

Archbishop Bessak Toumayan

Bishop Bessak Toumayan was born on the 27th May 1912 in the Armenian village of Bardizag (Turkey) which has given many ecclesiastics and teachers to the Armenian nation. His baptismal name was Pappgen and he comes from a very pious family.

As a child of three years of age he was deported with his family to Konia, due to Turkey's entry into the First World War, where they stayed until 1919, when the Armistice was signed and all Armenian deportees were allowed to return to their native towns.

~~In~~^{In} 1920, as a result of his father's death, he was placed in one of the Armenian orphanages in Constantinople. In 1922 he was transferred with the rest of the orphanage to Greece, first to Loutraki and then to Syra.

He was gifted with an extremely musical voice, and whilst singing in the church in Syra (Greece) he made such an impression on Mr. Levon Zenian that the latter made all the necessary arrangements with the Armenian Patriarchate in Jerusalem, for him, together with a few other boys, to be admitted into the Seminary. He entered the Seminary in 1926 where were teaching at that time great scholars such as Patriarch Toorian, Bishop Pappgen (later Catholicos of Cilicia) and others. The late Mr. Levon Tchilinguipian was his first music teacher.

In 1930, after finishing the first half of his training, he was ordained deacon by the then Locum Tenens of the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Bishop Mesreb Nishanian, and then he took purely theological courses at the Seminary, having on the teaching staff Patriarch Terkom Koushakian, Father Guregh (later Patriarch of Jerusalem), Father Tiran Nersoyan (at present Patriarch of Jerusalem) and Canon C.T. Bridgeman.

It was at this time that, besides Armenian ecclesiastical music, he studied piano and harmony with Mr. Edward Pearsonne who was at that time the organist of St. George's Anglican Cathedral in Jerusalem.

After completing his four year study at the Theological Seminary of the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, on the 15th July 1934 he was ordained priest by Patriarch Koushakian and was named Bessak. He was soon appointed music teacher for the Seminary and choir-master of the Armenian Cathedral of St. James. Most of the younger priests who nowadays officiate in America have received their musical tuition from him.

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In the meantime he continued to study Gregorian (Latin) music with a Dominican monk and tried to acquaint himself with the music of other churches. He published numerous articles on church music in "ZION", the official magazine of the Armenian Patriarchate in Jerusalem, and wrote many critics on musical publications.

In 1943 he was nominated assistant to the Armenian Primate of Egypt in Alexandria, where he remained until 1949. During his tenure of office in Alexandria the church and the National school made considerable headway. The church was well attended because of inspiring sermons and well organised services. He founded and became the patron of the "Loussavoritch" choir which sang in the church, gave concerts and which still carries out its activities in Alexandria.

In 1949 on the appointment of the late Patriarch Guregh and by the invitation of the late Mr. Calouste Gulbenkian and the Trustees of St. Sarkis Armenian Church in London, he was made the officiating priest there.

He became a student of theology at the King's College ~~University of London~~ (London University) for two years, taking courses in Historical Theology, Philosophy on Religion and on Holy Scriptures. He enrolled at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama for singing, harmony, counterpoint, orchestration, orchestral conducting and Pianoforte, thus equipping himself with all the available tools to devote himself to Armenian Ecclesiastical music and to be able to continue the work of Komitas Vardapet which was unexpectedly interrupted because of his tragic sickness.

In London he organized the ~~1500th~~ 1500th anniversary of the Battle of Vardanantz and invited the Archbishop of Canterbury to his church, where the Archbishop and himself preached on that day to mark the occasion. The 7th of October 1951 will be an unforgettable date for the Armenian Community in London.

In 1955 as a result of appreciation of his devoted services to the church His Holiness Vazgen I Supreme Catholicos of all Armenians consecrated him bishop and appointed him His Special Delegate in England.

Bishop Toumayan, together with the Anglican Church authorities organized that tremendous welcome to ~~His Holiness the Supreme~~ ~~Catholicos of all Armenians~~ which was given to His Holiness the Supreme Catholicos of all Armenians on his Apostolic Visitation to England in 1956.

Bishop Toumayan was invited to the Lambeth Conference, where he addressed 327 ~~Bishops~~ Anglican bishops. Our readers will be able to see his address in this issue of "The Armenian ~~Guardian~~".

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