

գորս ան դրաւ զանձանակ, աշխարհի վրայ իր ԱՄԲՈՂՁ ունեցածն էր, եւ տակաւին ան մեծ սիրով ու պատրաստակամութեամբ կը վերադարձնէր զանոնք Աստուծոյ, վստահ՝ որ անոնք եկած էին իրմէ: Ան անդրադարձած էր այն իրականութեան, որ աւելցուքէն, խեղերանքներէն տրուածը կարելի չէր նկատել, այսպէս ըսած՝ սիրոյ նուէր մը, հետեւաբար չէր կրնար ընդունելի ըլլալ Աստուծոյ կողմէ, նման Կայէնի նուէրին, ասոր համար իսկ ան տուաւ ինչ որ ունէր, իր ամբողջ ունեցածը: Այս է իրաւ հաւատքը: Եւ զարմանալի չէր, որ Քրիստոս զովեց այդ անոք, Այրի կինը:

Աստուածորդին՝ Մարկոս Աւետարանիչի բերնով կու գայ մեզի ըսելու, «Մի՛ յուսահատիք, Հայր Աստուծոյ աչքը ձեր վրայ է: Ան ձեզ չէ մոռցած եւ երբեք ձեզ ջանձնէր կեանքի յորձանուտներուն, այնքան ատեն, որ մենք կը վստահինք Իրեն:

**Ն. Ա. Մ.**

## PATRIARCH YEGHISHE DERDERIAN'S VIEWS ON THE ARMENIAN PEOPLE AND THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

**Written By**  
**Patriarch Yeghishe Derderian**

**Transl. by: Fr. Krikor Maksoudian**

**F**ew nations have persistently and continually struggled for survival as the Armenian nation. And if on the external front that struggle has not always been crowned with success, it has left a profoundly heartfelt mark inwardly [on our people] and has, over the course of many centuries, gloriously adorned our history with art[istic creativity], spirit and beauty.

All the powerful states of the past have been destroyed and shattered to pieces on the highway of history: first, because of the onslaught of powerful external forces that they could not endure; and, second, because they had internally--that is morally—fallen apart and were already wasted. The moral aspect, however, has been our strong point thanks to our profound Christian faith and our impregnable yearning, as well as our right, to be at peace with ourselves.

It is not only in recent times that we have given victims on our way: namely, apostates, traitors, those wishing to save their skin, those running after distant and drifting glory—people whose disgraceful processions have forever relinquished the fullness of our nation and the glory of our Church to seek in other folds tranquility, profit and protection that they covet at the price of, and in spite of, their nation[al identity] and their past.

Based on these spiritual realities, we believe that the Armenian Church is the ultimate place where an Armenian would feel himself at home with another Armenian more so than anywhere else. The Armenian Church, at all times and at all odds, is the spiritual and even physical institution where the Armenian soul can be sheltered from exterior influences; it is a stage where the Armenian public can connect with the real dream of its people.

Though in essence a religious institution, within her own [fold] the Armenian Church has always held her national character in a predominant position. This means that religion and community life [among the Armenians] are identical. In our national history this stands out as a beautiful and heartening spectacle, and indicates that in the private sphere the church does not have a detaching impact on the children of the Armenian people but stands out as a true bond unifying religious faith

and public life as a single social unit.

Despite the unrest caused by political circumstances, the conversion of the Armenian people to Christianity and the application of Christian values to daily life stand out as a tangible reality that persists in a singular and unique manner throughout our history.

A century had hardly elapsed in the life of our people since that first day when—enlightened by Christianity our national instincts were molded into a national identity—political storms more than once rattled our existence from its roots. But thanks to our powerful inherent spiritual vigor we always succeeded in gathering the broken fragments and remained faithful to our own values, refusing to give them up for foreign influences that would detach us [from our past].

For us the term “National Church” is not a religious attribute that is opposed to the Church of Christ.

If the Church is a regulated form of spiritual life here on earth, our Church is called “National” not in order to suggest a theological concept but a historical fact, within whose context our nation became the instrument and Christianity her moving force.

