

Saint Gregory of Narek: The Thirty Sixth Doctor of the Church

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Abstract

Saint Gregory of Narek, who was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church on 12 April 2015 by Pope Francis is the first Armenian Saint to be elevated to such a special honour. His famous works include his mystical interpretation on the *Song of Songs* and the mystical poem commonly called the *Book of Prayer* or the *Book of Lamentations* or simply "Narek". It was written towards the end of his life in 1003 AD. It is acclaimed as an "encyclopaedia of prayer for all nations," consists of 95 prayers on human being's separation from God and his quest to reunite with him. The *Book of Prayer* has been compared with *Psalms* and Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, and bears some resemblance to the Hymns of Simeon the New Theologian, and the Hymns of Ephrem the Syrian.

Introduction

Saint Gregory of Narek was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church on 12 April 2015 by Pope Francis in the Vatican during the Holy Eucharistic Celebration in the august presence of dignitaries like His Beatitude Nerses Bedros XIX, Patriarch of Cilicia of Armenian Catholic Church. His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of the Orthodox Armenian Church, and His Holiness Aram I, Orthodox Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia. Saint Gregory of Narek is the 36th Doctor of the Church and the first to be proclaimed as such by Pope Francis. Doctor of the Church is an honorary title given to some saints

of the Catholic Church who have made remarkable contributions not only by their very life, but also through their written works either in the theological realm or in spiritual life. This title is not given to martyrs and no one from the first two centuries is in this list as they are known as apostolic fathers. Doctors of the Church, thus, come under the category of Confessors and of the thirty six, there are only four women.

The proclamation of Saint Gregory of Narek is unique in many ways. He is the first Armenian Saint to be elevated to such a special honour. Saint Gregory was born around 950 AD at Andzevatsik in Armenia as the son of the Armenian bishop Khosrov Andzevatsi, the author of the earliest commentary on the Divine Liturgy, and died in 1005. Called Grigor Narekatsi in Armenian language, Gregory was a priest, monk, poet, mystical philosopher and theologian and most of his life he spent in the monastery of Narek in Greater Armenia, which is in the present Eastern Turkey. His famous works include his mystical interpretation on the *Song of Songs* and the mystical poem commonly called the *Book of Prayer* or the *Book of Lamentations* or simply "Narek".

Armenia was the first State in history to adopt Christianity as its official religion in 301 AD, when King Tiridates III was converted to Christianity by Saint Gregory the Illuminator (Robertson 2004). The cathedral at Etchmiadzin, which was built immediately after this, became and still remains the centre of Armenian Christianity. In 506 AD the Armenian synod rejected the Christological teachings of the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) since no bishop of the Armenian Church took part in it. However, there was no *de facto* separation of this Church from the Catholic fold before the Great Schism of 1054 AD. The real reason for the rejection of Chalcedon Council in 506 AD was the fact that during that time Armenia was under the rule of the Byzantine Empire. Since Armenia was a buffer State between the hostile Roman and Persian empires, the ecclesial life of this unique Church was very often not much in contact with the other units of Christianity. One can safely conclude that at the time of Saint Gregory of Narek, though the Armenian Church did not keep much contact with the Bishop of Rome, it was not without communion with the Catholic Church and the situation could be compared to the faith and communion of the Saint Thomas Christians in India before the Synod of Diamper of 1599. In fact, this is evident from the Bull of Reunion with the Armenians of the Council of Florence, which praises the Armenians as quick to accept the invitation of the Pope to participate in the Council (Tanner 1990). In the 10th century, the kingdom of Armenia was in what historians describe as a golden age, with great achievements in literature, art and architecture. That

era of progress ended in the late 11th century with the invasion by the savage Seljuk Turks and then later the Mongols followed by centuries of war and bloodshed that climaxed with the genocide of 1.5 million Armenians during World War I by the Ottoman Turks. St. Gregory was a leading light in the era of the Armenian cultural renaissance and a source of comfort and courage in the often grim centuries that followed his death in 1005.

The Armenian Apostolic Church and the Armenian Catholic Church

The Armenian Church is not a monolithic Church today. There is a more numerous one popularly called the Armenian Apostolic Church, which is not in communion with the Catholic Church and a less numerous community called the Armenian Catholic Church headed by Patriarch Nerses Bedros XIX Tarmouni (elected in 1999) having the title “Patriarch of Cilicia of the Armenians” and having his See in Beirut in Lebanon. This See traces its origin to 1742 AD, when Pope Benedict XIV confirmed a former Armenian Apostolic bishop, Abraham Ardzvian (1679-1749), as the Patriarch of Cilicia of the Armenians (Robertson 2004). This Patriarchal Church is one of the six Patriarchal Churches in the Catholic Church, which is the communion of twenty-three *sui iuris* Churches, of which the Latin Church is the only one from the Western fold whereas all others come under the category of Eastern Catholic Churches. The other Catholic Patriarchal Churches are Coptic Church having its See in Cairo, Egypt, Syrian Church with the patriarchal residence in Beirut in Lebanon, Maronite Church having the patriarchal See at Bherké in Lebanon, Chaldean Church having the patriarchal See in Bagdad, Iraq, and the Melkite Church having its headquarters in Damascus in Syria (Nedungatt 2015).

