

# Hovhannes of Otzoon



## GROWTH AND ORGANIZATION OF THE CHURCH

In 720 Catholicos Hovhannes called a Church Assembly to adopt a set of rules to enable him to carry out a program of reform for the Armenian Church. As the church was growing in numbers many inconsistencies in ritualistic teachings and practices had crept into the church with a threat to contaminate its purity. More than thirty bishops attended the assembly. The

assembly enacted a set of 32 rules, among which the most significant were the following:

1. No ordained member of the clerical order shall become intoxicated.
2. No marriage ceremony shall be performed Saturdays after sunset.
3. The altar where badarak is celebrated, and the baptismal font, shall be of solid stone and immovable.

4. Association with followers of cults alien to the creed and principles of the Armenian Church shall be prohibited.

Some of these canons or rules had already been adopted earlier by former assemblies but they existed only as a mass of papers lying loosely in a corner of a room of the Holy See (Etchmiadzin). Hovhannes undertook the important task of classifying the archives. He studied the rules one by one and published them in a single volume called the "Book of Canons of the Armenian Church." It contained 37 chapters and was grouped in six principal divisions:

1. Traditional rules of the universal Christian Church.

2. Traditional rules of the Armenian Church.

3. Rules adopted by ecumenical councils (Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus).

4. Rules adopted by other assembled councils of Ankara, Caesarea, Antioch.

5. Rules proclaimed by metropolitan bishops and such as Magar of Jerusalem, Parsegh of Caesarea, Cyril of Alexandria.

6. Rules enacted by national church assemblies and supreme patriarchs of the Armenian Church.

Today there is a need for the re-evaluation of the ancient canons, at least those that are found to be relevant and applicable in our times.

## HOVHANNES OF OTZOOON THE PHILOSOPHER

Hovhannes was born in the village of Otzoon of the province of Dashirk, during the 8th century. It is believed that he received his early education in local schools, but his secondary education was obtained under the private tutorship of Greek educators.

He is also known as "John the Philosopher" because of his extensive education in the sciences and philosophy. He was an excellent orator and writer. Hovhannes was a strong theologian of the orthodox faith and actively

denounced heretical groups that were increasing in Armenia at that time.

St. John of Otzoon is the fifth catholicos after St. Nersess III, the Builder. During his reign as Catholicos, he was successful in gaining political favor with the Arabs and severing association with the Byzantine Empire. In 654, the Arabs established a government in Dvin which was headed by a deputy governor, Abd-el-Aziz, or "the grand emir."

The grand emir was a simple man



and knowledgeable about the Christian faith. He had heard rumors about Catholicos Hovhannes who was described as a man of unusual charm, looks, and elegant attire. He is said to have groomed himself with oils and sprinkled his long beard with gold dust, as was the custom of the day. The grand emir requested the Catholicos to be his guest and to wear his most exquisite garments.

In the spring of 719, Catholicos Hovhannes and his staff of assistants arrived in Damascus. After the patriarch rested awhile from his long journey, he presented himself to the emir with such a display of splendor that his host gasped in admiration. Still dazzled by the magnificent appearance of his illustrious guest, the emir inquired: "I have heard that your prophet Jesus was meek and humble, loved poverty over riches, wore modest and ordinary clothing and taught his disciples to do the same. Even your own predecessors led a frugal life and preferred humility to luxury. How is it that you, their successor, groom yourself so richly?" The patriarch replied, "It is true that our Lord Jesus Christ lived very humbly, so did his apostles and the patriarchs following them. But they possessed the power of miracles through which they influenced the people, who were strengthened by these works. Therefore, the apostles did not need any external signs, which we do, since we don't have the same power. Just as you use external symbols of clothing and arms to reflect your authority, so do we, but that is only for the externals."

Then he asked the emir to order everyone to leave the room. When the

two men were left alone, the Catholicos removed his clothes to expose an undergarment made of camel's hair worn on his skin, which through friction had rendered the skin tender. The emir said, "You are truly a holy man. You may ask for whatever you desire and it will be granted."

