

# Hovhannes of Otzoon

Hovhannes was born in the village of Otzoon, province of Dashirk, in close proximity to the City of Lori. The exact date of his birth is unknown. Nothing has been written about his boyhood, family relations, environment and associations. It is thought that he received his preliminary education in local schools, but his more advanced learning was obtained in Hellenic schools and under the private tutorship of a well-known Greek educator.

There is no authentic information about his ordination as a priest or his consecration as bishop. It is to be assumed, however, that he followed the course of his predecessors and was advanced step by step, perhaps more swiftly than many others.

It has been definitely established that long before he was elevated to the exalted office of supreme patriarch in the year 717, Hovhannes of Otzoon was a learned man. Archbishop Maghakia Ormanian, author of *Azkabadour*, calls him one of the glories of the patriarchal seat. And certainly his title as philosopher pleased him the most and formed his crowning glory.

Historians have described him as a man of unusual charm, looks and elegant attire. His outer garments were gorgeously decorative in contrast with the plain clothing worn by his predecessors of the apostolic era.

When the news of his impressive looks and magnificent attire reached the Mohammedan chieftain of Damascus, the latter requested him to be his guest and as an honor to his host to wear his most exquisite garments.

It was in the spring of 719 when Catholicos Hovhannes, accompanied by a staff of assistants and associates, started on a long journey to Damascus. After many days of travel, marked by many thrills and hardship, the party arrived at Damascus and was given an enthusiastic welcome.

After the Patriarch rested awhile he put on his most elegant raiments and presented himself to the Emir with such a display of splendor that his host gasped in admiration. Warm greetings were exchanged and the Patriarch was escorted to the seat of honor.

Still dazzled by the magnificent appearance of his illustrious guest the Emir inquired:

"I have heard said that your prophet Jesus was a humble and meek person, preferred poverty to riches, wore modest and ordinary clothes common to people in want and recommended similar demeanor to his disciples; even your own predecessors led a frugal life and preferred privation and humility to luxury and comfort. How is it, then, that you adorn yourself so gorgeously?"

Without any embarrassment or hesitation the Patriarch replied:

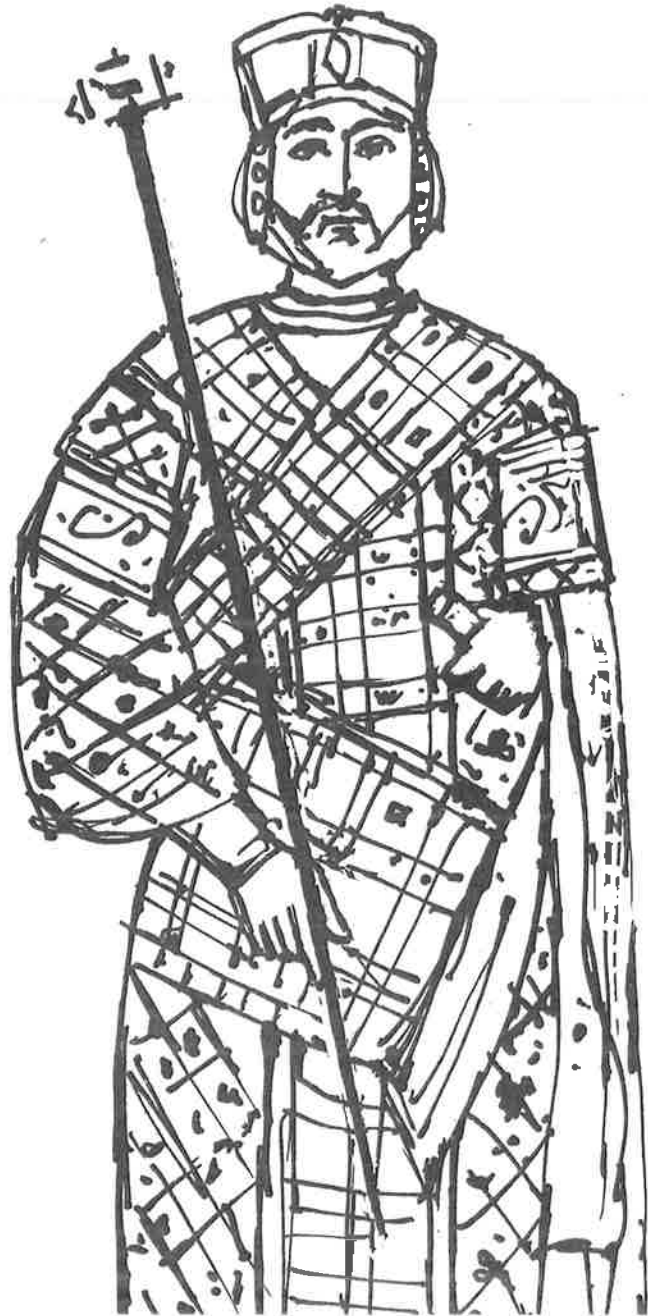
"My predecessors possessed divine powers and did not need any outward display of greatness to impress the people. But now, with the change in manners and

the general attitude of the people, splendor in appearance seems to symbolize power, as is the case of my gracious host, the Emir."

