

A Nearly Forgotten History: Women Deacons in the Armenian Church

by Knarik O. Meneshian, July 6, 2013

On Sunday afternoon, June 9, 2013, the Chicago chapter of the Hamazkayin Armenian Educational and Cultural Society presented a program on a segment of Armenian Church history at the Armenian All Saints Church and Community Center's Shahnazarian Hall in Glenview, Ill. After welcoming words by the chapter's chairman, Haroutiun Mikaelian, Ani Vartanian introduced the participants in the program, followed by the presentation of crosses from the Eastern Prelacy to the female members of the choir who had served the church in that capacity for 25 years. Lusine Torian recited the poem "The Armenian Church" by Vahan Tekeyan, followed by Lousin K. Tokmakjian's piano rendition of "Nor Dzaghig," a sharagan (or psalm). Following the day's event, refreshments were served.



The speaker of the day, Knarik O. Meneshian, presented a lecture and slideshow titled "The Armenian Deaconess and Her Forgotten Role in the Armenian Apostolic Church." After Meneshian thanked the Chicago Chapter of the Hamazkayin Educational and Cultural Society for inviting her to present her lecture, and greeted the guests, she began her talk with the following introductory remarks:

"Since childhood, I've always had a reverence and love for the Armenian Church. I joined the choir when I was a teenager. The Armenian All Saints Apostolic Church, as some of you will recall, was on Lemoyne Street in Chicago at the time. One day, Der Hayr Maronian, the parish priest then, handed me a scroll and told me to go home and study it and be prepared to read it the following week. It was a long scroll, and beautifully handwritten in Armenian. The following week during church service, I was motioned to ascend the altar where I unrolled the scroll and read from the Book of Daniel (Danieli Girik). I've never forgotten the serene feeling that came over me in church that day as I read to the congregation.

"Before starting my presentation, I would like to recount a scene from a historical novel I read several years ago on the American Indians. The scene began with an entire village walking—again in search of better hunting grounds. The village elder followed behind the group carrying a tattered bundle on his back. Once in a great while, he slipped something into his bundle, but he never removed anything from it. The people often wondered what it was that he carried in the bag and guarded so carefully. One day, someone asked, 'Oh, Elder, what is in your bundle? It looks so heavy and seems such a burden to carry.' The village elder paused and then beckoned everyone to sit down. As they sat around him, the elder gently placed the bundle on the ground and reverently kneeled before it and said, 'This bag, my people, contains our history. Without it, we would not know who we are; what we are.'

"Now, let's glimpse into our own history, a segment of our history nearly forgotten: the women deacons of the Armenian Apostolic Church.



“After Armenia accepted Christianity as the state religion in 301 AD, magnificent things began to take place in the country. Churches were built, some over the ruins of pagan temples. Tatev Vank, for example, was built atop a pagan ruin and Holy Etchmiadzin over a Zoroastrian temple. The alphabet was invented. The Bible was translated into Armenian. The arts, education, and literature flourished. Books such as *The History of Vartanank* by Yeghishe, *The History of Armenia* by

Khorenatsi, and later, *The Book of Prayers* by Narekatsi, were written.

“Susan, a woman scribe, copied Yeghishe’s and Khorenatsi’s books, and the scribe Goharine copied Narekatsi’s book. Sharagans were written, some by women, notably Sahagadoukht, a poetess and composer who wrote some of the sharagans for the Armenian Church and taught men while seated behind a canopy. It is believed that some of the ancient pagan tunes were used to sing the psalms.

“Women deacons, an ordained ministry, have served the Armenian Church for centuries. In the *Haykazian Dictionary*, based on evidence from the 5th-century Armenian translations, the word deaconess is defined as a ‘female worshipper or virgin servant active in the church and superior or head of a nunnery.’ Other pertinent references to women deacons in the Armenian Church are included in the *Mashdots Matenadaran* collection of manuscripts from the period between the fall of the Cilician kingdom (1375) and the end of the 16th century, which contain the ordination rite for women deacons.’

“The diaconate is one of the major orders in the Armenian Church. The word deacon means to serve ‘with humility’ and to assist. The Armenian deaconesses historically have been called *sargavak* or *deacon*. They were also referred to as *deaconess sister* or *deaconess nun*. The other major orders of the church are bishop and priest. The deaconesses, like the bishops and monks, are celibate. Their convents are usually described as *anabad*, meaning, in this case, not a ‘desert’ as the word implies, but rather ‘an isolated location where monastics live away from populated areas.’ *Anabads* differ from monasteries in their totally secluded life style. In convents and monasteries, Armenian women have served as nuns, scribes, subdeacons, deacons, and archdeacons (‘first among equals’), as a result not only giving of themselves, but enriching and contributing much to our nation and church. In the 17th century, for example, the scribe and deaconess known as *Hustianeh* had written ‘a devotional collection of prayers and lives of the fathers, and a manuscript titled *Book of Hours*, dated 1653.’

