

# The Armenian Church in the New World



## The Pilgrims Find Freedom

The king of England proclaimed that the faith of his church would be imposed on all his subjects. However, living in Great Britain were many people, actual communities, which viewed the practices of the church to be harmful to the faith in their Lord Jesus.

Their view of Christianity was a simple and pure one, without rules, traditions, customs. Only the Bible was necessary and a freedom to personally respond to God.

Under threat of persecution and death these "purists" or Puritans sought refuge in a new world. Knowing that their future was bleak where they lived, their only alternative was to find a place in the world where they could live without fear of persecution. It was the new world, America.

Boarding the Mayflower in 1620, they left England, still uncertain of their fate, yet hopeful

that God would provide for them. Their journey was long, but the bright day of new life came in the fall of 1620 when they docked in Plymouth, Massachusetts, and set foot in the new world where they could worship, and celebrate a true thanksgiving for deliverance and survival.

## The Armenian Church Community Finds New Life

Following the fall of the Ottoman Turkish Empire, the Armenian Christian people were subject to the ultimate persecution. Their Christian unity aroused such insecurity in the Turkish overlords that a systematic process of





genocide was begun which resulted in mass death and deportation. Because we refused to denounce Christ and convert to Islam and because we were Armenians whose very existence embodied the moral teachings of Christ, we were forced to flee for survival and build a new life with the remnant of the community that survived.

Because of earlier persecutions, there already existed in America a small community of Armenians who lived in Worcester, Massachusetts. Seeing no hope of returning to their historic homeland, they rooted themselves in this new land and encouraged their compatriots to follow. By 1889 a sizable community was established in Worcester. Here the Armenians lived among the Finnish, Swedish, and Danish people who had also come to the New World. The visible symbol of their identity as Christians became the focal point of their community efforts; they built the first Armenian church in America. Their sufferings became their blessings and in 1891 in Worcester, Massachusetts, the first house of worship was consecrated and named Holy Savior Armenian Church. This was only the beginning of the huge community of believers that was to converge in America.

## PERSECUTION AND REACTION

Read the following statements and respond to them. Be honest!

1. You've worked for five years at your present job, but someone new in your department (less than a year) is given a promotion over you.

Your reaction is: \_\_\_\_\_

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2. Every year some of your friends are given an excused absence from school in observance of their holidays; this year you and several Armenian students missed class because of April 24 but you were marked absent.

Your reaction is: \_\_\_\_\_

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3. Your country is ruled by a dictator and you have just learned that your church will be closed.

Your reaction is: \_\_\_\_\_

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4. You are a committed Christian and believe prayer is a necessary part of your daily life, but you just learned that most of the students at your college have no religious life and really don't want one.

How would you react? \_\_\_\_\_

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The faithful remnant of our persecuted people formed our foundation here in the United States. In 1891, Bishop Hovsep Sarajian consecrated not only the Holy Savior Armenian Church, but also consecrated the "new" re-born, reaffirmed community.

The survivors of these dark days of suffering were rewarded; as Christ himself said:

"Blessed are you when men shall revile you and persecute you . . . Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven."

## A Testimony of Deliverance

**Interview the Survivors:** During the next week ask the following questions at home to your immediate family or to people you know in

your church community who have survived the persecutions and genocide of 1915. Collect your answers and bring them to class next week when you will share their personal faith-response in that time of struggle.

(You might need an interpreter if you don't speak Armenian.)

*Questions:*

1. What kept you going, even though you had suffered many losses?
2. Did you ever pray with other people who were also suffering?
3. Were you afraid to say you were an Armenian Christian?
4. Did you ever feel like giving up your Christian faith?
5. Do you think those who gave up being Christian and became Moslems really knew what they were doing?
6. How did you help or support each other as the Armenian community?
7. How did you feel when you escaped the Turkish sword?
8. What can we young people today do to honor our Armenian confessors and martyrs of the Christian faith?