Then he asked the Emir to order everyone to leave the room. After the two were left alone the Patriarch removed his outer garments and, lo and behold, there stood before the very eyes of the proud Arab a man wearing a shaggy garb made of goat's coarse hair hugging his naked body.

Bewildered and filled with admiration the Emir, chief of millions of Arabs, said in a deeply respectful voice: "You are truly a holy man. You may ask for whatever you desire and it will be granted."

The Supreme Patriarch of All Armenians desired nothing for his person. He acquainted the Emir with



some of the many sufferings of his people because of their Christian faith and worship and made the following requests:

1. That the Armenian people be allowed to worship their God freely and without molestation, and that no direct or indirect pressure be brought upon them to renounce their faith.

2. That all churches and clergymen be declared tax exempt and no dues, imposts, duties and excises of any nature whatever be assessed on them or collected from them.

The Emir was pleased with the reasonableness of the request and praised the pontiff for his selfless attitude. He granted all the requests by an official decree in return for a promise that the Armenian people would break away from the Greeks completely and accept him as their only sovereign. A solemn promise to serve him faithfully was given.

It did not escape the Emir's attention that the head of the Armenian Church had made no request for himself. This unselfish and wholly altruistic attitude deserved special recognition and reward. So, the Emir bestowed upon his distinguished guest innumerable honors, presented him with gifts of silver and gold as well as a wardrobe of exotic beauty, charm and splendor and bade him farewell and ordered a military escort to lead him safely to Armenia accompanied by many Armenian prisoners of war who were set free at the request of the Catholicos.

Upon his return to the Holy See the astute and far-sighted Patriarch publicly sanctioned this new and far-reaching policy for the Armenian people. Ties with the Greeks were broken and undivided loyalty was pledged to the Emir of Damascus. This policy was two-fold in nature: political and religious. The political purpose was to put an end to Greek influence and domination; the religious purpose was to obliterate once for all the practice of the Chalcedonian declaration of faith which was being imposed upon the people in some parts of the country by force or cajolery.

The success of his efforts before the Emir had so enhanced the reputation and influence of the Patriarch that he undertook the onerous task of correcting errors and eradicating aberrations which had crept into the Church with a threat to contaminate its purity. In order to achieve his purpose he called a Church Assembly in 720 to deliberate upon and adopt a set of rules to enable him to carry out his program of reforms. The exact date and place of the assembly are not known, but it has been generally believed that the meeting was held in the City of Dwin where more than thirty bishops and many nobles, among them the famous Ashod Badrig, attended.

The welcoming address of the Catholicos was a remarkable oration about his personal life, the circumstances of his election to the exalted office of Supreme Patriarch, the difficulties besetting the Holy See, and the need for immediate and effective reforms. The address was unprecedented in form and content revealing the intellectual greatness of an industrious and untiring servant of the Church. It expressed the hopes and desires of the Pontiff and advocated the

adoption of plans for the betterment and glorification of the Church and its services. It was a manifestation of the Patriarch's virtuous and noble soul, his fundamental and intimate knowledge of philosophical, religious and ritualistic teachings and practices of Christianity and the true meaning and concept of certain ceremonial acts practiced in the Church.

The Assembly enacted a set of thirty-two rules, among which the most significant were the following:

1. No ordained member of the clerical order, of whatever rank, shall become intoxicated. The violators of this rule shall be defrocked and expelled from the Order.

2. No marriage ceremony shall be performed Saturdays after sunset, nor during the entire period between Easter and the feast of Pentecost, and there shall be no revelry or drinking parties on the eve before the wedding.

3. The altar where mass is to be celebrated and the baptismal font shall be of solid stone and immovable.

4. Association or fraternization with heretics or followers of cults alien to the creed and principle of the Armenian Church shall be prohibited.

This body of canons and civil laws also contained provisions about communion, baptism, prerogatives of the clergy of various ranks to consecrate and administer holy oil (miuron), the use of the cross, cymbals and flabellum (kshotz), etc.

Some of these canons or rules had already been adopted or confirmed earlier by former assemblies or were based upon apostolic traditions, but they existed separately and scattered loosely here and there or lost in a mass of unclassified papers piled in every corner and crevice of the Holy See. No reference could be made to them when and if needed.