Hovhannes desired nothing for himself, but asked a favor for his people who were suffering because of their Christian faith. He asked for freedom of religion for Christians, the right of free worship wherever they may be found, and that all churches and clergymen be declared tax-exempt, and no dues, duties, and excises of any nature be collected from them.

The emir was pleased with the reasonableness of the request and praised Hovhannes 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.



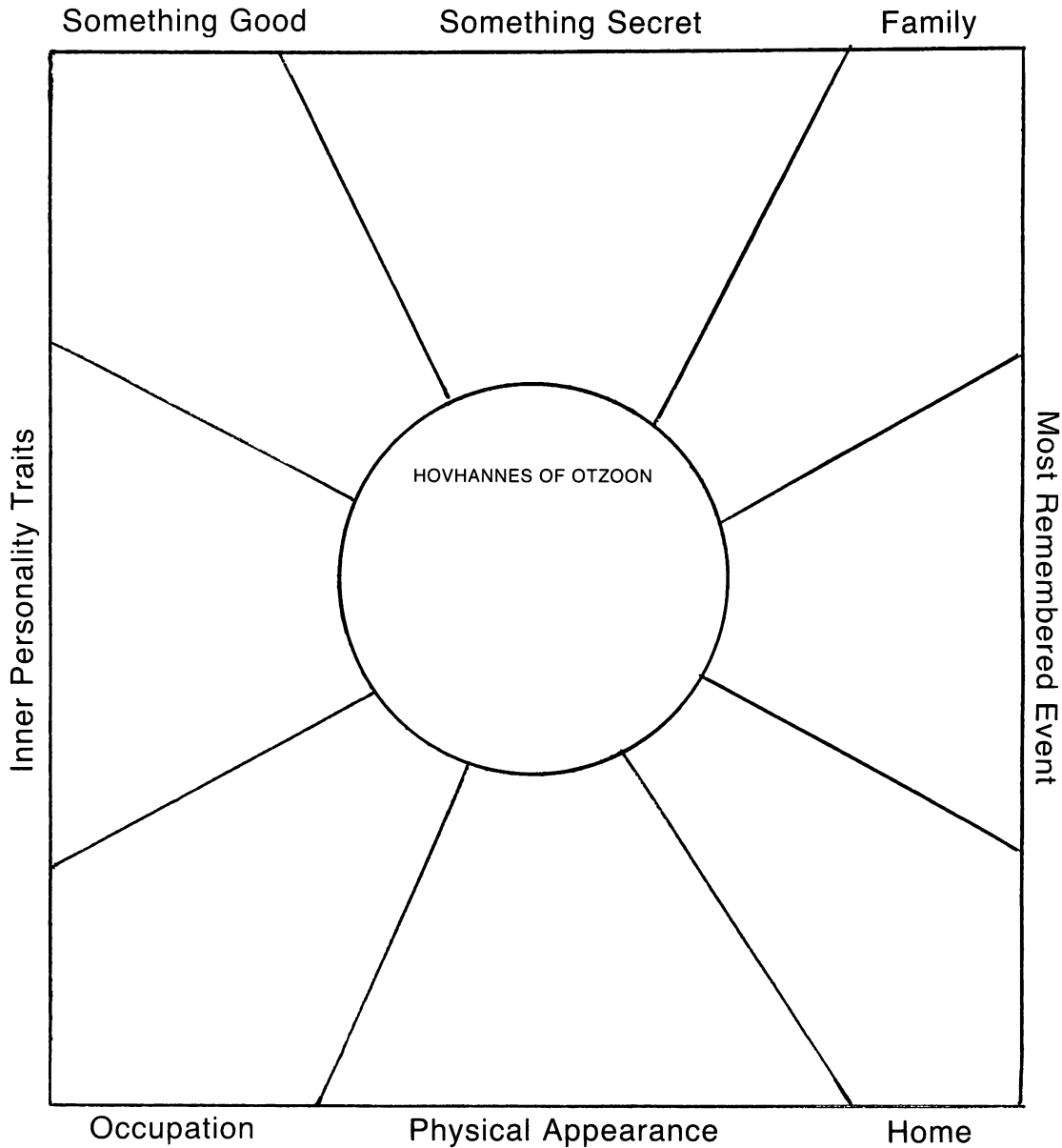






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*In the center of the circle is the name of Hovhannes of Otzoon. Draw an illustration of what you think he looked like. Now, read the labels around the outside of the square. In each space, write at least one phrase or sentence that tells something about that category in the life of the person whose name appears in the circle.*





