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580 YEARS (1441-2021)
RETURN OF THE PONTIFICAL MOTHER SEE
FROM SIS TO ETCHMIADZIN
(1292-1441)

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Peregrination

This year the Armenian Church marks the 580th year of the historic return of the Pontifical See of Holy Etchmiadzin after a very long peregrination in Greater and Lesser Armenia. Under different political conditions, and as the Armenian Kingdom moved from one capital city to another, the Mother See of the Armenian Church peregrinated accordingly with the incumbent Catholicos for 957 years outside her original site, from 484 to 1441 AD, beginning from Dvin, capital of Armenia near Vagharshapat (Etchmiadzin), during the pontificate of Catholicos Hovhannes Mandakuni (478-490).

Next, the Holy See moved to Aghtamar (Lake Van), to Ani, capital of Bagratuni Kingdom of Armenia, to Hromkla (Cilicia), to Sis, capital of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia, and finally returned to Holy Etchmiadan in 1441, during the pontificate of Catholicos Krikor IX Mousabekian (1439-1441), ending her much too long peregrination. The last Catholicos Krikor IX was invited to move with the Holy See to Etchmiadzin, but declined, most probably because of his age, thus initiating instead the Catholicosate of the House of Cilicia in Sis. As the last Catholicos of All Armenians “in exile” he showed no objection to the election of the new Catholicos in Holy Etchmiadzin to replace him. The same tolerance was shown from Holy Etchmiadzin, not opposing to the formation of the See of Cilicia.

Question is asked as to what happened to the Cathedral of Holy Etchmiadzin during the vacancy, to the churches of St. Hripsimeh and Gayaneh, when the pontiffs left for Dvin near Vagharshapat, during the unusually long period of time. The Holy See was attended by dedicated clergy with no authority in the administration, under duress exercised alternately by Persian and Turkish rule. Instead, many religious institutions and monasteries, on the other hand, flourished from the 12th century on, such as Haghbat and Sanahin, Datev and Noravank, Geghart and Glatsor, and many others, where numerous Eastern Vartabeds (Doctors of Theology) dominated faithfully and dedicated to the learning and maintaining the Armenian Church doctrine and the art of historiography, handwritten manuscripts with outstanding miniatures. In fact, due to the firm commitments of those Vartabeds, that the Return of the Pontificate of All Armenians no matter how late was realized.

During the first and long period of peregrination in Dvin capital of Armenia, near Etchmiadzin, the Holy See was fortunately safe and much productive considering the great achievements all the way to the end of the 10th century with famous Pontiffs, such as Bapken of Othmou, Komitas Aghtsetsi, Nersess III the Builder, and historian Hovhannes of Draskhanakert. It

was during those centuries when the Churches of Hripsimeh and Gayaneh, the Zvartnots Cathedral were built. The other question one might ask if those nine centuries outside Etchmiadzin did mark any significant achievements for the persistence of the Armenian Church. The answer is absolutely positively yes, especially in Dvin, Ani, and Hromkla (Cilicia) where famous pontiffs, such as Babken I, Komitas I, Nersess III, Hovhanness X, Krikor II, St. Nersess IV the Graceful, among them especially Komitas I, Nersess III, and St. Nersess IV who enriched immensely the theology, the religious architecture, and the hymnbook of the Armenian Church. They proved irreplaceable Pontiffs residing far from the original site of the Armenian Church in Holy Etchmiadzin.

Back in Holy Etchmiadzin

Led by the Eastern Vartabeds, historians have recorded 700 lay and religious delegates who assembled in Holy Etchmiadzin in 1441, on the Ascension Thursday of Christ, to decide both the formal and the final return of the Holy See from Sis to Vagharshapat-Etchmiadzin, and elect a new Catholicos to succeed and replace Catholicos Krikor IX, considering his wishes not to return from Sis. The Assembly therefore decided to elect a successor. The Abbot of the Monastery of Khor Virap Giragos Vartabed was elected Catholicos, was consecrated bishop and anointed Catholicos of All Armenians in the Cathedral of Holy Etchmiadzin.

