

The Armenian Church in the New World



The Pilgrims Find Freedom

The king of England proclaimed that the faith of his church would be imposed on all his subjects. However, living in Great Britain were many people, actual communities, which viewed the practices of the church to be harmful to the faith in their Lord Jesus.

Their view of Christianity was a simple and pure one, without rules, traditions, customs. Only the Bible was necessary and a freedom to personally respond to God.

Under threat of persecution and death these "purists" or Puritans sought refuge in a new world. Knowing that their future was bleak where they lived, their only alternative was to find a place in the world where they could live without fear of persecution. It was the new world, America.

Boarding the Mayflower in 1620, they left England, still uncertain of their fate, yet hopeful

that God would provide for them. Their journey was long, but the bright day of new life came in the fall of 1620 when they docked in Plymouth, Massachusetts, and set foot in the new world where they could worship, and celebrate a true thanksgiving for deliverance and survival.

The Armenian Church Community Finds New Life

Following the fall of the Ottoman Turkish Empire, the Armenian Christian people were subject to the ultimate persecution. Their Christian unity aroused such insecurity in the Turkish overlords that a systematic process of



genocide was begun which resulted in mass death and deportation. Because we refused to denounce Christ and convert to Islam and because we were Armenians whose very existence embodied the moral teachings of Christ, we were forced to flee for survival and build a new life with the remnant of the community that survived.

Because of earlier persecutions, there already existed in America a small community of Armenians who lived in Worcester, Massachusetts. Seeing no hope of returning to their historic homeland, they rooted themselves in this new land and encouraged their compatriots to follow. By 1889 a sizable community was established in Worcester. Here the Armenians lived among the Finnish, Swedish, and Danish people who had also come to the New World. The visible symbol of their identity as Christians became the focal point of their community efforts; they built the first Armenian church in America. Their sufferings became their blessings and in 1891 in Worcester, Massachusetts, the first house of worship was consecrated and named Holy Savior Armenian Church. This was only the beginning of the huge community of believers that was to converge in America.

PERSECUTION AND REACTION

Read the following statements and respond to them. Be honest!

1. You've worked for five years at your present job, but someone new in your department (less than a year) is given a promotion over you.

Your reaction is: _____

2. Every year some of your friends are given an excused absence from school in observance of their holidays; this year you and several Armenian students missed class because of April 24 but you were marked absent.

Your reaction is: _____

3. Your country is ruled by a dictator and you have just learned that your church will be closed.

Your reaction is: _____

4. You are a committed Christian and believe prayer is a necessary part of your daily life, but you just learned that most of the students at your college have no religious life and really don't want one.

How would you react? _____

The faithful remnant of our persecuted people formed our foundation here in the United States. In 1891, Bishop Hovsep Sarajian consecrated not only the Holy Savior Armenian Church, but also consecrated the "new" re-born, reaffirmed community.

The survivors of these dark days of suffering were rewarded; as Christ himself said:

"Blessed are you when men shall revile you and persecute you . . . Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven."

A Testimony of Deliverance

Interview the Survivors: During the next week ask the following questions at home to your immediate family or to people you know in

your church community who have survived the persecutions and genocide of 1915. Collect your answers and bring them to class next week when you will share their personal faith-response in that time of struggle.

(You might need an interpreter if you don't speak Armenian.)

Questions:

1. What kept you going, even though you had suffered many losses?
2. Did you ever pray with other people who were also suffering?
3. Were you afraid to say you were an Armenian Christian?
4. Did you ever feel like giving up your Christian faith?
5. Do you think those who gave up being Christian and became Moslems really knew what they were doing?
6. How did you help or support each other as the Armenian community?
7. How did you feel when you escaped the Turkish sword?
8. What can we young people today do to honor our Armenian confessors and martyrs of the Christian faith?

If no personal interviews can be conducted, select one of the following titles and *read* a survivor's story:

The Cup of Bitterness by Antranig Antreassian

Passage to Ararat by Michael Arlen

The Urchin by Kerop Bedoukian

Daughter of the Euphrates by Elizabeth

Caraman

The Road from Home by David Kherdian

Rebirth by Elizabeth Hagopian Taft

Scenes from an Armenian Childhood by Vahan

Totovents