

Recovering the Monastic Tradition: Publishing Trends in the Armenian Apostolic Church in Armenia and America

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Introduction

Unlike the Catholic and most Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches, the monastic tradition in the Armenian Church is all but non-existent today due to complex historical processes that were already underway in the fifteenth century. In recent decades, however, there has been an effort on the part of the Armenian Apostolic Church, both in the post-Soviet Republic of Armenia as well as the Diaspora, to seek ways to revitalise the monastic tradition and rediscover its vast literary heritage. This paper will proceed by first offering a brief discussion of the decline and disappearance of the Armenian monastic tradition from the late medieval to the modern period. I will then highlight one avenue by which the Church has sought to revitalize the monastic tradition in an attempt to bring its wisdom to the faithful of the Church today, namely through the publication of texts from the monastic tradition in modern vernacular languages. For the purposes of this paper, I will limit myself to those publications in modern Armenian issued from the headquarters of the Armenian Church – the Mother See of Holy Ejmiatsin – and to publications in English issued from one of the largest and most important dioceses of the Diaspora, that of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern) headquartered in New York City as well as St. Nersess Armenian Seminary – the only Armenian seminary in the Western Hemisphere – also located in New York and sharing a close relationship with the Eastern Diocese.

The decline of Armenian monasticism

Very little scholarly literature exists on Armenian monasticism from the fifteenth century to the present. For example, this period is entirely ignored in a recently published volume devoted to the Armenian monastic tradition.¹ It is, after all, easier for historians to document the appearance and activities of an institution than that same institution's decline and disappearance, which is what

¹ Jasmine Dum-Tragut, Dietmar W. Winkler (eds.), *Monastic Life in the Armenian Church: Glorious Past – Ecumenical Reconsideration* (Zürich: Lit Verlag, 2018).

happened to Armenian monasticism from the fifteenth to the twentieth century. Given the minimal state of scholarly research into this question, it is thus difficult to account fully for the decline of Armenian monasticism across this time period. One crucial factor seems to relate to the gradual decline and disappearance of the *nakharar* (noble) class, who were the traditional landholders in Armenian society and the principal patrons and sponsors of monastic institutions throughout the medieval period.² It is thanks to the economic backing of various *nakharar* families, especially the Bagratid, Artsrunid, and Siwni, that permanently endowed, large-scale cenobitic monastic institutions came to be founded across the Armenian *oikoumené* beginning in the ninth century.³ When the Byzantine state annexed the autonomous Armenian kingdoms in the eleventh century and resettled them westwards into the themes of Sebastia and Cappadocia, many of the monasteries in the dislocated Armenian realms also moved westwards with their patronizing lords and were refounded there.⁴ Monasticism thrived in the area of Armenian Cilicia from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, thanks to the sponsorship of the Armenian noble families, such as the Rubenid and Hetumid, that controlled territory there during the period of the Crusades.⁵ However, Armenian monastic life in the region declined drastically in the aftermath of the loss of sovereignty in the

2 On the decline of the *nakharar* class, which took place over the course of many centuries, see Nina Garsoïan, “Esquisse de l'évolution du *naxararut'iwn* arménien durant l'inter règne (vii^e–ix^e siècle),” *Revue des études arméniennes* 34 (2012): 41–71; Sergio La Porta, “The Kingdom and the Sultanate were Conjoined: Legitimizing Land and Power in Armenia during the 12th and Early 13th Centuries,” *Revue des études arméniennes* 34 (2012): 73–118.

3 On the role of noble and princely families in sponsoring monastic foundations in this period, see Krikor Maksoudian, “A Note on the Monasteries Founded During the Reign of King Abas I Bagratuni,” *Revue des études arméniennes* 22 (1990–1991): 203–15; Zaroui Pogossian, “The Foundation of the Monastery of Sevan: A Case Study of Monasteries, Economy, and Political Power in ix–x Century Armenia,” in *Le Valli dei Monaci, Atti del Convegno internazionale di studio, Roma – Subiaco, 17–19 maggio 2010*, edited by Letizia Ermini Pani, 181–215 (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 2012), *eadem*, “Locating Religion, Controlling Territory: Conquest and Legitimation in Late Ninth Century Vaspurakan and its Interreligious Context,” in *Locating Religions: Contact, Diversity and Translocality*, edited by Reinhold Gleis and Nikolas Jaspert, 173–233. (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

4 One prominent example of this phenomenon is the case of the renowned Narek monastery (Narekavank[՝]), which was refounded as Arek monastery (Arekavank[՝]) in 1021 in Sebasteia, to where the Artsruni king Senek'erim-Yovhannēs along with 14,000 retainers had relocated from Vaspurakan. See Jean-Michel Thierry, *Répertoire des monastères arméniens* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1993), 76, note 410; Nina Garsoïan, “The Byzantine Annexation of the Armenian Kingdoms in the Eleventh Century.” In *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, edited by Richard G. Hovannisian, 1:187–98 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 190.

5 Hamazasp Oskean, *Kilikiaiyi vank'erē* [Կիլիկիայի վանքերը = Die Klöster Kilikiens] (Vienna: Mkhit'arean Press, 1957).

late fourteenth century.⁶ In the traditional Armenian homeland, monastic institutions did their best to survive under the shifting politics that ruled in the wake of the disappearance of *nakhharar* rule over the bulk of the Armenian plateau. The migrations and subsequent conquests of various peoples from Central Asia – Turkic, Mongolian, Timurid – in the Caucasus and Eastern Anatolia from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries had a destabilizing and, in some cases, devastating impact on many of the monastic institutions in the Armenian *oikoumené*. Historians of the period recount monasteries being raided, monks being taken prisoner, and monastic teachers, such as Grigor of Tatev, being forced to relocate along with their students from monastery to monastery in an effort to carry on their spiritual and scholastic activity in a safe environment.⁷ Despite this, many monastic institutions continued to flourish, especially in Eastern Armenian regions that were still in the orbit of autonomous Armenian lords. Likewise, thanks to the emergence and expansion of Georgian rule, some monastic institutions received economic assistance and sponsorship through new endowments.⁸

