

the Jews to the Romans who were trying to make them lose their national identity.

Yeghishe knew that if the Armenians based their religious faith on victories they would lose it because this world does not guarantee immediate success to the righteous. He wanted to prepare the Armenians for potentially long centuries of lost national independence by strengthening the spiritual kingdom within them. He knew that the Armenians with God as their king could survive even though they had no earthly king. He realized that God could take the Armenian people, great and small, and make them heroes of the Christian faith. This strength that comes from God is part of our own tradition. This strength is as important to us today as it was in 415 to those who were martyred for their faith in Christ at the battle of Vartanantz.

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## ST. SAHAG BARTEV CATHOLICOS

St. Sahag was the last male descendant of St. Gregory and the son of St. Nerses the Great. He was born in 346 A.D. and educated like his forefathers in Caesarea and Constantinople. He was married and had one daughter, Sahagtoukhd, who became the mother of the famous Armenian national hero, St. Vartan Mamigonian.

St. Sahag became Catholicos in 387 in a period full of political tragedies for the tiny kingdom of Armenia. He became one of the longest reigning heads of the Armenian Church, remaining in office for 50 years.

He was a great scholar and could use fluently the international languages of the time: Greek, Persian, and Syriac. The achievements of St. Sahag and St. Mesrob are inseparable. They are the founders and originators of the Armenian written literature. Together they worked to form the Armenian alphabet, to establish schools and churches, to train priests, to spread the gospel and produce a wealth of religious literature.

## THE STORY OF SAINT SAHAG

On the Holy Friday of the year 378 the people of the city of Valarshapat had gone to church for that day's evening

service. Following the service they sat assembled in the church, praying, and thinking about the death of Jesus. Only occasional whispers would break the general silence.

"Who is that man sitting near the altar with his head in his hands, mother?" asked a little boy in as low a voice as he could. The mother, too, had noticed the man.

"He is Deacon Sahag," she said softly, leaning over. "He is a very learned man. His father's great great grandfather was Saint Gregory the Enlightener."

The boy looked at him once more with sparkles in his eyes.

Deacon Sahag was in deep thought, but suddenly he looked up. Some people who saw him move nudged each other. The famous deacon was looking at something that they could not see. In fact, he was having a vision. It was like a dream, only more real:

*The altar was suddenly covered with a white linen and a flashing cross appeared on top of it. The altar opened up and the deacon saw a table on which there were loaves of bread and bunches of grapes. There was also a tray and on the tray a golden globe and a dried skin. On the skin were lines of golden letters. Some of the golden lines were red instead of gold. Then he saw many children, more boys than girls. They grew up instantly. There was something like an earthquake. The boys stood up on the table and from there they went up to heaven.*

"I wonder what all this means," Saint Sahag was asking himself. The vision continued. *A figure appeared and explained to the saint its meaning. "Armenia," he said, "is going to lose its independence. It is going to be divided between the Persians and the Romans. It is going to split in two halves as an earthquake splits open the earth. You yourself shall become a priest and then a Catholicos and shall serve the world. You shall be the last descendant of Saint Gregory the Enlightener. With you the family of Saint Gregory which came down from son to son shall come to an end as the golden lines on the dried skin. You must have noticed," the figure went on explaining, "that some lines were rubbed out on the dried skin. That is because between Saint Nerses and you three bishops occupied the see of Catholicos who were not of the house of Saint Gregory. Many people, more men than women, will be martyred, after you. They will die for the sake of Jesus Christ and will go to heaven."*

The mysterious figure disappeared. The vision had come to an end. Saint Sahag now knew that he had a great work to do for the Armenian people, and for the whole Christian Church.

Following the vision Saint Sahag lived as a monk for nine years. He wanted to suffer for the sake of Jesus Christ. He decided to wear clothes made of coarse material; he carried an iron weight around his waist, and did not wear shoes. Soon he had some sixty followers and became the head of a community of monks who went about educating the people and helping the poor and the sick. His wife was now dead. He had only a daughter who was married to the chief military official of the Armenian court. His name was Hamazasp Mamiconian. Hamazasp had a son whose name was Vardan.

When Saint Sahag became the Catholicos of the Armenian Church, he was nearly forty years of age. It was at that time that the rulers of Ctesiphon and at Byzantium (or Constantinople) divided our land between themselves.

As a result there was a Persian Armenia and a Byzantine or Roman Armenia. Saint Sahag had gone to school in Byzantium and was one of the world's best educated men. But he now lived in Persian Armenia, in the province of Ayrarat, where the official residence of the Catholicos was located.

