtanes Vardapet Kertogh**, Vicar of the Catholicosate, established 7 (seven) canon laws to confirm the orthodoxy of the participant bishops. No details are provided by historian Ukhtanes (*History II*, 151), who simply mentions the steps taken as important prerequisites before the Council could elect the new **Catholicos Abraham Aghbatanetsi** (607-615). Those seven canon laws are specified in the *Book of Letters (Keerk Tghtots)*, as follows:

- 1) *A bishop who has deviated from the true faith unknowingly or under pressure may be received back after refuting his error publicly and in writing.*
- 2) *A bishop who has deviated from the true faith voluntarily, may be received back by the then Vicar, Vrtanes Vardapet Kertogh, following repentance and repudiation for his errors. His final return, however, is left up to the discretion of the Catholicos and the bishops.*
- 3) *A bishop who has deviated from the true faith a second time is subject to Penitence before his case is presented to the College of Bishops.*
- 4) *Those bishops and priests who are not in communion with us and wish to join the Armenian Church may be accepted as lay members.*

- 5) *Any priest who wishes to return to the Armenian Church, such priest can do so only through his bishop.*
- 6) *Priests abiding by these canon laws shall be blessed.*
- 7) *All those who disobey the canons of the Council shall be excommunicated.* Cf. Ormanian, AZG., 612.

The Council of Karin I (633)

This Council was enforced by the Byzantine **Emperor Heraclius** during the Patriarchate of **Catholicos Ezr of Parajnakert** (630-641) of Armenia. It dealt with doctrinal issues between the Greeks and the Armenians on the two natures of Christ. Participants included a very limited number of bishops. The Armenian Catholicos Ezr was headed by four bishops and three archimandrites, whereas the Greeks came to meet with the Emperor himself, and a number of Greek bishops on behalf of the Greek Patriarch Sergius (610-638). A new doctrine was brought up by the Greeks, namely, the doctrine of *Monothelism*, from the Greek, meaning Christ had and exercised *One Will, the Divine Will only*, next to possessing the human nature. The Armenians were forced to accept the doctrine, which turned out to be a temporary acceptance. They even went ahead and shared the Holy Communion with the Greeks. Soon after the death of Catholicos Ezr of Armenia, the doctrinal position reverted back to the original.

The Council of Dvin IV (645)

The **Fourth Council of Dvin** was called by **Catholicos Nersess Ishkhantsi** (641-661). In attendance were 16 bishops, identified by their names, who deliberated on matters of diocesan issues. The Council set 12 rules on *"The bishops to live and serve the dioceses in purity and justice, without encroaching on other dioceses as they wished."* The rules mandated to stay away from greed, not to confiscate properties belonging to monasteries, and to assure that proceeds from the monasteries are properly and

fairly spent. Penalties are also enforced on those clergy who disobey, including defrocking priests and bishops from their ranks.

At the same Council of Dvin the singing of the Armenian Church hymns was modified by **Barsegh vardapet Jon** the rector of the Seminary in the district of Shirak. Following the reformation made by Barsegh, Catholicos Nersess III Ishkhantsi established the music of the hymns and gave his approval. The system ever since was known as *Jonundir*, meaning "*arranged by Barsegh Jon.*"

The Council of Karin II (680)

The Council was called by **Emperor Justinian II** (685-695) to meet in Karin, at the meeting point of Armenia, Georgia, and Albania. **Catholicos Sahak III Dzoraporetsi** (677-703) of Armenia and many Armenian bishops gathered both to reconfirm the doctrinal issues of the First Three Ecumenical Councils and to renounce the heresies including the Tome of Pope Leo. Among the bishops of the above three countries the Council established nine canon laws. Among them:

- 1) *On the Feast Day of the Nativity and Revelation of God*
- 2) *On the Epiphany, the Pouring of Holy Muron in Jordan*
- 3) *Reading of prescribed passages from the Gospels*
- 4) *Reading of the Old and New Testament passages on the Eve of Nativity*
- 5) *Gospel readings on the Eighth Day of Nativity*
- 6) *Reading of the Biblical passages on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord to the Temple.*

The Council of Dvin V (720)

Catholicos Hovhannes Otsnetsi was concerned about the welfare of the Armenians when stating, "*We see lack of discipline among our people, even among the faithful of our church and the*

leaders of the dioceses,” referring to the religious sects that emerged from the church and rejected the dogma of the Armenian Church officially adopted in the first three Church Ecumenical Councils. Furthermore, internal conflicts among the Armenians added insult to injury, warranting the pursuit of unity and integrity by way of constituting the *Book of the Canon Law* once and for all. The Council of Dvin in 720 was attended by 30 bishops, Prince Ashot Patrik, and a number of *nakharars*.

