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## **UNIVERSAL KEY BETWEEN EAST AND WEST: ST. GREGORY OF NAREK**

### ***Abstract***

The contribution of St. Gregory of Narek (ca. 950–1003) to the corpus of world spirituality during the Middle Ages has been the subject of underestimation, particularly by Western authors and sources. In the contemporary era, Gregory of Narek's oeuvre, along with its dissemination and re-evaluation in the West, is regarded through the lens of literary schools, interpretations, and modern translations. Of particular significance is his canonization by the Catholic Church.

Gregory of Narek is recognized as an exceptional chronicler of poetic art from the School of Narek and as a developer of its literary traditions. This article will focus on the theoretical and creative connections between the School of Narek and the School of Cilicia, which enabled chroniclers of the Cilician school to restore and rediscover Gregory of Narek's literary legacy. The commentaries on the *Book of Lamentation*, in particular, have contributed to a more profound understanding of St. Gregory of Narek's ecclesiastical and spiritual-poetic works, thereby facilitating comprehension for Western scholars and translators. The dissemination of St. Gregory of Narek's oeuvre in the West has been significantly facilitated by the efforts of French, Russian, English, Italian, and other translators. On April 12, 2015, Pope Francis I formally designated Gregory of Narek as a *Doctor of the Universal Church*.

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This formal acknowledgement by the Catholic Church signifies a pivotal development, propelling heightened interest and closer examination of Gregory of Narek's contributions within the Western academic and cultural landscape. It also heralds a renewed scholarly focus on the universal, human, and enduring significance of St. Gregory of Narek.

**Keywords:** *St. Gregory of Narek, Book of Lamentation, School of Narek, School of Cilicia, canonization, poetic art, universal key.*

#### ***Introduction***

St. Gregory of Narek's literary works have attracted considerable scholarly attention, as reflected in the recent growth of academic interest in his life and oeuvre. This reassessment is largely attributed to the advent of modern studies, translations, publications, and references that have collectively served to re-evaluate and re-contextualize his significance within the broader literary and theological landscape. Despite the passage of a millennium, the oeuvre of Gregory of Narek continues to resonate with humanity not only in the East but also in the West. This enduring appeal can be attributed not only to the preservation of his creative heritage and its significance in the field of Armenian Studies but also, most fundamentally, to its universal and timeless perception. St. Gregory of Narek's literary works have attracted considerable scholarly attention, as reflected in the recent growth of academic interest in his life and oeuvre. At the heart of this oeuvre is a sustained meditation on the human condition and the manifold elements that shape its refinement and perfection. The corpus of Gregory of Narek's works has been extensively imitated and disseminated across nearly all periods of history. A significant proportion of these imitations have been preserved in the form of valuable memoirs. The imitative prose and verse lines, in addition to the rich and eloquent descriptions, offer a comprehensive perspective on the influence of the author. The appellations "holy and blessed archpriest" and "wise"<sup>1</sup> serve to underscore the profound influence of Gregory and the remarkable dissemination of his oeuvre. The highest assessments of his life and work are expressed in the numerous writings of various genres, written by contemporaries, which shed light on almost all aspects of Gregory of Narek's multifaceted life. The following steps have been outlined to enhance

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<sup>1</sup> See **Ghazinyan** 1995, 29–39.

understanding of the holiness of Gregory in the West: the relationship of *schools*, *commentaries*, *translations* and *editions* of the *Book of Lamentation*, and the *canonization* of the author.

### ***School of Narek and School of Cilicia***

To present the dissemination of Gregory of Narek's work in the West, it is essential to consider it within the context of the living connections and deep relationships between the *School of Narek* (10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries) and the *School of Cilicia* (12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries).<sup>2</sup> Gregory of Narek, the chronicler of the School of Narek, developed the literary and theoretical traditions of that school in his works. In the new historical reality, the continuation of the School of Narek can be observed in the School of Cilicia (Western Armenia). This school is notable for its renowned chroniclers, including Nersēs Shnorhali, Gregory Tgha, and Nersēs of Lambron.