We are proud of our Church, the greatest creation of the Armenian people. Designed, molded, nourished and developed through centuries of historic and political circumstances, the Armenian Church has toiled and suffered martyrdom in order to preserve intact the spiritual profile of her people and the legacy inherited from the Gospel.

The Church, which is founded on divine and universal principles, must keep away from all ideas that in any way or form embrace political and partisan ways of thinking. Notwithstanding this, the term [ARMENIAN Church] is as dear to us as a religious designation, which we have wished to see woven into the fabric of our religious life through a kind of a national instinct.

This phenomenon, as conjectured, predates that period in our history when the primitive Church lost her unity, as the Western and Eastern Churches had the understandable urge to describe the nature of their [institutional] image with specific titles.

The Latin West preferred to call itself “Catholic” (universal) while the Greek East adopted [the term] “Orthodox,” the first in consideration of the extensiveness of the Roman Empire and the second, because of its pretention of being the only one that possessed the truth in regard to doctrinal and dogmatic matters.

As for the Syriac, Egyptian and other ancient but smaller churches, they were gradually confined under the mere banner of their ethnic names, since despite the important and illustrious role that they had in many ways played in the earlier period of church history, awareness among them of their past faded away, and because of unfortunate political circumstances they lost their language, the most distinctive sign of national awareness, and could not see their identity bloom into a profusely blazing national ideal.

Finally, churches that came into being as a result of the great Reformation movement were born from negative reactions against an establishment that professed to be universal. They are all recognized by a general designation, namely Protestant, a description that is simply a reminder of their historic origin.

The name of our Church was formulated over the course of time and in a way that brings to mind the circumstances of the emergence of the above churches, now those of one and now of the other; but more precisely, a combination of all their circumstances put together. As a place name (“Church of Armenia”) or a national name (“Armenian Church”) Armenian could be a descriptive title for our Church, but from the perspective of our national sentiments and historical awareness it would be more correct if we apply to it the term National. This word expresses with greater precision and more implicitly what the other four titles, either individually or all together, would specify. This is because the Armenian Church is a living organism that can—through her spirit, aspiration and character—symbolize, more than any other institution, what has been and still is the most national trait in the life of the Armenian people.

A national role-model, a national character and traditions, national language and literature, intellectual and moral impact on national life, a national psyche and national art -all of these served as incentives responsible for the emergence of feelings and inspirations that molded in the Armenian soul the mystery of the Gospel and the spirit of Christianity, at first with the creation of a hierarchical institution intended to be the receptacle and guardian of the sublime faith in the divine truth in order to acquire in return [from that institution] an instantaneous reassurance for the protection of their existence and their preservation.

For many centuries, in our [national] life religious feelings and the concept of nationhood have stood out as twin forces, intertwined since the first century of the Christian era and reinforcing each other. This shows that the [Armenian] Church from very early times was the place where the vision of faith and the ideal of a homeland/nationhood merged, and from the very first ... one was inspired and complemented by the other.

An uplifting image symbolizing the principle and spirit of indivisibility of Nation and Church is furthermore such a reality that the Church among us is one and the same as the people. Even in the ecclesiastical realm there is no sharp dichotomy between clergy and laity, a situation generally present in other nations [and churches].

For example, while in the Church of Rome the clergyman is an officer dedicated to the propagation of faith, and in the Greek Church to preaching and officiating sacred rituals, the Armenian priest, either in contrast or in addition to the above two functions, is at the same time an educator, leader, father and a brother to his people.

One, Holy, Universal and Apostolic - these are the true attributes of Christ’s Church in theological context. From a theological perspective, the Armenian Church, because of her ancient claim on orthodoxy, holds the right to be always recognized by these titles, since it was founded by apostolic evangelization and is based on the unity, holiness and universality of the Christian faith that Christ’s Church had in the first centuries of Christianity. But the name that reflects her historic identity should be Church of Armenia, Armenian Church or Armenian National Orthodox Church.

