

THOUGHTS FOR ALL SAINTS

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Each year in late October or early November, the Armenian Church celebrates a feast which is known as ALL SAINTS DAY - DOHN AMENAYN SURPOTZ. How appropriate to have a special day on which to officially remember ALL saints. This particular observance can be traced back to an early date of A.D. 608 or a late date of A.D. 834. Its purpose is to commemorate all saints, those who have other official feasts, as well as those who don't. The official designation of this feast day is - THE FEAST OF ALL SAINTS, OLD AND NEW, KNOWN AND UNKNOWN.

In considering this title, we realize that it is the purpose of All Saints Day to cause us to bring to mind ALL saints of all times and places, those who are known and acknowledged, as well as those who are unknown. In a limited sense, it can be compared to the civil observance of Memorial Day or Veterans Day when ALL deceased are remembered, even the Unknown Soldier.

Undoubtedly, every Armenian Christian has heard of St. Thaddeus and St. Bartholomew; St. Gregory the Illuminator; St. Sahag and St. Mesrob; St. Vartan; St. Nersess the Gracefilled. Beyond these, some may have heard of St. Sandoukht; St. Shooshanig; St. Hripsime; and St. Gayane. Some may even have heard of St. Augustine; St. Jerome; or St. Cyprian. But, when we get to St. Pepron; St. Medropanos; St. Meletus; or St. Yevkineus, undoubtedly many will shrug their shoulders and say: "Beats me!"

Yet these and many, many more saints are remembered in the Armenian Church. There is a rather bulky volume called *HAYSMAYVOOR - ON THIS DAY*. It contains a brief biography

of each of the saints and is read prior to the services of the day. Each of the readings begins with the statement, "HAYSMAYVOOR - ON THIS DAY." Then follow the biographical and editorial comments about the saint(s) whose feast is being celebrated on that particular day. Since this practice is done in Jerusalem and the readings are done in Classical (Krapar) Armenian, most members of the Armenian Church are unaware of it. For that reason, its translation into Modern Armenian and English should receive high priority. It is an excellent source for information about the saints.

In his 1982 book entitled *HAY AZKIN SOORPER - SAINTS OF THE ARMENIAN NATION*, His Beatitude Archbishop Shnork Kaloustian, Patriarch of the Armenians of Turkey, lists some 55 Armenian saints who are formally listed as saints and some other 25 who are described as *persons who led a holy life and famous personages who are not listed in the Directory of Saints*.

These numbers, of course, merely scratch the surface, even in terms of the Armenian Church. When we consider the numbers of saints who are shared by and unique to the Orthodox Churches, of which the Armenian Church is one, and the Roman Catholic Church, we get some idea of the numbers involved. Of course, there are not enough days in the year to accommodate the numbers of saints.

The very fact that there is a special feast designated as ALL SAINTS DAY tells us quite forcefully that it would be numerically impossible to have a separate feast day for each saint. Hence there is a need for an ALL SAINTS DAY.

Let us now consider a most basic question: WHAT IS A SAINT? After all, since we are speaking of ALL SAINTS DAY, we should reasonably be expected to know what a saint is. The English word *saint* is derived from the Latin word *sanctus* from which we also get the English word *sanctuary*. In this sense, a saint is one who is set aside or apart. A saint is one whose very life has set him/her apart in terms of a lived and visible Christian commitment. It seems no exaggeration to say that a saint is one whose very life proclaims the centrality of Jesus Christ. In looking at a saint, we see not so much the individual as we see Christ. A saint, then, is one whose life proclaims Jesus Christ.

Keeping this crucial element in mind, we can easily delineate several categories of saints:

- 1.) those who had immediate, earthly contact with Jesus Christ; such as St. Mary, the Mother of Jesus; St. Joseph; St. John the Baptist; all the Apostles, and so forth.
- 2.) those who gave their lives for Jesus Christ; that is the martyrs such as St. Stephen; all the Apostles except St. John; St. Sandoukht
- 3.) those who made a major contribution to Christianity - St. Mark the Evangelist; St. Gregory the Illuminator; St. Augustine
- 4.) those whose lives embodied the Christian life; such as St. Ashkhen; St. Nersess the Gracefilled; St. Gregory of Nareg

It is in this latter category that we find most of the saints, not only of the Armenian Church, but of the universal Church.