The sixteenth century was also a period of significant crises due to two major disruptive forces on the Armenian plateau. Firstly, many of the Ottoman-Safavid battles of the sixteenth century took place in Armenian-populated territory and wreaked havoc on the economic and cultural life of the inhabitants there.⁹ Secondly, the Jelali rebellions of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries brought about the destruction of towns, brought terror among the local populace, and led to migrations out of the region into more stable western areas of the Ottoman Empire, such as Izmir, Rodosto, and Constantinople.¹⁰ The local population was further depleted due to the forced relocation of Armenians from Julfa and its environs imposed by Shah Abbas in 1604/5 as he pursued a scorched earth policy and sought to create a no-man's land buffer zone between his own empire and the Ottoman.¹¹ The decline in monastic activity due to such disruptive forces is doc-

6 Jean Mécérian S.J., *Histoire et institutions de l'église arménienne: évolution nationale et doctrinale spiritualité – monachisme* (Beirut: Imprimerie catholique, 1965), 302.

7 These are recurring themes in historians of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, such as Kirakos Ganjakets'i, Vardan Arewelts'i, and T'ovma Metsop'ets'i.

8 See La Porta, "The Kingdom and the Sultanate."

9 Dickran Kouymjian, "Armenia from the Fall of the Cilician Kingdom (1375) to the Forced Emigration under Shah Abbas (1604)," in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, edited by Richard G. Hovannisian, 2:1–50. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997) 14–19.

10 Henry R. Shapiro, *The Rise of the Western Armenian Diaspora in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire: From Refugee Crisis to Renaissance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022) 29–82; Kouymjian, "Armenia from the Fall of the Cilician Kingdom," 19.

11 Kouymjian, "Armenia from the Fall of the Cilician Kingdom," 19–21.

umented both by a chronicler of the time, Grigor Daranaghts'i, and also reflected in the notable decline in manuscript production in the scriptoria of this period.¹²

When the dust settled from these events, the monastic tradition never recovered. Armenians lacked autonomous rule in their homeland and were scattered across various diasporic communities divided by different empires under the jurisdiction of different catholicos and patriarchs. Taking the place of the *nakharar* class as the new sponsors of Armenian culture was the new merchant elite (*khoja*, *chelebi*),¹³ especially associated with the New Julfan merchant networks, as well as members of the new middle class, and later the financial and industrial magnates known as *amiras* in and around Constantinople.¹⁴ These mobile *nouveau riche*, whose wealth was not as tied to the land as the *nakharars* of old, often had different priorities for their patronage and philanthropic activity than the old nobles who deposited much of their wealth and substance in stable, fixed monastic foundations.

The two final nails in the coffin of Armenian monasticism came in the twentieth century, with the brutal massacres, deportations, and genocide of the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire and the enforced secularization and atheism in Soviet Armenia.¹⁵ Thus, as we return to our present topic to examine recently published works pertaining to the Armenian monastic tradition both in the Diaspora and the post-Soviet Republic of Armenia, it is important to bear in mind that we are dealing with a Christian communion that has been ontologically severed from its own monastic tradition – which historically was the metaphorical mind, heart and soul of that same Church – and now is seeking ways both to revive and rediscover the monastic spirit and wisdom of the past.

12 Shapiro, *Rise of the Western Armenian Diaspora*, 147–196. Dickran Kouymjian, “Dated Armenian Manuscripts as a Statistical Tool for Armenian History,” in *Medieval Armenian Culture*, edited by T. J. Samuelian and M. E. Stone, 425–439 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984); idem, “Armenia from the Fall of the Cilician Kingdom,” 41–43; S. Peter Cowe, “Church and Diaspora: The Case of the Armenians,” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity. Volume 5: Eastern Christianity*, edited by Michael Angold, 430–456 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 430.

13 Kouymjian, “Armenia from the Fall of the Cilician Kingdom,” 23–24; Dickran Kouymjian, “From Disintegration to Reintegration: Armenians at the Start of the Modern Era, xvth–xviih Centuries,” *Revue du Monde Arménien* 1 (1994): 9–18; Sebouh D. Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

14 Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean*; Hagop L. Barsoumian, *The Armenian Amira Class of Istanbul* (Yerevan: American University of Armenia, 2007).

15 There is a vast bibliography on these topics. As a starting point, see Ronald Grigor Suny, “They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else:” *A History of the Armenian Genocide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

In the appendix to this study one may find a brief bibliography of representative works related to the monastic or spiritual tradition, that have been issued by the Holy See of Ejmiatsin and the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern) in recent years. The next section of the paper will provide a brief discussion of some of these publications.

The publication of monastic texts in the vernacular

Mother See of Holy Ejmiatsin: Mayr At'or Surb Ejmiatsin Hratarakch'ut'yun
The end of Sovietization ushered in a period of renewal and new possibilities for the Armenian Apostolic Church in Armenia. Naturally, the initial years were occupied by administrative and political expediencies. As the years have proceeded, increased emphasis has been turned toward recovering the literary and spiritual tradition of the Armenian Christian tradition, which was suppressed (if not extinguished) during the era of communist rule, with its official policy of atheism and suppression of religious activity, including all monastic life.¹⁶

In the middle of the first decade of the new millennium, several publication series were initiated at the official press of the Mother See of Holy Ejmiatsin (the headquarters of the Armenian Apostolic Church), which brought spiritual and theological writings into modern Armenian. Here, it must be remembered that the official language of the Church is Old Armenian (*grabar*, գրաբար), with liturgical services still primarily conducted in the ancient idiom, which is not immediately intelligible to untrained speakers of the modern vernacular. With the modern forms of the language – Eastern and Western Armenian – only being standardized in the middle of the nineteenth century, there is not a long history of rendering spiritual or monastic texts in a form of the language that is readily understandable to the populace, particularly when one factor in the period of Sovietization, which all but eliminated the publication of such writings, at least as far as Soviet Armenia was concerned.¹⁷

The first of these series is called Հոգևոր ընթերցումներ (*Hogewor ěnt'erts'umner*, “Spiritual Readings” or “Spiritual Texts”). 2007 saw the publication of four titles in

16 On the history of the Armenian Church since independence, see Hratch Tchilingirian, “The Armenian Apostolic Church,” in *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Lucian N. Leustean, 471–497. (New York: Routledge, 2014), and “In Search of Relevance,” in *Réligion et politique dans le Caucase post-Soviétique*, edited by Bayram Balci and Raoul Motika, 277–311 (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2007).