The two schools are introduced through the creative heritage of their respective literary families and the fundamental, profound similarity of their works, regarding both theoretical and creative perspectives. Specifically, the notable representatives of the Cilician school share strong ties with Gregory of Narek. Evidence of the Gregory of Narek and Nersēs of Lambron connection can be found in Gregory's *Life*, composed by Nersēs of Lambron; the commissioned copy of the *Book of Lamentation* (the oldest preserved version dating back to 1173); and the commentary on the prayer of Gregory of Narek, written in Nersēs of Lambron's first extensive work in 1177. Consequently, the endeavor to replicate and disseminate the *Book of Lamentation* was initiated, thereby marking the inception of the study of Narek.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, one of the founders of the School of Cilicia, Catholicos Gregory II the Martyrophile, established one of the most celebrated libraries of the period, accumulating a vast collection of scattered manuscripts and bibliographic heritage. He was the first to collect the works of the School of Narek, particularly those of St. Gregory. This indicates that by the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the works of the chroniclers of the School of Narek were already available in the prominent libraries of Cilicia, where they were studied and discussed within spiritual-

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<sup>2</sup> For more details about the relationship of the School of Narek and the School of Cilicia, see **Tamrazyan** 2007.

<sup>3</sup> See **Khach'atryan** 1996, 160–161.

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theological circles.<sup>4</sup> This is evidenced by the first mention of St. Gregory, preserved in Mashtots Matenadaran manuscript 2496 [Կամ հոմանունն իր սքանչելի / Փիլիսոփայն Նարեկացի / Ջայն հանճարեղսն ես ուզեի / Եւ ինձ ի յաւգն կոչէի]<sup>5</sup> (“Gregory is a philosopher of distinction and a poet of remarkable talent”). However, Gregory’s name had mainly remained unknown for nearly a century. This marks the first instance in the 12<sup>th</sup> century when Gregory’s name became well-known. He was already a highly respected author, recognized for his philosophical insights. Starting in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Gregory of Narek’s work helped spread his universal ideas throughout the School of Cilicia.

#### ***Commentaries on the Book of Lamentation***

The representatives of the School of Cilicia were responsible for the rediscovery, reinterpretation, and dissemination of the works of St. Gregory of Narek to the West. The dissemination of Gregory of Narek’s thought to the West was significantly facilitated by the widespread circulation of his work’s imitations.

The *Book of Lamentation* was held in high esteem in the medieval Armenian literary tradition, as evidenced by the numerous imitations that survive. The oldest surviving copy of the book dates back to 1173 and was commissioned by the chronicle of the School of Cilicia, Nersēs of Lambron. The text was copied in Skewra by Grigor of Skewra. Nersēs of Lambron is credited with the biography of Gregory of Narek, which is included in the M1568 manuscript.<sup>6</sup> In his inaugural volume, written in 1177, Nersēs of Lambron presents a comprehensive account of the life and teachings of Gregory of Narek, entitled: «Խորհրդածութիւնք ի կարգս եկեղեցւոյ եւ մեկնութիւն խորհրդոց պատարագին» (“Reflection on the order of the church and comment on the liturgy of the performance”).<sup>7</sup> In his work, Nersēs of Lambron included a section dedicated to Gregory’s 33<sup>rd</sup> prayer. This prayer offers an insightful interpretation of the prayer dedicated to the Holy Spirit and a special appreciation of St. Gregory and his work. The prayer (33.6–8)

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<sup>4</sup> T’amrazyan 2007, 9–12.

<sup>5</sup> Main Catalogue of Armenian Manuscripts of Mashtots’ Matenadaran 1965, manuscript № 2496, 326a.

<sup>6</sup> Main Catalogue of Armenian Manuscripts of Mashtots’ Matenadaran 1965, manuscript № 1568, 119a–b, see.

<sup>7</sup> See Nersēs of Lambron 1847, 195–197, 250–260.

has become an integral part of the preparatory rites of the Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church since the thirteenth century:<sup>8</sup>

*Almighty, beneficent lover of humankind, God of all, maker of the visible and the invisible, savior and restorer, provident one and peacemaker, mighty Spirit of the Father: We implore you with outstretched arms and pray with cries and sighs in your astounding presence.*<sup>9</sup>

In this prayer, Gregory is referred to as “blessed,” and the efficacy of his prayer to the Holy Spirit is demonstrated by the harmonious interplay between feeling and speech. In his comparison of this advisory prayer by Gregory of Narek to the biblical books, Nersēs of Lambron sanctifies both Gregory and the copying and spreading of the *Book of Lamentation*.

