*"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?  For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.'  And lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was.  When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him.  Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh."*(Matthew 2:1-11, RSV)

The Armenian Church celebrates the holy birth (*Sourp Dznount*) of Jesus Christ on January 6. In Armenian tradition, this feast day commemorates not only the birth of Christ, but also His baptism by John the Baptist. The latter is remembered through the "Blessing of Water" ceremony, which follows the Divine Liturgy on January 6.

On the eve of the Feast of the Nativity and Theophany of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the *Jrakalouyts*Divine Liturgy (the lighting of the lamps service) is celebrated in honor of the manifestation of Jesus as the Son of God (theophany). It is custom for the faithful to hold lit candles during this special service.

On the following day, the mystery of our Lord's baptism in the River Jordan is remembered in the ceremony of the *Jurorhnek*, or the "Blessing of Water."

In ancient times, this ceremony was celebrated by the riverside or sea shore, but, for various reasons, it was later confined to the interior of the churches. During the ceremony, the cross is dipped in water, recalling Christ's immersion in the Jordan River. Blessed oil, or Holy Chrism (Muron), is poured into the water from a dove-shaped container, symbolizing the appearance at the baptism of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove and the voice of the Father proclaiming to all that Jesus is His Son.

The Holy Chrism is prepared in Holy Etchmiadzin and is blessed by the Catholicos assisted by the bishops. Muron contains olive oil, balsam and the essence of forty different flowers and herbs. At the end of the ceremony, members of the congregation are given the blessed water to drink, thereby sharing in the life giving act of Christ. As water is essential to the life of the body, drinking the blessed water is a reminder that participation in the acts of Christ is essential for eternal life.

**Why January 6?**

Even at the time of the Holy Apostles, the traditions in the Christian churches in the different parts of the world were not uniform. In fact, Christmas was probably not observed at all in the very early Church. Later, the mysteries of the birth and baptism of Jesus Christ began to be observed on January 6.

By the end of the 3rd century, Christmas in Rome was celebrated on December 25, which coincided with a major pagan feast. The Eastern churches, meanwhile, continued to observe Christmas on January 6. The Armenian Church has maintained that ancient tradition to this day, whereas the Greek-speaking Christian world switched to the Latin tradition at the end of the 4th century.

Armenian-American households may exchange Christmas gifts on December 25, since it is the custom in American society to do so. In some of our churches in the United States, it has become traditional to observe the feast of St. Stephen the Proto-Martyr on Christmas Eve (December 24), though that feast is movable and may not always fall on December 24.

If possible, the faithful should fast during the seven-day period preceding January 6, and should inform their children that they are fasting as a way of preparation for Christmas. On the evening of January 5, families should attend church and participate in the celebration of the Christmas Eve Divine Liturgy. They should do the same on the morning of January 6.