17 On the Armenian language in the modern period, see S. Peter Cowe, “Amèn tel hay kay: Armenian as a Pluricentric Language,” in *Pluricentric Languages: Differing Norms in Differing*, edited by Nations M. Clyne, 325–345 (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992).

this series: the life of Saint Anthony the Great along with his ascetical instructions (խրատներ, *khratner*), ascetical instructions by Macarius the Great, and ascetical instructions by Saint Ephrem the Syrian.¹⁸ The fourth volume is a text known as *Հայելի վարդ* (*Hayeli varuts*, *The Mirror of Life*), a late medieval ascetic miscellany compiled in 1480 and published in 1841 and translated from Polish to Old Armenian by Step'anos Lehats'i in 1651. The first three texts were not translated from the original languages or from Old Armenian but from Russian to modern Armenian, while the fourth was translated from Old Armenian. The introductions to the first three works contain historical, biographical, and theological information about the early church fathers as well as summaries of the texts being translated. The introductions seem to presume familiarity with the monastic or ascetic tradition and make no attempt to accommodate a modern audience unfamiliar with ascetic terminology or norms. Nor is there any discussion aimed at how the modern reader may practically use or apply the book in the contemporary world or setting.¹⁹ The one-page introduction to the fourth book simply mentions the publication history of the volume and offers the (dubious) assertion that “the collection left its original mark on the prose of late medieval aesthetic literature (Ժողովածուն իր ուրոյն հետքն է թողել ուշ միջնադարի գեղարուեստական գրականութեան արձակում).” Such a statement reveals that the preoccupations of the editors and translators remained more on the literary plane than with spiritual or monastic issues, a hold-over from the Soviet period when medieval texts were studied only for their literary merit with spiritual and theological elements largely ignored.²⁰

Another series that held even more promise for enriching the spiritual lives of the contemporary faithful was called *Աղօթագրքեր* (*Aghōt'agrk'er*, “Prayer Books”) and likewise started in 2007. Two prayer books in this series were published with the Old Armenian original and modern Armenian translation arranged in facing-page format. The first in the series was the prayer book of Yovhannēs Sarkawag (eleventh/twelfth c.), and the second was prayers by Yovhannēs Gaṛnets'i (twelfth/thirteenth c.). Here too, the texts of the prayers were presented

18 The works of Ephrem in this volume are not authentic works of the Syrian father, but rather issue from the vast corpus of Psuedo-Ephremica that circulated in Greek and Old Church Slavonic. On the Greek corpus attributed to Ephrem, see Trevor Fiske Crowell, “The Biblical Homilies of Ephraem Graecus” (Ph.D. Diss., Catholic University of America, 2016) 8–16.

19 On the general failure of the Church to address or speak to the spiritual needs of people in the post-Soviet sphere, see the Tchilingirian studies cited above in n. 16.

20 S. Peter Cowe, “Armenological Paradigms and Yovhannēs Sarkawag’s ‘Discourse on Wisdom’ – Philosophical Underpinning of an Armenian Renaissance?” *Revue des études arméniennes* 25 (1994–1995): 125–156, here 130–134, Igor Dorfmann-Lazarev, “Studies of Armenian Christian Tradition in the Twentieth Century,” *Annual of Medieval Studies at Central European University* 18 (2012): 137–152.

solely with a brief scholarly introduction and without any instruction as to how they relate to the lives of contemporary readers.

Two other series, likewise begun in 2007, contained publications by church fathers. The first, *Ընդհանրական եկեղեցու հայրեր* (*Ĕndhanrakan ekeghets'u hayrer*, "Universal Church Fathers") saw the publication of six texts between 2007–2009 from the following Greek patristic figures: St. Cyril of Jerusalem, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. John Chrysostom, and Origen of Alexandria. One text was translated from ancient Greek (St. Cyril), three from French, one from Russian, and one from Old Armenian. Likewise, from 2007–2008, the series *Հայ եկեղեցու հայրեր* (*Hay ekeghets'u hayrer*, "Armenian Church Fathers") published writings translated from Old Armenian to modern Armenian from fathers of the Armenian church: The Teaching of St. Gregory, Movsēs of Khoren, Eghishē, Davit' the Invincible, Yovhan Mandakuni, and Vardan Aygekts'i. Similar to the above series, the introductions contained biographical, historical, and some literary and theological commentary.

Finally, a publication series began that rendered patristic commentaries on the Bible in modern Armenian. Six books were issued between 2007 and 2010, with commentaries primarily on the wisdom literature and Gospels, the most prized portions of Scripture for medieval monks. Authors included St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Gregory of Narek, St. Nersēs of Lambron, and St. Nersēs Shnorhali, among others, all of whom took a spiritualizing approach to the interpretation of Scripture. In this series, like the others, the introduction and notes focused on questions of historical and literary interest. They did little to elucidate the patristic approach to the Bible, which vastly differs from the approach of biblical or literary scholars to texts.

