History of Armenia
The Armenian Kingdom Of Cilicia
Christianity in Armenia can be traced back to the age of the Apostles. The Apostolic Church of Armenia acknowledges as its original founders two of the twelve Apostles of Christ, St. Thaddeus and St. Bartholomew, who evangelized in Armenia, and were martyred there. It was at the beginning of the fourth century, during the reign of King Trirdates III, and through the missionary efforts of St. Gregory that Christianity was declared and adopted as the official religion of Armenia in 301 A.D.

Until the 5th century, Christian worship in Armenia was conducted in Greek or Syriac. In 404 A.D., St. Mesrob together with the Catholicos St. Sahag (387-439), having the financial assistance and collaboration of King Vramshabouh, invented the Armenian alphabet in 404, which became a decisive and crucial event for Armenian Christianity. Soon after with a number of disciples, St. Mesrob worked on the translation of the Bible and a large number of religious and theological works were translated into Armenian, and the golden age of classical Armenian literature began shortly thereafter. This “cultural revolution” gave national identity and led to one of the most creative and prolific periods in the history of Armenian culture.

The Armenian Apostolic Church aligns herself with the non-Chalcedonian or with lesser-Eastern-Orthodox churches, namely: Syrian Orthodox Church; Coptic Orthodox Church; Ethiopian Orthodox Church. They all accept the first three Ecumenical Councils of Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), and Ephesus (431).

The Armenian Church has traditionally maintained two Catholicosates: The Catholicos of Etchmiadzin in Armenia, and Catholicosate of Holy See of Cilicia in Antelias-Lebanon. Two Patriarchates: One in Jerusalem established in 1281, is the guardian of the Holy Places in the possession of the Armenians, and is one of the three principal custodians of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher as well as other important shrines and sanctuaries in the Holy Land. The Patriarchate of Constantinople established in 1461, serves a community of approximately 50,000 Armenians living in Istanbul. Throughout difficult times and its upheaval trial history, the Holy Armenian Apostolic Church has been her people’s rock of faith, fountain of light and ark of salvation; remained the courageous shepherd which gave her identity; has been responsive to the needs of the people; has been closely identified with the joy and suffering; victory and defeat as well as assured her resurrection.
In 1065, when the Armenian kingdom of Bagratid fell under the invasion and attacks of the Seljuks, a great number of Armenians came to settle in Cilicia, which rapidly grew in strength and became a kingdom. From the 11th to the 14th centuries the center of Armenian national and ecclesiastical life was in Cilicia where the city of Sis was made the Capital City. This is why the Catholicosate of Cilicia is sometimes referred to as “the Catholicosate of Sis.” In 1375 the kingdom of Cilicia was destroyed by the Mameluks of Egypt. The Catholicosate continued in Sis and took upon herself the most difficult charge of leading the nation. When the kingdom of Cilicia fell and the situation in Cilicia was deteriorating, bishops and leaders made plans to elect a Catholicos in Etchmiadzin, the original and highly venerated place of the Catholicosate which had ceased to function as a Catholicosal See since the year 485. Thus, in 1441, in Etchmiadzin they elected Kirakos Virapetsi as Catholicos, while Krikor Mousabekiantz was still living and was the Catholicos in Cilicia. Therefore, since 1441, there have been two Catholicoses in the Armenian Church with equal rights and privileges and with their respective jurisdictions. For five centuries the two Catholicates, for the most part, have worked harmoniously, in a spirit of cooperation. Both Catholicates prospered and served their peoples until 1914. With the outbreak of World War I, Turkey unleashed a Genocidal program of systematic extermination of the entire population of Western Armenia. More than 1.5 million Armenians were massacred. The rest were deported and dispersed to various parts of the world. The Catholicosate See in Sis was confiscated and ruined by the Turks. Catholicos Sahag II followed the exile of his flock. In 1930 he established the Catholicosate in Antelias, a suburb of Beirut, Lebanon. Thus, a new era began in the history of the Cilician Catholicosate with the organization of Dioceses and the founding of a new theological Seminary, from where a new generation of committed servants of God would come forth to take upon themselves the sacred mission of those clergymen who fell under the mortal blow of the Turkish massacres.