Besides her role both in the Christian Church in general and in Armenian life, the Armenian Church has played two other major roles, cultural and political. These two roles have been forged over [a long] time, beginning with the days when Christianity was first introduced into Armenia. But the greatest virtue of the Armenian Church lies in its originality and in the fact that it has served as an anchor for our national survival, as a bulwark with standing all internal and external assaults at the price of her blood. In the gloomy days of yesterday the Church also became the birthplace of our

soul. Though we were frequently deprived of state and government institutions, we came to possess a solid establishment that unified our blood, language, history, religion and traditions; as stated, it became the birthplace of our soul.

For people living a civilized life there is, besides a tangible homeland, such a thing as the birthplace of the soul, namely a people's cultural heritage and her bygone civilization. The birthplace of the Armenian soul is the Church, because in the consciousness of the Armenian people civilization began with Christianity and Armenian art flourished thanks to Christianity. This was especially true when, because of difficult circumstances during our captivity, we were denied, both on foreign soil and specifically in a homeland that was no longer ours, the blessings of a real homeland. The Armenian Church, the birthplace of our soul, took its place. The Church has embraced us to her bosom like the Ark of the Covenant or a religious ideal, stimulating our community life and acting as its protector.

A captive people without a homeland can survive, if it has a religious ideal. It has been observed, and is worthy of notice, that our political setup, both in her fortunate and less fortunate days, was always inseparable from the religious authority. The Patriarchal See of the Armenian Church, the most heartening symbol of the Armenian Church, moved to wherever the state capital was located. This phenomenon cannot be explained only by administrative expediency. The real reason for it must be sought in the religious and ideological spirit rooted in the character of our people ever since the beginning. It became a more prevailing drive in her soul during the Christian era.

Our literature was religious not only at the time of its inception but also for the most part throughout her long history; it is as if were a kind of "Discourse with God." Our national and social life, enlightened with Christian awareness, the pursuit of righteousness and liberty, became interminably our national and religious identity through centuries of anguish. The Church always remained as the major agent that cultivated its development. For the most part, we owe to the Armenian clergy all of the following: literature, national life and the Church that made our heart focus on the religious ideal blooming in our soul.

The idea that desertion from the National Church always opens before us the gates of [national] degeneration is neither a fable nor a myth. This sad reality has been well established from A.D. fifth century on and even now. Those who have more or less studied our history know that first the Byzantine and then Roman [Catholic] fanaticism snatched from the bosom of the National Church many myriads of Armenians, engulfing and burying them forever in the abyss of degeneration.

The national work that the Armenian Church did in the past, and is doing now, is the mandate of her soul. On the other hand, the Armenians who leave the Armenian Church receive their inspiration and direction from a different ethos, and, despite what one may wish to say, that ethos looks with distrust at ours.

We obviously cannot deny there is Armenian blood and soul in these people; but we wish to point out only one fact, that is, the lukewarm national spirit [in them], which, we believe, is the result of the de-nationalizing Roman [Catholic] spirit, confronting which has always been a priority in our healthy awareness.

All knowledgeable Armenians know that the identity of the Armenian people and the truth stay pure in their Church, the institution that our forefathers built stone by stone right through the eternal and the evanescent.

If our Church and our public are one and the same, and if the Armenian Church is the only guardian and protector of our identity, these are [consequences that] had not been the Church's goal; they are only side lines resulting from the circumstances of her activities and occasionally because of the lack of a more proper national institution that could not be maintained due to political calamities. This matter indicates neither denial nor negligence of the real mission of the Church, which is very religious.

Again, The Armenian Church is the place where Armenian people's most noble traits, spiritual values and wonderful capabilities to build converge. In short, through her genius our Church has fulfilled her mission many times and rescued her ship from so many dangers. Her sound reasoning, her wisdom to adapt herself to circumstances, her beautiful graciousness for not losing sight of herself have been qualities that have equipped our people with tools to create her history under the magnificent structure of her Church and reach our own times.

