

Armenia's Nuns: a Rare Breed

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In devout Orthodox Christian Armenia, only four women have become nuns – but they don't regret it

When the Armenian Apostolic Church celebrated its recent great Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross at Echmiadzin, the seat of the church's Catholicos, or spiritual leader, there were four particularly unusual members of the congregation.

For all the popularity and influence of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church, to which the overwhelming majority of Armenians belong, it has almost no nuns and convents. In fact the four women attending the liturgy in Echmiadzin's Saint Hripsime Church on the second Sunday of September are the only living Armenian nuns.

Convents all but disappeared from Armenia after the fourth century, when King Pap ordered their closure, saying that women should marry, not dedicate their lives to God in the closed institutions.

The 7th century Saint Hripsime Church itself stands on the traditional site of a massacre of Hripsime and 32 other pious women in the 4th century – all because Hripsime refused to marry the king at that time, called Trdat.

At the Saint Hripsime convent, another unusual aspect is that there is no Mother Superior. A man is in charge. "We are all God's children without sex or age differences," the prior, Archimandrite Martiros Pogosian, told IWPR.

Father Martiros, whose name means "martyr," is a "black monk" and cannot marry. He said the women might have also chosen a rare way of life, but had done so freely. "Leaving the world is an entirely voluntary matter, and no one forced these women."

Becoming a nun, he said, is a simple process, but it is a step only for those who are totally dedicated.

"The convent is not a place to solve your social problems, we can't give people jobs or means for existence," he said. "We don't even have a monastic hierarchy, unlike the Russian Orthodox Church, or acts of penance, or a ceremony of taking of monastic vows. We believe that if a person came to God, he or she has consciously taken that decision."

"I am also a human being and I understand that their coming to the convent is a sort of escape from the abnormal life, problems and maybe even from oneself."

Of the four nuns, the youngest one is 42 years old and the oldest is 56.

They rarely socialise with lay people, but this is not prohibited. They can visit their relatives or go to town. However, one of the nuns, Elizaveta, told IWPR there was not much need to go to Yerevan. "We live quietly, don't need anything, they even pay us salaries: 40 US dollars a month by the order of Catholicos of All Armenians Garegin II," she said.

The nuns' living quarters are small and are surrounded by a small orchard and kitchen garden. Vegetables and fruit grown here are quite enough for the sisters, father superior and deacon of the church. They also keep chickens; in other words, it is quite a big farm considering that just four women – none of them especially youthful – look after it.

"We always take part in all services and help the father any way we can," Sister Aida said.

"You know, a regulated life has its advantages. A day that is precisely scheduled doesn't leave any time for idle thoughts. There is always work here: prayers in the morning, then dining, doing household work, praying again, and then off to bed. We also have a television set so you can't call us hermits. Incidentally, there is no 'religious censorship' as to what we watch."

While talking to the prior in the yard of the convent, a delicious smell of freshly baked bread came from the kitchen. "Yes, we make everything ourselves," he said.

The nuns are governed by the statute of the church, which is constitutionally separated from the state. They are not entitled to state benefits, but do not have to pay for anything. "They are freed from worldly troubles and they are not threatened by a miserable pension, Father Martiros said.

There are mixed feelings among ordinary Armenians about the role of these few nuns.

Astkhik Pogosian,³⁰ told IWPR she was sceptical. "Maybe these women just didn't have a choice but to become nuns, they didn't have enough strength to face up to social problems. But on the other hand, it is simply running away from reality. Somehow I don't believe in their desire to serve God."

Garegin, the manager of a computer firm, agreed. "One must be really tired of life voluntarily to renounce all its worldly joys. ... I wouldn't wish such a lot for my loved ones." He blamed the state for failing to provide the women with an alternative.

Even a guard at the church was critical. "Women are preordained to get married, give birth to children, in other words - create families," he said. "King Pap did the right thing 16 centuries ago when he shut down all nunneries."

However, there are many who admire and even envy the nuns' vocation. "I would be glad to become a nun, not because life is hard, but because of lack of spirituality. Although I am often told that it is all a figment of my imagination, I think I am right," Onarik Asatrian, a mother of two, said.

Gayane Minasian, a student, said there should be more nuns. "What do we see in life: emptiness and pursuits of material well-being, and there is no time to think about the soul. Well done for these women. If there were more of them it would have been better for all of us."

Sister Aida said it was for individuals to decide.

"We don't thrust our choice on anyone. If somebody wants they can come to the convent, and if he, I mean she, comes to us consciously, we will only be happy. If not, then we will have to say goodbye. No one keeps grudges here against other people, we don't force people to take vows, and maybe we are freer than other citizens of Armenia."

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