

The “Encyclical letter” by Nerses the Graceful as a source for studying the history of everyday life and social relations in the 12th century.

Armine Melkonyan

In the 11th century an Armenian powerful state was formed in Cilicia¹ becoming the political, religious and cultural center of the Armenians during the 11th up to 14th centuries. Close political and economic ties with the crusaders were established, promoting to the deepening of Armenian-European relations². From the other hand Byzantine Emperors were striving to restore Church Unity hoping to obtain political unity and thereby to strengthen the position of the Empire³.

Nerses the Graceful, the Catholicos of the Armenians in Cilicia, was one of the most prominent figures of the ecclesiastical and political life of the 12th century. He was born in about 1101 and descended from the Pahlavuni patrician family. Nerses received his education in Karmir Vank (Red monastery) located on of the famous Black Mountain in Cilicia. At the age of 16 he was ordained a priest. From 1166 until his death 1173 he was the Catholicos of the Armenians. Nerses the Graceful is notable for his literary legacy and ecumenical activity. He has various writings: Letters, Theological, Liturgical, Pedagogical works, Commentaries, Poems, Prayers and Hymns⁴. He started to participate actively in the ecumenical events when he was a bishop, assisting his elder brother Grigoris Pahlavuni the Catholicos of the Armenians. In 1165-1173 Nerses the Graceful, Patriarch of Constantinople Michael III and Emperor Manuel I Comnenus undertook an effort towards restoration the Church unity⁵.

¹ Cilicia is a South coastal region of Asia Minor, having a multi-ethnic population from the ancient times.

² Ter-Petrossian L., The crusaders and the Armenians, vol 1, A study and translations, Erevan 2005, vol 2, Historico-Political study, Erevan 2007.

³ Armenian Church is one of the Non-Calcedonian churches (see Sarkissian K., The council of Chalcedon and the Armenian church, Canada, 2006).

⁴ See Thomson R.W. A Bibliography of Classical Armenian literature to 1500 AD, Brepols – Turnhout, 1995, pp. 178-184.

⁵ Aram I, St. Nerses the Gracious and Church Unity: Armeno-Greek Church Relations (1165-1173), Lebanon, Antelias, 2010, Zekiyan B. L. “St. Nerses Snorhali en dialogue avec les Grecs: Un prophète de l’oecuménisme au XIIe siècle”, In memoriam Haig Berberian 1986, 861-883, P. Dzolikian, “Deux évêque arménien du XII e siècle apologistes de l’Union. Nerses Schenorhali”, POC II (1961), 36-43.

The “Encyclical letter”⁶ is dated to 1166. Nerses wrote it three months later after becoming a catholicos. The whole title of this treatise is “The Encyclical letter by Lord Nerses, Catholicos of the Armenians to the entire Armenian nation, whose welfare was entrusted to him by the Lord”. Taking into consideration the use of the pronoun *him* I am disposed to think that this is not the original title and was probably edited by another author or perhaps a scribe. However, it exists in the oldest manuscripts reached us from the 13th century.

As a multidimensional work the “Encyclical” has often been referred by the Armenian as well as foreign scholars to elucidate divers issues mainly regarding Canon law and social-economic relationships in the Middle ages. This report intends to analyze questions concerning different aspects of everyday life and social relations, traditions and emotions of the people reflected in the “Encyclical”. We aim at examining this treatise as a letter in its entirety, presenting not only the important historical and cultural data but also focusing on the author’s sentiments and attitude to different phenomenon regarding his addressee’s life.

The “Encyclical” is an open letter addressed to the different classes of Armenian nation. It consists of a long preface and 9 chapters addressed to 1. Monks, 2. Abbots, 3. Bishops, 4. Priests, 5. Princes, 6. Soldiers, 7. Tradesmen and Craftsmen, 8. Farmers, 9. Women. Actually it is a moral-sententious letter aiming to regulate the internal life of the society, relations between groups and classes, to promote people’s consolidation around the Church, cleanliness of their life and habits. The author strives to educate his addressees according to Christian faith and morality.