The Armenian Church has for centuries been our mother and tutor and still remains to be so especially in these times. Leaving her and becoming estranged from her is the very denial of our history, our ethos, our nationality and finally all the things that constitute the expression of an Armenian identity. Nationality is ethos. Our national ethos can flourish only in our Church.

It is indeed true that Christianity by and large has a universal nature, but she is not opposed to the existence of different nationalities living under her protection. Moreover, she supports them to preserve their distinctive existence. Especially as a religion of enlightenment of the soul and conscience, Christianity has always encouraged and cultivated among [different] nations affiliated with it intellectual and social aspirations for liberty, providing all of them the opportunity to have their own alphabet and literature. From this perspective the continuity of contemporaneous development of literary and national traditions such as those of the Armenians, Georgians, Caucasian Albanians, and Slavic tribes is a historical fact in the East.

The same can also be stated about many present-day Western nations, among whom one cannot disregard a simultaneous development in literature and a distinctive national/political way of life.

Christianity has preserved the Armenian people, who holds on to her faith not only with religious fervor, but also with apolitical instinct, finding in it an energy that corresponds to her national instinct of self-preservation and her ethos. The Armenian Church is the quintessence of the union of this religious fervor and political instinct.

As for the concept of a national church, it is, as we said, nothing more than a nation's awareness that the Church has preserved or salvaged her identity. We call the Armenian Church, our Holy and Apostolic Church, NATIONAL, as it truly is. We do not assign to the word "national" a theological significance, since that word is not one of the four attributes of the church; [the use of the word] is confined to a historical understanding.

The Armenian people, namely the Armenian people's national instinct for self-preservation, molded the Armenian Church only with the spirit of the spiritual and moral freedom that is in the Gospel. In that sacred undertaking, if the nation was the agent or, more precisely, the instrument, Christianity was its source of power.

Three centuries before the time of St. Gregory the Illuminator, Christianity spread in Armenia and

was established thanks to missionary evangelization. This is a fact that has been demonstrated beyond any doubt. Yet, it is also true and accurate [to say] that the faith of the Gospel began as an organized entity, as a separate hierarchy and as the Armenian Church from the time of St. Gregory the Illuminator, since Gregory was the very person who organized and sealed it as it is known to us.

The nature of St. Gregory the Illuminator's vision itself reveals that from the day of her inception the Armenian Church was conceived in the mind of its architect as a national Church, that is to say, a religious institution whose mission would also include the security and safety of a politically imperiled nation reinforced by moral and spiritual salvation.

This principle was step by step--but always with an accumulated yield--put into effect during the times of St. Gregory and his family members, who succeeded him[as chief-bishops of Armenia] over the ensuing two centuries: first, at the time of [Gregory's elder son] St. Vrtanes, when brave warriors martyred for their Christian faith and their people were canonized at his order; then, at the time of [Gregory's great-grandson] St. Nerses, when the Church authorities selflessly embarked on the colossal task of reinforcing the nation's morality by establishing benevolent institutions; and finally, in the days of Sts. Sahag and Mesrob, with the miraculous advent of the Golden Age of national revival thanks to the invention of the Armenian alphabet and the creation and development of Armenian literature.

All of this--that is, all the hard work and effort to achieve a national ideal from the time of the Illuminator's vision to that of Sahag --were carried out in Vagharshabad, the last capital of the [ruling Armenian] Arsacid dynasty, which had now, through a celestial regulation, become the capital of the [ecclesiastical] hierarchy of the nation and thereby a spiritual womb for the revival of the entire Armenian people.

In so far as Armenian sentiments are concerned throughout Armenian history Etchmiadzin has always been held in high esteem from the very first, and has become increasingly more appealing. It is not at all a tale nor a myth that this splendid name holds a profound meaning; at the very least it represents the vision experienced by a great illustrious heart where in the great soul of the nation dwelled and palpitated intensely on one occasion. The point in time when that vision was conceived happened to be one of the most important psychological moments for a nation with a deep and inflexible faith in her future.