Christianity, meets with King Drtad of Armenia, to try to persuade him to follow Jesus Christ. If he succeeds, Armenia will be the first Christian state in the world.

b. Scene: St. Athanasius goes to the Council of Nicaea to debate the Arians. The Arian philosophy is that "there was a time when the Son was not." It is in direct conflict with the teachings of the Holy Trinity. The Arians feel that Christ was not God, but a mere creature of the earth. St. Athanasius describes Christ "of one substance with the Father" which is stated in the Nicene Creed.

c. Scene: St. Cyril of Alexandria attends the Council of Constantinople to debate the teachings of Nestorius. Nestorius believes that Christ was not the Son of God and, therefore, it would follow that Mary is *not* the Mother of God.

d. Scene: A school lunchroom. The discussion is whether or not God really exists. Or, do we believe in God because our parents and church teach us of his existence?

The class can use a Bible, *Great Stories: From the History of the Armenian Church* by Hagop Nersoyan, and excerpts from the Nicene Creed for reference material.

Allow approximately 10-15 minutes for research and the remaining time for debate. (30 min.)

5. *Homework:* Parent/pupil worksheet: "What Is a True Christian?"

## Session 3—Hovhannes of Otzoon

### Key Concepts

1. Catholicos Hovhannes adopted a set of rules, or canons, which helped to organize the Armenian Church during a period of rapid growth.
2. He published these laws in a single volume, "Book of Canons of the Armenian Church."
3. The canons of the Armenian Church help to keep its teachings and practices pure, and free from error.

### Objectives

Students will

1. List canons of the Armenian Church.
2. Use a Bible Concordance to find references to "intoxication."
3. Discuss each canon in the lesson, how it relates to us today, and what special meaning it holds as part of our tradition.

### Background for Teacher

Hovhannes of Otzoon, or St. John the Philosopher as he is also called, was born in the 8th century in the village of Otzoon, in close proximity to the city

of Lori. The exact date of his birth is unknown. Nothing has been written about his childhood, family background, or friends. It is believed that he received his early education in local schools, but his more advanced learning was obtained in Hellenic schools under the private tutorship of Greek educators.

There is no reliable information about his ordination as a priest or his consecration as a bishop. But it is to be assumed that he followed the course of his predecessors and was advanced step by step. Historians have described him as a man of unusual charm, looks, and elegant attire. But his character marked him as a different person. Hovhannes was as humble, meek, and kind as Jesus wished his followers to be. He suffered quietly for Jesus each day when he dressed in his decorative attire. Underneath this facade was a shaggy garb made of coarse goat's hair which irritated his tender skin. He offered these tiny sufferings up to Jesus to show his great love for the Lord.

Hovhannes was a learned man and earned himself the title of "Philosopher" due to his knowledge of the sciences. He used his education to organize the Armenian Church and its canons. No one had ever taken up the task of organizing and classifying the canons that had already been adopted by former assemblies. But as the church grew in numbers, there was a great need for organization in teachings and practices so the church would remain pure and consistent in character.

In order to achieve his purpose Hovhannes 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 assembly enacted 32 rules, or canons, among which the most significant were the following:

- No ordained member of the clergy shall become intoxicated.
- No marriage ceremony shall be performed Saturdays after sunset.
- The altar where badarak is to be celebrated and the baptismal font shall be of solid stone and immovable.

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 (muron), the use of the cross, symbols, and flabellum (kshotz), etc. Hovhannes classified all this information and published the "Book of Canons of the Armenian Church."