Hovhannes of Otzoon personally undertook the important task of classifying the archives. He studied the rules one by one, segregated, added to, compiled and published them in a single volume which was called the *Book of Canons of the Armenian Church*, modelled on Justinian's *Corpus Juris*. The Armenian *Corpus Juris* preceded the Greek *Book of Rules* by a whole century. It contained thirty-seven chapters with 1207 sections and was grouped in six principal divisions which were:

1. Traditional rules of the universal Christian Church.
2. Traditional rules of the Armenian Church.
3. Rules adopted by Ecumenical Councils, such as of Nicea, Constantinople and Ephesus.
4. Rules adopted by other and subsequently assembled Councils of Ankara, Cesarea, Antioch, etc.
5. Rules proclaimed by metropolitan bishops, such as Magar of Jerusalem, Parsegh of Cesarea, Cyril of Alexandria and others.
6. Rules enacted by national church assemblies and supreme patriarchs of the Armenian Church.

In addition to the *Book of Rules* Hovhannes of Otzoon compiled the archives of the Holy See, classifying all decisions and resolutions of former general assemblies and synods. He exercised great care, prudence and attention in this important undertaking. He considered every detail with scrutiny, comparable to his great love for tradition.

His orations on heretics and heresies and his interpretations of the teachings of the holy fathers about the creed of the Armenian Church are excellent treatises carefully penned by a man of great stature in literary accomplishments and scholarly attainments.

The Council of Manazguer in 728 constituted the final act of his fruitful and productive administration. Twenty-three bishops and eight vartabeds representing the Armenian Church and eight bishops of the Assyrian Church took part in the deliberations of the Council which was presided over by Catholicos Hovhannes of Otzoon.

The main topic on the agenda concerned the heresies within the church and the adoption of a resolution condemning those who maintained religious concepts contrary to those accepted by the Church and rejected doctrines expounded by the Church. The Council unanimously adopted ten anathemas.

"Complete doctrinal union was achieved between the two churches and the teachings allegedly propounded by Severians and Julianists respectively were condemned without touching either Severus or Julian. Doctrines implying patripassianism or docetism were condemned in ten anathemas arming the orthodox monophysite position and repudiating misrepresentations.

"This was the last doctrinal dispute, in the fourth and fifth century style, in which the Armenian Church engaged. After that scholastic ideas and methods began to dominate the minds of the theologians, but only to defend what was already formulated." (*The Christological Position of the Armenian Church*, by Archbishop Tiran (Nersoyan), *The Armenian Church*, September, 1961.)

The Council considered, also, minor doctrinal and ritualistic differences existing between the Armenian and Assyrian Churches. An agreement was reached on all fundamental issues, although in certain matters complete accord could not be achieved.

After the Council of Manazguer the aged and fatigued patriarch could no longer remain active at his post. He felt the need for peaceful rest. He, therefore, retired to his native village of Otzoon and spent the remaining days of his life in prayer at the altar of the church he had constructed.

The angel of death appeared to him on April 17, 728, and he passed into eternity in peace. His remains were interred near the village of Otzoon.

Hovhannes of Otzoon has been accepted as one of the most brilliant and deserving bearers of the patriarchal scepter, because of his scholastic attainments, his religious fervor, and executive and administrative abilities. The social and political security and the religious freedom of the Armenian people during his administration were entirely due to his ingenuity, acumen, adroitness, eloquence, and sincerity in negotiating with the various rulers of the country.

History gave Hovhannes of Otzoon the recognition he fully deserved. The philosopher-catholicos became one of the saints of the Armenian Church, a divine distinction enjoyed by only a selected few of his predecessors.

*THE PILLARS OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH*  
Dickran Boyajian

## DRE Spotlight on...



### ALICE BOYAJIAN

Alice Boyajian is a petite woman of five feet and one hundred pounds, but her energies are endless! For the past ten years she has been the superintendent of the Saints Joachim and Anne Church of Palos Heights, Illinois, coordinating activities, directing assemblies, teaching, and caring beyond the call of duty.

She has a staff of six teachers and a school enrollment of forty.

Alice prepares, plans, and executes her own lesson programs along with D.R.E. materials. She has put together a wonderful assembly book of hymns, prayers, and other information. This, along with the special program she runs for the children every Sunday morning after their worship period, makes all the difference between an ordinary Sunday School and a good one.

In addition to her Sunday School leadership, Alice has chaired the Women's Guild for many years and is generally very active in all areas of church life. She loves to cook and contributes to the good eating of church functions whenever she can.