The letter opens with greetings of peace and love to all the Armenians in Armenia, to those who have emigrated to the West, and those in the various countries among foreign nations⁷. Nerses divides people according to their residence, social class and profession, and lastly to sex and age “those who live in the cities, castles, villages and farms, to all bishops and priests, monks and laity, to lords and servants, to the armed forces, cavalry and infantry, to

⁶ There are Latin (Sancti Nersesis Clajensis Armeniorum Catholici opera nunc primum ex Armenio in Latinum conversa notisque illustrata, studio et Labore D. Josephi Cappelletti, Venetiis, typis PP. Mekhitaristarum, in insula S. Lazari, vol. I, 1833, pp. 92-172) modern Western Armenian (translated by A. Danielean, Antelias, 1977), Eastern Armenian (translated by Aramyan M., Khachatryan T., Stamboltzian S., Yerevan, 1991), English (St. Nerses Shnorhali, General Epistle, Translation and Introduction by Fr. Arakel Aljalian, St. Nersses Armenian Seminary New Rochelle, New York 10804, 1996), French (Nérsès Chnorhali, Lettres aux Arméniens, Traduction de l’Arménien classique, introduction et notes par mère Mariam Vanérian, pp. 322-414) translation of this work. For this report I have used the Ancient Armenian original text (Nerses Shnorhali, “Encyclical letter” (critical edition), prepared by E. M. Baghdasaryan, Erevan, 1995, pp. 53-162. hereafter Nerses Shnorhali, “Encyclical letter”)

⁷ Nerses Shnorhali, “Encyclical letter”, pp. 53-73.

governors and officers, landlords and farmers, merchants and craftsmen... to men and women, children, youths, adults and elders". This passage itself is an important evidence of the social classes in the Middle ages. But at the same time it seems that the author aimed to indicate the equality of different social groups and wished to embrace everybody in his letter. In the prologue we find a very sincere and emotional monologue. Nerses shares his feelings and preoccupations with his addressees asking to pray for him. He tells how he denied and avoided from the post of Catholicos, but the assembly of bishops and his elder brother, the former catholicos, forcedly ordained him. Becoming the spiritual leader, shepherd of the nation, he realizes himself responsible for each member of his herd. It seems that he is anxious because of the difficult times, when people have walked so far away from God and divine rules. And he avows: "My eyes knew no sleep and my eyelids no rest... But I understand that God is not remissive to sluggish and careless shepherds... As far as I can't perform personally my duties towards each of you because of scarcity of time and space, instead of speaking I'm talking to you by writing". One can say that the addressee of this letter is general, a whole nation, but at the same time it is so personal, referring to each member of the society.

The first chapter deals with the clergy, who live in the monasteries⁸. The most fascinating information concerning the everyday life of the monastic institutions is that from the second half of the 12th century a part of the monks begin actively to make agriculture, accumulating a large financial and material resources. Some of them even left the monastery residing in the cities and villages among the laypeople, in order to spend their earnings for their personal goals. It seems that Nerses the Graceful is very concerned about this new habit developing in monasteries, because this question, which occupies several pages, is examined in detail from moral and religious viewpoints. He gives the example of the early period of Christian Church, when wealthy men were donating their property and inheritance to the poor, then entered the monastery. Whereas in his time the poor were coming to the monastery and after gaining some property leaving it. Monks became not only good growers, but merchants as well. They were competing with each other for more spacious and fertile soil. Instead of learning the art of virtue, the unversed members were striving to learn the technique of gardening from their skilled brothers. "Imagine they know everything about the agriculture",- wonders Nerses, but at the same time explains in detail the process of the agricultural work and it seems that he himself is

⁸ Ibid., pp. 74-96.

so much interested in it. When the monks meet each other they do not ask about their spiritual life, about the health of souls, nor about the battle against demons, nor about peace, but ask. “My brother, how is the fertility of your harvest this year. Is it more or less?” And the other monk complains that some of the plants have been scorched or damaged by worms, or lost their blossoms, others are burned by the sun, and clusters of grapes dried out. Then the first shows the ways how to bud and remedy the damaged plants. In this letter the technique of cultivation is presented, and also the preservation and enhancement of yield in case of bad weather. Nerses describes, that the monks work day and night with the purpose of getting much more fruit and multiplying the quantity of wine. Here we receive another interesting information: besides horticulture wine had been prepared in the monasteries as well. However, Nerses the Graceful does not forbid to make agriculture in the monasteries but simply urges not to regard it as a primary occupation and advises to donate a part of their crop and wine to the poor.

