

FEAST

ST. SERGIUS (SARGIS) THE COMMANDER

St. Sergius (Sargis, or Sarkis) enjoys a special popularity among the Armenian faithful. The feast day is movable, occurring between January 11 and February 15, and follows the five-day abstinence for the Catechumes (Arachavorats), as established by St. Gregory the Enlightener.

Although the abstinence interval is not associated with the Feast of St. Sergius, and the people often mistakenly call it the abstinence of St. Sergius, or the St. Sergius week of fasting.

In families where there is the name Sargis or Martiros or Martik festivities are held with relatives and friends to congratulate the honoree.



LIFE OF ST. SERGIUS THE COMMANDER

Sergius the Commander was Greek by birth, and a Roman citizen, although for centuries he had been memorialized and his feast day celebrated, it was not until the 12th century that St. Nerses Full of Grace made a thorough study of his life and wrote a biography.

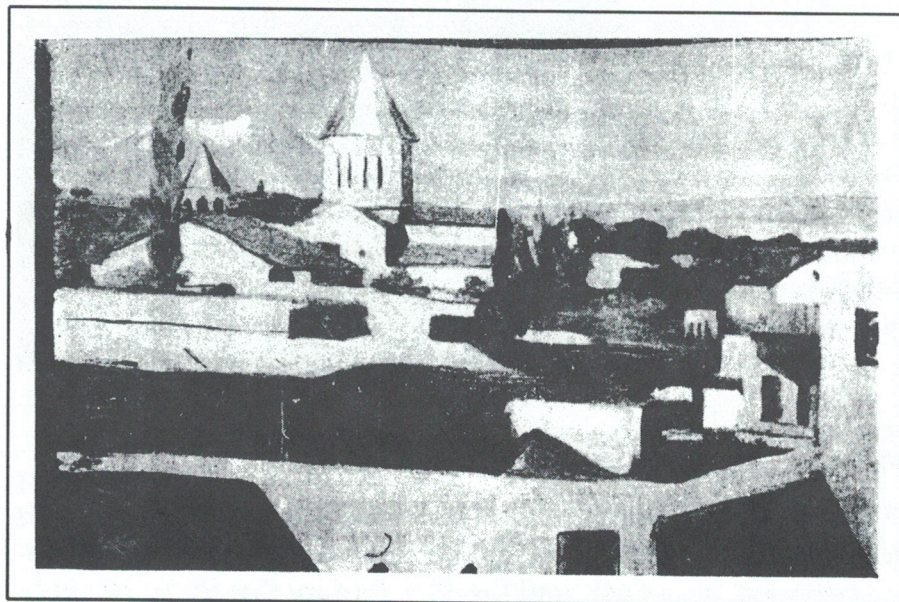
Commander Sergius lived in fourth century. He was appointed

military commander of Cappadocia by Emperor Constantine of Rome (337). A later caesar (361-363), Julian the Apostate, suddenly began an intense persecution of Christians, making every effort to restore the old pagan faith.

The Commander was a devout and faithful Christian. He fled Cappadocia with his son Martiros to Armenia. Then, fearing that his presence in the Armenian royal household might precipitate war between the Greeks and the Armenians, he moved on to Persia where he was gladly received by the king, Shapouh II (310-379). He was designated by the king as commander of the Persian forces at the Perso-Roman border.

Commander Sergius claimed many military victories and left the Persian king much pleased. On the other hand, word of his preaching Christianity reached the Persian royal palace. The devious King Shapouh II, however, invited Commander Sergius and his son Martiros to take part in their great religious holiday. Though the Commander had a premonition about the impending threat, he decided to attend anyway. and there declare his true faith within the royal circle.

The inevitable did occur. Commander Sergius refused to bow be-



St. Sarkis Church in Yerevan (by Martiros Sarian)

fore the idols and the fire. Moreover, he spoke defamatory words about the Persian gods. The enraged magi seized his son Martiros and killed him on the spot. Commander Sergius was sent away to a distant place, to be beheaded.

The order to do so was carried out. Fourteen faithful of his soldiers who had embraced Christianity went to recover Sergius' body and bury him honorably. But they too were arrested and put to death in the same manner.

Unyielding faithful persevered stubbornly and succeeded in finding Commander Sergius' body, and sent it to Assyria.

This episode was justification to class Sergius the Commander, who was martyred for his faith, his son Martiros, and the fourteen soldiers among the saints.

During the fifth century St. Mesrop Mashtots in a meeting with Assyrians obtained remains of St. Sergius and brought them to Armenia, storing them in a hamlet named Karb, in the region of Vaspurakan.

In reverence and admiration for the Commander, his son Martiros, and the soldiers for their faith, the Armenian people have over the centuries built countless churches named in their memory.

