

SERMON: ST. SARKIS SUNDAY: PHILADELPHIA - FEB. 7, 1993

In the Name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The calendar of the Armenian Church identifies this Sunday as "Sourp Sarksi Giragi," or St. Sarkis Sunday. We commemorated the martyrdom of this great saint yesterday, remembering with him his son Mardiros and his fourteen soldiers who all bore witness to the Name of Christ. Since the early days of Christianity, the fathers of the Church saw a reason in commemorating annually those who achieved the crown of eternity by shedding their blood for their faith. Their determination to uphold their faith, their denial of earthly life for the sake of eternal life and their love for Christ set a wonderful example for us to follow. Their lives stand before us as worthy patterns from which we can learn important lessons. St. Sarkis's life represents one of the many lessons that served to inspire our fathers to persevere in their faith. There is every reason to believe that it will also inspire us in these difficult days when we as a nation and as a Church are going through many hardships.

Born at the beginning of the fourth century in Caesarea or Gesaria, the renowned city which was also the hometown of our St. Gregory the Illuminator, St. Sarkis distinguished himself in military service and rose to the rank of general in the armies of the Eastern Roman Empire. He prospered in his faith during the reign of the most pious Emperor Constantine and took an active part in the task of Christianizing the pagan population of Asia Minor. In every sense of the word he was a Christian missionary who heeded the word of the Lord by proselytize all the heathens in the Name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

St. Sarkis's religious and professional activities were abruptly terminated in 360 when the imperial throne passed into the hands of Julian the Apostate, who forsook Christianity and returned to paganism. The emperor's persecution of Christians forced St. Sarkis and his son Mardiros to leave their homeland and seek refuge in the Christian kingdom of Armenia. As professional soldiers they later entered the service of the Persian king of kings. The general's deep commitment to the cause of Christianity instigated him to preach Christ to his soldiers, many of whom converted to the true faith. This was not noticed until the King of kings expected the general to pay allegiance to the state by offering sacrifice before the fire altar. The general's refusal to comply with the accepted tradition invited on him the wrath of the Persian priests who killed Mardiros before the eyes of his father, trampling him under their feet. St.

Sarkis himself was incarcerated and later tried at a tribunal where he remained firm in his faith. The tribunal condemned him to death. The verdict was carried out and St. Sarkis was publicly beheaded, earning the eternal crown of God. His body was later carried away by fourteen of his soldiers, converts to Christianity, who gave the saint a proper Christian burial. These soldiers were also condemned for their act and were martyred.

St Sarkis's relics were brought to Armenia at an unspecified date and were greatly honored by our ancestors. In the mid-seventh century, Catholicos Nerses the Builder had a special chapel constructed adjacent to the St. Gregory the Illuminator cathedral of the capital city of Dvin. The fact that the residence of the Armenian catholicos was also near this cathedral, indicates how much St. Sarkis was venerated by the Armenians. The foundation stones of the Chapel and the cathedral are still visible today. Every year Armenian pilgrims from various parts of Armenia visited the holy site to commemorate the saint. In the twelfth century, St. Nerses Shnorhali revived the traditional veneration by commissioning a biography of the saint to be translated from Syriac.

It seems to me that our ancestors' high regard for St. Sarkis was due to the fact that they saw in him another figure like St. Vartan, namely a man prepared to take a firm stand on matters of faith and religious conviction. Impressed by such traits of character, our fathers followed the example of the likes of St. Sarkis and St. Vartan. Their traits - faith, hope in eternal life, determination to defend their religious beliefs and conviction that to die for Christ was better than life without Him - became a part of the Armenian identity.

After so many centuries, we Armenians still have the same traits as our fathers. A proof of this recently surfaced. As soon as the Communist regime was toppled in Armenia, our people turned to their faith. In the words of a foreign journalist, we are now fighting our Massada in Karabagh and Armenia to preserve our Christian identity. Today also we must be brave like St. Sarkis and St. Vartan and persevere in our faith and hope in a bright future. Our brothers and sisters in Armenia, who are going through the hardships of winter and war without food, fuel and clothing, have not given up and are upholding the fortress of faith. Those of us in the diaspora and particularly the United States, must also be affected by the same spirit and extend a helping hand to restore the normal way of life in Karabagh and Armenia. What is at stake are our Christian nation and her ancient tradition.

The lives of martyred saints and their commemoration may impress some as a strange kind of inspiration for a people threatened with destruction. Let it be clear that the Church does not celebrate death and execution. The Church condemns execution and violence and believes that the Glorious Resurrection of Christ abolished death. The martyrdom of saints is a testimony to their love of God and their belief in life. As Christians we all aspire for life, both on this earth and in the kingdom of God. The life we want on the face of this earth, however, must be one that is pleasing to God. This is the nature of our people's noble cause. We must survive the hardships of this winter and continue to live in our homeland and in the diaspora. God's design was such that Armenia and the Armenian nation be a part of His Only Begotten Son's fold. We have made the choice of becoming a part of that fold and that choice leaves us with one alternative, to make the supreme sacrifice in order to survive and make sure that His Name will be praised in our sanctuaries according to our liturgy in our own language. Amen.