“The following illustrates the length of time it took a candidate, ‘after years of serious spiritual and religious preparation,’ to become an ordained deaconess: The Deacon *Hripsime Sasunian*, born in Damascus, Syria, in 1928, entered the *Kalfayan Sisterhood Convent* in Istanbul, Turkey, at the age of 25. At age 38, she was ordained sub-deacon, and at age 54, deacon.

“To appreciate more fully the role of the deaconess in the church, Father *Abel Oghlukian*’s book, *The Deaconess In The Armenian Church*, refers to Fr. *Hagop Tashian*’s book *Vardapetutiun Arakelots...* (*Teachings of the Apostles...*), Vienna, 1896, and *Kanonagirk Hayots (Book of Canons)* edited by V. *Hakobyan*, Yerevan, 1964, in which a most striking thought is expressed:

If the bishop represents God the Father and the priest Christ, then the deaconess, by her calling, symbolizes the presence of the Holy Spirit, in consequence of which one should accord her fitting respect.

“The history of the deaconess in the Armenian Apostolic Church can be broken down into two periods: the medieval period beginning in the 9th century, and the modern period beginning in the 17th century to the present, though before the 9th century vague reference is made to them ‘beginning in the 4th century.’ In Prof. Roberta R. Ervine’s published paper titled, ‘The Armenian Church’s Women Deacons,’ which includes a number of fascinating photos of deaconesses, she lists the names of 23 of the Church’s women deacons who have been recorded, along with their ordinations, various activities, and contributions to the church.

“Over the centuries, in some instances, the mission of the Armenian deaconesses was educating, caring for orphans and the elderly, assisting the indigent, comforting the bereaved, and addressing women’s issues. They served in convents and cathedrals, and the general population.



“Though there were those who approved of women in the diaconate, some of the church fathers, such as the clergyman Boghos Taronatsi and Nerses Lambronatsi (1153-1198), whose great uncle was Nerses Shnorhali, did not. Instead, they wanted to close it to them.

Interestingly, when Lambronatsi was around ‘37 years old in 1190, his mother Sahandukht and two sisters Susana and Dalita entered the Lambronatsi convent as founding members of that congregation.’

“Mkhitar Gosh (1130-1213), however, who was a priest, public figure, scholar, thinker, and writer, ‘defended the practice of ordaining women to the diaconate,’ Ervine writes, and she adds that in his law book titled, *On Clerical Orders and the Royal Family*, Gosh described women deacons and their specific usefulness in the following words:

There are also women ordained as deacons, called deaconesses for the sake of preaching to women and reading the Gospel. This makes it unnecessary for a man to enter the convent or for a nun to leave it.

When priests perform baptism on mature women, the deaconesses approach the font to wash the women with the water of atonement behind the curtain.

Their vestments are exactly like those of nuns or sisters, except that on their forehead they have a cross; their stole hangs from over the right shoulder.

Do not consider this new and unprecedented as we learn it from the tradition of the holy apostles: For Paul says, ‘I entrust to you our sister Phoebe, who is a deacon of the church.’

“Smbat Sparabet (Constable), who lived in the 13th century, was the brother of King Hetoum and an important figure in Cilicia. He was a diplomat, judge, military officer, translator (especially of legal codes), and a writer. In his *Lawbook* he, like Gosh, also mentions women deacons, but ‘places them under the authority of priests, rather than of male deacons.’

“In his book, *The History of the Province of Syunik*, the historian and bishop of Syunik, Stepanos Orbelian (1260-1304), also wrote about women deacons. He, like Mkhitar Gosh and Smbat Sparabet, also approved of women deacons and believed that it was a laudable institution. In her paper, Ervine explains that Orbelian placed the deaconess in the role of preacher and Gospel reader, and denoted her status of office as a stole

(oorar) on the right side. (Later, the women deacons would wear the stole on the left side, like the male deacons.) She includes this passage from Orbelian's book on Syunik:

The woman deacon served on the altar, as did her male counterpart, and the bishop did not limit her liturgical service to convent churches only, but she did stand apart from the male deacons for avoidance of any perceived impropriety. She also did not touch the sacred Elements.

“In the 17th century, a great reform movement, begun by Movses Tatevatsi, took place in Etchmiadzin. When Tatevatsi became Catholicos in 1629, he ‘sparked a spiritual and cultural revival not only in the Armenian homeland, but also in communities as far away as Jerusalem.’ He was a great believer in the education of women and encouraged them; as a result, the number of women deacons in the church increased.