While the aforementioned series aims to bring the texts of the patristic and monastic tradition into modern Armenian so that they can be easily accessed by contemporary readers today, the editors and publishers of the text reflect more on the literary and historical value of the works than on their theological or spiritual value. Likewise, little discussion pertains to the monastic environment from which such texts were issued and in which they were intended to be read. Due to the rupture in the Armenian monastic tradition, especially during the period of Sovietization, such ascetic texts now circulate divorced from the environment to which they belong. In the pre-modern setting, ascetic texts, such as those issued in the above series, were produced and circulated in monastic settings, which were laboratories of ascetic practice. Such texts were not read for abstract or intellectual pursuits or for literary or aesthetic pleasure but rather were employed in conjunction with ascetic practices and for the purpose of acquiring virtue. Such texts formed an essential ingredient in the larger ascetic-mystical quest of monks

to transform the self and seek union with the divine.²¹ By contrast, the texts issued in these series are divorced from the ascetic environment that gives them meaning and within which they were meant to be read and employed. Instead, the publication of such texts seems to have more to do with their cultural and literary value, which is perhaps not surprising given their emergence just fifteen years after the end of Soviet rule. While the content of the published texts contained much of practical use, one cannot help but feel that it was a lost opportunity to publish the texts without any accommodation to the contemporary reader in the twenty-first century or practical instruction as to how they might use or apply the text in their own spiritual life.

Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern): St. Vartan Press and St. Nersess Armenian Seminary

The Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern) is one of the largest and most important dioceses of the Armenian Church in the diaspora. Founded in 1898, it was the first jurisdiction of the Armenian Church established in the New World.²² In addition to its official press, St. Vartan Press, it is also home to two institutions that have also issued publications of a popular and scholarly nature: St. Nersess Armenian Seminary, the only Armenian seminary in the Western Hemisphere, founded in 1962, and the Krikor and Clara Zohrab Information Center, an endowed research library, a cultural and academic centre founded in 1987 thanks to the philanthropy of Dolores Zohrab Liebmann, daughter of the jurist, writer, and Ottoman parliamentarian, Krikor Zohrab.

Over the year since its founding, the Eastern Diocese has produced a small library of books and booklets. Many of these publications are liturgical and pertain to the practical functioning, operations, and services of the Church. There are also publications relating to Armenian history and culture of all time periods, literature, art, etc. Publications on such topics fall outside the scope of the present study. In the bibliography found in the appendix, I have attempted to compile the most relevant publications of the last fifty years, whose aim was to foster spirituality and present monastic wisdom and practice to the faithful. In the section that follows, I will highlight some of these publications.

An early such publication, which appeared in 1976, was called *Conversing with God* and included English-language Psalms and prayers for various occasions and

21 On this see Jesse Siragan Arlen, "Texts for Keeping Watch: The *Hymns of the Night* of Ephrem of Nisibis and the *Book of Lamentation* of Gregory of Narek." *Viator* 49 no. 2 (2018): 1–23.

22 Christopher Hagop Zakian (ed.), *The Torch was Passed: The Centennial History of the Armenian Church of America* (New York: St. Vartan Press, 1998), 3–12.

purposes, e.g., thanksgiving; for various times of the day; intercession; penitential; for receiving holy communion, etc. The introduction contains some instruction on prayer, including practical direction and instruction on how, what, and when to pray:

First, we should pray regularly. To make a regular time and place for prayer is one way to open ourselves to God. Our place should be private, our time undisturbed. The Church has wisely told us to kneel in prayer, for this physical attitude helps us feel as creatures speaking to our Creator, and also to be grateful for His infinite gifts to us. Kneeling can help us get ready, psychologically, to pray. We can use the Bible, especially the Psalms, as prayers. There are also the prayers of the saints, such as Nersess and Gregory, which may be able to express for us all the things we need to say. Or they can be used to get us started, to help us form the words we will say. How do we say them? In our own most personal and natural way...²³

This prayer book was intended not just to present prayers that one may pray but also to provide instruction on what prayer is, how, when, and in what posture to pray. It thus also serves as a practical guide for the individual who intends to use it in prayer with God. Such instruction on prayer ultimately derives in an adapted form from the Church's own monastic tradition, even when it is not explicitly mentioned or acknowledged.

Other booklets have focused on individual sacraments or practices that were central to monastic spirituality, intending to guide the reader toward making such a practice a regular part of their spiritual life. For example, a 40-page book entitled *Penance: The Sacrament of Saying I'm Sorry*, published in 1985, contained instructions on sin, forgiveness, confession, and the sacrament of penance. In the middle of the booklet are two detailed sections providing practical how-to guidance on how to prepare for confession and how to make a detailed examination of one's conscience through a series of reflective questions directed toward the self. This is followed by sections that feature relevant prayers as well as Scriptural passages like the apocryphal prayer of Manasseh. Following this is a section devoted to meditative and prayerful Scriptural reading (*lectio divina*) on key Scriptural passages for confession and repentance, such as Psalm 51, Psalm 32, or the parable of the Prodigal Son.²⁴

²³ *Conversing with God*, By the order of Archbishop Torkom Manoogian, compiled by the Women's Advisory Council (New York, NY: Diocese of the Armenian Church of America, 1976), vii–viii.

²⁴ Rev. Vartan Kasparian, *Penance: The Sacrament of Saying I'm Sorry* (New York, NY: St. Vartan Press, 1985), 18–33.

