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ARMENIAN CHURCH COUNCILS

Catholicos John III of Otsoon

24 Councils 4th to 17th Centuries

The Source

The source of the Armenian Church Councils and their deliberations goes back to a great Church leader of the 8th century Catholicos John III of Otsoon (717-728), who was the first to collect all canons available up to his time and classify them under the title of “*Kanonakirk Hayots*” (Book of Canon Law of Armenia), concurrent with the historic evidences of our earliest Armenian historiographers, including some of the canons of the Christian Church in general, exclusively from the first Three Ecumenical Councils, thus confirming canonically the origins of the Armenian Church as an integral part of the Universal Church.

Over all, the main trend of the compilation of the *Book of Canon Law* was to safeguard the traditional and legitimate law and order, bearing in mind the political stability of Armenia as a nation. Those steps could have been taken through the Armenian Church Councils, presided by the Catholicos of All Armenians, with the participation of bishops, clergy, and lay representatives, headed variably by kings and princes whenever applicable, thus giving the Church Councils from the outset a democratic and more powerful status. The Catholicos and the Church were given the power alternately to overtake the governance of the nation where the Armenian kingdom and the political power failed.

The Final Text in Two Volumes

It is understandable for sure that the original *Book of Canon Law* so formed and established by Catholicos John III Otsnetsi in the 8th century, could not have reached us intact. Because of its extreme importance, scribes in different monasteries in Armenia copied from the original version extensively, thus creating many variants emerged from those numerous duplications, with unwarranted additions and deletions, due to possibly inaccurate readings on the part of the scribes. One most ancient manuscript copy of the survived texts comes from 1098, kept in New Joulfa, Iran, most probably the earliest copy available, which His Holiness Vasken I Catholicos of All Armenians had requested in photographed reproduction for the final edition and publication by Vasken Hakobyan.

Presently scholars have identified over 200 survived manuscripts of the text, of which 47 selected copies were read painstakingly and edited by a great scholar and specialist Dr. Vasken Hakobyan who published them in two large volumes in Yerevan, in 1964 and 1971. He classified all the canons tediously and completely, compiled by Catholicos John III in volume I, and additional codes collected by later Pontiffs of the Armenian Church down to the 17th century in volume II.

Chronology

In total 24 Armenian Church Councils convened between the 4th and the 17th centuries. Historians have recorded one council in the 4th, two in the 5th, two in the 6th, four in the 7th, three

in the 8th, one in the 9th, one in the 10th, three in the 12th, one in the 13th, three in the 14th, one in the 15th, and one in the 17th centuries. Fourteen of those were called by the Supreme Patriarchs of the Armenian Church, one was a General Assembly to elect the Catholicos in 1441, upon the return of the Pontifical See from Sis, Cilicia, and nine were called by secular leaders of Armenia. They are specified as follows.

The first 14 Councils comprised the Councils of Ashtishat in 354 by Catholicos Nersess Partev the Great, Shahapivan in 444 by “a group of spiritual brothers”, Artashat in 449 by Catholicos Hovsep Hoghotsmetsi, Dvin I in 506 by Catholicos Babken I 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, and Manazkert in 726, both by Catholicos John III of Otsoon, Partav in 768 by Catholicos Sion Bavonetsi, Kesoun (Karmir Vank) in 1113 by Catholicos Krikor Pahlavouni, Hromkla in 1179 by Catholicos Krikor Tgha, Adana in 1317 by Catholicos Constantine III Kesaratsi, Sis in 1343 by Catholicos Mkhitar Krnerts, Jerusalem 1652 by Catholicos Philibos Aghbaketsi.

A General Assembly convened in 1441 in Etchmiadzin by Hovhannes Vartabed Hermonetsi, an influential leader of the Armenian Church at the time and the head of the famous University of Datev in Siunik, to transfer the Seat of the Catholicos once and for all from Sis (Cilicia) to Etchmiadzin. The Assembly elected Kirakos Vardapet Virapetsi (of Khor Virap) to succeed Catholicos Krikor Mousabekian who chose to remain in Sis and start the second and the limited branch of the Armenian hierarchy in Cilicia.

Nine Councils were called by secular leaders of Armenia as follows: Council of Dvin III in 607 by Armenian princes, Karin I in 633 enforced by the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius, Karin II in 680, Yernchak in 841 by Armenian princes, given the fact that in 607 at the Council of Dvin III the election of Catholicos Abraham Aghbatanetsi (607-615) was held, and at the Yernchak Council in 841 the accusation against the ousted Catholicos John IV Ovayetsi was resolved. It was in Ani, the capital of the Bagratuni Kingdom, a Council in 969 was called by King Ashot III. Later, four Church Councils were held in Cilician Armenian Kingdom, in 1197 in Tarsus by King Levon I of Cilicia, the Council of Sis I in 1208 again by King Levon I, of Sis II in 1307 by King Levon III, and the Council of Sis III in 1343 by King Constantine of Cilicia.

Doctrinal Issues

It is important to single out from the above the Church Council of Karin I in 633 during the pontificate of Catholicos Ezr of Parajnakert (630-641). It dealt with doctrinal issues between the Armenians and the Byzantines regarding the two divine and human natures of Christ inherited from the Council of Chalcedon in 451. In Karin the Catholicos was accompanied by four bishops and three archimandrites, whereas the Greeks came at the Council with the Emperor Heraclius himself and a number of bishops headed by the Greek Patriarch Sergius. To complicate matters more, a new doctrine was brought up at the Council by the Greeks, namely, the doctrine of *Monothelism*, a Greek term meaning “Christ had and exercised one will, the divine will only” next to possessing his human nature.

It is reported by historian Stephan Orbelian in his “*History of the Province of Sisakan*” that at the Council of 633 an important paper was read by Methusela, the Armenian Bishop of Siunik, a highly regarded philosopher and doctor of the Armenian Church who had studied the original doctrines of St. Sahak and St. Mesrob. He is hailed by the historian as “*a great poet, a philosopher and orator, full of wisdom and perfect in knowledge.*” In his paper Methusela had rejected categorically the Council of Chalcedon, along with the newly introduced doctrine of the

“one will in Christ.” The Armenians were forced by the Emperor and the Patriarch to accept the Greek Orthodox doctrine as presented that turned to be ephemeral and to no avail.

General Agenda of the Councils

Six of the Church Councils dealt with matters of “reformation within the church,” four of which established specific canon laws that have entered in the two-volume edition by V. Hako-byan. Five other Councils responded to the official correspondences addressed to the Armenian Church, and one among them aimed at establishing the relationship between the Armenian and the Syrian Orthodox Churches. Another Council tried to improve the relationship between the Mother See Holy Etchmiadzin and the See of Cilicia. The remaining four Councils have discussed attempts toward unity with the Greek Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches under the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia (Lesser Armenia). All such attempts were diplomatic rather than anything else, since the Armenian Church always remained totally independent and apostolic since her inception from 301 AD.

Church and State

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

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