The Council established 32 canons prohibiting clergy and laity from excessive drinking, otherwise to be denied receiving Holy Communion. Other laws placed restrictions on the days of the blessing of marriages, ordering definitely to bless marriages in the sanctuary and not anywhere else. Subsequent laws dictated that the Catholicos alone can bless the Holy Oil. Others established the site and the structure of the Holy Altar and the Baptismal Font, both of which must be built with stone and not with wood, so that they become installed as unmovable holy sites for the Eucharist and the Baptism.

The rest of the laws were adopted regarding the blessing and consecration of wooden crosses and gospel books, so that they may be honored as holy items, separated from the rest. Important canons were set to renounce the heretics, especially the *Paulicians*, until such time when they repent and return.

The Council of Manazkert (726)

Catholicos Hovhannes Otsnetsi convened this important Church Council in the city of Manazkert in the district of Apahunik. The Catholicos had with him 23 bishops and 8 *vardapets*. It was a meeting with the Syrian Orthodox Church to review some doctrinal issues from the immediate past. There were only 6 bishops from the Syrian Church who represented the Syrian Patriarch. All the attendants, Armenian and Syrian, are identified by their names. Outstanding among the Armenian theologians were the **Catholicos** himself, **Khosrovik Tarkmanich**, and **Bishop**

Grigoris of Arsharunik. Among the Syrians there was a distinguished theologian of the Syrian Orthodox Church.

Obviously, the Council of Manazkert dealt with theological and Christological issues regarding the *patripathos*, "patripassian" doctrine from the Greek, which meant, *whether or not God was subject to suffering on the cross*. Also was discussed the doctrine of *phantastikos*, "imaginary" from the Greek, whether or not Christ's life and Resurrection were mere appearances. Catholicos Otsnetsi came up against the sect writing his famous *Contra Fantasiasts* (Against those who preached Christ's Resurrection as a mere fantasy). The Council rejected all such heresies by signing an agreement by **Patriarch Athanasius of Syria** and **Catholicos Otsnetsi of Armenia**. The Council of Manazkert issued ten anathemas in defense of the *Monophysite* doctrine, that is, the doctrine of Christ's two natures in One Person advocated by Cyril of Alexandria at Ephesus in 431, as against the decisions reached at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

The Council discussed other issues also, such as the *date of the Nativity and the Epiphany of Jesus*, December 25 or January 6, the issue of the *preparation of the bread of the communion*, unleavened or not, on the *cup of the Eucharist*, pure wine or water added to it. The Syrians differed in those issues, while the Armenian Catholicos declared the Armenian stand unchanged "*as established by St. Gregory the Illuminator*."

On another matter, at the same Council of Manazkert, the heads of the churches, **Otsnetsi** and **Athanasius**, alerted that the Armenians were "*gradually migrating to Syria*," and because "*there were neither Armenian bishops nor priests in Syria, those immigrants were following the Chalcedonian doctrine and even the sectarians*." Subsequently, Catholicos John Otsnetsi sent three Armenian bishops to Syria to follow up with the orthodox teaching of those immigrants. Even, as the historian states, Patriarch Athanasius gave those three bishops a monastery "*where Syrian and Armenian students learned both languages*,

and even some Syrian religious books written in the Syrian language were translated into Armenian." (History of the Armenian People, Vol. III, p.506. Erevan, 1976).

The Council of Partav (768)

This Church Council was called in 768 in Partav, the seat of the Catholicos of Albania, by **Catholicos Sion Bavonetsi** of Armenia (767-775), "*to review the administration of the Armenian Church on a yearly basis.*" Beside the Catholicos, 12 Armenian bishops attended along with **Catholicos David of Albania** and three *nakharars*. The total participants were 17, among them 6 high-ranking clergy and 11 *nakharars*. Ormanian thinks that many more from the Albanian church must have attended, and that the three mentioned represented the official delegation only.