### Materials Needed

- Bibles
- Candles
- Bible Concordance

### Procedure

1. Review parent/pupil worksheet. Discuss briefly how



people have served the Church in the past through councils and conversions. (5 min.)

2. Worship Service—Suggested Bible reading: I Peter 5:4-11; pray the Creed as an affirmation of faith. (5 min.)

### 3. Discussion

a. Take a few minutes to think about all the things you have done to prepare yourself for today, starting from the time before you went to bed until this morning when you first awoke. Did you lay out your clothing for Sunday services the night before? Were your Sunday School books in order? Was your church offering ready to be brought to church? How organized were you to begin your day?

b. Each Sunday you arrive at Sunday School with your Bible, offering, textbook, notebook, journal, and last week's homework assignment—at least that is our hope. Are your notes all in order? Is your journal organized so that sometime in the future it will be a good resource for you? Will your notes be good reference material for you or a younger brother or sister?

c. Why do you think it is important to be organized? (The students will give various responses. Focus upon the idea of being organized so we can easily find things or answers to questions.) We need to be consistent. For example, if we did not have encyclopedias and dictionaries, it would be very difficult for us to find information on topics of interest to us.

d. Name some people for whom it is important to be highly organized. (The President of the United States; a teacher; businessmen; authors; secretaries; the parish priest.)

e. People who are organized have certain *rules* or guidelines they must follow. That is why they are organized. They know exactly where to locate information which is pertinent to their job.

f. It is not easy to be organized, as some of us will know. In the early history of the Church, there were problems of organization and a lack of rules for all the Armenian churches to follow in order that they be consistent with the teachings of the orthodox faith.

There were various councils (or meetings) of bishops that took place to decide upon how to organize the Church and what canons, or laws, the Church should follow.

Unfortunately, no one ever recorded the outcome of these councils into a book for all the churches to follow, until Hovhannes of Otzoon assumed the task of classifying all information that existed concerning the canons of the Church.

Why do you think it would be important for all churches to have this book in their possession? (Each church could use it as a book of rules to follow in teaching people about the Armenian faith. The teaching would be the same thus keeping the doc-

trine of the Armenian faith free from erroneous intrusions.)

g. What types of rules would a church need? (The church needs rules concerning the sacraments; the Divine Liturgy; the life-style of priests, bishops and other clergy members.) (10-15 min.)

4. Open your text to "Growth and Organization of the Church." Take a few minutes to read student text silently. Ask the class for examples of rules incorporated into the canons of the Armenian Church. They should give four.

- No ordained member of the clerical order shall become intoxicated.

- No marriage ceremony shall be performed Saturdays after sunset.

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

- Association with followers of cults alien to the Creed and principles of the Armenian Church shall be prohibited.

There are also canons containing provisions about communion, baptism, prerogatives of the clergy of various ranks to consecrate and administer holy oil (muron), the use of the cross, symbols, and flabellum (kshotz).

Instruct the students to *underline* the canons listed in their textbooks.

Using a Bible Concordance, have the class look up "intoxication." Find several references to the subject, and then ask the question: Why do you feel the Armenian Church thought it important that a member of the clergy not become intoxicated?

Some references to intoxication: Proverbs 20:1-2 (provokes anger.); I Cor. 11:21,22 (disorderliness).

(A member of the clergy is a representative of Jesus Christ. The Bible, being the Word of God, speaks against intoxication. Therefore, a member of the clergy as a representative of Jesus, could not be found in a state of intoxication. This is an important rule of the Armenian Church, to protect the purity of Jesus.)

The next canon states: "No marriage ceremony shall be performed Saturdays after sunset." Why do you think this is an important rule of the Church? (Marriage should be solemnized in the Church on such days as the Church has appointed for the administration of Holy Matrimony. In the Armenian Church, as in all eastern churches, the new day begins after sunset of the previous day. The sacrament of Holy Matrimony cannot be performed before the Divine Liturgy is celebrated.)

Another canon states that the altar where the Divine Liturgy is celebrated, and the baptismal font, shall be of solid stone and immovable. Why do you think they should be immovable?