Other publications of a hagiographical nature present the lives of the saints, many of whom were monastic figures or whose lives and memories were crystallized in a monastic setting. One such publication, entitled *The Light of the World: Lives of Armenian Saints*, speaks directly to this goal of adaptation in the introduction:

It might have been advisable for us to wait for the publication of critical editions on which to base our English translations...Yet, waiting for the critical editions...would have required many years and would have deprived English language readers of spiritual nourishment. From our perspective, the utmost accuracy of a given text, required by serious scholarship, is not a matter of great concern, since our purpose is to reach not a scholarly public but the faithful of our Church, in order to present them with a readable work of spiritual benefit. To this end, the translated texts have been heavily edited so that the present-day reader may not struggle with difficult words, expressions, or grammatical forms.²⁵

As the introduction to this volume makes explicit, the lives of the saints are published not for scholarly but for spiritual purposes and are meant to serve as exemplary models for the faithful to be inspired by and follow in their own lives in the contemporary world. The end of the introduction expands on this point:

Saints' lives are meant to serve as examples for us who are still living. Their determination to bear witness to Christ, as conveyed through hagiographical literature, has inspired past generations and can also show us, on the threshold of both a new century and a new millennium, the way to eternal life through Christ our Lord.²⁶

The introduction goes on to talk about how the example of the saints may be instructive for living in the contemporary world with all its unique challenges and difficulties.

A 130-page book published in 2004, entitled *Welcome to the Armenian Church*, aimed “to provide an informal narrative about the Armenian Church designed

25 Fr. Krikor Maksoudian, Fr. Arten Ashjian, and George Terian, *The Light of the World: Lives of Armenian Saints* (New York, NY: St. Vartan Press, 2000), xvii.

26 Maksoudian, Ashjian, Terian, *Light of the World*, xviii.

for those who want an introduction to its history and culture.”²⁷ In the section of this book covering the history of Armenian Christianity, there was a discussion of the crucial role of monasteries and monastic life, especially as pertaining to the realms of spirituality, art, literature, and cultural production in different periods of history.²⁸ Tacit acknowledgement that monasticism in the Armenian Church no longer operates according to the traditional model comes in a discussion of the celibate clergy, who populate the hierarchical ranks. The book says:

Celibate priests are, in our tradition, primarily monks who live in monasteries. They receive the same sacerdotal ordination as a married priest. Married and celibate candidates to the priesthood are frequently ordained together by the same bishop. In the present reality, the unmarried priests either work on administrative, liturgical and academic levels or serve as parish priests as a result of a shortage of married priests. The bishops, archbishops, patriarchs and the catholicoi ascend from their ranks.²⁹

Likewise, celibate brotherhoods continue in the present day in the administrative centres of the Armenian Church (Ejmiatsin, Antelias, Jerusalem), yet such celibate clergy do not live a traditional monastic life according to a rule, nor do they necessarily occupy themselves with ascetic and spiritual practices, but rather manage administrative, liturgical, or educational activity in the Church (which one would not necessarily need to be celibate in order to perform).³⁰

An interest in the Eastern Diocese to revive the monastic tradition of the Armenian Church is a development of recent years, which seems largely to be a result of influence from the faculty of St. Nersess Armenian Seminary. Earlier messages from the primate on the state of the Diocese plans for the future, and ways to nourish the Armenian faithful did not mention monasticism or the monastic tradition at all. For example, neither a forty-three-page booklet entitled *A Pastoral Letter to the Armenian Faithful*, published in 1995, nor a thirty-page one issued two years later, *The Primate's Plan: On the Road to a New Century*, which outlined a four-year plan and vision for the Armenian Church in America as it entered the new millennium (both from the pen of Archbishop Khajag Barsamian and published by St. Vartan Press) contained any

27 Michael Kermian and Arpi Nakashian McQueen, eds. *Welcome to the Armenian Church: Essentials about the Armenian Church Faith, Religious Culture and Traditions from Ancient Times to Present* (New York, NY: St. Vartan Press, 2004, 2007), 6.

28 Kermian, *Welcome to the Armenian Church*, 14–31 at 16, 19, 23, 26–27, 62.

29 Kermian, *Welcome to the Armenian Church*, 53.

30 Kermian, *Welcome to the Armenian Church*, 58, 61, 65.

mention of or reference to the words ‘monastery’ or ‘monastic.’ However, in 2022, a short volume entitled *Building Up the Body of Christ: The Treasure of the Armenian Church for Our People Today*, outlined the goals and vision for the Diocese by Bishop Daniel Findikyan – primate of the Eastern Diocese from 2018–2022, former Dean and Professor of Liturgical Studies at St. Nersess Armenian Seminary – and included the following goal related to the restoration of the monastic tradition:

Bring the vocation of monastic life in the tradition of the Armenian Church to the greater awareness of our people with the objective of restoring within our diocese forms of monasticism appropriate for the conditions of our day in the United States.³¹

During Bishop Daniel Findikyan’s years as dean of St. Nersess Armenian Seminary (2000–2012), a number of publications sought to bring the wisdom and spirituality of the Armenian monastic tradition to the contemporary faithful. Several short booklets were published containing the translations of texts and prayers from saints and monks, known as the St. Nersess Armenian Spirituality Series. One stands out as particularly exemplary for the way in which it contained instruction on how to use the prayers published in the booklet. The booklet is called *Daily Prayers for the Week by Hovhannes of Garni (ca. 1180–1245)*, and was edited and translated by the faculty of St. Nersess Armenian Seminary and printed in 2001. Hovhannes of Garni was a monk of the twelfth/thirteenth century, who lived several years in solitude at the Monastery of Ayrivank³² (Geghard) and later became known for the miracles he performed during pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Mount Sinai.³² In the introduction, the editors provide the following instruction to readers:

The key to using these prayers profitably is to take the time to read and contemplate each day’s prayer in quiet solitude. Read the prayer slowly and patiently from beginning to end. Then start again from the beginning, pausing after each sentence. Turn the words and images around in your mind and imagination. Reflect on how each statement reflects your own life. When, for example, Hovhannes prays, “I yielded to the lures of the enemy of life and thwarted your commandments” [Fri], ask yourself: “What ‘lures’

³¹ Bishop Daniel Findikyan, *Building Up the Body of Christ: The Treasure of the Armenian Church for Our People Today* (New York, NY: Diocese of the Armenian Church of America, 2022), 39.