The Council of Partav established 24 canons, mostly on disciplinary measures. Clerics were not allowed to leave their monasteries for unspecified reasons; they could do so only if assigned as prelates or preachers. Marriage laws prohibited the union of relatives closer than the fourth generation; otherwise, priests who shall bless such marriages shall be suspended and defrocked. For the second marriage, following the death of the spouse, marriage is allowed after repentance. The 24th canon law classifies the Canonical Books of the Old Testament, and excludes the nine books as apocrypha.

Canons of King Vachakan (Vol. II, pp.91-100)

Canons of the Second Council of Nicaea (Vol. II, pp.73-90)

Two important Codes of Church Law entered the *Book* in the mid-tenth century which I would like to identify. The first are the **Canons of King Vachakan of Caucasian Albania** back in 485 which were incorporated in the later canons of the Council of Partav of 768, under Catholicos Sion. King Vachakan reigned during the pontificate of Catholicos Babken of Othmus (490-516) and promoted the revival of Christianity in Albania where much

earlier **Grigoris**, grandson of St. Gregory the Illuminator and one of the twin sons of St. Vertanes, was the first Catholicos, and Mesrob Mashtots the first teacher of letters. Catholicos Grigoris was born in 295 in Caesarea, and was martyred in 338 at age 43, and buried in the church of Amaras in Artsakh. Although in the *Book of Canon Law* the canons of Vachakan follow those of the Second Council of Nicaea, we kept the chronology and stated first the **Council of Aghouen** under King Vachakan.

King Vachakan convened the **Church Council in Aghouen** to establish disciplinary laws with 21 canons related to the possessions of the clergy, to the privileges of the bishops, and to the fasting days of the week. The only source of the Council of Aghouen in Albania is the *History of the Country of Albania* by the 7th century historian Movses Kaghankatuatsi, known also Taskhurantsi. Scholars have determined that in the 10th century the second Movses continued the 7th century *History* which was written by his namesake. Some of the canons determined at Aghouen are as follows:

- 1) *About the gifts given to the priests by the people including sheep and horses.*
- 2) *Rules regarding the monks if found guilty.*
- 3) *Rules concerning Christian soldiers who give their lives.*
- 4) *Canons preventing persons who marry relatives.*
- 5) *Canons relating to those who eat meat during Lent.*
- 6) *Canons relating to those who eat meat on Wednesdays and Fridays.*
- 7) *Rules for those who gossip behind priests and deacons.*
- 8) *Wealthy churches must hand help to the diocesan mother church.*
- 9) *Canons on tithing of the Azatk (the nobility).*
- 10) *Priests shall not be removed from their churches without the bishop's permission.*
- 11) *Canons for Azatk not to build churches without permission.*

The Second Council of Nicaea in 787, the seventh and the last "Ecumenical" Council adopted by the Greek Orthodox Church, occupies the 34th chapter of the *Book of Canon Law* known as "*Canons of the Second Nicaea, the First Council being the one attended by the 318 bishops in 325 AD.*" An unusually large number of participants are recorded with 337 bishops. It took place during the last year of **Catholicos Esai of Armenia**. The canons of the Second Nicaea are the repetition of the First Council, with additional 115 canon laws (*Hakobyan, Vol. II 73-90*). Whereas in the *Book of Canon Law* 20 canons are shown from the **First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea**, the Second Council of Nicaea reports an additional 115 canon laws. Some of the outstanding canons of the **Second Council of Nicaea** are the following:

- 1) *No ordination of a bishop can be performed with less than three bishops attending.*
- 2) *Eunuchs are not allowed to be ordained priests.*
- 3) *A second marriage is allowed after three years of interval.*
- 4) *In a given church up to 7 deacons are allowed to serve as we read in the Acts of the Apostles (6:3).*
- 5) *If the wife is found in adultery, she should repent for 7 years, and only then be re-admitted to receive the Sacraments.*
- 6) *The same with the husband; if both are found in adultery, 7 years are required for them to repent before returning to receive the Sacraments of the church.*

The Council of Yernchak (841)

This was a "General Assembly," as specified by the historians, convened not by the Catholicos of Armenia, but by the initiative of the princes of the houses of Bagratunik and Siunik, with the participation of bishops and *nakharars*. The only agenda of this Council was the return to office of **Catholicos Hovhannes IV Ovayetsi** (833-855), who had resigned due to unjust allegations.