The *Book of Lamentation* was inspired by divine intervention and interwoven with the allegorical thinking of the Middle Ages, making it difficult for Western readers to understand. Even in the Middle Ages, the book was incomprehensible to many people because of the difficulty of understanding the words characteristic of the period, as well as the creation of new words and their ambiguous usage. Commentaries were written to make Gregory’s work more accessible.

a) The medieval commentaries of the *Book of Lamentation* are not a single original text; rather, they are divided into four separate editions, which are conventionally called the first, second, third, and fourth according to chronology.<sup>10</sup> The earliest version of the first edition of the Solution is known from a copy dating to 1271.<sup>11</sup> Its abridged version was included in the 1700–1702 edition of the works of Gregory, published in Constantinople, and then reprinted in all subsequent 18<sup>th</sup>-century Constantinople editions, with the exception of those from 1774 and 1790.<sup>12</sup> Only a small proportion of the

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<sup>8</sup> Tashean 1897, 520–521.

<sup>9</sup> The examples presented herein are drawn from the original *Book of Lamentation*, as translated into English by Abraham Teryan, see Terian 2021, 152.

<sup>10</sup> For more details see Khach’atryan 1996, 238–248.

<sup>11</sup> Main Catalogue of Armenian Manuscripts of Mashtots’ Matenadaran 1970, manuscript № 5518, 253a–305b. For more details, see Ghazinayn 1995, 35, see also Khach’atryan 1996, 246.

<sup>12</sup> See Grigor Narekats’i 1985, 197–209.

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medieval commentaries have been published, with the majority being manuscripts.<sup>13</sup>

In the West, the interpretations of the book by Patriarch Yakob Nalian and Father Gabriēl Awetik'ian followed.

b) The commentary of the scribe, commentator, and church figure Patriarch Yakob Nalian was published in 1745 in Constantinople. It consists of three sections: a preface (pp. 1–12), a commentary on the *Book of Lamentation* (pp. 13–720), and a commentary on the interjections (pp. 721–1051);<sup>14</sup>

c) The commentary of Mekhitarist scholar, lexicographer, grammarian, commentator, and philologist Father Gabriēl Awetik'ian was published in Venice in 1827.<sup>15</sup> The work is of significant value, particularly in its pioneering approach to interpreting the *Book of Lamentation*, which was previously examined through the lenses of “word and thing” and “theory or meaning.”<sup>16</sup>

Although the interpretations diverge significantly in structure and approach from the monotheistic ones, they serve as a dictionary or key to understanding Gregory's work.

In the West, the dissemination of Gregory's work was facilitated by various publications, contributing to its wider availability. After the invention of printing, the *Book of Lamentation* had many editions. It was published 32 times in Constantinople, 15 times in Venice, 6 times in Jerusalem, and 3 times in the city of Smyrna. There were also single editions in Marseille (incomplete), Paris, Buenos Aires, and Delmar.<sup>17</sup>

#### ***Translations of the Book of Lamentation***

In order to achieve a more profound and comprehensive understanding of any given work, it is generally accepted that one should prioritize the original version. The *Book of Lamentation* exemplifies this preference, as it stands out

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<sup>13</sup> For the medieval commentaries on the *Book of Lamentation*, see **Khach'atryan** 1995, 237–379.

<sup>14</sup> **Nalian** 1745, 678.

<sup>15</sup> **Awetik'ian** 1827. The initial iteration of this interpretation was first published in Venice in 1801, but the author was dissatisfied with it. A more comprehensive and revised version, incorporating additional manuscript material, was subsequently published in 1827 and republished in 1859. For Awetik'ian's interpretation, see **Khach'atryan** 1995, 61–64.

<sup>16</sup> **Awetik'ian** 1827, 6.

<sup>17</sup> See **Grigor Narekats'i** 1985, 225.

not only for its content but also for its innovative linguistic approach. Despite being one of the most widely read works for centuries, Gregory's *Book of Lamentation* was not universally comprehensible. The complexity of the philosophical underpinnings and the linguistic intricacies contributed to the challenge of comprehension. Given the complexity of the original text, it became imperative to provide explanatory notes or even a translation to facilitate comprehension. The proclamation of Gregory of Narek as a Doctor of the Church of Rome became an occasion for new translations and editions of the *Book of Lamentation*.