The following two chapters, concerning the abbots and bishops are shorter than the first, mostly containing moral exhortations⁹. Nerses briefly touches upon above-mentioned issue about the monks. Here he adds that in many monasteries monks were receiving donations from ordinary people to give a Mass in memory of their deceased relatives.

In the letter to bishops there are interesting reflections on the mission of bishops, how and for what purpose the the bishopric had been established by Jesus Christ and his disciples. Nerses cites passages about the bishops from the apostle Paul’s Letters and explains them. This part in the letter is interesting in terms of style. Nerses has created a commentary on the letters by Paul and inserted it in his own letter. He regrets that some of the abbots as well as bishops receive their positions bribing secular authorities, which means that these authorities had a great influence on the inner life of the Church.

The letter addressing the priests is mostly equipped with episodes of everyday life¹⁰. The author describes that some priests were tending to refuse their priest vestments and to make church liturgies having everyday clothes on and while approaching the altar wearing dirty shoes. Explaining that the priests of the Old Testament are the archetype of the priesthood of New Testament, Nerses indicates that the priestly vestments are not senseless and the priests don’t have right to celebrate the Divine Liturgy, read the Gospel, to take the Cross or approach the

⁹ Nerses Shnorhali, “Encyclical letter”, pp. 96-117.

¹⁰ Nerses Shnorhali, “Encyclical letter”, pp. 118-141.

other holy objects without their ritual clothes. According to the letter, some priests, particularly those in the cities had a secular lifestyle. They were active in horse accustom, riding, hunting and even were bearing arms. Besides the religious responsibilities some of them were engaged in secular affairs as well as collecting taxes, becoming town or village trustees and governors, which is not at all acceptable by the catholicos. Nerses highlights that the priests must be literate and well educated. They had to read correctly religious books and to have musical knowledge at least before being ordained. But now he complains, that there are illiterate priests, who even don't know the Psalter by heart.

The next question is related to Baptism. Nerses criticizes that some priests were adding ridiculous sayings and jokes during this sacraments. It would be interesting to know what kind of jokes they were, but the author does not inform more about this.

He gives more information about the wedding rituals, while describing the order of marriage. The guests and participants of the Wedding were moving from the house to the Church to the sounds of joyous songs and musical instruments. According to the author this custom was not only for providing a cheerful mood, but grace to the music heard everywhere, the eyes and ears of everybody even of those who are not direct participants become the witnesses of this event. In all probability musicians continued to play around the Church even during the Marriage sacrament. That's why the catholicos strongly orders that the singers must be silent until the newly-married couple leave the Church, in order not to mix the divine music to the secular. The preferable time for the Marriage sacrament was from the morning up to the noon. The priest who made the church order took part in the Wedding party, whom Nerses orders not to stay until the end of it but leave when the food is gone and the third cup is drunk. Nerses forbids the priests to make covert marriages, to marry those who have been kidnapped, as well as those who have illegally left his or her spouse. Marriage of relatives whose blood relationship is close was not allowed: they must be a full four degrees removed from each other.

In the following chapters Nerses the Graceful writes to the secular people starting from the wordly princes¹¹. He commends not to behave unjustly toward the obedient, applying high and burdensome taxes, but to take from each according to their abilities. He suggests to limit their employees working hours and give them enough food during the work. According to the letter servants as well as soldiers were free workers having a fixed stipend. Servants had given an

¹¹ Nerses Shnorhali, "Encyclical letter", pp. 142-152.

oath of loyalty before starting the work. At the same time they had a right to retire, which was often prevented by the seigneurs. In this case servant had to escape avoiding from the prison, punishment or being plundered by the householders. Nerses marks that leaving secretly they factually break their vows and recommends not to keep them violently but let work as long as they wish. Thus they will never run away, but will ask to leave the work openly. “If you owe something, reward them. Seeing your good attitude, they will desire to continue to work and in the case of leaving they will return to you”,- says Nerses, who acts as a protector of ordinary people rights, which is a very interesting phenomenon for the 12th century.