(Ormanian, AZG. 641). Obviously, this Council was not of any importance since no further actions were reported.

The Council of Ani (969)

The Council of Ani was called by **King Ashot III the Merciful** (953-977) to examine the orthodox faith of **Catholicos Vahan Siunetsi** (968-969). It was an insignificant meeting, given the attendance and the unjust allegations made against the Catholicos. Present were one bishop and three abbots, all named, and "*other bishops and priests.*" (Ormanian, AZG. 770). The Council obviously ended the term of office of Catholicos Vahan Siunetsi whose pontificate and that of his successor Catholicos Stepannos proved transitory between two outstanding pontiffs **Anania Mokatsi** (946-968) and **Khachik Arsharouni** (973-992).

The Council of Karmir Vank in Kessoun (1113)

Catholicos Gregory III Pahlavouni convened the Council of Karmir Vank in Kessoun, Cilicia, soon after his election in 1113. The Council was called to react against the rebellious actions taken by **Bishop Tavit Tornikian** of the Monastery of Aghtamar, an island in Lake Van, who had made himself the unauthorized Catholicos of Aghtamar.

The Council was attended by numerous members of religious and lay representatives, "*more than two thousand and five hundred,*" as reported by the historian. The Council renounced the self-proclaimed Tornikian and excommunicated him "from the Church of Christ." (Ormanian, AZG. 929). The Catholicosate of Aghtamar, however, survived until Khachadoor Shiroyan, the last Catholicos of Aghtamar, upon whose death in 1895, the Catholicosate of Aghtamar ended.

The famous church of Holy Cross of Aghtamar remained on the island as a center of worship and education until 1915. Today the 1100 year old church stands intact as the pride of the Armenian

religious and cultural heritage. At this writing the first liturgy after 95 years was performed in the Holy Cross Church of Aghtamar on September 19, 2010.

The Council of Hromkla (1179)

Catholicos Gregory Tgha (1173-1193) called this Council in Cilicia. In attendance were 33 bishops, including the Armenian Catholicos Gregory Tgha, **Catholicos Stepanos** of Caucasian Albania, Barsegh Bishop of Ani, Basilius Bishop of Tiflis, Stepanos Bishop of Siunik, and other bishops both from Cilicia and Greater Armenia. (Ormanian, AZG. 1012). The Council marked the founding of the schismatic **Catholicosate of Aghtamar which later earned recognition from the Mother See and existed until 1895.**

The Council of Tarsus (1197)

King Levon I of Cilicia and **Catholicos Gregory VI Apirat** (1194-1203) called the Council of Tarsus to pursue unity talks with Rome. It proved insignificant. The Council was attended by 14 bishops only. No lay representatives are reported.

The Council of Sis, Capital of Cilicia (1307)

Although considered not an authorized Council, since it was not called by the Catholicos of Armenia, it is recorded as a Church Council convened by 18-year old **King Levon III of Cilicia** on March 19, 1307, in the Church of St. Sophia in Sis. **Catholicos Gregory VII Anavarzetsi** (1293-1307) had just died. The Council is considered by Ormanian as "*a solemn celebration*", rather than a council as such (AZG. Par.1233). Present were 26 bishops, 16 of them from Cilicia, all properly registered by names. In addition, five more bishops are named from the districts of Iconium, and another four from Armenia proper. Ten *Vardapets* from Cilicia and seven abbots also attended the Council, in addition to princes from various districts.

It is noteworthy at the Council the presence of **Hetoum**, King **Oshin's father**; also, of Prince of Kapan **Alinakh**, and the Lords of Lambron and Taron, who were the brothers of King Hetoum. Deliberations of the Council are considered non-relevant to the Armenian Church.