The princes of Persian Armenia paid taxes, at the time, to the Persian king. The king had a great army and the lords of Armenia could not oppose him.

When the king of Persia heard at Ctesiphon, his capital, that Sahag had become Catholicos, he was very much displeased. He called in his advisers and said:

"Sahag's becoming the Catholicos of the Armenians is against our pleasure. We know that he had received his education in Byzantium. Perhaps he likes the Romans more than he likes us. Perhaps he will turn against us. The Catholicos has great power. Therefore Sahag must not be the Catholicos. It is our wish that he come here to Ctesiphon for a conference with us." The great king leaned back on his splendid throne and lowered his eyelids like a cat. "Perhaps we shall keep him here," he murmured to himself.

The king's orders were communicated to Saint Sahag at once, and before long he was in Ctesiphon. The interview with the Persian king was tense for a while, but then everyone relaxed. Saint Sahag had great confidence in his own intelligence. He knew that he would eventually cause the king to see the truth. He convinced him that it was good for the Persians to keep in touch with the Greeks. "Therefore," he said to the king, "my having a Greek education is to your advantage. Through the Armenians you will know the good things that the Greeks have, and they will know the good things that you have. It is good for the peoples of the world to keep in touch with each other, to exchange ideas and ways of doing things, rather than fight."

Saint Sahag spoke so well that the king admired his wisdom. He knew now that the Catholicos would not try to do harm to the non-Christian Persian empire. He then recognized Sahag officially, gave him many gifts, granted every favor that the Catholicos asked for, and sent him back to Armenia.

The king of Armenia was then a good and great king. His name was Vramshapouh. He too wanted peace. There were no wars for several years, and during this period something happened that the Armenians will remember forever with gratitude. Next to their becoming Christians, this was their greatest blessing.

A very learned Armenian monk and a life-long companion of Saint Sahag had invented the Armenian letters. The important thing is that for the first time in their entire history the Armenians could **write** in their own language. And the first book that they wanted to see translated into their own language was the Bible. Saint Sahag rendered this unforgettable service to his people. With some help from other learned monks, he translated the Bible into Armenian. Many other books were also translated from the Greek and other languages. Some authors wrote books in Armenian. There was a great animation all over the country. Thousands of people flocked to schools to learn how to write and read in their own language. Though there was a shortage of schools and teachers, many books were written and many people were educated in an astonishingly short time. Saint Sahag was entirely occupied with this work. Now that

Armenian people had the Bible in their own language, he wanted them to read and hear it. He wanted the bishops and priests in particular to read also, the other books that were written in Armenian. He himself began to teach. He went about the country to supervise the work of education. His own efforts and those of his learned companions were so successful that we now call the period in which they lived **The Golden Age of Armenia**. Historians tell us that the spirit of Saint Sahag was like a source from which living waters ran and made Armenia more beautiful than ever.

In the year 417 Saint Sahag went to Western Armenia to establish schools and to teach the language there. But the Greek consul of that part of Armenia would not allow him.

"The only language we want taught here is Greek," he said.

Saint Sahag seldom took "no" for an answer. He sent a delegation to the emperor himself. This delegation returned after having obtained the emperor's permission. In a few years the Armenians of Persian Armenia and those of Byzantine Armenia could write their own language in the same way. They all felt more than ever that they belonged to the same family, even though they were politically divided.

In the meantime Vramshapouh had died and the king of Armenia was now Artashir. Quarrels had developed among the Armenian lords. When the Catholicos came back to Val'arshapat they came to him with a terrible project that made him very sad.

"We do not want this king any more," they said, "and we are going to ask the king of Persia to depose him."

Saint Sahag was horrified.

"How can you be traitors to your own country?"...he asked.

"He is a bad king," the lords answered.

"I know, but a sick lamb is better than a healthy beast," the Catholicos pleaded with them, but the lords would not listen. A Persian ruler did displace the Armenian king in the end, and Saint Sahag was exiled.

Later, at the age of eighty-four, the saint was allowed by the Persian king to return to Armenia, but not to Val'arshapat. The Persians were oppressing the Armenians and the lords of the land were sorry they had exchanged their own king for a Persian governor. "We should have listened to the Catholicos," they said.

*From: Stories  
From the History  
of the Armenian Church  
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## TEACHER, DON'T TAKE YOURSELF TOO SERIOUSLY

Bruce Larson in his book, *Dare to Live Now*, asks the question, "Are you fun to live with?" The same question