

VARTABEDOOTYOON OF FR. NAREG BERBERIAN
NOV. 6, 1994—ST. JAMES CHURCH, RICHMOND, VA

In the Armenian Church, the four degrees of vartabedootyoon are a special rank given to clergymen who have distinguished themselves in the study of the doctrines of the Church, the Old and the New Testaments, and the profession of faith. A candidate for the rank of vartabed must show that he is a follower of the Holy Apostles and the fathers of the Church. After a series of public cross-examinations, the bishop confers on him the right to preach the Gospel and Christian doctrine, to instruct those who are ignorant of the teachings of Christ, and to summon the sinners to repent.

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In ancient and medieval times, the vartabeds were revered for their high qualifications. And it was the vartabedootyoon which gave the Armenian Church some of her greatest figures: men like St. Mesrop Mashtots, who invented the Armenian alphabet; St. Movses Khorenatsi, the father of Armenian history; St. Gregory of Narek, the greatest spiritual poet in medieval Armenia; St. Gregory of Datev, the most noteworthy theologian of the late Middle Ages. Even learned bishops and catholicos, such as St. Nersess Shnorhali, were referred to as vartabeds.

In order to be elevated to the rank of vartabedootyoon, one had to spend at least fifteen to twenty years studying under the guidance of a senior vartabed in a monastery.

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The Armenian vartabeds were considered to be the highest authorities on Biblical matters, theology, history, music, art, architecture and many other subjects.

I was reminded of these blessed vartabeds of our past on this day, as I conferred the four degrees of this sacred rank on your pastor. I am thankful to God for helping us keep this ancient tradition of our Church alive among the present generation of Armenians living in the New World. Here, in this quiet corner of the greatest nation in the world, a young priest is following in the footsteps of the earlier vartabeds of the monasteries of Gladzor, Datev, Haghpad and Sanahin.

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Like his predecessors, this young priest also excels in Biblical learning, which has been his area of study in graduate school. He has become well-versed in the teachings of the Armenian Church—like the revered vartabeds of old. And with his new rank, he has the full authority to preach the gospel to his people.

Fr. Nareg's example encourages us to be optimistic about the future of the Armenian Church. During his ordination two years ago, he was given the name "Nareg," after St. Gregory of Narek, and this name has proved to be a fitting one for this pious, studious and poetic young priest.

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Education has been a constant theme in his life. From his place of birth in Beirut, Fr. Nareg went to study in the Holy See at Etchmiadzin, and later attended the St. Nersess Seminary in this country. He received a second Master's Degree from New York's General Theological Seminary, and is currently continuing his advanced education at Union Theological Seminary.

Fr. Nareg is pursuing this education, not for personal advancement, but so that he may share his knowledge with others. He is learning so that he may be a better teacher. This is the significance of his new rank of vartabed, and it is a noble and godly calling. It was this spirit of spreading the word of God and sharing the gospel with

Like both of his saintly namesakes, Fr. Nareg takes on the rank of vartabed with devotion, conviction and humility, as well as a sincere love for his flock, and concern for the well-being of the Armenian people in general. I pray that Fr. Nareg will receive strength and guidance from St. Gregory, and that his ministry will someday be as fruitful as that of Vasken the First. May God bless this young and promising servant, and may He guide and protect him throughout his life.

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our people which inspired Fr. Nareg's namesake to write *The Lamentations*, one of the greatest works of devotional literature in the Armenian tradition—and any other tradition, for that matter.

I am reminded, too, that our new vartabed's baptismal name has also been a great inspiration to him. Fr. Nareg was baptized as "Vasken," and he was a student at the Holy See during the lifetime of our beloved, departed Vehapar, His Holiness Vasken the First, of blessed memory. I know that the example of Vasken the First has been an important guide to Fr. Nareg throughout his life, and perhaps helped direct him to taking up the vows and duties of Christ's sacred priesthood.