

## FOR TEENS: Sts. Vartan and Ghevont—Profiles in Faith

(A 20-minute reflection for high schoolers)

February is a month generally associated with remembrances of the famous Battle of Avarayr in 451, of the Armenian Christian soldier St. Vartan, and of those great men—such as the priest Ghevont—who were at his side at one of Armenia's darkest hours. This year's church feasts of St. Ghevont and St. Vartan are February 25 and 27 respectively. Try this with older students.

Have students read the meditation below. These were adapted from a marvelous DRE resource for your classroom and/or devotional life entitled *Profiles in Faith: Meditations on the Lives of the Saints*. Ask your superintendent to purchase copies (see *DRE Curriculum and Resource Catalog*). *Profiles in Faith* was written by the very talented Albert Keshgegian and released last year as part of the 1700th anniversary celebration.

The reading can be done in pairs, small groups, or as a class. Then have each group tell as much about the story as they can recall. A recorder can write down key words on the board. End sessions with reflection questions and then the prayer.

### St. Vartan

We don't often think about how fortunate we really are in the United States. Most of us have all that we need to live—good food, comfortable homes, nice clothing—and we have religious freedom. We can belong to whatever church or religion we want. We take this for granted. So on Sunday morning, if we feel like it we get into the car and drive to the Armenian Church. Our neighbor might be Episcopalian, Roman Catholic, or even Jewish or Muslim. It really doesn't matter.

It wasn't that way in 451. Armenians were part

of the Persian empire. The Persians weren't Christian and didn't even believe in God. They followed the religion of Mazdeism, which included worship of fire. The Persian king wanted to force the Armenians to give up Christianity and adopt Mazdeism. He sent a large army, including 220,000 soldiers and an armored elephant brigade, against the Armenians. Vartan Mamigonian led a much smaller Armenian army of 66,000 against the Persians. Ghevont was one of the primary leaders against the Persian king. He had led an uprising against the Persian priests who had come to Armenia to convert churches into fire temples. Before the Battle of Avarayr he addressed the soldiers and exhorted them to sacrifice themselves for the sake of God's immortal power, as Jesus had sacrificed himself for us. Ghevont has been called the soul of the movement of Christian resistance.

The Armenians knew that they might die, but they were prepared to lose their lives, to make the greatest sacrifice possible, for their right to worship God and be followers of Christ. As they had replied to the Persian king at the Council of Artashat two years earlier:

From this faith, no one can shake us, neither angels nor men; neither sword nor fire, nor water, nor all other horrid tortures. All our goods and possessions are in your hands, our bodies are before you; dispose of them as you will. . . . We choose no other God than Jesus Christ for there is no other God . . . [Christ] himself . . . so loved us that he took death on himself, that we, by his death, might be freed from eternal death . . . We . . . will die for his love willingly. . . .

And they did die, St. Vartan and 1,036 of those brave people, at the Battle of Avarayr on May 26 (some say June 2), 451. But their fight did not end. Armenians continued their resistance against the Persians. St. Vartan's nephew, Vahan Mamigonian, successfully used guerilla warfare tactics, gaining a



peace agreement in 484. Armenia was finally allowed autonomy and freedom to practice Christianity. This was the first time that a people were allowed to have freedom to choose their religion, something that we take for granted today.

Why did the Armenians feel so strongly about their religion? Why were they willing to die for Christ? Death means the end of life here on earth. It means that we can't do all the things that make us happy. No more vacations at the seashore. No more dinners at a nice restaurant. It means that we no longer own all those "things" that we like to say are "ours." No more second homes or sports cars or diamond rings.

The Vartanians didn't have these things; such pleasures weren't around hundreds of years ago. But the Vartanians had other things, and they were willing to give it all up—"our goods, our possessions, our bodies are yours." Why?

Our life on earth is short. It might seem like a long time, but it really isn't. We can enjoy what we have here. But our life in heaven will be long, and much more important than our life on earth. If we have to suffer on earth and make sacrifices, we should, if what we do is right and brings us joy in heaven.

St. Vartan and his companions knew this. Consider what they said about Jesus. Jesus was God; he was powerful. Yet he chose to suffer on earth and even to die. Out of love for us. Because Jesus knew that doing so would bring us something wonderful later on—being with God in his kingdom. The Vartanians knew that one can suffer, and sacrifice, and even die, if it is for the joy and happiness of the Kingdom of God. They knew that pleasures on earth are less important.

Do we know this today? We're not usually asked today to die for our religion. Many people before us, like St. Vartan, did just that, so that we would have religious freedom. But that same message of St. Vartan is still there for us. It says: Don't get caught up in the pleasures of this world. Sure they're enjoyable, but there is something more important—eternal life with God in heaven—even if we have to sacrifice some of our current pleasures.

God asks us to come to church on Sunday, even if we have to miss the brunch at the local restaurant. God asks us to give to the poor, even if we have to give away the money that we would have spent on another cashmere sweater or football game. God asks us to spend some time helping other people, even if we can't relax by the pool as long as we want to. St. Vartan had a very hard choice, but for him it was easy. He said yes to God. The sacrifices God asks us to make today are much smaller. What will *our* answer be?



### Reflection Questions

1. How does God call me to serve him?
2. What events have tested my faith?
3. What can I do to strengthen my faith in God?

### PRAYER

Lord, you call us all to serve you,  
Each in our own special way.  
May we have the courage to respond  
to your call.

May we put ourselves into your loving hands  
And, like St. Vartan, have faith from which  
No one and nothing can shake us.