The last canon states that we shall not associate with followers of cults alien to the Creed and prin-



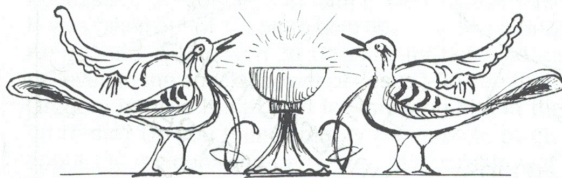
ciples of the Armenian Church. Why is this important as a rule in our church? (The Creed is an affirmation of our faith. It contains all the teachings of our church and everything we believe in. Followers of "cults" do not have faith in Jesus, or God, but follow a "person" who is the head of their cult. They are enticed or lured into this following through the encouragement of the leader of the cult. Jesus asks us to follow him of our own free will. Therefore, following a cult would be against the teachings of Jesus and our church.) (25-30 min.)

5. The Armenian Church is lucky to have had Hovhannes of Otzoon as a Catholicos and leader of the Church. As a result of his great interest in keeping the Church's teachings pure, the Church today carries on its tradition in the Divine Liturgy, celebrating the sacraments, etc. The Church's strength lies in the consistency of its teaching, and the faithfulness of its followers.

Hovhannes' influence is still present today as we use the "Book of Canons" to maintain the traditional teachings of the Church. This man must have been a very interesting person, especially one who loved "tradition." (10 min.)

6. For *homework*, read "Hovhannes of Otzoon—the Philosopher," and do the "Character Composite." See a sample "composite" on the next page. Special notebooks on Bible characters studied can be reinforced this way. The children can also choose their own "character composites" and at the end of the year have a wealth of information. If there is time to do this assignment during class, allow the students to begin their reading.

Send out letters to parents.



## Session 4—Martyrdom and Rebirth

### Key Concepts

1. As Christians we should practice "forgiving and forgetting," so that we might live in a spirit of brotherhood.
2. In rare circumstances, such as the Genocide, it is possible to "forgive," but to "forget" would be doing the entire world an injustice. Mankind must always remember the holocaust of the Armenians so

they will be capable of preventing it from happening again.

### Objectives

Students will

1. Illustrate Bible verses with the theme, "Forgive and Forget."
2. Read excerpts from an autobiography of a survivor of the Genocide.
3. Tell how we can best teach the lesson of "forgiveness" for the massacres by the Turks so that we might be able to live in a spirit of unity and brotherhood.
4. Tell why the Armenian people, and the entire world, should never "forget" the first holocaust of the 20th century.

### Background for Teacher

In the twentieth century, our nation went through a mass martyrdom when in 1915 close to two million people gave their lives under circumstances beyond imagination. We have mourned this tragedy and wept often with feelings of resentment, depression, anger, and frustration. One important thing to remember is the fact that a nation becomes great in proportion to its martyrs, whose blood is the seed of the following generations.

Armenia has had many heroes who have valiantly shed their blood for God's love and his principles. The Church *is* the Church of martyrs, the martyred body of the Supreme Martyr. Thus, the continuous persecutions and martyrdoms become one of the signs of the true Church of Christ, the Lamb who took away the sins of the world by the shedding of his blood.

Through martyrdom a disciple is transformed into the image of his Master who freely accepted the death of the cross for the salvation of the world, and bought for himself a new and holy people by the price of his blood. The martyrs of our nation have also guaranteed the life of coming generations in the paths of the same sacred principles passed on to us by our ancestors. They did not die in vain. They made us a staunch nation, exalted by the glory of their martyrdom. It is because of this that we should "forgive" our persecutors and know in our hearts that God has special intentions for the Armenian people. But, we can never *forget*. . . .!

The theme of this lesson will be "forgiveness." In most circumstances we as Christians should "forgive" the wrong-doer and "forget" about the injustice done to us. But in rare instances, such as the Genocide, we would be doing future generations an injustice if we did not make them aware of the holocaust. It is important for the whole world to remember such events, that they may never be allowed to occur again.