

St. Gregory the Illuminator

Patron Saint of the Armenian Church

(c. 257-c. 331)

St. Gregory as one of the great missionaries of Christendom teaches us faith in God that is fueled with a Christian spirit of love and good works. Looking to St. Gregory as our example, we, too, can affect our world today.



Gregory's story is one of the most interesting in the annals of Christianity. With the arrival of the apostles, Thaddeus and Bartholomew, Christianity spread during the middle of the first century. The Armenian Christians were a small, scattered group. Nevertheless, they survived the persecutions of the first three centuries. Gregory's early life and the account of the conversion of Armenia have been recorded by the historian, Agathangelos, who is traditionally known to have been King Tiridat's secretary. In 238 AD, the King of Persia plotted to kill King Khosrov of Armenia. He recruited Anak, the father of Gregory, to do this wicked deed because Anak and Khosrov were cousins and the Armenian King would trust the would-be assassin. One day, while hunting, Anak killed Khosrov. Men loyal to the King pursued Anak and killed him, throwing his body into the river. The dying King gave orders to exterminate Anak's family. Only one infant, Gregory, escaped from this slaughter. His Nanny speedily took him to safety to

Cæsarea in Cappadocia. She was a converted Christian and thus raised her princely charge in the Christian faith and gave him a Greek name, Gregory. The boy became a fervent Christian, married a Christian named Mariam, whose brother was a well know missionary bishop, confessor and martyr. Gregory had two children, Aristakes and Verthanes.

When the Persian King heard that the King of Armenia was killed, he overran the country with a huge army and established Persian rule in Armenia. Two of the children of King Khosrov were saved by a loyal local governor (satrap). Princess Khosrovidought was taken to an inaccessible castle, while the boy-prince Tiridat was taken to Rome. Tiridat received thorough Roman training, becoming a famous athlete and an able general in the army. When he came of age, the Roman Emperor Diocletian gave him a Roman legion and sent him to occupy Armenia to recover the throne of his father, and, of course, to become a Roman ally. As Tiridat was passing through Armenia Minor, which was under Roman control, most of the Armenian feudal lords, who had remained loyal to the throne and who had escaped the country, accompanied Tiridat. Gregory also decided to go along with him, hoping to atone for his father's crime by evangelizing his homeland. Nobody knew he was Anak's son and that he was a Christian. Tiridat, recognizing Gregory to be well educated, dependable and conscientious, appointed him as his secretary. *One cannot help seeing the hand of Providence in this strange association. Two young men, whose fathers had been foes, were returning to their native country with the idea of saving their homeland from alien yoke, the one physically, the other spiritually.* Following the victorious battle, Tiridat gave orders for a celebration, ordering Gregory to lay wreaths of flowers and laurel leaves before the statute of the goddess Mother Anahit. Gregory, after some hesitation, confessed that he was a Christian and he could not perform such an idolatrous act. He began preaching about the foolishness of idolatry and the wisdom of worshipping the One True God. One of the king's ministers, who had discovered Gregory's identity, told Tiridat that Gregory was the son of Anak, the killer of his father King Khosrov. Gregory did not deny the stunning revelation. So Tiridat gave orders to torture Gregory. The

story enumerates twelve terrible tortures. When Gregory stood fast, Tiridat ordered him to be put to death by throwing him into the prison (dungeon) where criminals were usually thrown to be starved to slow death. The pit was full of human bones and filth. St. Gregory survived this terrible ordeal for thirteen years. Khosrovidought, Tiridat's sister, traditionally is credited with helping Gregory survive by throwing bread into the pit.

With Gregory imprisoned in the pit, Tiridat ordered the persecution of all Christians in his realm which began with Hripsime who had spurned Tiridat. However, Tiridat became mentally unsettled and could not carry on the affairs of the state. When out hunting he often behaved like a beast, hence the legend that he was transformed into a boar. A King loved by his people and especially his sister, Khosrovidought, tried in vain to return him to his senses. Khosrovidought had a dream, seeing Gregory coming out of the dungeon and healing her brother! She told the people at the Court of her dream, and revealed that Gregory was living and was the only man in the world who could cure the King. As Tiridat's condition worsened men went to the pit and to their great surprise heard a feeble "yes" to the question: "Gregory, are you still alive?" As they lowered the rope, out came a man with a long beard and soiled clothes. But his darkened face was wrapped in an aura of light. After dressing him properly, they took him to the presence of Tiridat. Moved by a powerful force which he could not control, Tiridat kneeled down before his prisoner. Gregory, putting his hands on the King's head, prayed for him. Thereupon Tiridat was cured and became a new man. He said to Gregory: "Your God is my God; your religion is my religion." Gregory lifted him up and embraced him. From that moment until their death they remained faithful friends and worked together, each in his own way for the establishment of the Kingdom of God in Armenia, beginning in the year 301 A.D. Gregory first converted the people in the capital city and in its neighborhood. There were no bishops or clergymen left in the country, because of the severe persecutions by Tiridat. Thus, Gregory could not find people in holy orders to baptize the neophytes. Gregory himself was still a layman. Therefore the Royal Council decided to send Gregory back to Cæsarea to be ordained as the