The comments became the key for the translators of the *Book of Lamentation*. For a deeper understanding of each work, it is preferable to consult the original. The *Book of Lamentation* is exceptional not only in content but also in language. Although Gregory of Narek was widely read for centuries, his work was not accessible to everyone due to its philosophical depth and language. As a result, it became necessary not only to explain but also to translate the *Book*, as the original text had become almost unintelligible. The translation of Gregory's work into Western languages was eased by the availability of the existing translations of the *Book of Lamentation* in both Western Armenian and Eastern Armenian in the East.<sup>18</sup>

Gregory's work was first known to foreign language readers in the West through the French translation by Archag Tch'obanian. In 1900, Tchobanian published several parts of Gregory's book in *Mercure de France*.<sup>19</sup> Afterwards, several prominent writers and critics of the time, including Eugène Borre, Félix Neve, and Luc-Andre Marcel, referenced Gregory of Narek and were inspired by his *Book*.<sup>20</sup> They translated and published some parts of it. These initial, albeit incomplete, translations generated significant interest in Gregory. Subsequently, his work was translated in its entirety twice into French, four times into English, and four times into Russian; it was also translated into Italian

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<sup>18</sup> The most recent Eastern Armenian translation of the *Book of Lamentation* was published in 2019 by translator M. Priest Aramian, see **Aramian** 2019.

<sup>19</sup> **Tch'obanian** 1900, 369–405.

<sup>20</sup> For more details, see **Gasparyan** 1996, 145–150. In 1950 and 1951, the poet and translator Luc-André Marcel translated several sections of the *Book of Lamentation* and authored the article *Grigor Narekats'in ew hayots' hin poezian*. In 1953, the literary critic Jean Ballard published translated sections and an article in a separate book, see **Marcel** 1953, for more details, see **Ghazinyan** 1996, 54–56.

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and Persian, with partial translations appearing in several other languages.<sup>21</sup> Thanks to French, Russian, English, Italian, and other translators, St. Gregory has taken his rightful place not only in Armenian literature, but also in world literature. This is evidenced by the new foreign language translations of the *Book of Lamentation* in the West.

#### **Canonization of Gregory of Narek**

Gregory of Narek, in the realm of Western scholarship on medieval spirituality, has received relatively little recognition, which is regrettable given his significant contributions to the field. It is clear that he deserves to be included among most distinguished figures. The formal recognition of Gregory's contributions was not an instantaneous event; rather, it was the culmination of a protracted process undergone by the *Book of Lamentation*. The initial phase entailed the identification of Gregory and his contributions to the West, along with the acknowledgment and acceptance of the fundamental concepts articulated in the *Book of Lamentation*. The process of declaring Gregory a saint began in 1988 and required extensive effort from his translators and researchers.<sup>22</sup> In 2015, Pope Francis formally declared Gregory of Narek a Doctor of the Catholic Church during a ceremony held in St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome.

The recognition of Gregory of Narek's sanctity extends beyond the merely human, thereby articulating a paradigm of cosmic sanctity that remains a living reality and a source of spiritual edification and enlightenment for numerous individuals. The opportunity for humanity to learn from a thousand-year-old saint and be guided by his writings is invaluable. This formal acknowledgement by the Catholic Church of Gregory of Narek as a Doctor of the Church resulted in an increase in academic publications, commentaries, translations, and studies of his legacy. This assertion is substantiated by the emergence of recent translations of the *Book of Lamentation* in Western languages.<sup>23</sup> It is noteworthy

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<sup>21</sup> For the foreign language translations of the *Book of Lamentation*, see **Apresyan** 2021, 213–222.

<sup>22</sup> See **Zek'iyān** 2015, 10–23.