“Among the progressive and inspiring changes Tatevatsi made, even before his election to Catholicos, was the building of a convent next to St. Hovhannes Church in Nor Julfa (New Julfa) in 1623. The convent complex, which included a church for monastic women, was called Nor Julfaee Soorp Kadareenyan Anabad (St. Catherine's Convent of New Julfa) after a 4th-century martyr named Saint Catherine.

“Deaconesses Uruksana, Taguhi, and Hripsime were the founding members of St. Catherine's Convent, which existed for three and one-quarter centuries. St. Catherine's Convent ran two schools and an orphanage, and oversaw a factory. In its early years, the convent had many Sisters. Throughout the convent's history, some of the monastic women were ordained as deaconesses, while others ‘were content with receiving minor clerical orders.’

“By 1839, the number of women at the convent had decreased to 16. The last abbess of St. Catherine's was Yeghsabet Israelian, whose brother was elected Patriarch Giuregh I in Jerusalem in 1944. Eventually, the number of monastic women at the convent decreased even further and in 1954 the doors of St. Catherine's were closed.

“Around this period, approximately a thousand miles north of New Julfa, in the city of Shusi in Artsakh, there was a small convent whose members never grew beyond five. In the village of Avedaranots, southeast of Shusi, there was another convent. In the northern part of Artsakh, in the Mardagerd region, there was once a monastery for monastic women in the village of Goosabad known as Goosanats Anabad (Convent of the Virgins). Upon the ruins of the monastery a church was built.

“The women's monastic community of Koosanats Sourp Stepanos Vank (Convent of St. Stepanos Monestary) was established in Tiflis, Georgia in 1725. The mission at St. Stepanos was the training of women deacons. As at St. Catherine's, the Sisters at St. Stepanos were ordained deaconesses. ‘In 1933, the community comprised 18 members, 12 of whom were ordained deacons.’

“The abaouhi (abbess) of the convent was always an achdeaconess. She wore a ring on her finger and two crosses that hung down her chest. St. Stepanos' last abbess, Deaconess Hripsime Tahiriants, who was a woman of authority and influence, came from a prominent family. During a trip to Jerusalem, she served on the altar of the Cathedral of Saints James in Jerusalem. The deaconesses of St. Stepanos were noted for their musical abilities, and as a result, they were frequently asked to perform at functions, including funerals. These engagements helped support their religious community. When women entered convents, they brought funds with them to help support themselves. If, however, someone came from an indigent family, then the abbess provided for her needs. Upon the death of a deaconess, whatever money remained after funeral expenses was

kept by the convent. If, however, upon the monastic woman's death, she had not yet attained the rank of deaconess, after funeral expenses, half of the money she brought with her to the convent was returned to the family.

“It is interesting to note that Holy Etchmiadzin's finely carved wooden doors are a gift from Deaconess Tahiriants. The inscription on the doors read: Heeshadak Avak- Sarkavakoohi Hripsime Aghek Tahiriants, 1889 (In Memory of Archdeaconess Hripsime Aghek Tahiriants).

“In 1892, Deaconess Tahiriants traveled to Etchmiadzin for the consecration of Khrimian Hayrig as Catholicos, and there she presented him with a gold and silver embroidered likeness of the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin. It was on this occasion that she had given H.F.B. Lynch, the author of *Armenia: Travels and Studies*, her photo, which the author used in his book, and is on the cover of Fr. Oghlukian's book and in Ervine's paper.

St. Stepanos's women's community ceased to exist before 1939, but Nicolas Zernov, a Russian clergyman and writer on church affairs, wrote in 1939 how impressed he had been when present at the Eucharist in the St. Stepanos Armenian Church in Tiflis ‘where a woman deacon fully vested brought forward the chalice for the communion of the people.’

“According to internet sources, in 1988, the Georgian government took ownership of the 14th-century church. Between 1990 and 1991, all Armenian inscriptions were either removed or destroyed, and burial vaults where the Armenian deaconesses were laid to rest were destroyed. Goosanats Sourp Stepanos Vank is now a Georgian church.

“The Kalfayan Sisterhood of Istanbul, whose ‘stated mission was the care and education of orphans,’ was established in 1866. Patriarch Mesrop Naroyan ordained the sisterhood's first member, Aghavni Keoseian, as deacon in 1932. Patriarch Shnork Galustian ordained the last, Hripsime Sasunian, in 1982.

“Ervin writes of Sasunian: ‘In 1986, Deacon Hripsime Sasunian visited the Western Diocese of America, where she served the liturgy in a different parish of the Diocese on each Sunday of her visit. She had functioned as head of the Kalfayan Orphanage, served the Patriarchate as an accountant, in addition to serving the Sunday liturgy in various parishes in the capital. Patriarch Galustian used, on the occasion of the ordination of Deacon Hripsime Sasunian, the canon for a male deacon.’