There is a separate passage about the soldiers¹², according to which Christian soldiers could also serve non-Christians. Nerses calls them to serve selflessly and without guile, as their Christian owners.

The chapter titled “To the city dwellers” is devoted to tradesmen and craftsmen¹³. Already the title gives rise to think that the last were the main part of the population in the cities. Nerses describes the “streets of trade”, in other words markets, typical for medieval cities. They were special lines of craftsmen and tradesmen arranged according to the appropriate profession. He marks that the tradesmen and craftsmen were often duffing the weight and measures of the seller, deceiving the naive customers, particularly peasants and unversed people. He tells that the tradesmen lent money to poor peasants for paying taxes, requiring high percentage. Nerses exhorts to exempt them from percents taking back only the sum they have given.

The last chapter of the “Encyclical letter” is addressed to women¹⁴. The catholicos exhorts them to adorn themselves with modesty and propriety rather than with gold and silver, not to change the colour of their faces with different remedies, stumbling young men. He orders to beware of different sorts of divination, as well as from sects. Specifying these two points Nerses continues, that there are many questions he would like to discuss and recommends women to learn from the priests and bishops what is missing in his letter.

In the “Encyclical” there is no separate chapter regarding children, but the author touches upon them in the various passages. For example in the penultimate chapter, titled “To the farmers and the whole nation” Nerses calls all the believers to nurture their children in the love and fear of

¹² Nerses Shnorhali, “Encyclical letter”, pp. 153-155.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 156-157.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 161-162.

God. He advises to teach them prayers since childhood, but never blasphemies, because the edification of parents is imposed as an indelible memory in the minds of the children. It is particularly fascinating the issue of baptism of foreign children according to the armenian rituals, which is discussed in the letter to priests. The author remarks that this phenomenon is not new and comes from ancient times. Who were the mentioned foreigners and why had they baptized their children in the Armenian Church?. This question still lacks a scholarly research. Anyway, one can think, that they were not christians having into account the fact that the author calls their faith a “pagan faith”. It seems that this habit was not welcomed by Nerses. He notes, that many of those baptized children go back to their faith when grow up. Nevertheless, the catholicos does not forbid this practice. In the same letter he doesn’t let the priests to marry children for any reason and indicates that the minimum age for men must be upon the completion of 15 years and for women 12 years. Nerses gives a particular importance to the circumstance, that the man should be older than the woman, because God created Adam first and only then Eve.

The “Encyclical letter”, as we have seen, is an appreciable source for studying diverse aspects of people’s lifestyle and customs, social-economic, international relations and not only in the framework of Armenian history and culture. This composition is notable for its artistic value as a literary prose. It is equipped with artistic colors and impressive images, where the actors are not only individuals, but groups and classes. His style of writing is so living and imposing that in the process of reading you feel yourself an addressee or it seems that you watch a fascinating film about the daily life of the 12th century people.

I would like to conclude my speech citing the last phrase of the “Encyclical letter”:

“And we ask the Lord to remove from you a stony heart, to ednow you with a heart of flesh, to be fertile soil and bring to arvest the seeds of our words in your souls, and produce a three-fold harvest. For this with joyful and happy faces we shall say on the day of judgment before the just Judge: “Here I am and the children You gave me”. And may we be ranked with those at the right hand in eternal life together with you with Jesus Christ our Lord, who is blessed for ever. Amen”

In the divers editions and studies this passage particularly the first sentence, has always been considered as a part of the chapter addressing women, but I suppose that this is the ending phrase, the closure of the entire letter.

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Armine Melkonyan, PhD in History, Researcher, codicologist at Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts "Matenadaran", Yerevan, Armenia. Her research interests include the history of theological thought, Armenian Medieval Theological Literature, the Impact of philosophy in theology.