The Armenian Apostolic Church is headed by the Catholicos Karekin II elected in 1999, having the title Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians and having the residence in Etchmiadzin, Armenia. Under this supreme authority, there are three other administratively independent units of which two have the dignity of Patriarchates, namely, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Patriarchate of Constantinople and a third having the dignity of a Catholicosate: the *Catholicosate of Cilicia*, now having the headquarters in Antelias in Lebanon. Saint Gregory of Narek lived during the period before the Great Schism of 1054 and he is venerated by both the Catholics and the Armenian Apostolic Church as a great saint. The *Roman Martyrology*, which was first published in 1583, commemorates him calling a saint, a great mystic and *Doctor Armenorum* and 27 February is his feast day in it. He is also mentioned in article 2678 of the *Catechism of the Catholic*

Church. Pope John Paul II mentioned him in various talks and also in the encyclical *Redemptoris mater*.

Gregory of Narek: a Doctor of the Church

The Rite of proclaiming a “Doctor of the Church” is in fact simple. In the case of Saint Gregory of Narek, Pope Francis, after having begun the Holy Mass, after the *Ritus Initiales* and the Penitential Act, made the proclamation, which was preceded by the request of Cardinal Angelo Amato, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. The Prefect, in his request, recalled a similar declaration, almost one hundred years ago, of another Eastern Saint, Ephrem the Syrian, as a Doctor of the Church. Cardinal Amato noted that Saint Gregory has been compared not only to St Ephrem, but also to the Church Fathers St John Chrysostom and St Gregory the Illuminator, the patron saint of Armenia.

St Gregory of Narek, the Cardinal said, was a “great theologian, mystic, and poet,” who communicated his spiritual and ecclesial experience both by his life and his dogmatic teaching, “transmitting his theology along the path of beauty.” Cardinal Amato said that “the depth of the theological ideas of our Saint, the newness of his thought, and the force of his poetic words have always been appreciated both on the popular level and on the level of the men of culture.” He added that St Gregory’s works have penetrated “every aspect of Armenia’s religious life and culture.” Cardinal Amato pointed out four areas of special distinction in the doctrine of St Gregory of Narek:

1. The sense of sin and of the limits of man, who is incapable of speaking to and with God without the mediation of the incarnate Word.
2. The dogmatic reflection on the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity, in which he saw a reflection of the human soul, and especially an analogy with the three theological virtues.
3. The defence of the supernatural efficacy of the Sacraments and of their role in transmission and of the mediation of the Church, reaffirming the importance of divine grace and of the interior life, in contrast to the heretical tendencies of the Thondrakians, who claimed to go back to the origins of Christianity, denying the hierarchy.
4. The devotion to the Virgin Mary, the *Panaghia* (another name for *Theotokos*, the ‘Mother of God.’), “She who is nothing but

holiness,” the “All Holy,” exalting “the absolute invulnerability of the Holy God-bearer in the confrontation with sin,” in her role of Mediator, as a “bridge between God and man” (Francis 2015).

The actual text of the declaration by the Pope is the following:

We, having obtained the opinions of numerous Brothers of the Episcopate and of many of Christ’s Faithful throughout the world, having consulted the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, after mature deliberation and with certain knowledge, and by the fullness of the apostolic power, declare Saint Gregory of Narek, priest and monk, Doctor of the Universal Church. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

“Metz Yaghern,” the “Great Evil”

The date of proclamation of Saint Gregory as the Doctor of the Church coincided with the centenary of “Metz Yaghern,” the “Great Evil,” or the first genocide of the twentieth century in 1915 in which more than 1.5 millions of Armenians, both Catholics and Orthodox, were massacred because of their race and faith by the Ottoman Empire, during the First World War. In this horrific massacre, seven bishops, 130 priests, 47 nuns and as many as 100,000 catholic faithful died (Robertson 2004) and the Armenian Apostolic Church lost even more than tenfold of this number. Pope Francis in fact began his message during the Holy Mass thus:

A century has passed since that horrific massacre which was a true martyrdom of your people, in which many innocent people died as confessors and martyrs for the name of Christ.... On this anniversary, I feel a great closeness to your people and I wish to unite myself spiritually to the prayers which rise up from your hearts, your families and your communities (Francis 2015).