The Council of Adana (1317)

This Council was called by **Catholicos Constantine III Kesaratsi** (1307-1322). Under pressure by Pope John 22nd of Rome, the Catholicos was forced to convene the Council to rectify the decisions reached at the previous Council of Sis of 1307. The Council convened in Adana (Cilicia) in 1317, with Catholicos Constantine III presiding. Present were 17 bishops and seven *vardapets*. Ten of the bishops were from Cilicia, and six from Armenia. Among the *vardapets* were named Zakaria Dzordzoretsi, the Archbishop of Artaz, and Hovhannes Erznkatsi, known also Dzordzoretsi. Ten princes and "*numerous priests*" also attended the Council. The Armenian Church has given no specific importance to this Council, since it attempted to reaffirm the previous Council which was not authorized.

The Council of Sis (1343)

This Council convened in Sis, capital of Cilicia by **Catholicos Mekhitar Krnerts**i (1341-1355), was scheduled to answer the 117 doctrinal allegations the Roman Church had raised against the Armenian Church. Present were the Catholicos and 30 bishops, of whom 20 were from the dioceses of Cilicia. Also 8 assistant bishops, 6 bishops from churches in Asia Minor, and 3 from Armenia proper attended. There were in addition 15 archimandrites and 7 archpriests.

According to church historian Archbishop Malachia Ormanian, "*the Council was a local gathering and not a complete Armenian Church Council, which could have neither canonical significance nor authority as such.*" The Council was to react against the

Papal allegations of **Pope Clement VI** who demanded explanations on those 117 doctrinal issues for which the Armenian Church was blamed. The deliberations aimed at satisfying the Roman Catholic Church regarding the demands rather than expressing or defending the doctrines legitimately adopted by the Armenian Church in the past. All those allegations were vicious exaggerations raised by the Roman Catholic Church without any justification.

The Assembly of Holy Etchmiadzin (1441) Transfer of the Holy See to Etchmiadzin

Following the fall of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia in 1375, Armenian Church leaders resolved to move the Seat of the Catholicos of All Armenians back to its original site in Vagharsapat (Etchmiadzin) in 1441 during the pontificate of **Catholicos Gregory Musabekian of All Armenians** (1439-1441). For that purpose, an unprecedented General Assembly convened with the consent of the Catholicos to return the Seat and the Catholicos to Armenia. The Catholicos himself refused to return, even though without opposing to the convening of the Assembly of 1441 which elected **Giragos Virabetsi as Catholicos of All Armenians** (1441-1443).

In Cilicia, Catholicos Gregory Musabekian continued to remain as Catholicos of Cilicia, and the See, now a local See, continued as such ever since. The contemporary historian **Thovma Medzopetsi** who actually attended the Assembly of 1441, reports that *"about more than three hundred people, with numerous abbots and priests, along with lay azadk (nobility), and sons of azadk, lords and servants attended."*

The Council of Jerusalem (1652)

While in Jerusalem, **Philipos Aghbaketsi Catholicos of All Armenians** (1633-1655) met with **Nersess of Sebastia, Catholicos of Cilicia**. Fifteen archimandrites accompanied the Catholicos

from Holy Etchmiadzin, while the Catholicos of Cilicia had 6 bishops with him and one archimandrite. Present were **Asdvadzadour, the Armenian Patriarch** of Jerusalem, and 4 bishops. In total 63 clerics attended.

The purpose of Catholicos Philipos of All Armenians was to establish stability and peace between the two Sees, **Holy Etchmiadzin** and **Cilicia**, since jurisdictional problems among the bishops of the one Patriarchal See and the other had created confusion and encroachments from the days of Simeon, the former Catholicos of Cilicia.

The Council signed a treaty with 13 canons to “*establish love and respect between the two Sees,*” as reported by **historian Arakel of Tabriz**. This way they hoped to arrange mishandlings and restore discipline among the bishops who held diocesan offices. The Council restored the canonical limits of mutual jurisdictions of the past and safeguarded law and order for the future.

