

ST. NERSES THE GRACEFUL (“SHNORHALI”)

1100 AD - 1171 AD

“I confess with faith and worship You, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Uncreated and immortal nature, Creator of angels, men and all that exists. Have mercy upon your creation, And on me, a manifold sinner.”

Verse 1 of 24

One of the most noble and saintly leaders of the Armenian Church, and a great literary figure in Armenian Ecclesiastical Literature is St. Nerses, “The Graceful,” was born into a princely family.



Through a female lineage he was a descendant of St. Gregory the Illuminator. Nerses and his elder brother, Gregory (Krikor), were put under the guardianship of their uncle, who was the Catholicos of the time, when their father, who was an army general, was killed in battle when Nerses was ten years old.

Nerses and his brother were tutored by Stepanos Vartabed who was renowned for his wisdom, scholarship and eloquence. In the year 1113 Nerses’ elder brother Gregory was elected Catholicos and in 1120, at the age of 20, Nerses was ordained a celibate priest. He became his brother’s principal assistant, administering most of the affairs of the Holy See with wisdom and skill, while at the same time, devoting himself to music, poetry and literature. He composed the music and words of hymns and chants which are still in use today. He was consecrated a bishop when he was thirty five years old.

Upon the death of his brother in 1165, Nerses was elevated to Catholicos (Nerses IV). He wrote “I confess with Faith,” a celebrated prayer, consisting of twenty-four verses which is often recited during Lenten services. When Nerses became Catholicos, he wrote his first Gontag (encyclical) longer than usual addressed to his flock, which was scattered from the Caucasian to the Taurus Mountains in Cilicia, like sheep without a shepherd. Copies of this encyclical were distributed among Armenians everywhere.

This pontifical letter is used even today, as a valuable document on pastoral theology. He made a permanent contribution to Armenian Church literature by enriching the Book of the Hours (Zhamagirk), with many liturgical hymns which he wrote and popularized. Among these are “Aravot Louso” and “Aysor Anjar”. Most are written acrostically, that is, in the order of the Armenian alphabet, consisting of thirty six verses. Others bear upon them his signature permanently, as the first letter of each verse starts with a letter of his name spelling the word “Nerses.” He worked hard to bring about reconciliation and intercommunion between the Greek and the Armenian Churches, but forces beyond his power prevented the realization of his noble ideals.

Window installed during 1965 construction. Inscription reads: *Donated in Memory of My Husband Mehran Agzigian by Maritza Agzigian*

Sources: Archbishop Shnorh Kaloustian, Saints and Sacraments of the Armenian Church, 1969.

<http://www.armenianchurch.org/index.jsp?sid=1&id=12805&pid=12804>