The Pope continued again about the speciality of the day thus: “This faith also accompanied and sustained your people during the tragic experience one hundred years ago ‘in what is generally referred to as the first genocide of the twentieth century’.” The Republic of Turkey, which is the successor of the Ottoman Empire was incensed by this audacious statement of the Pope and made an official protest to the Ambassador of the Vatican to it and has called back its Ambassador to the Holy See for consultations. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also released a statement, saying that the Pope’s remarks “contradict historical and legal facts.” However, since such a reaction was foreseeable, it can be safely concluded that 12 April 2015 was chosen to make this proclamation together with the celebration of *Metz Yaghern* by the Pope with a clear intention to raise the voice against the manifold ways in

which even today the Christians are persecuted in the different parts of the world and especially in Libya and Iraq in the hands of terrorist Islamist outfits like ISIS. In fact, Pope Francis indirectly justified his reference through his homily on 13 April 2015 during his Holy Mass in *Casa San Martha* describing the courage to tell the truth as a gift of the Holy Spirit.

For Pope Francis, the elevation of Saint Gregory as the Doctor of the Church and the celebration of the centenary of *Metz Yaghern* is not only an occasion of remembrance, but also of reflection and action. He continues in his message as follows:

It is the responsibility not only of the Armenian people and the universal Church to recall all that has taken place, but of the entire human family, so that the warnings from this tragedy will protect us from falling into a similar horror, which offends against God and human dignity. Today too, in fact, these conflicts at times degenerate into unjustifiable violence, stirred up by exploiting ethnic and religious differences. All who are Heads of State and of International Organizations are called to oppose such crimes with a firm sense of duty, without ceding to ambiguity or compromise. May this sorrowful anniversary become for all an occasion of humble and sincere reflection, and may every heart be open to forgiveness, which is the source of peace and renewed hope.

The Doctors of the Catholic Church

The list of 35 Doctors of the Church who precede Saint Gregory of Narek starts with four of the Western Church and four of the Eastern Churches. The four earliest Doctors of the Western Church are Saints Ambrose (340-397), Jerome (347-420), Augustine (354-430) and Gregory the Great (540-604). They were called Doctors of the Church in 1298 AD.

The first four Doctors of the Church from the East are Saints Athanasius (298-373), Basil (330-379), John Chrysostom (347-407) and Gregory Nazianzus (329-373) and they were declared and accepted as Doctors of the Church in the West in 1568 AD. Though St. Ephrem the Syrian (306-373) was contemporary of them, he found a place in the list of Doctors of the Church only in the year 1920. The other saints from the East who are declared the Doctors of the Church before Gregory of Narek are Cyril of Alexandria (376-444), Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386) and John Damascene (676-749) and these three were proclaimed Doctors of the Church in 1883.

The Dominican saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) known as Angelic Doctor (*Doctor Angelicus*) and the Franciscan saint Bonaventure (1221-1274) known

as the Seraphic Doctor (*Doctor Seraphicus*) found their place in the list of Doctors of the Church in the year 1588. Saint Anselm of Caterbury (1033-1109) from the Benedictine family, also known as the Magnificent Doctor, was next in chronology to get membership in this elite club in the year 1720. They were followed by saints Isidore of Seville (560-636), Peter Chrysologus (406-450), Leo the Great (400-461), Peter Damian (1007-1072), Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), Hilary of Poitiers (300-367), Alphonse Liguori (1696-1787), Francis de Sales (1567-1622), Bede the Venerable (672-735), Peter Canisius (1521-1597), John of the Cross (1542-1591), Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621), Albert the Great (1193-1280), Antony of Padua (1195-1231), Lawrence of Brindisi (1559-1619) (Rengers 2000).

In 1970, Pope Paul VI declared Saints Theresa of Avila (1515-1582) and Catherine of Siena doctors of the Church and thus for the first time in the history of the Catholic Church there are two women saints in this exclusive club of men. Thereafter, Pope John Paul II declared St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897) as a Doctor of the Church in 1997 and St. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was added to the list by Pope Benedict XVI in the year 2012. He also proclaimed St. John of Avila (1500-1569) a Doctor of the Church in that year.

Saints Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great and Catherine of Siena belong to the Dominican religious family. Likewise, Bonaventure, Antony of Padua and Lawrence of Brindisi are from the Franciscan group. The Carmelite family can boast of John of the Cross, Theresa of Avila and Thérèse of Lisieux. The Benedictine bigger family is represented by Anselm, Peter Damian, Bernard of Clairvaux (O. Cist) and Hildegard of Bingen. Robert Bellarmine and Peter Canisius belong to the Society of Jesus (SJ) and Alphonsus Liguori represents the Redemptorists in this list. Thus one can observe that most of the Doctors of the Church of the Second Millennium are from various religious Orders.