If no personal interviews can be conducted, select one of the following titles and *read* a survivor's story:

*The Cup of Bitterness* by Antranig Antreassian  
*Passage to Ararat* by Michael Arlen  
*The Urchin* by Kerop Bedoukian  
*Daughter of the Euphrates* by Elizabeth Caraman  
*The Road from Home* by David Kherdian  
*Rebirth* by Elizabeth Hagopian Taft  
*Scenes from an Armenian Childhood* by Vahan Totovents

or denial of that truth.

### Materials Needed

- Divine Liturgy books

### Procedure

1. Opening prayer: The Nicene Creed. (2 min.)
2. Begin the class with a discussion on religious freedom. Make the statement: "A Christian believes that freedom is a necessary condition for faith." What must we be able to do with our faith? How can we freely express it? (By expressing it personally in our lives, developing value systems, teaching others, sharing with those who possess it, showing it in our works and deeds, defending the faith from those who may try to destroy it.) Discuss. (5 min.)
3. Have the students do the activity, "Free to Make A Choice." Point out that freedom is the ability to choose right from wrong; freedom means the ability to make the right decision, to choose and follow the truth and stick with it no matter what. Discuss their answers briefly. (10 min.)
4. Now read "The Christian Community Defends the Truth" and "The Armenian Church Fights Heretics" in the student text, pages 80-81.

Points to stress about the anathema: It was primarily written against Arius/Arianism; it means that the Church rejects those who teach that the Son and Holy Spirit are created from nothing—meaning they did not pre-exist with God—and further that both Son and Holy Spirit are different from one another (destroying the concept of the Holy Trinity).

Ask students if, after this brief study, they are aware of any heresies or heretics today. (20 min.)

5. Read these two descriptions of modern day heresies:

#### a. *Jehovah's Witnesses*

This body strongly repeats the doctrine of Arius, rejecting Christ's Incarnation and his origin with God the Father, viewing him as created, and also the Holy Spirit as created, and denying the concept of the Holy Trinity.

#### b. *The "Moonies" or Unification Church*

This doctrine destroys the entire concept of the Holy Trinity. The Moonies do not accept Christ as God, but see him as a "good Jesus," an ideal person. Only his goodness existed from the beginning with God the Father, but certainly not his energy, his life, his Being, or his Spirit, which we Orthodox Christians proclaim. The Moonies also state that the Trinity does not exist. They use the same words to render different meanings. For example: God, the Creator; Jesus, Goodness as a person; Holy Spirit, Peace-maker as a person.

All are separate entities. (5 min.)

6. Now let the students defend their Christian faith in terms of their own knowledge of the creed, liturgy,

Fathers, etc. Have pairs of students role play in front of the class, one acting as a Jehovah's Witness or Moonie and the other as a member of the Armenian Church. If students are reluctant, *you* take the adversary's role and have *them* defend their faith.

(15 min.)

7. Read "Defending Our Faith Today" in text. (3 min.)

## Session 3—The Armenian Church in the New World

### Key Concepts

1. Persecution can lead to renewal.
2. The faith-heritage of the Armenian Church entered a new era in the new world.
3. The pluralism in the American nation and the concept of freedom pose further challenges to the community of faithful called the "Church of Armenia."

### Objectives

Students will

1. Examine the Beatitudes for a reappraisal of God's values.
2. Compare the accounts of the Pilgrims, who fled to America from religious persecution, with the persecutions and immigration of Armenians.
3. Do an exercise on individual persecution.
4. Prepare to interview a survivor or read a survivor's testimony.

### Background for Teacher

The Christian community, despite persecutions and heretics, was always able to sustain the faith and renew her commitment to the original expression of belief. Paradoxically, persecution promoted a spirit of renewal and reaffirmation. The faith-heritage had indeed become the fabric of life for the early Church and the communities that followed. The faith in Jesus as savior was no longer just a personal response to the established faith by the entire community but it became a duty of the whole church to protect that faith.

In the histories of the Christian communities throughout the world we have seen how those "persecuted for righteousness' sake" have inherited the kingdom of heaven. This was Christ's very own promise to us all, that despite the obstacles, our personal faith-response in protecting the truth would ultimately make us free and bring us into heaven.