“Deaconess Sasunian was invited to Lebanon in 1990 by His Holiness Catholicos Karekin I to found a new Sisterhood. Named the Sisterhood of the Followers of St. Gayane, it was established next to the Bird's Nest Orphanage in Byblos, Lebanon. As a result, the monastic veil was awarded to the Sisterhood's first candidate, Knarik Gaypakyan, in the Cathedral at Antelias on June 2, 1991. ‘At the present time, three women deacons serve the Bird's Nest Orphanage...under the jurisdiction of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia.’ (Note: In a press release from the Armenian Prelacy of Aderbadagan, Iran, it was announced that on Mon., June 24, 2013, the Very Reverend Der Grigor Chiftjian, Prelate of Aderbadagan, attended a meeting regarding church matters at the Catholicosate in Antelias. He also visited the Bird's Nest Orphanage and met with Sisters Knarik Gaypakian, Shnorhig Boyadjian, and Gayane Badakian to discuss how to attract more women to the Sisterhood.)

“Besides the places mentioned, women's religious communities also existed in Astrakhan, Russia, Bursa, Turkey, and Jazlowiec, Poland. In Astrakhan, two deaconesses, sisters Hripsime and Anna Mnatsaganyan, served the community. They each gifted a diaconal stole to the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin, with the inscriptions ‘Deaconess nun at the Cathedral of Soorp Asdvatsadzeen, Astrakhan, 1837,’ followed by their

names. In the 1800's, in Turkey's Bursa region, Deaconess Nazeni Geoziumian ran a school for girls, along with her religious duties. In Jazlowiec (pronounced Yaswovietch), Hripsime Spendowski was ordained deaconess. She was the daughter of Stepan Spendowski, an Armenian who had immigrated to Jazlowiec in 1648. The town had a sizeable Armenian population, and the Armenian Prelacy was established there in 1250. Because of Spendowski's heroism and distinguished military service fighting the Tatars and Turks, who had invaded the town, the King of Poland honored him with the rank of nobility, and bestowed upon him the title of 'mayor for life' of Jazlowiez.

"In 1984, Archbishop Vatche Hovsepian, Primate of the Western Diocese, ordained Seta Simonian Atamian acolyte at the holy altar of St. Andrew Armenian Church, in Cupertino, Calif. In 2002, Archbishop Gisak Mouradian, Primate of Argentina, ordained Maria Ozkul to the diaconate.

"Currently, there is a small number of nuns serving the Armenian Apostolic Church in Armenia. Established in the early part of the 21st century, their order is known as the Sourp Hripsimyants Order. They reside in the vanadon (monastery) at Sourp Hripsime Church in Etchmiadzin, one of the 'oldest historical monuments of Armenian architecture and the second church built by St. Gregory the Illuminator during the first quarter of the 4th century, and rebuilt in 618.'

I conclude my presentation with a quote by Bishop Karekin Servantzdiantz who was a student of Khrimian Hayrig, a patriot, preacher, writer, and compiler of Armenian stories—fables, anecdotes, and folk-tales:

Patriotism is a measureless and sublime virtue, and the real root of genuine goodness. It is a kind of virtue that prepares a man to become the most eager defender of the land, water, and traditions of the fatherland.

"The women deacons of the Armenian Apostolic Church, who through the centuries have reverently and humbly served our church and nation, are shining examples of the most eager defenders of the land, water, and traditions of the Fatherland."

Photos

Photo 1-Armenian nun-deacons, New Julfa (Fr. A. Oghlukian photo)

Photo 2-Kalfayan Sisterhood with Patriarch Galustian (R. R. Ervine photo)

Photo 3-Dn. Hripsime, Istanbul 1998 (R. R. Ervine photo)

Photo 4-Dn. Hripsime Tahiriants (H.F.B. Lynch photo)

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Knarik O. Meneshian was born in Austria. Her father was Armenian and her mother was Austrian. She received her degree in literature and secondary education in Chicago, Ill. In 1988, she served on the Selection Committee of the McDougal, Littell "Young Writers" Collection—Grades 1–8, an anthology of exemplary writing by students across the country." In 1991, Knarik taught English in the earthquake devastated village of Jrashen (Spitak Region), Armenia. In 2002–2003, she and her late husband (Murad A. Meneshian), lived and worked as volunteers in Armenia for a year teaching English and computer courses in Gyumri and Tsaghadzor. Meneshian's works have been published in "Teachers As Writers, American Poetry Anthology" and other American publications, as well as Armenian publications in the U.S. and Armenia. She has authored a book of poems titled Reflections, and translated from Armenian to English Reverend D. Antreassian's book titled "The Banishment of Zeitoun" and "Suedia's Revolt" She began writing at the age of twelve and has contributed pieces to The Armenian Weekly since her early teens.

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