One final question is asked whether the peregrination of the Holy See to ten different locations was necessary. It was necessary, and moreover, beneficial and providential, considering the political pressures Armenia and the Armenians went through. Of vital importance were the two kingdoms of Armenia, the Bagraduni Kingdom (885-1045), and the Cilician Kingdom (1080-1375), which provided political support and cultural productivity wherever the Holy See was destined to locate. The result at the end was the creation of a second Hierarchic Holy See, the See of the Great House of Cilicia that flourished in Sis, capital of Cilicia until WWI with little significance due to internal conflicts. Soon after the War, the See was re-established honorably up to this date in Antelias, Lebanon since 1930. Presently the Armenian Church has four Hierarchical Sees, including the Patriarchates of Jerusalem and Constantinople.

Return Commemorated

It was not until 1945 when the National-Ecclesiastical Assembly in Holy Etchmiadzin honored the return of the Pontifical See from Sis with a special commemoration as a feast day on the church calendar. The Assembly convened to elect His Holiness Kevork VI Chorekjian Catholicos of All Armenians, presided over by His Holiness Karekin I Hovsepian Catholicos of Cilicia, who had traveled from Lebanon to Armenia with an entourage of bishops and delegates. Considering the political intolerance of the time regarding religious affairs, Archbishop Chorekjian, while serving as Locum Tenens, was able to meet with Marshal Stalin at the Kremlin in April, 1945, just a month before the Assembly and secure various permissions, including the Church Assembly which anticipated lengthy and urgent agenda.

As an important remembrance, the final return of the Pontificate of All Armenians to Holy Etchmiadzin was brought from the floor of the Assembly to be included in the agenda by delegate Prof. Stepan Malkhassian for discussion. Subsequently, a resolution was adopted on the Assembly's June 19th session to commemorate the historic event annually. It was resolved that each year on Jesus Christ's Ascension Thursday the Return of the Holy See to Holy Etchmiadzin is commemorated as a religious feast.

Declaration of Catholicos Kevork VI

The newly-elected Catholicos Kevork VI of All Armenians dispatched his First Encyclical dated April 1, 1946, remembering among other urgent undertakings, the various locations the Holy See had peregrinated for centuries and finally returned to its original site. The Catholicos specified “*the year 1292 as the year the Holy See was transferred to Sis, capital of the Rubenian (Cilician) Kingdom, where it stayed for 149 years.*” His Holiness described the last station of the Holy See as “*disastrous,*” since there was no political stability after the fall of the Cilician Kingdom in 1375. The final return “*was the only way to safeguard the Pontificate’s existence and the spiritual leadership world-wide,*” as His Holiness concluded in his Encyclical. He declared and instituted the annual remembrance on the Ascension Thursday with a special order of *Pontifical Thanksgiving Service (Hayrabedagan Maghtank)* dedicated to the Pontifical Holy See of All Armenians.

Celebrations

As directed by the Catholicos of All Armenians, the Armenian Patriarch Cyril II Israelian of Jerusalem was the first to celebrate the Feast of the Return of the Catholicosate at St. James Cathedral, himself being one of the promoters of the remembrance while attending the 1945 Assembly. The Patriarch wrote a lengthy panegyric in the official monthly *SION*, reflecting on the Pontifical Encyclical, on the history of the Holy See, and finally on its return which, he said, marked a great milestone in our church history. The Patriarch considered the peregrination of the Holy See forcefully applied, bringing serious danger for its survival. He stressed in his writing that, “*the return was once and for all truly providential.*”

As said earlier, one reading the Encyclical and the Panegyric will fail to see the positive harvest on the other hand of those 900 years “in exile” in terms of religious revival, great monasteries, historiography, architecture, manuscript art and culture, feeling overall somewhat negative path “until the return”. It is for sure the “Pontificate in exile” that produced much more than expected, given the deep faith and dedication of both, the clergy and the laity, the kings and the queens, who sponsored immensely for the real survival of the Pontificate of All Armenians.

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