In order to fulfill this great task, Catholicos Sahag II, already advanced in age and deeply affected by the long suffering of his people, asked the help of Archbishop Babgen Gulessarian, who was enthroned as Coadjutor-Catholicos in 1931. Soon, a printing press was established in Antelias, a monthly review “Hask” was started together with religious, educational and historical publications. But the expectations of Catholicos Sahag II with
regard to his succession were not fulfilled. The Coadjutor-Catholicos Babgen, who was to succeed him, passed away in 1936.

The Archbishop of Cyprus, **Bedros Sarajian** was nominated Vicar-General. Soon the property of Antelias was purchased from the American Near East Relief which from 1922 to 1928 had run an Armenian orphanage on the grounds where the Catholicosate was established. A new building for the Seminary was first erected followed by and then the Cathedral. A chapel in memory of one and half million Armenian martyrs as well as a residence for the Catholicos were built.

Sahag II passed away in 1939. He was succeeded by Vicar-General, Petros I, who died the following year.

Subsequently, Archbishop **Karekin Hovsepiants**, the Prelate of the Armenian Church in North America was elected Catholicos in 1943. The Second World War had already started and he couldn’t come to Antelias until 1945, where his consecration took place. During his pontificate (1945-1952), the Catholicosate started a new period of spiritual, cultural and intellectual awakening. The Catholicos, himself being a great scholar, encouraged the higher studies in the Seminary; the academic curriculum was expanded; new and well-qualified professors were called to join the faculty; gave impetus to the publishing work. The scope of the work of the Catholicosate was considerably widened. This lasted until Karekin I died in 1952.

During the period from 1952 to 1956, an Electoral Assembly was called and postponed three different times. On February 20, 1956, an Electoral Assembly was convened by Bishop Khoren Paroyan, and Bishop **Zareh Pyaslian**, the Prelate of Syria, was elected Catholicos. A young, and devoted servant of God, the first graduate of the Seminary in Antelias, Catholicos Zareh I (1956-63) dedicated himself to the work of the Armenian Church and nation. During his short-lived pontifical ministry, the mission services of the Catholicosate was extended to the communities in Diasporan countries Greece, Persia and the United States, which for many years had been in desperate need of spiritual care and guidance. During his reign, particular attention was
given to the Seminary. His personal insights and saintly life influenced and encouraged the young Seminarists to graduated and enter the ministry of the Church. The relations of the Catholicosate with other Churches and the nations of the Middle East were strengthened. Unfortunately he died in 1963, at age 48, following a massive heart attack. His classmate and close associate, Archbishop Khoren Paroyan, the Primate of the Armenian Church in Lebanon, was elected to succeed him in 1963.

Under his Pontificate (1963-83), the Catholicosate went through an unprecedented era of achievements in various domains. The reign of Khoren I is remembered for the extensive physical improvements made not only within the Catholicosate, but the construction of schools and apartment buildings outside of Antelias. Under his devout efforts, guidance and leadership, the financial stability of the Catholicosate greatly improved. Khoren I, continued his deep involvement in the ecumenical movement, and through his efforts the Cilician See soon became a member and was represented in the World Council of Churches. In 1977, having suffered several heart attacks, his holiness wished to have a Coadjutor assist him and he called for an election of a Coadjutor-Catholicos. On May 1977, Archbishop Karekin Sarkissian, a Prelate in the United States, was elected as Coadjutor-Catholicos. Years later, Catholicos Khoren I, passed away in 1983.