<sup>23</sup> The *Book of Lamentation* has been translated into several languages. An initial translation into Latvian was completed by Valda Salmina in 2017, see **Salmina** 2017. This was followed by translations into Estonian by Peeter Volkonski in the same year, see **Volkonski** 2017, Dutch by Theo Maarten van Lint in 2018, see **Maarten** 2018, and Litvian by Sigita



that before this, the *Book of Lamentation* had already gained recognition in the West through Italian translations by B.L. Zekian and French translations by J.-P. Mahé.<sup>24</sup>

The *Book of Lamentation* is distinctive in that it has been translated into multiple languages and by the same translator on multiple occasions. The objective of these new translations was to create an accurate representation of the original text, ensuring that Gregory's words were conveyed to the reader with the utmost clarity and precision. Following the canonization of Gregory of Narek, translators J.-P. Mahé and B.L. Zekian, who had previously translated Gregory's work, revisited it and translated it once more.<sup>25</sup> It was primarily through the efforts of these translators, complemented by numerous multi-genre writings by contemporaries and international scholarly conferences, that St. Gregory of Narek was awarded the title of Doctor of the Church, and that almost all aspects of his multifaceted life have been brought to light. The study and translation of the *Book of Lamentation* in Armenian is an ongoing process. The work is currently one of the most widely published books in Armenia.<sup>26</sup>

#### ***Toward a Better Understanding of the Prayers***

The recognition of Gregory of Narek in the West allowed researchers to unravel the symbolic meaning of his prayer, which they discussed in the prefaces to their translations of the *Book of Lamentation*, as well as in separate articles and studies.

Gregory's work resonates with Western readers and researchers due to its universal and timeless nature: "*May earnest supplications be made on behalf of some and good counsel be given to others through the prayers in this book*" (Prayer 3.2).

By transcending the limitations imposed by historical context, world history, temporal boundaries, and nationalistic perspectives, St. Gregory's work has emerged as a new phenomenon among Western audiences. This represents a significant departure from medieval traditions, where authors prioritized

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Geda in 2021, see **Geda** 2021. An additional translation into English was completed by Abraham Terian in 2021, see **Terian** 2021.

<sup>24</sup> For these translations see **Zek'ian** 1999, see also **Mahé** 2012.

<sup>25</sup> **Zek'ian** 2016.

<sup>26</sup> **Grigor Narekats'i** 1985, 225.

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collective experiences and the study of history over the complexities of personal lives. Instead, individuals were assessed based on their actions, character, and prevailing traits. By emphasizing the importance of human discourse, St. Gregory elevates his viewpoint on humanity. The moral image of man, shaped by the continuity of generations, suggests that the moral life of humanity continuously assimilates to God and undergoes deification: "*And may you make this book consisting of prayers of lament, begun in your name, Most High, into a life-giving remedy to heal your creatures' ailments of body and soul*" (Prayer 3.5).

Another noteworthy aspect of the author's oeuvre is the content and the issues it addresses. While Gregory of Narek's ethical views were influenced by a mix of ancient and Christian texts, literature, folk traditions, and his personal experiences, the 10<sup>th</sup> century nonetheless marked a shift from theocentricity to anthropocentricity. His literary works provide insight into the complexities of the human psyche and the subtleties of the individual's inner world. In the *Book of Lamentation*, St. Gregory poses profound questions: What is the essence of man? In whose image and likeness does he exist, and for what purpose does he exist? These inquiries signal the beginning of humanity's exploration and self-awareness in the *Book of Lamentation*: "... for I do not know myself, can never understand by whom, in whose image or to what end I was created!" (Prayer 46.1). The fundamental questions posed by St. Gregory – namely, the nature of human essence, the image and likeness in which it is reflected, and the underlying purpose of existence – serve as catalysts for the exploration of the human condition.

The significance of the relationships between Western authors and the ideas presented in the *Book of Lamentation* cannot be overstated. In the *Book of Lamentation*, St. Gregory exhibits notable affinities with earlier mystical writers such as Evagrius, John Cassian, John Climacus, Isaac of Nineveh, and his contemporary Symeon the New Theologian, as well as with anonymous authors like the pseudonymous Dionysius the Areopagite.<sup>27</sup> In these penitential prayers, Gregory shows numerous similarities with earlier mystics, particularly Dionysius of Areopagite. The shared metaphors and spiritual practices highlight a common spiritual tradition and a shared experience of divine presence: "*May the saint's*

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<sup>27</sup> Terian 2021, 28.

prayer for those who help disseminate his prayer book (Prayer 26.4) be answered”.