In the imagination of our people, the lantern [symbolizing] the nation's hope, whose flame is replenished by the Saint's [Illuminator's] tears—symbolizing the grief of the nation—remains extinguishable on the summit of Mt. Arakadz. And Holy Etchmiadzin, frequently like a mother in grief who loves her children, always speaks to her children, to the Armenian people scattered all over the world, [touching them] with the sweetness of past memories, with the sanctity of her traditions, with the radiant anointment of her Chrism, by means of the sacred letters of her encyclicals, through her pontifical legates promoting the homeland, with the distribution of her blessings and with all of her heartwarming affection.

The Sahag-Mesrob movement is nothing other than a national movement created to oppose degenerative and anti-Armenian sentiments. The invention of the Armenian alphabet was the fruition of that struggle and its chief tool.

What was in Sahag's and Mesrob's undertaking that provided the Armenians with a personal and national identity, a spiritual fulfillment and character? It was something that was absent in the previous centuries; it was the Holy Scriptures in Armenian, Armenian literature and Armenian

Ritual—the core of the new national and religious movement.

Those afflicted with ailments of mind, palate and stomach who see poison in the union of religion and nation will never be able to understand and appreciate the Fifth Century [in Armenia], the Golden Age that nationalized our Church and made it Armenian. If the slogan of previous centuries was to convert the Armenians to Christianity, that of the fifth century was to make Christianity Armenian. The spiritual and national triumph of the fifth century was therefore the mandate of the resistant vigor of the Armenian people and of her impregnable dream to be self-sufficient. It was especially the triumph of a national Christianity [forged] for the purpose of driving away Syriac and Greek influences and of raising a barricade against Persian intrigue inside [the country]. Whatever was Armenian was appreciated, acceptable and appealing. The loss of independence, like the condition of an ailing person who seeks healing, frequently gives birth to such a great passion of patriotism.

The translation of the Holy Scriptures to Armenian gave birth to the Armenian Ritual, and ritual is of course the implacable enemy of alienation. It is the attainment of a “We” that is cast as one body, one heart and one mind—a distinct national entity. This new tool—the triumphant awareness of Armenian-ness—eliminated Syriac and Greek influences; it would henceforth have the knowhow and the capability of standing tall against outsiders, be it Persian, Greek or Roman, when the occasion occurred.

By introducing letters as opposed to foreign scripts, the Bible[in Armenian] as opposed to Bibles [in foreign languages], [the Armenian] ritual as opposed to rituals [in foreign languages], Sahag and Mesrob created the Armenian “We,” by means of which they molded our Church, the National Church.

If there is an indisputable reality in the life of the Armenian people, it is her frequent outburst to find spiritual independence. The Golden Age is symbolic of that extraordinary effort of the Armenian people to shake off the yoke of the foreign mind and to generate her own spiritual independence. The demand of this historic yearning showed that Armenian identity had a dynamism that could integrate and synthesize ideas; and that it was not a weak entity that disintegrated under the influence of foreign ideas.

As for the broad-minded stance of our Church—which ... [some] would consider as evading the truth—it stands out as the glorious accomplishment of the Armenian ecclesiastical mind and as the victory of its spirit. This is one of the traits of our national character. First, the Armenian Church is open-minded towards other churches—an open-mindedness that is conservative rather than unrestrained, whose shining and imposing representative is St. Nerses Shnorhali [the Grace-filled]. Second, any institution that does not keep pace with the times and within the limits of the truth loses a great deal of its special attributes. Christianity has always reconciled itself with sound knowledge that existed before it and with intellectual movements that surfaced afterwards. She frequently embraced and fused elements in them that were essential, correct and healthy, dismissing innovative trends that were alien, and she remained the only victor on the scene. Christianity owes her power and triumph to this capability.

