

HIS HOLINESS KAREKIN I
SUPREME PATRIARCH AND CATHOLICOS OF ALL ARMENIANS

Biographical Notes

His Holiness Karekin I, baptized Neshan Sarkissian, was born in Kessab (Northern Syria) on August 27, 1932. After attending the Armenian elementary school in his native village, he was admitted to the Theological Seminary of the Armenian Catholicate of Cilicia in 1946. In 1949, he was ordained a deacon, and graduated with high honors in 1952.

On September 28, 1952 he was ordained a celibate priest, renamed "Karekin" in memory of the late Catholicos Karekin I Hovsepian, and joined the religious order of the Armenian Catholicate of Cilicia. Upon presentation of his doctoral thesis—*The Theology of the Armenian Church, According to Liturgical Hymns (Sharakans)*—he was given the ecclesiastical degree of "vardapet" in 1955. He then assumed the duties of supervisor and member of the faculty of the theological seminary in Antelias, Lebanon. He was appointed dean of the seminary in 1956.

From 1957 to 1959, he studied theology at Oxford University, in Great Britain, where he wrote his scholarly thesis on *The Council of Chalcedon and the Armenian Church* (published in London by SPCK in 1965, reprinted in New York in 1976). Upon his return to Lebanon in January 1960, Fr. Karekin resumed his responsibilities as dean of the seminary.

Following the election of Khoren I as Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia on May 5, 1963, Fr. Karekin became an important aid to Catholicos Khoren, organizing pontifical visits around the world, and taking part in high-ranking ecumenical gatherings with the World Council of Churches. He also served as observer to such historic assemblages as the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965), the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Church (1968), and the Adis-Ababa conference of the Heads of the Oriental Orthodox (non-Chalcedonian) churches (1965).

During this period, alongside his regular activities, he lectured on theology, literature, history and culture in a number of schools and universities in Beirut, Lebanon, as well as in Roumania, Moscow and Kotayyam, India. In recognition of his intense activities, Fr. Karekin was

elevated to the rank of senior archimandrite on June 16, 1963, and was consecrated bishop on January 19, 1964, by Catholicos Khoren I. He was granted the rank of archbishop on April 26, 1973.

In 1971, Bishop Karekin was elected Prelate of the Diocese of New Julfa, Isfahan (Iran). In 1973, he was appointed Pontifical Legate of the Eastern Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church of America (in New York) under the jurisdiction of the Catholicate of Cilicia, and a year later was elected its Primate. He worked diligently in promoting various activities and services in the United States and Canada for the benefit of the people, particularly the younger generation. He played a decisive role in organizing a fund-raising drive for Lebanon during that country's turbulent period of 1976-1977.

On May 22, 1977, Archbishop Karekin Sarkissian was elected Catholicos, Head of the Armenian Church under the jurisdiction of the Catholicate of Cilicia. He served in the capacity of "Catholicos Coadjutor" until the death, in February 1983, of Catholicos Khoren I, at which point he was fully installed as Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia.

During the 18 years of his reign as Catholicos of Cilicia, His Holiness gave new impetus to religious education, promoted the Theological Seminary (which he transferred from Antelias to Bikfaya), overhauled and modernized the seminary printing press, and established a new museum-library. He undertook extensive pontifical visits to Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Cyprus, the United States and Canada, Kuwait and the Gulf States. Among his ecumenical activities were visits to His Holiness Pope John Paul II and the Roman Catholic Church; Dr. Robert Runcle, Archbishop of Canterbury; the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches; the Lutheran Churches of Denmark and Germany; and His Holiness Shenouda III, Pope of the Coptic Church. In 1989, having completed his term of office as one of the three presidents of the Middle East Council of Churches, His Holiness was elected honorary president of that organization.

Catholicos Karekin has authored numerous articles and studies on theological, Armenological, philosophical, ethical and literary subjects, in *Hask* monthly (the official organ of the Holy See of the Catholicate of Cilicia) and other periodicals, as well as in the form of books and booklets in Armenian, English and French.

During his tenure in Cilicia, Catholicos Karekin paid frequent visits to the See of Holy Etchmiadzin in Armenia—the mother see of the Armenian Church—both during Armenia's Soviet period and after Armenia regained independence. In the aftermath of the earthquake of December 7, 1988, he visited the stricken area and expressed solidarity with His Holiness Vasken I, of blessed memory, the late Catholicos of All Armenians. He was elected a member of the Central Board of Directors of Armenia Fund, Inc., established by the president of the Republic of Armenia.

Following the passing of Catholicos Vasken I—who died in August 1994 after a nearly 40-year reign as the leader of the global Armenian Church—Armenian Church communities from around the world sent elected delegations of lay and clerical leaders to Armenia, to choose a new Catholicos of All Armenians. About 400 delegates met in a National Ecclesiastical Assembly, which began on Monday, April 3, 1995, at Holy Etchmiadzin, in Armenia, to elect the 131st in a continuous line of pontiffs which dates back to the 4th century.

On April 4, 1995, Armenian Christians elected His Holiness Karekin Sarkissian as their new Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians—the most authoritative office in the Church's hierarchy.

The enthronement of the newly-elected Catholicos of All Armenians took place on Sunday, April 9, 1995 (Palm Sunday), at the Cathedral of Holy Etchmiadzin. It was the first such ceremony to take place in the Armenian Church in nearly 40 years, and the result of the first pontifical election to take place on the soil of the free and independent Armenian republic.

As Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians and successor to the Throne of St. Gregory the Illuminator, Catholicos Karekin (who is now known as Karekin *the First*, as he is the first supreme patriarch to bear that name) has entered a new and challenging phase in his own ministry, even as the global Armenian Church enters a new era of leadership.

Less than a year into his reign, Catholicos Karekin I has already made his initial priorities clear: boosting morale in the beleaguered Republic of Armenia, rebuilding the administrative structure of the Church, revitalizing the seminary of the Holy See of Etchmiadzin, and preparing for the upcoming jubilee year of 2001—when the Church will celebrate the 1700th anniversary of the historic conversion of Armenia, which established it as the first Christian nation in A.D. 301.

Karekin I has undertaken a series of pontifical visits to the various regions of Armenia, including Nagorno-Karabagh. He also traveled to Lebanon, to preside over the election of a new Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia (the post left vacant when Karekin I became Catholicos of All Armenians). The present tour of North America is His Holiness' first visit to this continent since assuming the highest office of the Armenian Church.

—11/1/95

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A Brief Biography

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Following the election of Khoren I as Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia on May 5, 1963, Fr. Karekin became an important aid to Catholicos Khoren, organizing pontifical visits around the world, and taking part in high-ranking ecumenical gatherings with the World Council of Churches. He also served as observer to such historic assemblages as the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965), the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Church (1968), and the Adis-Ababa conference of the Heads of the Oriental Orthodox (non-Chalcedonian) churches (1965).

During this period, alongside his regular activities, he lectured on theology, literature, history and culture in a number of schools and universities in Beirut, Lebanon, as well as in Roumania, Moscow and Kotayyam, India.

In recognition of his intense activities, Fr. Karekin was elevated to the rank of senior archimandrite on June 16, 1963, and was consecrated bishop on January 19, 1964 by Catholicos Khoren I. He was granted the rank of archbishop on April 26, 1973.

In 1971, Bishop Karekin was elected Prelate of the Diocese of New Julfa, Isfahan (Iran). In 1973, he was appointed Pontifical Legate of the Eastern Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church of America (in New York) under the jurisdiction of the Catholicate of Cilicia, and a year later was elected its Primate. He worked diligently in promoting various activities and services in the United States and Canada for the benefit of the people, particularly the younger generation. He played a decisive role in organizing a fund-raising drive for the Lebanon during that country's turbulent period of 1976-1977.

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During the eighteen years of his reign as Catholicos of Cilicia, Karekin II gave new impetus to religious education by establishing, promoted the Theological Seminary (which he transferred from Antelias to Bikfaya, in the hills over-looking Beirut), overhauled and modernized the seminary printing press, and established a new museum-library which will become what "a new house of light," in Karekin II's own words.

In the last few years, he has undertaken extensive pontifical visits to Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Cyprus, the United States and Canada, Kuwait and the Gulf States. Among his ecumenical activities were visits to His Holiness Pope John Paul II and the Roman Catholic Church; Dr. Robert Runcle, Archbishop of Canterbury; the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches; the Lutheran Churches of Denmark and Germany; and His Holiness Shenouda III, pope of the Coptic Church.

In 1989, having completed his term of office as one of the three presidents of the Middle East Council of Churches, Karekin II was elected honorary president of that organization.

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His Holiness Catholicos Karekin II has paid frequent visits to the See of Holy Etchmiadzin in Armenia—the mother see of the Armenian Church—both during Armenia's Soviet period and after Armenia regained independence. In the aftermath of the earthquake of December 7, 1988, he visited the stricken area and expressed solidarity with His Holiness Vasken I, of blessed memory, the late Catholicos of All Armenians. He was elected a

member of the Central Board of Directors of Armenia Fund, Inc., established by the president of the Republic of Armenia.

Now as the new Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians and successor to the Throne of St. Gregory the Illuminator, Catholicos Karekin (who will henceforth be known as Karekin the First, as he is the first supreme patriarch to bear that name), will enter a new and challenging phase in his own ministry, even as the global Armenian Church enters a new era of leadership.

The Armenian Church

The Armenian Church is an independent Christian church, also known as Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church. Its origins date back to the earliest period of the Christian religion.

In the middle of the first century, two of Jesus Christ's original apostles, Saints Thaddeus and Bartholomew, introduced Christianity to Armenia. Repeated persecutions failed to stem the rapid growth of the new faith, and Christianity was declared the state religion of Armenia in A.D. 301. Armenia thus became the first nation to adopt Christianity as a state religion.

This was largely due to the efforts of St. Gregory the Illuminator. Born a nobleman, he converted Armenia's King Tiridates III, who had formerly severely persecuted Christians. Conversion of the rest of the population soon followed. It was St. Gregory who built the Mother Church at Etchmiadzin in A.D. 303, and who became the first Catholicos.

Today, Holy Etchmiadzin (the name refers to both the cathedral as well as its surrounding city, which lies near Yerevan, the modern capital of the Republic of Armenia) remains the central spiritual authority for millions of Armenian Christians living in Armenia and in diaspora communities around the globe. Overt expressions of the Church's activity in Armenia itself were severely hampered during that country's long Soviet period. However, since the demise of the U.S.S.R., the new independent Republic of Armenia has experienced a vigorous revival of religious sentiment, and the Church has resumed its traditional public role as the "national faith" of the Armenian people.