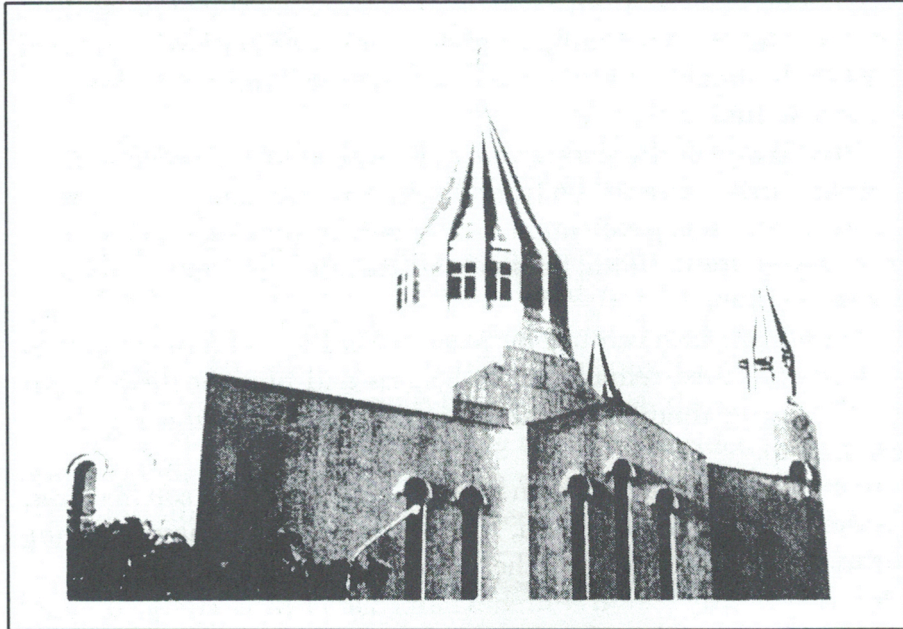
It is noteworthy that in churches named after St. Sargis, and sometimes in other churches, there may be a painting in which St. Sergius is shown astride a white horse, and with a spear piercing a dragon, which symbolizes evil. Usually, below such paintings there are trays provided worshippers to light candles to the saint, seeking intercession.

Over the centuries St. Sergius has been the subject matter for our illuminators of miniatures who have tried artistically to portray to the best of their abilities the commander's noble and brave character of of having faith.

Also, we find gems in our literature dedicated to St. Sargis. To understand the boundless faith our people have had in calling on St. Sargis as an intercessor, even to the level of fanaticism, we recommend reading the heart-rending tale by the peerless martyred writer Rouben Zartarian, "Pout Mu Jour" (Boud mu Chour — A Drop of Water).

There are many cities with large Armenian populations having churches named after St. Sargis. On the feast day of the saint those

churches hold glorious religious festivals, and blessing of “matagh.” Among such churches are the St. Sargis Church in the New Sis sector of Bourj Hamoud, Lebanon; the St. Sargis Church of Tehran; and the main church in Yerevan bearing the same name.



St. Sarkis Church in Tehran, Iran

POPULAR TRADITIONS CONNECTED WITH THE FEAST OF ST. SERGIUS

According to popular tales St. Sergius the Commander had rescued a girl. As written by Avetis Aharonian, the girl was a Jewess. But according to the writer Armenouhi G. Ter Karapetian, the girl was Greek.

This traditional belief is the reason why young people have a warm fondness for St. Sergius the Commander, believing that the Saint best understands them as young people and can therefore help them in the realization of their dreams.

Based on that, young people, especially girls, maintain an agonizing fast for three or five days during the week preceding the feast day of the Saint. In any case, abstinence is the rule for that week.

Also, in earlier times, a wheat-and-flour meal (pokhintz, gruel) was

put on the corner of the roof, where St. Sergius would ride by on his horse. The next morning the members of the household would look to see the horseshoe imprints on the rooftop and they would gather up the meal and feed it to young people so they would attain their desires.

Two significant traditions were penned by Avetis Aharonian.

“On that feast day, using pure flour, they baked a very salty bun (kata). Young men and maidens ate of those buns in the evening and went to bed for the night without drinking water. If in their dreams they gave or received water from the object of their love, that was a sign that their wishes would be realized.

“On Saturdays, in bringing their abstinence to a close, young men and girls placed their first bit of food on the rooftop, and monitored it to see which morsel the crow, which does not usually leave the village in winter, takes, or in what direction it flies with the morsel of food. These would be indication of which girls would become lifemates.”

GLOSSARY—NOTES

CONCERNING THE VISIT TO ARMENIA BY ST. SERGIUS THE COMMANDER:

St. Nerses, Full of Grace, wrote that the visit occurred when Tiran was King of Armenia (339-359). Arshak II was King of Armenia (359-368) during the reign of Julian the Apostate (361-363).