It is noteworthy to remember an identical meeting held in Jerusalem some 300 years later in October, 1963 with the exact same agenda between the **Catholicos of All Armenians Vasken I** and **Catholicos Khoren I of Cilicia**. Among the 13 canons of the Council of 1652 the essentials were the following:

1. *Bishops to be ordained only for the appropriate See.*
2. *A bishop ordained by one of the Sees shall not attempt to serve in the other.*
3. *No ordination of bishop shall take place without the request of the people and without proper certificate of recommendation.*
4. *It is prohibited for a bishop to usurp another diocese.*
5. *Not more than one bishop to be ordained in the same diocese.*
6. *Bishops should ordain priests only for their own dioceses.*

Two 19th Century Constitutions: In Russia and in the Ottoman Empire

Two separate major Constitutions were imposed on the Armenian nation in the 19th century, the ***Polojenia (Cons-titution)***, by the Russian Empire for the Armenian Churches in Armenia and Russia, and the ***Azgayin Sahmanadrutiun (National Constitution)*** by the Turkish Ottoman Empire for the Armenians in Turkey. Both Constitutions, mutually unrelated, regulated totally independently, if not in opposition to each other, the affairs of the Armenian Church and Nation more or less successfully within their respective domains, as "dictated," rather than mutually agreed upon by the Armenians. In both cases the Armenian Church and nation benefited by the norms of democracy that infiltrated in the Constitutions, keeping the balance between the sovereign states and the Armenian Church.

The *Polojenia* (1836)

In 1828 Armenia came under the jurisdiction of the **Russian Empire** following the Treaty of Turkmencha. In view of the fact that the Armenian Church had no formal Constitution, other than the ***Book of Canon Law*** of the past centuries, the Russian Empire recommended that the Armenian Church prepare a guideline for a Constitution. The Holy See of Etchmiadzin formed a commission of four members, headed by Serovbe *vardapet* Karnetsi to draft a set of bylaws which required a careful study of the matter for a decade. Upon its final edition the Constitution, named the *Polojenia*, was approved by the Russian government in March, 1836, and the edict of **Emperor Nicola I** put it in use by the head of the Armenian Church, effective January 1, 1837.

The new Constitution comprised of **10 Chapters with 141 Articles**, specifying the rights and the obligations of the Catholics of All Armenians as the Supreme Patriarch, the Bishops' Synod, the six specified Dioceses, namely, the Araratian Diocese, the Dioceses of Karabagh, Georgia, Shamakh, Nor Nakhichevan-

Besarabia, and Astrakhan. The Abbots of monasteries were also given their status. Permission was essential to open seminaries for the preparation of Armenian clergy, beginning with the Kevorkian Seminary in Etchmiadzin which opened its doors in 1874 by its founder **Catholicos Kevork IV of All Armenians**.

The Constitution dealt with the Armenian Church exclusively, and had little to do with the national interest of Armenia as a state. Furthermore, the Constitution was labeled as “*The highest Constitution for the operation of the Gregorian Armenian Church in Russia.*” It implied that the new set of bylaws was not enforced on the Armenian Church worldwide, but only on the churches within the jurisdiction of the Russian Empire.

The *Polojenia* proved beneficial in view of the immediate past when the Armenian Church constantly suffered confusion and internal strife because of the lack of a set of bylaws. It lasted as the permanent law for the Holy See of Etchmiadzin and for the churches within the borders of the Russian Empire, for the following 80 years, when the Bolsheviks established the Soviet Union after the fall of the Empire in 1917.

According to *Polojenia* the Armenian Church came under the supervision of the Russian Emperors, whose representative, called the *Procuror*, always attended the Bishops’ Synod in the Mother See and kept control over the religious affairs. There was also a significant control over the election of the Catholicos of All Armenians, which took place in Holy Etchmiadzin by a duly convened **National-Ecclesiastical Councils**. The new bylaws *required the final appointment of the newly elected Catholicos by the Emperor who would choose one of the two finalist candidates presented to him by the Ecclesiastical Council.*

The last to be elected by *Polojenia* was Catholicos Kevork V Soureniants in December, 1911. His successor, Khoren I Muradbekian, was elected by the next **Constitution** drafted and approved by **Catholicos Kevork V Soureniants in 1925** under the Soviet

regime. The same Constitution, revised and improved, is in force as of today, and the elections of the succeeding four Pontiffs were taken place accordingly.