### **Conclusion**

Following the Catholic Church’s declaration, St. Gregory of Narek has increasingly gained recognition in the West, complementing the prominence he has long held in the East. The School of Cilicia continues the theoretical and creative tradition established by the School of Narek. The chronicles of the Cilician School work diligently to unearth and rediscover the literary heritage of St. Gregory of Narek. Emerging in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in Cilicia, the Cilician School offers a unique interpretation of the intricate world of Gregory of Narek’s prayers and poetry. The followers of the Cilician School examined the intricacies of these works and developed Gregory of Narek’s concept of prayer through their writings, offering valuable explanations and interpretations. These commentaries have been essential in facilitating Western scholarship of spirituality and understanding of the symbolic meanings embedded in Gregory of Narek’s oeuvre. The commentaries have clarified the intricate connections shared between the author’s work and biblical texts. Furthermore, in recent centuries, translations and publications have emerged that firmly establish Gregory of Narek’s seminal work, the *Book of Lamentation*, within the broader context of world literature. Current studies have highlighted the profound spiritual and religious significance of St. Gregory’s 95 prayers from the depths of the heart.

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**ԱՆՈՒՇ ԱՊՐԵՍՅԱՆ**

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**Ամփոփում**

Սբ. Գրիգոր Նարեկացու (մոտ 950–1003) ներդրումը համաշխարհային գրական գանձարանում արևմտյան հեղինակներին հիմնականում անհայտ էր մնացել: Նրա ստեղծագործության մերօրյա նշանակությունն Արևելքում, ապա տարածումն ու վերաարժևորումն Արևմուտքում քննվում է գրական դպրոցների, հեղինակի «Մատեան ողբերգութեան» երկի մեկնությունների ու ժամանակակից թարգմանությունների, ինչպես նաև կաթոլիկ եկեղեցու կողմից հեղինակի սրբադասման կարևորության տեսանկյունից:

Գրիգոր Նարեկացին Նարեկյան դպրոցի ականավոր մատենագիրն էր և բանաստեղծական արվեստի ավանդույթների զարգացնողը: Նարեկյան և Կիլիկյան դպրոցների կենդանի կապերի ու խոր առնչությունների քննությամբ՝ անդրադարձ է կատարվում այն տեսական-ստեղծագործական առնչություններին, որոնց շնորհիվ Կիլիկյան դպրոցի մատենագիրները վերհանեցին ու նորովի ուսումնասիրեցին Գրիգոր Նարեկացու գրական ժառանգությունը: «Մատեան ողբերգութեան» երկի սուրբգրային հարասություններն ու հեղինակի բանաստեղծական արվեստի ընկալումներն արևմտյան ուսումնասիրողին ու թարգմանչին ընկալելի դարձան մեկնությունների միջոցով՝ որպես այդ ստեղծագործության համար գրված համառոտ բառարան: Գրիգոր Նարեկացու գրական ժառանգությունն իր արժանի տեղը գրավեց Արևմուտքում նաև ֆրանսիացի, ռուս, անգլիացի, իտալացի և այլ թարգմանիչների շնորհիվ: 2015-ի ապրիլի 12-ին Ն.Ս. Ֆրանցիսկոս Առաջին Պապը Գրիգոր Նարեկացուն հռչակեց «Տիեզերական եկեղեցու վարդապետ»: Կաթոլիկ եկեղեցու այս պաշտոնական ճանաչումը կարևոր աղիթ դարձավ Սբ. Գրիգոր Նարեկացու ստեղծագործության առավել հետևողա-

**Apresyan A.**

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կան ու խորաքնին ընկալման և նրա բարեխոսության տարածման համար Արևմուտքում՝ ուղենշելով նոր մոտեցումներ հեղինակի համամարդկային ու վերժամանակյա ընկալումների ճանաչման, արժևորման և ուսումնասիրման համար:

**Բանալի բառեր՝** Սբ. Գրիգոր Նարեկացի, «Մատենան ողբերգության», Նարեկյան դպրոց, Կիլիկյան դպրոց, սրբադասում, բանաստեղծական արվեստ, համամարդկային բանալի: