

# Unit One

# Who Am I? Who Are We?

## Lesson 1

### We Are Orthodox Christians

#### heart to Heart

Lord, thank you for your gift of the beautiful season of summer and for all we enjoyed with the hearts and minds and souls you created.

We are all grateful for... \_\_\_\_\_

Create in us, Lord, a grateful heart to always be aware of life's blessings. Amen.



#### Believing Is Seeing

You've probably heard the expression "seeing is believing." Well, if you turn that phrase around you have a great way of imagining how belief affects our lives. Seeing with the eyes of faith is like having a special pair of glasses that allows you to see more clearly, to see what is there

that you couldn't see otherwise. Think of a microscope, which makes it possible to see all the tiny organisms that you can't see by just looking with your eyes alone. Faith is like that – knowing that God is the origin and center of all things means understanding the spiritual nature of the universe. Believing that Jesus Christ, Son of God, sacrificed himself on the cross for us gives us added insight into human nature and the value of living God's way.

There is a very touching (no pun intended!) story in **Mark 8: 22-25** about seeing. Open your Bibles and read it together.

This has often been considered a beautiful example of how faith impacts upon the way we see the world. Consider these questions together:

1. How did the man come to see Jesus?
2. What did the man need before he could see?
3. Were his eyes opened at once?
4. What would be a good title for this story (one that would sum up its message)? Write it here:



#### Verse Master

"Give thanks in all circumstances."

1 Thessalonians 5: 18



## What Do I Believe?

Circle your answer in each pair and think about why you chose the answer you did.

1. What is your faith more like?
2. What do you think of when you think of Jesus?
3. Holy Communion is more like
4. Praying is more like
5. What do you think is most important to God?

A balloon or a bowling ball?

Human or divine?

Command or promise?

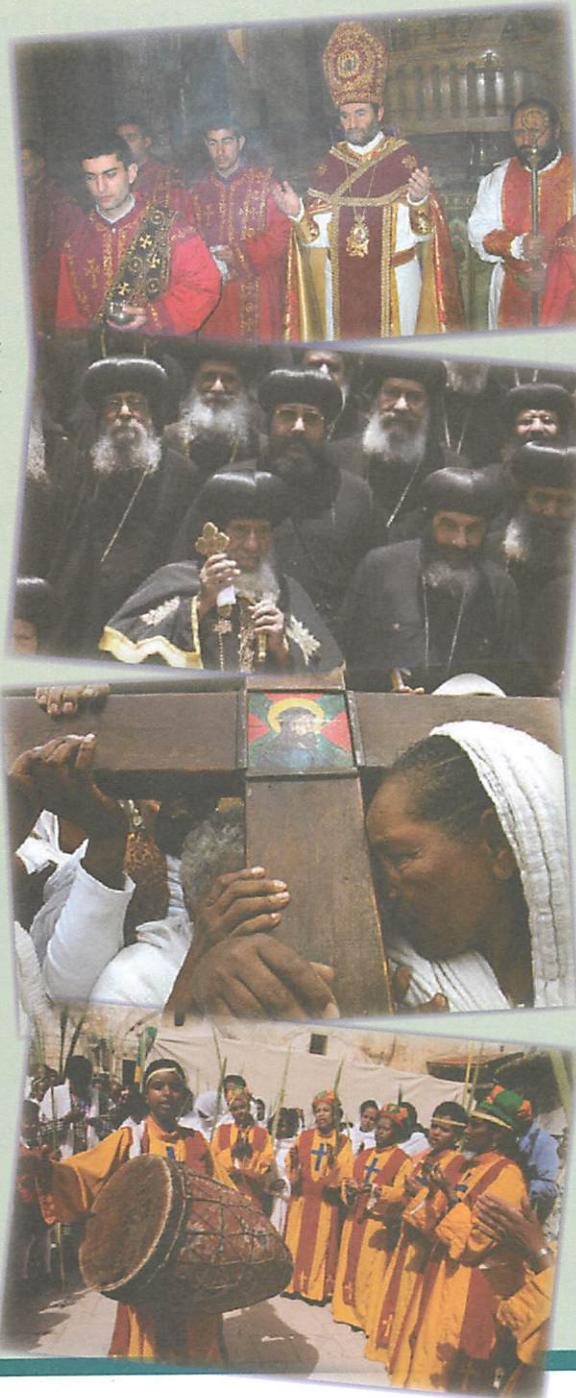
Stumbling in the dark or walking in the light?

The beliefs we hold or the life we live?

## We Are Orthodox Christians

Why are there different “families” of Christians? This unfortunate reality is simple to explain, for even though there is one Lord Jesus Christ and a canon of Holy Scripture that all churches accepted in the early centuries, people eventually began to differ in their *understandings and traditions*. Sometimes compromise proved impossible and over time the Christian Church began to evolve into three major divisions, Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant. Of course, this was not our Lord’s wish when he left his earthly ministry in the care of “His Body” – the Church. Today, churches continue to work together to establish common ground through such large ecumenical bodies as the National Council of Churches or even smaller cooperative groups.

But despite this variety of Christian understandings, we



all share a common faith in Jesus Christ, in the fellowship of the church, and in some sort of sacramental life (although the extent of that life varies widely). And so, happily, our faith can indeed thrive and we can grow closer to God in the teaching and fellowship of our own small, specific church.

The Armenian Church belongs to the large Orthodox family. The Orthodox (which literally means “correct thinking”) trace their origins to the apostles and their beliefs to the earliest traditions and creeds of the Church. These teachings are considered the most faithful to the ancient understandings of the church. There are two groups within the Orthodox family known as “greater” and “lesser.” These terms are not about importance; they simply refer to the fact that the Eastern Orthodox are greater in number. “Oriental” simply refers to the fact that these churches are to the east geographically. Here’s a simple look:

## The Eastern or Greater Orthodox Churches

Greek  
Russian  
Ukrainian  
Antiochian  
Romanian  
Bulgarian  
American and  
others



## The Oriental or Lesser Orthodox Churches

Armenian  
Coptic  
(Egyptian)  
Syriac  
Ethiopian  
Malankara  
(Indian)  
Eritrean



## Differences

### **The Eastern or Greater Orthodox**

Accept the teachings and canons of seven councils as ecumenical (accepted by the universal church).

The 4<sup>th</sup> church council (Chalcedon) defined Jesus Christ as being two in natures (human and divine but one in substance).

Local traditions in worship, sacraments, prayers, feast day customs, of course, developed differently (Armenians bless grapes on the Feast of Assumption, for example, while Greeks, Russians, and Romanians bless fruit on the Feast of the Transfiguration).

### **The Oriental Orthodox**

Accept the teachings and canons of only the first three ancient councils as truly ecumenical.

They believe the nature of Jesus Christ is fully human and divine, united in him together as one substance.

## They Share

Theology, governance, and understanding of Holy Tradition and the Bible are generally the same.

As a result of the one difference in their theological understanding of Christ's nature, these two orthodox families are not "in communion" with each other, which means they cannot receive Holy Communion in each other's churches.

## We Are Members of the Armenian Church

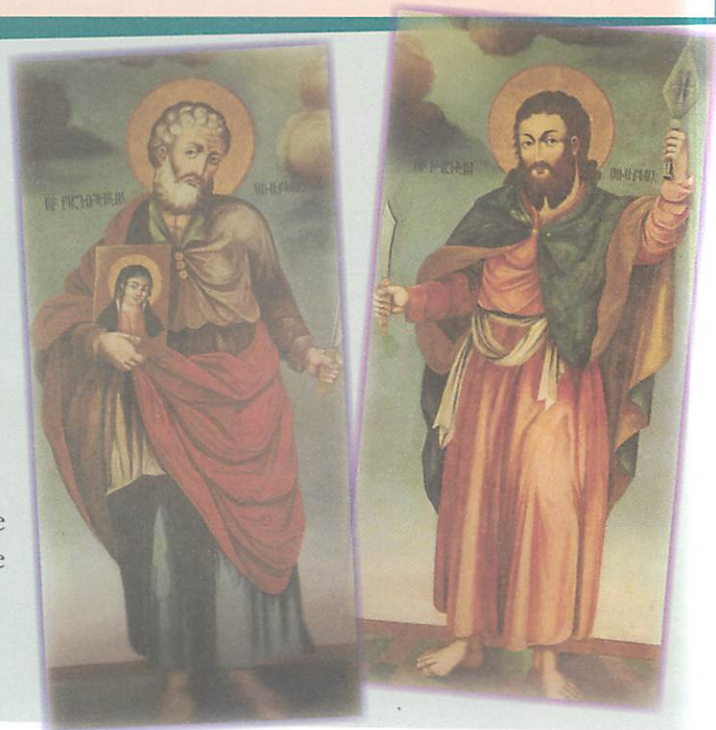
The birth of the Armenian Church can be traced to two of Jesus' apostles, Sts. Thaddeus and Bartholomew, who went to Armenia at different times to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ. In what century would this have taken place?

*Write it here:* \_\_\_\_\_.

They are referred to as the "First Enlighteners" of Armenia.

Do you remember the event that gifted the disciples with the knowledge of languages and enabled them to go out into the world as "apostles" (literally: "sent out")?

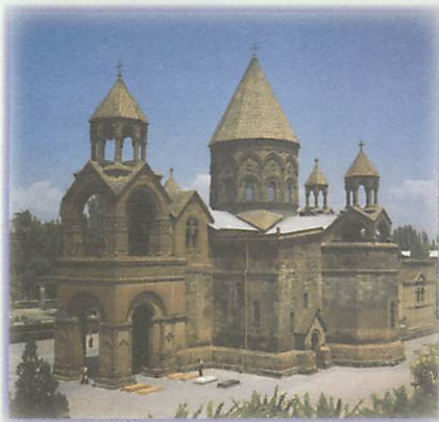
*Write it here:* \_\_\_\_\_.





So the faith was slowly spreading, even though Armenia remained essentially a pagan nation. Finally, it was St. Gregory the Enlightener in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century who made the inevitable happen. Fate brought him to Armenia and to King Drtad's court and after a long series of events, including his imprisonment for 13 years, he baptized King Drtad, Queen Ashkhen, Princess Khosrovitookht (his sister and Gregory's protector), and the royal court and army in 301 A.D. Then he began the work of Christianizing the nation, the first in the world. He is referred to as the "Third Enlightener of Armenia."

*How does being a member of the first Christian nation make you feel?*



The first Armenian Cathedral, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, was built in 303 A.D. in Etchmiadzin, and was founded by St. Gregory - inspired by Gregory's famous dream in which Jesus came down and struck the ground with

a golden hammer (sound familiar?). He himself became the first Catholicos. And the rest is a rich and complex history during which the church grew and spread, sometimes over vast territories, often oppressed and persecuted, and out to other continents where Armenians eventually lived, including North America. And so here we are!