The Constitution includes Articles defining the Executive Body of the Mother See, replacing the Synod, presided over by the Catholicos of All Armenians, under the name of the **Supreme Spiritual Council**. Even though according to the Constitution the Council members are elected by the National-Ecclesiastical Assembly, for all intensive purposes the Catholicos of All Armenians has assumed the authority to remove or add members as required, regardless of the convening of the General Assembly, until the latter is convened for specific reasons.

The National Constitution (1863)

Approved by the Turkish Ottoman Empire in March, 1863, the Constitution was known as "*The Constitution of the Armenian Nation*," in recognition of the Armenian Christians as one of the minorities of the country. It was designed to govern the Armenian religious community only, rather than our national interests. The basis of the **National Constitution (Azgayin Sahmanadrutiun)** was the "*national spiritual and supreme councils*" embodied in the person of the **Patriarch** and the **National General Assembly** of the Patriarchate. Subordinate to these were the Council of Education with membership from the leading intellectuals of the Armenians in Constantinople. The latter had their training in France and Belgium, and upon return had brought with them the principles of national values to be included in the Constitution.

The Ottoman Empire received the first draft in May, 1860, and after major emendations, accepted the document with its **99 Articles and 5 chapters** as the **National Constitution in March, 1863**. According to the National Constitution the **National General Assembly**, the highest legislative body, comprised of

140 members, 20 clergy, 40 lay members, and 80 lay delegates from the Turkish provinces.

The 5 chapters of the Constitution are the following:

- 1) *The National Executive Council*
- 2) *General rules to govern the meetings*
- 3) *National Dues*
- 4) *Executive Board for the Provinces*
- 5) *Control over the Constitution*

Under the National Council, a Central Council, a religious Council, and a Civic Council operated as subordinate bodies. In view of the general structure of the National Constitution, no mention was made to safeguard national or personal rights. The election and the resignation of the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople had 12 Articles. ***For the election of the Patriarch 7 candidates and then 3 finalists were to be elected before the election of the Patriarch. The final election would be subject to the approval of the Sultan.***

According to the Patriarch of Constantinople **Archbishop Malachia Ormanian**, the National Constitution, on the other hand, weakened the religious aspect of the Patriarchate and the Armenian Church in general, because of the overwhelming majority of lay representatives, with a ratio of 120 lay and 20 clergy, which is inherited and still remains in modern times as the ratio in the Armenian Church administration nationally and locally. The Constitution lasted until 1915, and was removed altogether with the Genocide of the Ottoman Empire perpetrated against the Armenians in Turkey.

Modern Times

During the second half of the 20th century the Armenian Church flourished in our homeland Armenia, in Holy Etchmiadzin, where the Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians resided

since the national adoption of Christianity in 301 AD. The Church also represented the Armenian faithful in the Diaspora, formed as a result of the massacres and the genocide of the Armenians perpetrated by the Ottomans in Anatolia. Spread all over the Middle East, Europe and the Western Hemisphere, the Armenian Church identified itself theologically and administratively a united and integrated entity under the jurisdiction of the See of Holy Etchmiadzin. In as much as it was highly desirable to have a united Constitution, it was, on the other hand, not applicable for the One Apostolic Armenian Church worldwide because of local civic ordinances in each and every country in the Diaspora.

Efforts were made by **Catholicos Vasken I of All Armenians** (1955-1994) to draft such a Constitution to govern all Armenian Churches in Armenia and abroad in unison. It would have been an ideal way of centralizing the integrity and the effectiveness of this ancient church if such a Constitution was feasible worldwide. Such efforts however proved not practicable, because, whereas in Armenia proper it was possible to draft such a Constitution, in the outside world it was not, since different countries required different status.

The natural course was to pursue the alternate route, that is, to draft individual constitutions, based on the norms of the ancient Canons of the Armenian Church, agreeable to and approved by each government wherever Armenian Churches were given legal status. This has been the basis of the Constitutions of the Armenian Churches in the American and the European Dioceses which could possibly and gradually prevail in other countries.

The centrifugal administration of the Armenian Church has offered strength to our church and has kept the faithful united. Local Constitutions, **if internally related to the Canons of the Armenian Church**, are always useful to benefit the growth of the Armenian Church in the dispersion.

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