



DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

# bulletin

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## ST. NERSESS SHNORHALI BARD OF FAITH

For most Sunday School teachers and students, St. Nersess is one of the many "important" church figures about whom little is known or remembered. And yet it is his remarkable contribution to the prayers and hymns of the Armenian Church that have defined and strengthened the popular faith. After all, it is in song and prayer that people worship!

St. Nersess was born c. 1100 and lived in a period of great turmoil in the Armenian Church. External and internal pressures inspired Nersess to expand his poetic art (he had already written many beautiful lyric poems and hymns, including the famous "Elegy on the Fall of Edessa" and his tragedy, "Jesus, Son") in the area of doctrine and theology. He prepared a celebrated encyclical defining the acceptable forms of worship, ritual, conduct and ecclesiastical canons. The encyclical was so influential and well-written, that Patriarch Malachia Ormanian wrote about it in his renowned history *Azkabadoum*. "Truly, if the encyclical (called *Tookht Untanragan*) were to be written today, not even one word would need to be altered."

St. Nersess also engaged in conversation with western and orthodox churches—both of which were pressing the Armenian Church to conform to their theology—and encouraged cooperation and union on the basis of equality. His correspondence revealed a great desire to reach an agreement on all the basic Christian principles of the Church, and thereby bring about spiritual union. This was not to succeed.

The literary accomplishments of St. Nersess are only part of his extraordinary legacy to the Armenian Church, but for those of us who shun the details of church history, these are indeed his more accessible contributions. His sharagans fill the pages of our liturgical services. Perhaps the best known of his



hymns and prayers are Aravod Looso and the 24-verse prayer (usually recited in its entirety during Lent) called "I Confess With Faith" (Havadov Khosdovanim).

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