Beyond these categories, there are two more general categories of saints: 1.) those who have been officially acknowledged as saints, that is formally canonized saints; and 2.) those who are in fact saints but have not been officially acknowledged as such.

At this point, it seems appropriate to insert a warning. None of the Churches which

acknowledge saints, that is none of the Orthodox Churches or the Roman Catholic Church, worship the saints. That is, our attitude toward the saints is not that they are kinds of "gods". Only Almighty God Himself is worshipped. The saints are simply honored as worthy examples for us to follow. They are remembered as special friends of God. It is this attitude which should direct us in any consideration of the saints.

Additionally, historically, all Christians were regarded as saints or on the way to sainthood. Witness the words of St. Paul in his various letters to the Christian communities of his day:

"To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints." (Romans 1:7)

"To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours." (1 Corinthians 1:2)

"Paul, an Apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother. To the church of God which is at who are in the whole of Achaia." (2 Corinthians 1:1)

"Paul, an Apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (Ephesians 1:1-2)

"Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (Philippians 1:1-2)

"Paul, an Apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colossae." (Colossians 1:1)

It is in precisely this context that the entire concept of sainthood can take on a new and very relevant meaning for each and every Chris-

tian. Saints are important because they are precisely like us - thoroughly and completely human. As such, they are/were subject to all the human frailties and temptations that we are. They are/were absolutely no different from you or me.

How, then, did they become saints?

Simply, the saints are those who made our Lord Jesus Christ the most important element in their lives. They would not let anyone or anything reduce the importance of Christ. When necessary, they sacrificed themselves and their own material well-being for Christ. Witness the heroes of Vartanantz whose memory we still honor each year. It was their singleness of purpose in following Jesus Christ no matter where He led that made them saints.

Herein, we see our own potential for becoming saints.

Let's now turn for a moment to consider the Armenian word for saint, as a means of underscoring this point. In Armenian, we speak of a *saint* as *soorp* - *holy*. The Armenian word *soorp* is derived from the infinitive *surpel* - *to cleanse*. That's right! A saint is someone who has been cleansed,

made clean, made holy! Remember the words of Scripture, ". . . the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7).

As Christians, then, we have all been *cleansed* - *surpatzadz* by the blood of Christ. As such, we are all on the road to sainthood.

As we observe ALL SAINTS DAY, the great and burning question for each of us should be, "Will I achieve the sainthood for which I am destined as a Christian or will I let this sainthood slip through my fingers as a result of my involvement with the myriad of trivialities which so characterize our age and society?"

The very existence of an ALL SAINTS DAY tells us quite clearly that we can achieve that sainthood if we will but strive. We must remember that sainthood is not simply a matter of mystical experiences and visions. Sainthood is the result of a will trained to follow our Lord Jesus Christ no matter what. Even a casual look at any of the saints is overwhelming testimony that it can be and has been done.

Perhaps the Church of the world will never officially acknowledge us as saints, but as long as God does, that's enough!

WHO AM I ?

- 1.) I am the year when Christianity became the state religion of Armenia.
- 2.) I am the year when the Armenian alphabet was completed.
- 3.) I am the year when the Armenian translation of the Holy Bible [Asdvadzashoonch] was completed.
- 4.) I am the Armenian word for Gospel.
- 5.) I am the part of the Holy Bible where we find the Gospels.
- 6.) I am the one who wrote the first Gospel as it appears in the Holy Bible.
- 7.) I am the Armenian word for those who wrote down the Gospel.
- 8.) I am the one who wrote letters to the Romans, the Thessalonians, the Corinthians, and so forth in the Holy Bible.
- 9.) I am the Armenian term for New Testament.
- 10.) I am the Armenian word for holy.
- 11.) I am the name of the Sacrament in which we receive the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.
- 12.) I am the Armenian word for this Sacrament.

Answers to Last Month's WHO AM I? - 1.) Archangel Gabriel 2.) Bethlehem 3.) John the Baptist 4.) King Herod 5.) the Prophet Micah 6.) Zacharia 7.) Elizabeth 8.) Nazareth 9.) Joseph 10.) Hisoos 11.) Hovhannes 12.) Simeon