We have read how persecuted Christians fled the pressures of authority in search of freedom in America. The Puritans, the Pilgrims who landed on our shores in 1620 at Plymouth, Massachusetts, fled



from conditions that prevented them from freely responding to their faith. This was an experience that was not new, nor exclusive to them.

Since 301 A.D. our faith community has likewise been plagued by persecution, suffering, heresy and other impediments to the truths of God expressed by our faith. The persecutions of the early confessors and martyrs brought witness to a sense of renewal and re-affirmation. St. Gregory's suffering witnessed to Christ, and gave courage to the community. St. Hripsimeh's choice of martyrdom gave confidence to the community that the value of life could only prevail with Christ. The same was true of St. Vartan and his soldiers who chose to fight for Christ's sake.

The most recent trials of our church are still fresh in our minds: the horrible persecutions by the Ottoman Turkish Empire in 1915. The sword could not prevail over the spirit of God and Christ's very own presence within the fabric of our people's life.

Indeed the torments were many; death was a reality at every moment. But what resulted beyond the tragic loss of human life was a heightened sense of survival and faith.

As a result of persecution, a journey of faith to this land of freedom took place. Here our "old world" community took new roots. In America, in Lebanon, in the countries of Europe, the Armenian Church began a slow but successful process of recovery. The challenges of the differing responses to the faith by the presence of other Christian communions have brought us to examine more closely the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church as she witnesses to the faith of our fathers.

#### Materials Needed

- Bibles

#### Procedure

1. Read the Beatitudes—Matthew 5:1-11. (2 min.)

Ask class to think again of examples of persecution that the church has encountered. (Martyrdom, confessorship, heresy, false teachers, etc.) (3 min.)

3. Read again together the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-11, after making the statement: "The Beatitudes taught by Christ proclaim God's favor toward those who aspire to live under his rule."

Ask students to read the Beatitudes line by line, and give their "personal" response to the statements made by Christ. Perhaps some words and phrases should be defined: Poor in spirit (those who need to grow in their faith); comforted (implies strengthening); pure in heart (sincerity); peacemakers (those who earnestly work for peace).

Now stress the point that no one anywhere is free from the evils of persecution; but that by enduring, our reward of rebirth and reaffirmation is possible; and that the early Church, as well as the Church to-

day, has experienced this. (10 min.)

4. Read the two short texts from the student book: "The Pilgrims Find Freedom," "The Armenian Church Community Finds New Life" (page 83).

Ask students to list five points of similarity between these two accounts. Write them on the blackboard for reference in your discussion. (15 min.)

5. "Persecution and Reaction."

Have the students do this exercise in their text. Allow them ample time to answer questions adequately. Ask if they have been personally persecuted because of their faith, and how they felt. What did they do or want to do? (20 min.)

6. Now review homework assignment to be shared at the next class session.

Go over the interview questions with the students. They should, if possible, interview an actual survivor of the 1915 Genocide or perhaps talk with one of the children of those survivors, asking about their parents' faith, endurance, hardships in coming to the new world. Otherwise, have students read from the personal testimonies. This exercise will give the students an opportunity to experience the depth of faith which is a personal response to persecution.

(10 min.)

## Session 4—A Family of Churches

### Key Concepts

1. The body of Christ grows.
2. Interpretations and opinions of faith and doctrine create differences.
3. The Armenian Church expresses the Christian faith in her unique and diverse way through tradition, language, music, and thought.
4. The Oriental Orthodox witness the life of the early church community.

### Objectives

Students will

1. Report on survivor interviews or written testimonies.
2. Read about the formation of differing faith communities resulting from new interpretations—opinions of Scripture, theology, doctrine, and the concept of Christian community.

### Background for Teacher

Throughout history, as the believing community grew in separate kingdoms, varying interpretations and opinions of the faith and of doctrine created communions that differed slightly or greatly from one another. The original faith, re-interpreted by some, was gradually diluted and was almost dissolved completely.