From this perspective, the Armenian Church is perhaps the only one in the entire Christian world that, despite the onrushing calamities and unfortunate situations rising before her, has not only set aside woes brought on by the times, but has also been progressive and flexible in paying equal trib-

ute to the times and to the truth. Our forefathers did what was necessary to reconcile the times with the truth for the purpose of forging a comprehensive world view. The one who is an enemy of Christ's Church and disloyal to it is he who has no need for rebirth and wishes to sit idle on its past heritage, thus preventing the growth and progress of the human soul and mind. Behold, flexibility of this kind is another aspect of Armenian Church's liberalism.

All the faithful and brave leaders of the Armenian Church have always held the conviction that whatever is profoundly holy and sacred, whatever is rational and divine that can stimulate truthful and healthy minds, and whatever ennobles a human being is everlasting. Neither science would contest it nor civilization trample it under foot; not even godless fanaticism would walk over it. The Armenian Church with all of her own faithful children knows that she has found the "hidden treasure" (Col 2:3) and has chosen "the best part" (Luke 10:42) that has hitherto preserved her and will preserve her forever.

We are proud of not only our national Church but also of the open-mindedness of our Church—the greatest creation of our people that has, during the course of centuries, acquired form and shape under historic and political circumstances, toiled and suffered martyrdom in order to shield the spiritual identity[of her people] and the heritage received from the Gospel.

#### AN APPEAL TO OUR OWN

Children of the Armenian Church,

Bear in mind that your Mother Church is the conscience of [our] nation. Her walls have been reinforced and cemented with the blood of her children. The lamp of her faith is always replenished with her tears.

Bear in mind that the Armenian Church is the sanctuary where Armenian life was taught [to seek] goodness and perfection. She is the treasure house where the graces of our soul and mind were and are still preserved. And, above all, she is the ark of salvation withstanding the bloody tides of our history.

Never exchange her for anything else of value; Her, whose architect was the Illuminator, whose chief sacristan was St. Mesrob, whose diligent attendant was St. Sahag, whose prayerful priest was St. Gregory of Nareg and whose melodious poet was St. Nerses the Grace-filled!

Do not look at her present modest state. After running into many adversities, she did not fall apart. She did witness many storms, but always beamed her light on those holding on to her and extended [over them] her protection, which is perhaps not an arm equipped with worldly power but one that has always been a source of spiritual consolation and faith supporting her physically tortured and subjugated children. Looking at her present state of weakness do not think that she has ceased from carrying out her compassionate role. Do not look at her ragged cloths. She was once a queen clad in purple who covered her children's wounds with the shreds of her robe.

Love your Mother Church, cleanse yourselves in it and search your spiritual refreshment in the treasures of her greatness, and if needed, be ready to tear your close and with the best pieces cover and adorn the Mother of the entire Armenian people.

Do not cause grief to your Mother, and do not become estranged children of the Armenian Church.

Those who forsake the Mother Church, giving in to newly formed marriage ties or responding to a misinterpreted religious emotion or personal gain, are first of all betraying their blood ties, their forefathers, their calling and their nation.

You can rest assured that those Armenians who leave the Armenian Church receive inspiration and guidance from another spiritual source that looks askance at ours. All those who snatch naive and willing children from the bosom of the [Armenian] nation by means of proselytizing snares in order to lead them to degeneration are traitors. Let them be aware that they will summon Armenian people's centuries-old protest in regard to blood and faith and, more so, they will invite upon themselves the forewarning of a bloody curse.

Furthermore, all those children of our Church who, driven by sad vengeful and meaningless family motivations, either directly or indirectly, willingly or unwillingly support this physical, religious and national tradeoff and destruction of our people are traitors before our history, as well as our present and future existence.

Armenians,

Beware of not only all kinds of fleece-clad wolves and venerable monsters, but also those who, despite their concern for personal motives and their anxious expectation for far-fetched hopes, are either willingly or unwillingly striking the axe at [the roots of] our Church's physical, national and religious being.

The latter amaze us because they lack the most reassuring trait in the character of our race, namely, the healthy instinct for self-defense. In this state, they get the courage to add yet a new wound to the much pierced heart of our people.