³² *Daily Prayers for the Week by Hovhannes of Garni (ca. 1180–1245)* (New Rochelle, NY: St. Nersess Armenian Seminary, 2001), v–vii.

ensnare me? Who is the enemy of my life? How have I thwarted God's commandments?" When emphatic statements such as, "I have no rest from my excruciating pains" [Sat] seem excessive, mentally rephrase them to better reflect your situation. You will also certainly encounter images and phrases that seem to resonate with you in a special way, virtually pouring forth from your own soul. Stop and savor these words prayerfully. The piercing silence of the Lord's voice may be speaking to you.

The faculty of St. Nersess Armenian Seminary offers you these prayers in English translation, with the hope that they will bring you physical and spiritual healing, and much more.

This is similar to the kind of instruction that a young monk might have received from his spiritual director in a medieval monastery and represents an approach aimed at popularizing monastic practices in the modern world, a phenomenon similar to the promotion and diffusion of Centering Prayer and *lectio divina* by Fr. Thomas Keating and Contemplative Outreach.³³ Other publications in the series also mentioned how the booklets were intended to be used in private contemplation and had the aim of leading readers into an awareness of God's presence. For example, the introduction to *Hymns and Odes in Honor of St. Gregory the Illuminator* has the following statement about the goal of the series as a whole: "Drawn from the deep roots of Armenian Christian tradition, these small volumes offer readers ancient doors to a modern awareness of God's presence."³⁴ The introduction thus reveals the explicit purpose of the series: to foster an 'ancient spirituality' by drawing texts from the monastic tradition and putting them into an approachable form and format for modern readers. Likewise, the foreword to the booklet *Twelve Saints: Twelve Prayers of the Armenian Apostolic Church* indicates that "The prayers are provided for private devotion, contemplation, and as a call to grow in the apostolic faith of our forebears. In some ways, these prayers are maps for our journey to God, uttered by saintly sojourners who knew the spiritual territory, and having arrived, now call us to join them."³⁵ Likewise, in the introduction to *Prayers of Catholicos Simeon Yerevants'i* (c. 1710-1780), the faculty writes:

³³ <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/> (last seen, 6/4/25).

³⁴ *Hymns and Odes in Honor of St. Gregory the Illuminator* (New Rochelle, NY: St. Nersess Armenian Seminary, 2001), v.

³⁵ *Twelve Saints: Twelve Prayers of the Armenian Apostolic Church* (New Rochelle, NY: St. Nersess Armenian Seminary, 1998, 2001), v.

While the language of Simeon's prayers differs from our own in tone and vocabulary, the feelings he expresses are as applicable to the twenty-first century as they were to the eighteenth. The feeling that one should frame the day, start and finish, with prayer; the desire to rise above pettiness and pray even for our enemies; the sense of closeness with the departed, whether they be our own near and dear ones or the great saints; the assurance that Christ's mother is ours as well, and that the heavenly hosts are our colleagues in the praise of God and in His care for us – these are all integral parts of our own Christian prayer experience.³⁶

Thus, the St. Nersess Armenian Spirituality Series represents an important development in the position of the contemporary church toward its defunct monastic tradition, representing one of the most tangible and specific ways that instruction in traditional monastic spirituality, prayer, and practice has been offered in a palatable form to a contemporary audience.

Concluding remarks

In this brief paper, I have attempted first to sketch the decline and disappearance of the monastic institution within the Armenian church. Against the background of the decline of monasteries and the attendant monastic life in the Armenian milieu, it is instructive to observe how ascetic materials are being published in the post-Soviet Republic of Armenia and the diasporic context of the United States. Both have published relevant materials that issue from the pre-modern monastic context, but the way these materials are framed differs significantly. While in the Republic of Armenia, the texts are presented more as items of cultural and historical value or for their literary interest, in the United States the texts are presented with an eye to their value for enriching the spiritual lives of the faithful. This difference can perhaps be explained by the general uneasiness or unfamiliarity with spirituality in the post-Soviet Republic of Armenia on the one hand, and on the other hand, with the educational impetus in the diasporic context that involves a growing sensitivity to the 'how' of spiritual practice and aims to bring ascetic and spiritual practices into the life of the ordinary believer.

³⁶ *Prayers of Catholicos Simeon Yerevants'i (c. 1710-1780)* (New Rochelle, NY: St. Nersess Armenian Seminary, 2005), x.

Appendix: Recent publications by the Armenian Apostolic Church in Armenia and America relating to the monastic tradition

*Mother See of Holy Ejmiatsin: Mayr At'or Surb Ejmiatsin Hratarakch'ut'yun
Հոգևոր ընթերցումներ (Hogewor ėnt'erts'umner, Spiritual Readings)*

(2007)

Սուրբ Անտոն Մեծ: *Խրատներ*: Ռուսերէնից թարգ. Ա. Զօհրաբեան, խմբգ.

Ասողիկ եպիսկոպոս: Հոգևոր ընթերցումներ Ա: Ս. Էջմիածին, Մայր աթոռ
սուրբ Էջմիածին հրատարակչութիւն, 2007.

[Surb Anton Mets. *Khratner*. Ruserēnits' t'arg. A. Zōhrabeian, khmbg. Asoghik
episkopos. Hogewor ėnt'erts'umner A. S. Ėjmiatsin: Mayr at'or surb Ėjmiatsin
hratarakchut'iwn, 2007.]

Սուրբ Մակար Մեծ: *Խրատներ*: Ռուսերէնից թարգ. Ա. Գ. Ալեքսանեան, խմբգ.

Ասողիկ եպիսկոպոս: Հոգևոր ընթերցումներ Բ: Ս. Էջմիածին, Մայր աթոռ
սուրբ Էջմիածին հրատարակչութիւն, 2007.

[Surb Makar Mets. *Khratner*. Ruserēnits' t'arg. A. G. Alek'sanean, khmbg.
Asoghik episkopos. Hogewor ėnt'erts'umner B. S. Ėjmiatsin: Mayr at'or surb
Ėjmiatsin hratarakchut'iwn, 2007.]

Ս. Եփրեմ Ասորի: *Խրատներ*: Ռուսերէնից թարգ. Վ. Ֆերենշեբեան, խմբգ. Ասողիկ
եպիսկոպոս: Հոգևոր ընթերցումներ Գ: Ս. Էջմիածին, Մայր աթոռ սուրբ
Էջմիածին հրատարակչութիւն, 2007.

[S. Ep'rem Asori. *Khratner*. Ruserēnits' t'arg. V. Fereshet'ean, khmbg. Asoghik
episkopos. Hogewor ėnt'erts'umner G. S. Ėjmiatsin: Mayr at'or surb Ėjmiatsin
hratarakchut'iwn, 2007.]

Հայելի վարուց՝ բարոյախրատական պատումներ: Գրաբարից թարգ. Տ. Իսահակ
աբեղայ Պօղոսեան եւ Տ. Ռուբեն աբեղայ Զարգարեան, խմբգ. Ասողիկ
եպիսկոպոս: Հոգևոր ընթերցումներ Դ: Ս. Էջմիածին, Մայր աթոռ սուրբ
Էջմիածին հրատարակչութիւն, 2007.

[*Hayeli varuts': Baroyakhratakan patumner*. Grabarits' t'arg. T. Isahak abeghay
Pōghosean ew T. Rubēn abeghay Zargarean, khmbg. Asoghik episkopos.
Hogewor ėnt'erts'umner D. S. Ėjmiatsin: Mayr at'or surb Ėjmiatsin hratarak-
chut'iwn, 2007.]

Աղօթագրքեր (Aghōt'agrē'er, Prayer Books)

(2007)

Յովհաննէս Սարկաւագ Վարդապետ: *Աղօթամատոյց*: Գրաբարից թարգ. Ա. Մաղոյեան, խմբգ. Ասողիկ եպիսկոպոս: Աղօթագրքեր Ա: Ս. Էջմիածին, Մայր աթոռ սուրբ Էջմիածին հրատարակչութիւն, 2007.

[Yovhannēs Sarkawag Vardapet. *Aghōt'amatoyts'*. Grabarits' t'arg. A. Madoyean, khmbg. Asoghik episkopos. Aghōt'agrē'er A. S. Ējmiatsin: Mayr at'or surb Ējmiatsin hratarakchut'iwn, 2007.]

(2008)

Մեր սուրբ հայր Յովհաննէս Գառնեցոյ Աղօթքները՝ իր անուան տառերով:

Գրաբարից թարգ. Ա. Մաղոյեան, խմբգ. Գեորգ Տէր-Վարդանեան: Աղօթագրքեր Բ: Ս. Էջմիածին, Մայր աթոռ սուրբ Էջմիածին հրատարակչութիւն, 2008.

[*Mer surb hayr Yovhannēs Garñets'u Aghōt'k'nerē ir anuan tarerov.* Grabarits' t'arg. A. Madoyean, khmbg. Gēorg Tēr-Vardanean. Aghōt'agrē'er B. S. Ējmiatsin: Mayr atat'or surb Ējmiatsin hratarakchut'iwn, 2008.]

Ընդհանրական եկեղեցոյ հայրեր (Ēndhanrakan ekeghets'u hayrer, Universal Church Fathers)

(2007)

Ս. Կիրել Երոստաղէմացի: *Կոչումն ընծայութեան*: Հին յունարէնից թարգ. Ս. Կրկեաշարեան, խմբգ. Ասողիկ եպիսկոպոս: Ընդհանրական եկեղեցոյ հայրեր Ա: Ս. Էջմիածին, Մայր աթոռ սուրբ Էջմիածին հրատարակչութիւն, 2007.

[S. Kiwregh Erusaghēmats'i. Koch'umn ěntsayut'ean. Hin yunarēnits' t'arg. S. Krkeasharean, khmbg. Asoghik episkopos. Ēndhanrakan ekeghets'u hayrer A. S. Ējmiatsin: Mayr at'or surb Ējmiatsin hratarakchut'iwn, 2007.]

Ս. Գրիգոր Նիսացի: *Քրիստոնէական*: Ֆրանսերէնից թարգ. Պարգեւ Շահբազեան, խմբգ. Ասողիկ եպիսկոպոս: Ընդհանրական եկեղեցոյ հայրեր Բ: Ս. Էջմիածին, Մայր աթոռ սուրբ Էջմիածին հրատարակչութիւն, 2007.

[S. Grigor Niwsats'i. *K'ristonēakan.* Franserēnits' t'arg. Pargew Shahbazean, khmbg. Asoghik episkopos. Ēndhanrakan ekeghets'u hayrer B. S. Ējmiatsin: Mayr at'or surb Ējmiatsin hratarakchut'iwn, 2007.]

Ս. Յովհան Ոսկեբերան: *Ճառերի ընտրանի*: Ռուսերէնից թարգ. Թ. Խաչատրեան, խմբգ. Ասողիկ եպիսկոպոս: Ընդհանրական եկեղեցոյ հայրեր Գ: Ս. Էջմիածին, Մայր աթոռ սուրբ Էջմիածին հրատարակչութիւն, 2007.

[S. Yovhan Oskeberan. *Chaṙeri ėntrani*. ẖuserĕnits' t'arg. T'. Khach'atrean, khmbg. Asoghik episkopos. Ėndhanrakan ekeghets'u hayrer G. S. Ėjmiatsin: Mayr at'oṙ surb Ėjmiatsin hratarakchut'iwn, 2007.]

Որոգինէս: *Աղօթքի մասին*: Ֆրանսերէնից թարգ. Պարգեւ Շահբազեան, խմբգ. Ասողիկ եպիսկոպոս: Ընդհանրական եկեղեցու հայրեր Դ: Ս. Էջմիածին, Մայր աթոռ սուրբ Էջմիածին հրատարակչութիւն, 2007.