The Works of Saint Gregory of Narek

His first written work was a mystical interpretation of the *Song of Songs* of the Bible which he wrote in 977 AD. Thereafter he composed many poetical writings. His most famous work, written towards the end of his life in 1003 AD, the *Book of Lamentations* (Narekatsi 2001), which he called an “encyclopaedia of prayer for all nations,” consists of 95 prayers on human being’s separation from God and his quest to reunite with him. It has been published in 1673 from Marseille in France and has been translated into many languages including English and has played a significant role in the development of the Armenian literary language. Saint Gregory’s poetry is deeply biblical and is penetrated

with images, themes and realities of sacred history, distinguished with intimate, personal character.

St. Gregory's *Book of Prayer* is also sometimes called the *Book of Lamentations*. The book is known in Armenian as *Girk aghotits* (literally, 'Book of Prayer') or *Matean voghbergutyun* (literally 'Book of tragedy or lamentation'). 'Lamentation' is one possible translation of the Armenian word *voghbergutyun*, which also can be translated as 'tragedy,' as it has been translated into French. In the second line of the first prayer, St. Gregory gives a clue as to why this book might be a tragedy and from whose perspective. For God, the Seer of Secrets, our failure to recognize our sins and our attempts to conceal them are tragic. It might be compared to the experience of an audience seeing the flaws, infidelities and betrayals of the characters on stage, while the characters do not, usually until it is too late.

The *Book of Prayer* has been compared with *Psalms* and Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, and bears some resemblance to the Hymns of Simeon the New Theologian, and the Hymns of Ephrem the Syrian. Like the *Psalms*, it is a work of universal worship, and like the *Confessions*, it is a personal effort of the heart in search of reconciliation with God. In their quantity and quality, the Prayers in this work are especially reminiscent of the *Psalms*, work of inspired prayer, praise, confession and worship, which are a staple of liturgical life in the Armenian Church. In fact, this work can also be compared to the *Compunction of Heart* of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara. The humility and unworthiness that are present both in the *Narek* of Saint Gregory and in the *Compunction of Heart* of Saint Chavara testify apparently to the fact that in the mystical experience, centuries or cultures or languages do not create any barrier or difference as the source of their experience and writing is the same.

Though written while he was terminally ill, Saint Gregory does not lament his plight in the *Book of Prayer*. Rather he laments his unworthiness for God's grace and his own ingratitude and disobedience before God's good will. Shifting seamlessly between the individual and the universal he equates his ingratitude with that of humankind: "God spoke, but who listened? He himself gave witness, but who believed? (Prayer 28d)". He characterized his own unruliness in a colourful image, comparing himself to "a talking horse with a callous mouth, breaking my reins and shaking off my bit (Prayer 22b)." Pope Francis cites in his message during the Holy Eucharist the *Narek* and states thus:

Saint Gregory of Narek, an extraordinary interpreter of human soul, offers words which are prophetic for us: "I will blame myself

with myriad accounts of all the incurable sins, from our first forefather through the end of his generations in eternity, I charge myself with all these voluntarily" (*Book of Lamentations*, LXXII). How striking is his sense of universal solidarity! How small we feel before the greatness of his invocations: "Remember, [Lord,] ... those of the human race who are our enemies as well, and for their benefit accord them pardon and mercy ... Do not destroy those who persecute me, but reform them, root out the vile ways of this world, and plant the good in me and them" (*ibid.*, LXXXIII).

Conclusion

The proclamation of Saint Gregory of Narek can be seen as a recognition of the Eastern Christianity. After the canonization of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara and Saint Euphrasia of the Syro Malabar Church, and the *de facto* all India jurisdiction granted to the Syro-Malankara Church, now it is the turn of the Armenian Church to be honoured by Pope Francis. Pope Francis was close to the Armenian community in Buenos Aires when he was Cardinal Bergoglio. His personal knowledge and appreciation of that Church might have paved the way for this declaration. The extensive use of the works of Saint Gregory of Narek in the Divine Praises of the Armenian Church should in fact inspire the Syro-Malabar Church, which has not yet finalized and promulgated the Breviary, to draw lavishly from the works of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara, and especially from his *Compunction of the Heart*. If Saint Ephrem can be proclaimed a Doctor of the Church in 1920 AD and Saint Gregory of Narek is made a Doctor of the Church in 2015, that is, 1010 years after his death, then one day Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara, who also wrote his most important spiritual writing in poetical language using the language of the ordinary, may indeed be made a Doctor of the universal Church. With the elevation of Saint Gregory of Narek, his works, especially the *Book of Lamentations*, will have more readers and it will help many to quench their spiritual thirst from the well of living waters contained in these great mystical works.

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