

Armenian Christmas

Why Do Armenians Celebrate Christmas on January 6th?

"Armenian Christmas," as it is popularly called, is a culmination of celebrations of events related to Christ's Incarnation. Theophany or Epiphany (or Astvadz-a-haytnootyoon in Armenian) means "revelation of God," which is the central theme of the Christmas Season in the Armenian Church. During the "Armenian Christmas" season, the major events that are celebrated are the Nativity of Christ in Bethlehem and His Baptism in the River Jordan. The day of this major feast in the Armenian Church is January 6th. A ceremony called "Blessing of Water" is conducted in the Armenian Church to commemorate Christ's Baptism.



Armenian priests conduct the "Blessing of the Water" during Christmas services.

It is frequently asked as to why Armenians do not celebrate Christmas on December 25th with the rest of the world. Obviously, the exact date of Christ's birth has not been historically established-it is neither recorded in the Gospels. However, historically, all Christian churches celebrated Christ's birth on January 6th until the fourth century.

According to Roman Catholic sources, the date was changed from January 6th to December 25th in order to override a pagan feast dedicated to the birth of the Sun which was celebrated on December 25th. At the time Christians used to continue their observance of these pagan festivities. In order to undermine the importance of this pagan practice, the church hierarchy designated December 25th as the official date of Christmas and January 6th as the Feast of **Epiphany**. So, remaining faithful to the traditions of their forefathers, Armenians have continued to celebrate Christmas on January 6th until today.

What is the Feast of Epiphany?

On January 6, twelve days after Christmas, the Western church celebrates Epiphany. The word epiphany comes from a Greek word that means "to manifest" or "to show." On this date the church has traditionally commemorated the visit of the magi and the "epiphany" of when God showed himself in the person of Christ to the Gentiles.

Decorations and Traditions

Armenians thoroughly clean their homes before the Christmas season. They put up a Christmas tree and decorate it with fruit, white doves for peace and golden bows. Many Armenians like to use the three colors of the Armenian flag on the tree – red, orange and blue. Additionally, Armenian families often put out a crèche, or nativity scene, and display their intricate needlework. After a large meal on Christmas Day, family and friends exchange gifts, including flowers and silver items. Afterward, children climb to the rooftops with handkerchiefs and sing carols. Passersby offer them fruit, nuts and coins.

Traditional Food

The week before Christmas, Armenians abstain from eating meat. Instead they eat traditional braided bread, rice pilaf, figs, baklava, fresh vegetables and rice pudding. They also enjoy a wheat-based pudding with berries and apricots called "anoushabour." On Christmas Eve, Armenians eat a traditional fish dish called "ishkhanatsoog," or "princely trout." For dessert they have dried fruit and nuts as well as "rojik," or whole walnuts encased in grape jelly and hanging on a string. On Christmas, family and friends gather for the large family meal. Meat is finally introduced, often in the form of traditional Armenian specialties such as "poulgeur pilav," a lamb and rice dish.