bishop of Armenia. His fame as a wonder-working confessor and a great missionary had already reached Cæsarea. He was received with great honors. The Metropolitan of the city, Leontius, ordained him a priest and then consecrated him a bishop. Gregory took many priests from Cæsarea and from Sebastia, where his bishop brother-in-law Athanakenes was martyred. He took with him his two sons also, who were well educated young men. His elder son, Verthanes, was already married. His younger son was a monk. Gregory's wife was already dead by this time. Thus, with a group of clergymen Gregory returned to Armenia. The King, the ruling feudal lords and the army came to meet him at the banks of the river Euphrates. He ordered a week of abstinence for everybody, including the King, the Queen and courtiers. The Armenian Church to this day observes this week of abstinence, established by St. Gregory, as the week of "Arachavorats" i.e., "the week of Catechumens." He preached and prepared the people for baptism. The clergymen whom he had brought with him assisted him in baptizing the people. Most Armenians were baptized in Aratsani (upper Euphrates) and Yeraskh (Arax) rivers. He personally baptized the first Christian King of Armenia in the year 302, together with the Queen and the King's sister and the royal household and the feudal lords of the country. Tiridat formally proclaimed his country a Christian State, in the year 302 A.D. So Armenia became the "First country of any size to become officially Christian." The Roman Empire became Christian twenty years later in 323 AD. Then the mass conversion of the whole country began. Gregory preached the Gospel from one end of the country to the other. Occasionally he met resistance from pagan priests. But such resistance was quickly subdued. Pagan places of worship were transformed into Christian temples. Together with many other churches, Gregory built two famous sanctuaries: The shrine of "St. Garabed," "The Forerunner," near the city of Moosh, dedicated to the name of St. John the Baptist, whose relics he had brought with him from Cæsarea and had placed in this church. This Monastery became one of the most important religious centers of Armenia. It was almost the greatest Holy place where Armenians used to go on pilgrimage for many centuries. It is now in ruins under Turkish rule, after the deportations of 1915. The other shrine which Gregory and Tiridat built was Holy Etchmiadzin still

functioning as the Holy See of the Armenian Church near the present capital of Armenia. Although there were bishops in Armenia long before St. Gregory, looking after their flock in the persecuted Church in Armenia, yet it was St. Gregory who became the first “Catholicos of All Armenians.” He governed the Armenian Church for about 25 years. He diligently worked for the internal organization of the Church. Gregory died in 325 AD, shortly after the First Ecumenical Council of the Universal Church was convened in the city of Nicaea. His son Aristakes, who was ordained a bishop by him, attended this famous Church Council as the representative of the Armenian Church, because his father was too old to attend. It was in this Council that the Nicene Creed of the Christian Church was formulated. St. Gregory was also instrumental in spreading the seeds of the Gospel in the neighboring Caucasian countries of Georgia and Caspian Albany (present day Azerbaijan). Gregory sent his youthful grandson Grigoris to these countries, who was cruelly martyred by Caucasian barbarians. He is commemorated as a canonized Saint by all the ancient churches of the East and of the West, including the Greek Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches. The Armenian Church has set aside three holy days in honor of St. Gregory, commemorating three of the main events of his life: first his Sufferings and Entrance into the dungeon, second, His Coming out of the dungeon and Converting Armenia to Christianity, third Discovery of his relics. St. Gregory died in solitude, like Moses. He is also honored with a feast day on the liturgical calendar of the Episcopal Church (USA) on March 23.

On Pope John-Paul II’s historic trip in 2001 to Armenia to mark the 1700th anniversary of the conversion of the Armenian nation to Christianity he became inspired by a visit to Khor-Virab where Saint Gregory was confined. As an outcome a statue of Saint Gregory the Illuminator now stands (unveiled on January 19, 2005) in the Vatican’s last remaining niche along the walls of saints

monuments leading to St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Almost 8 feet tall, it is situated at the site where visitors wait to climb the cupola. Thousands of visitors now wait under the gentle gaze of St. Gregory the Illuminator of Armenia. See Photos.



Inscription:

**Donated in Memory of My Parents, Manoog and Miriam H. Giragosian, by Maritza Agzian
Installed during 1965 Construction**

Adapted by Ruth Bedevian from the following sources:

<http://www.armenianchurch-ed.net/feasts/st-gregory-the-illuminator/>

<http://www.armenianchurchlibrary.com/files/SaintsandSacramentsoftheArmenianChurchAbpKaloustian.pdf>

<http://asbarez.com/51205/vatican-unveils-monument-of-saint-gregory-the-illuminator/>