

The Enlightener of the First Christian Nation

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.



The Church remembers Saint Gregory, Enlightener of Armenia. Like other enlighteners--Nina of Georgia, Columba of Scotland and Innocent of the Aleuts--Gregory was not a native of the country he would one day illumine with the Christian faith.

Born about 239 in Parthia, Gregory came to Armenia as a child with his family. His father, Anak, had a dark purpose: the king of Persia had paid him to assassinate the Armenian king when some good opportunity arose.

Anak bided his time until one day, out hunting with the king and some nobles, he saw the king sitting alone in a secluded spot. Anak attacked, but the dying king was able to cry out his name, and command that he and his family should be executed.

Pursued to a river by the nobles, Anak could see no escape. He jumped into the river and drowned. Most of his family members were soon killed, but a quick-thinking nursemaid had grabbed Gregory, and took him to safety in Caesarea.

Gregory was raised as a Christian, and among his childhood friends was the crown prince of Armenia, Tiridates, who had been forced out of his country when the Persian king's plan to invade and seize the throne succeeded. When the prince decided to return to Armenia and claim his throne, he invited Gregory to come along as his trusted advisor. Neither young man knew about the history they shared.

Once in Armenia, the two came into conflict. Gregory earnestly wanted Tiridates to become a Christian; Tiridates was content with his pagan gods. When jealous nobles noticed this rift they enlarged it by informing the king that Gregory was the son of his father's assassin. Enraged, the king consigned Gregory to a deep, foul pit. He would spend fourteen years there, visited only by a woman who dropped him morsels of bread.

The king became ill and depressed, and when nothing seemed to help, his loving sister ordered Gregory to be released from the pit. She was convinced that only this Christian could help her brother. Gregory, finally free, immediately asked the courtiers to fast, and prayed day and night. When Tiridates recovered his sister revealed that she was the one who had fed Gregory in the pit.

The king was now ready to accept the Christian faith with Gregory as his learned and loving teacher. In the year 301 he and his courtiers, followed by masses of citizens, were baptized, making the Armenian people the first to accept Christianity as a nation.

After being consecrated a bishop in Caesarea, Gregory returned to Armenia and traveled the country, teaching and preaching, opening monasteries and building churches. In the place where he had a vision of Christ he erected a cathedral, with the king's support. He also sent missionaries into neighboring countries to spread the faith. Though known as the enlightener of one nation, Gregory never forgot the command of Christ to "Go and teach all nations."

Troparion - Tone 4

By sharing in the ways of the Apostles,
you became a successor to their throne.
Through the practice of virtue,
you found the way to divine contemplation,
O inspired one of God;
by teaching the word of truth without error,
you defended the Faith,
even to the shedding of your blood.
Hieromartyr Gregory
entreat Christ God to save our souls.