[Oroginēs. Aghōt'k'i masin. Franserĕnits' t'arg. Pargew Shahbazean, khmbg. Asoghik episkopos. Ėndhanrakan ekeghets'u hayrer D. S. Ėjmiatsin: Mayr at'oṙ surb Ėjmiatsin hratarakchut'iwn, 2007.]

(2008)

Ս. Գրիգոր Նիսացի: *Մովսէսի կեանքը*: Ֆրանսերէնից թարգ. Պարգեւ Շահբազեան, խմբգ. Ասողիկ եպիսկոպոս: Ընդհանրական եկեղեցու հայրեր Ե: Ս. Էջմիածին, Մայր աթոռ սուրբ Էջմիածին հրատարակչութիւն, 2008.

[S. Grigor Niwsats'i. *Movsēsi keankē*. Franserĕnits' t'arg. Pargew Shahbazean, khmbg. Asoghik episkopos. Ėndhanrakan ekeghets'u hayrer E. S. Ėjmiatsin: Mayr at'oṙ surb Ėjmiatsin hratarakchut'iwn, 2008.]

(2009)

Ս. Յովհան Ոսկերեան: *Ճառեր*: Գրաբարից թարգ. Մարթա Արաբեան, խմբգ. Եզնիկ Արք. Պետրոսեան: Ընդհանրական եկեղեցու հայրեր Զ: Ս. Էջմիածին, Մայր աթոռ սուրբ Էջմիածին հրատարակչութիւն, 2009.

[S. Yovhan Oskeberan. *Chaṙer*. Grabarits' t'arg. Mart'a Arabeian, khmbg. Eznik Ark'. Petrosean. Ėndhanrakan ekeghets'u hayrer Z. S. Ėjmiatsin: Mayr at'oṙ surb Ėjmiatsin hratarakchut'iwn, 2009.]

Հայ եկեղեցու հայրեր (Hay ekeghets'u hayrer, Armenian Church Fathers)

(2007)

Սուրբ Գրիգորի Վարդապետութիւնը: Գրաբարից թարգ. Սեն Արեւշատեան, խմբգ. Ասողիկ եպիսկոպոս: Հայ եկեղեցու հայրեր Ա: Ս. Էջմիածին, Մայր աթոռ սուրբ Էջմիածին հրատարակչութիւն, 2007.

[*Surb Grigori Vardapetut'iwnē*. Grabarits' t'arg. Sen Arewshatean, khmbg. Asoghik episkopos. Hay ekeghets'u hayrer A. S. Ėjmiatsin: Mayr at'oṙ surb Ėjmiatsin hratarakchut'iwn, 2007.]

Սուրբ Մովսէս Խորենացի: *Աստուածաբանական երկեր*: Գրաբարից թարգ. Գ. Գասպարեան, խմբգ. Ասողիկ եպիսկոպոս: Հայ եկեղեցու հայրեր Գ: Ս. Էջմիածին, Մայր աթոռ սուրբ Էջմիածին հրատարակչութիւն, 2007.

[Surb Movsēs Khorenats'ī. *Astuatsabanakan erker*. Grabarits' t'arg. G. Gasparean, khmbg. Asoghik episkopos. Hay ekeghets'u hayrer G. S. Ējmiatsin: Mayr at'or surb Ējmiatsin hratarakchut'iwn, 2007.]

Սուրբ Եղիշէ Վարդապետ: *Աստուածաբանական երկեր*: Գրաբարից թարգ. Մարթա Արաբեան, խմբգ. Ասողիկ եպիսկոպոս: Հայ եկեղեցու հայրեր Դ: Ս. Էջմիածին, Մայր աթոռ սուրբ Էջմիածին հրատարակչութիւն, 2007.

[Surb Eghishē Vardapet. *Astuatsabanakan erker*. Grabarits' t'arg. Mart'a Arabeian, khmbg. Asoghik episkopos. Hay ekeghets'u hayrer D. S. Ējmiatsin: Mayr at'or surb Ējmiatsin hratarakchut'iwn, 2007.]

(2008)

Սուրբ Դաւիթ Անյաղբ: *Ներբողներ*: Մամբրէ Վերծանող: *Ճաւեր*: Գրաբարից թարգ. Մարթա Արաբեան: Հայ եկեղեցու հայրեր Ե: Ս. Էջմիածին, Մայր աթոռ սուրբ Էջմիածին հրատարակչութիւն, 2008.

[Surb Dawit' Anyaght'. *Nerboghner*. Mambrē Vertsanogh. *Charer*. Grabarits' t'arg. Mart'a Arabeian. Hay ekeghets'u hayrer E. S. Ējmiatsin: Mayr at'or surb Ējmiatsin hratarakchut'iwn, 2008.]

Սուրբ Յովհան Մանդակունի: *Ճաւեր*: Գրաբարից թարգ. Մարթա Արաբեան, խմբգ. Եզնիկ Արք. Պետրոսեան: Հայ եկեղեցու հայրեր Զ: Ս. Էջմիածին, Մայր աթոռ սուրբ Էջմիածին հրատարակչութիւն, 2008.

[Surb Yovhan Mandakuni. Grabarits' t'arg. Mart'a Arabeian, khmbg. Eznik Ark'. Petrosean. Hay ekeghets'u hayrer Z. S. Ējmiatsin: Mayr at'or surb Ējmiatsin hratarakchut'iwn, 2008.]

Վարդան Այգեկցի: *Ա Խրատ քահանայական եւ ժողովրդին. Բ Խրատներ*: Գրաբարից թարգ. Գէորգ աբեղայ Սարոեան եւ Մկրտիչ աբեղայ Պողոսեան (Ա), Շահէ քահանայ Հայրապետեան (Բ), խմբգ. Եզնիկ Արք. Պետրոսեան: Հայ եկեղեցու հայրեր Է: Ս. Էջմիածին, Մայր աթոռ սուրբ Էջմիածին հրատարակչութիւն, 2008.

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