Dedicated, dynamic, and determined are words most often used to describe Karekin II (1977-1999). During his many years of service to the Armenian Church and nation he has served in many capacities and to each he brought with him a rich intellectual and scholarly background, considerable administrative experience and a deep ecumenical understanding. Born in Kessab, Syria in 1932, he received his primary education in the village school, then he was admitted to the Cilician Seminary in Lebanon. He was ordained deacon in 1946 and then a celibate priest in 1952. In 1957 he attended Oxford University in England, where he received his B.Litt. in 1959. In the following years, until 1967, he served as Dean of the Seminary in Antelias, and editor of “Hask,” the Catholicosate’s official periodical. During this time he also represented the Cilician See in various ecumenical meetings in Athens, the Vatican, Lisbon, London, Geneva and Vienna. He was ordained and consecrated Bishop in 1964. He was elected Prelate of Julfa-Isfahan, in Iran, a post he held until his election as Prelate of the Eastern Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church of America in 1973. His election and consecration as Coadjutor-Catholicos in
1977, following the death of Khoren I in 1983, Karekin II assumed the full duties as Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia.

Karekin II continued the work of the late Catholicos Khoren I. He built new buildings for the Catholicosate, expanded the Seminary and was responsible for dozens of volumes being published by the Catholicosate’s press. However, the Lebanese civil-war, which started in 1975, created difficulties and unpredictable situations for both the Holy See and the Armenian population of Lebanon. Nevertheless, with his faith and determination, Karekin II gave hope for a brighter and peaceful future to the Armenian people. His personal efforts and several visits to Etchmiadzin resulted in brotherly atmosphere in which the somewhat tense relationship between Etchmiadzin and Cilician See was normalized.

With the election of Karekin II to the throne of the Holy See of Etchmiadzin in 1995, and the subsequent election of Archbishop Aram Keshishian, the Prelate of the Armenian Church in Lebanon to Catholicos of the Holy Cilician See, the Armenian nation both in Armenia and Diaspora came into a period of great understanding. With mutual respect, they resolved to work together for the great benefit of the Armenian Church and nation.

The Armenian people, spread all over the world, looked at the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia as the center of spiritual, religious, cultural as well as a national headquarters with great hopes and expectations. Indeed, the Theological Seminary of the Catholicosate has been regarded as the backbone of the Cilician See, where new, young, energetic, educated and highly trained religious leaders have come forward to serve the Armenian Church and various needs. In fact, in the last 75 years more than 400 teachers, 250 married priests, 80 vartabeds, 35 bishops and archbishops and 4 Catholicoi have graduated from the Seminary, served and still serving God, the Armenian Church, the Armenian people, nation and the Armenian homeland.

**His Holiness Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia 1995-**

**Education**

Born in 1947, in Beirut, Lebanon, His Holiness Catholicos Aram I studied at the Armenian Theological Seminary, Antelias, Lebanon and the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, Geneva, Switzerland. He received his M.Div. from the Near East School of Theology, his S.T.M. jointly from the American University of Beirut and Near East School of Theology, and his PhD from Fordham University in New York. He also holds several honorary degrees. His major areas of specialization are philosophy, systematic theology, and Near Eastern church history.

**Church Ministry**

Catholicos Aram I was ordained as a celibate priest in 1968 and obtained the title of Vartabed (Doctor of the Armenian
Church) in 1970. In 1979, after serving for one year as Locum Tenens, he was elected Primate of the Armenian Orthodox Community in Lebanon; the next year he received episcopal ordination. In June 1995, His Holiness was elected Catholicos (the Head of the Church) by the Electoral Assembly of the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia (35 clergy and 115 lay representatives), and was consecrated one week later.

Called to serve as Primate of the Armenian Community of Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil War, His Holiness reorganized parishes and schools, restructured and reactivated church-related institutions, and renewed community leadership.

As Head of Church, he:

- reorganized and revitalized the work of the Church, particularly in the areas of theological formation, Christian education, publications, communications, cultural activities, youth, justice and peace and human rights.
- realized several construction projects in the Catholicosate, such as: the ‘Cilicia’ Museum, Center of Archives and Manuscripts, buildings for bishops and monks, a guesthouse and offices, a center for youth and university students and apartments in Beirut for low-income families.
- paid pontifical visits to all the dioceses of the Catholicosate in the Middle East, Europe, and North and South America, and brought a new dynamism to the relationship between these world-wide dioceses and the administrative center of the Church, the Catholicosate, in Lebanon;
- emphasized the Church’s outreach through social service (orphanage, old peoples’ home, blind peoples’ home, and school for the disabled);
- strengthened ecumenical relations and collaboration, by establishing a special department for this work, developing close personal relations with world church leaders, organizing important ecumenical meetings and events, and chairing and lecturing at international conferences and events in different regions;
- In the context of international relations, he met with a number of heads of states, political and religious leaders, and representatives of international organizations.