### *Basic Beliefs of the Armenian Church*

1. Jesus Christ, Son of God, who made it possible for us to share in eternal life through his sacrifice on the cross.
2. The Holy Trinity: three persons in one Godhead: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Son and Spirit proceed only from the Father.
3. The first three ecumenical councils and the Nicene Creed. You'll be learning more about that later. Additional local councils continued the process of defining the faith.
- 4 A life of sacrament when God is especially present and bestows a special grace. Those sacraments begin with baptism, which is the spiritual birth that follows our physical birth. Since we are all born with the tendency to do the wrong thing ("original sin"), baptism cleanses us of this sin and makes it possible for us to receive God's grace. The Armenian Church baptizes infants because we believe that children need to be full participants in the life of the church; the commitment to faith can be made on their behalf by the community, through their godparents. We have formalized seven sacraments: baptism, chrismation, penance, holy communion, ordination, marriage, and prayers for the sick (extreme unction - the final anointing - is reserved only for clergy).
5. Holy Communion, the most important sacrament, received at our Divine Liturgy or *badarak*. It is this gift of Jesus himself, bread and wine that becomes his body and blood, which feeds our souls.
6. The Church, the heart and hearth of our faith, a place where we worship, pray, serve, and learn together with the rest of our extended Christian family.
7. We are led in our worship and sacramental life by an ordained ministry, currently reserved for men, in three basic ranks: deacon, priest and bishop. We have both married and unmarried priests; these are distinct vocational choices. Only unmarried priests may be elevated to higher positions of authority as bishops.



### **Remember**

*The Armenian Church is a member of the Orthodox family of churches, specifically the "Oriental Orthodox."*





## Scenic Overlook

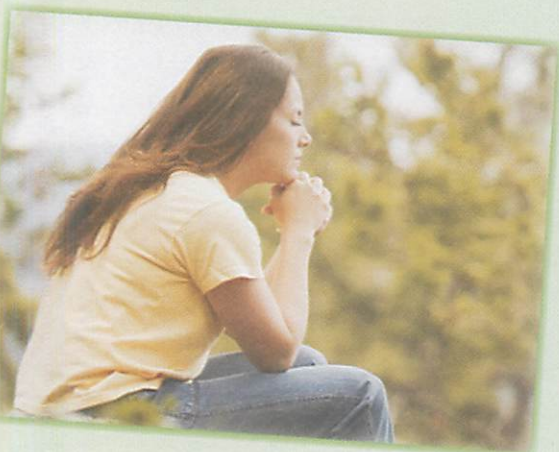
The 4th world church council of Chalcedon took place in 451 A.D. Armenians couldn't send representatives because, under the generalship of Vartan Mamigonian, they were at war with the Persians (the Battle of Avarayr). The Armenians did not consider the Council of Chalcedon as truly ecumenical and so could not adhere to its decisions, especially concerning the nature of Christ.



8. A hierarchical leadership at the apex of which is the Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians who lives in the international headquarters of the Armenian Church – in Etchmiadzin, Armenia. The two other important Patriarchal centers are in Jerusalem and Constantinople.

9. The Holy Bible as the foundation and main source of a rich Holy Tradition that includes our sacraments, feasts, saints, canon law, music, art and much more. All of these inform our faith. Since the Bible came about through an inspired process *within* the church, we need to read it regularly; it is best understood as we read it with the guidance of the church through its trained leaders. We also read it privately for ongoing spiritual support and enlightenment.

10. Prayer is our means of growing closer to God and his will for us. We pray with the community and through our own ongoing personal conversations. We believe that God fills us with his answers, slowly, over time.



## Highlights

1. **Holy Day:** Sunday, The Lord's Day, in Armenian: *Giragi*, which comes from the word for "Lord."
2. **Holy Days:** Feast days commemorating the events related to the life of Christ, the church, and the saints.
3. **Holy Book:** The Bible (Old and New Testaments)
4. **Membership Rites:** Rites of initiation are celebrated at baptism and include baptism itself (immersion in water), chrismation (anointing with oil, being "sealed" with the Holy Spirit), and the baby's (or adult's) first Holy Communion.
5. **Leadership:** The Catholicos, first of all bishops; Council of Bishops; Primate, Diocesan Council and Diocesan Assembly (delegates elected and sent by the parish); priests, parish councils, and parish assemblies (consisting of all parish members) in the local parish.
6. **Most Basic Belief:** Jesus Christ, Son of God and God himself incarnate, who made it possible for us to share in eternal life through his sacrifice on the cross. God as understood as Holy Trinity: three persons in one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.