**Academic and Intellectual Achievements**

For many years His Holiness Catholicos Aram I has regularly lectured on armenological, theological, and ecumenical subjects at the Armenian Seminary and Haigazian University in Beirut. He has also given numerous public lectures in various universities, academic and cultural centers, and at public events and international gatherings.

**Ecumenical engagement**

His Holiness was appointed in 1972 as the Catholicosate’s representative for ecumenical relations and he served in this position until 1995. His Holiness has played a major role in the world-wide ecumenical movement:

- He was a founding member of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), in 1974. From the beginning he has served on the Council’s Executive Committee and played a leading role in the major initiatives of the Council.
– In 1975, he was elected as a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC, and in 1983 as a member of its Standing Committee. At the Vancouver Assembly (1983), His Holiness was elected as a member of the Central Committee of the WCC.
– At the Canberra Assembly (1991), he was elected Moderator of the Central and Executive Committees of the WCC, the highest position of this global fellowship of churches, which comprises more than 350 churches from different confessions, cultures, nations and regions. He is the first Orthodox and the youngest person to be elected to the position of Moderator. After serving as Moderator for seven years, His Holiness was unanimously re-elected at the Harare Assembly (1998). The re-election of His Holiness, which was based on his “strong leadership, firm commitment, theological knowledge and administrative experience”, was unprecedented in the history of the WCC.
– Catholicos Aram I is a founding member of the Oriental Orthodox-Eastern Orthodox Theological Dialogue, Oriental Orthodox-Reformed Theological Dialogue, and the Orthodox-Evangelical Dialogue. He has played an important role in initiation of Oriental Orthodox-Roman Catholic and Oriental Orthodox-Lutheran Theological Dialogues. His Holiness is an honorary member of Pro Oriente.
– His Holiness was instrumental in creating, in 1996, the fellowship of the Three Heads (Coptic, Syrian, Armenian) of the Oriental Orthodox Churches in the Middle East.
– His Holiness is president of the Middle East Council of Churches since November 2007.

**Inter-Religious Dialogue**
As a strong supporter of inter-religious relations, dialogue and co-operation, His Holiness Aram I has played a significant part in promoting common values, mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence among religions. In this context he:
• worked hard as Primate to create tolerance and build mutual confidence between Christian and Muslim communities during the most critical times of Lebanese Civil War.
• made frequent reference in his writings and public interventions to the vital importance of dialogue and collaboration among the living faiths of the world.
• initiated a number of inter-religious dialogues and took active part in important inter-religious meetings on regional and international levels.
• played an instrumental role in re-organizing the Christian-Muslim Committee of the Middle East Council of Churches, and in preparing the International Inter-religious Conference organized by the World Council of Churches (June 2005).
• organized in Antelias a high level meeting of the representatives of religions of Asia and the Middle East (January 2007).
• gave lectures at inter-religious meetings, universities, and public events in different parts of the world.
• His Holiness is an honorary President of the World Religions Museum Foundation, and World Religions for Peace international organization.

**Commitment to peace with Justice**
As a result of his strong commitment to peace with justice, and human rights, His Holiness:
• became a strong voice for mutual understanding among religions, cultures and civilizations.
• organized regional and international seminars and conferences at the Catholicosate, in Antelias.
• gave public lectures to university students, visiting academic, religious and NGO groups.

With his vision and commitment and with his hard work, His Holiness Aram I has made the Catholicosate of Cilicia of the Armenian Church “a living center of reflection, dialogue and action”.

The CV of His Holiness appears in *Who’s Who in the World, in the International Directory of Distinguished Leaders* and in many other regional and international directories, dictionaries and publications.

E-mail: catholicos@ArmenianOrthodoxChurch.org