

Aveadis

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WHAT DO WE MEAN, *ASDVADZADZIN*?

On the 21st of this month, the Armenian Church celebrates the feast of the Presentation of Mary, the Holy Mother of God, to the Temple. This feast commemorates the fact that Joachim and Anna, Mary's parents, dedicated her to God's service at an early age. Like many important young men in the Old Testament, and like Jesus Christ Himself, Mary was presented to the Temple, symbolically "given" for the service of

God. Her parents were older than most, and had waited a long time for a child. So this was an act of thanks and piety on their part.

But the Presentation of Mary shows us many other things, too. First, she was presented just as many male figures were. Obviously, then, women can be as important as men in their service to God (though the type of service may be different.) Also, the early dedication of Mary to God's Temple shows us clearly that she was intended to do some very special kind of service to Him, as indeed she did by willingly becoming the Mother of His Son.

The Armenian Church's veneration of Mary is one of the most important characteristics of our worship. We need to examine this veneration, since it is not shared by some of the other churches that we call Christian. And the first thing to notice is a very big difference between our teachings and those of the Roman Catholic Church.

NO IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

In the Roman Church, the teaching is that Mary was born without original sin. She was, in other words, different from us when she was born. One problem with this teaching is that it puts a gulf between Mary and us. How can we be like her, how can we try to model our life on hers, if she is not like us to begin with?

In the Armenian Church as in all Orthodox churches, the teaching is that Mary is born just as we are, with the possibility either to seek and do His will, or to go her own way and refuse to do what God asks of her. Mary becomes a model for us because she willingly chooses to turn her back on sin, and do what God wants no matter what the personal cost. So, the first

thing to notice about Mary is that she became the Mother of God because she was willing to do what the Lord asked, as we all can. And she could have said no, just as we all can.

MOTHER OF GOD

The next thing to notice is that our Church does call Mary the Mother of God, or Asdvadzadzin (many other Orthodox churches use the word Theotokos, which has the same meaning in Greek.) And because she has this exalted position, we venerate her and exalt her name.

And this is where many Protestants object to what we do. They do not understand that we never worship Mary as equal with God. (Perhaps this is because they are not aware that our church has no teaching of the Immaculate Conception, which is purely Roman Catholic and which can lead to some wrong ideas because it makes Mary different from us at birth.) They do not see that our deep love for Mary is based on gratitude for her part in our salvation, and based also on admiration for the motherly love she gave to Christ as her Son, while also worshipping him devoutly as her God.

ARE WE FOLLOWING TRADITION?

In the Armenian Church, there is a body of teaching called Holy Tradition. The largest single element of this body of teaching (though not the only one) is the Scriptures. And it is in the Scriptures, specifically in the New Testament's Gospel According to Luke, that we find one of the most important reasons for our church's veneration of Mary. They are her own words, and they are called the Magnificat:

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior. For he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden; behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed."
(Luke 1:46-48)

Here is a very clear Biblical statement that we are supposed to pay special respect to Mary. And a famous figure in Christianity once wrote a commentary on the Greek word "makariouisi", which is translated in our excerpt as "call blessed". Here is what he said:

The "makariouisi" means more than simply "to call blessed"; its meaning is rather "to bless" or to "make blessed." This consists not merely in saying the words...(but) it is done with all one's strength and with downright sincerity, when the heart, moved by her low estate and God's gracious regard of her...rejoices in God and says or thinks with all its heart, "O Blessed Virgin Mary!"

Who wrote such a commentary? One of the well-known Eastern church fathers such as St. John Chrysostom or St. Basil? Perhaps a Western father like St. Augustine? Or perhaps someone in our own church's pantheon of spiritual writers, St. Nersess or

St. Gregory? In fact, it was none other than Martin Luther, who also wrote (as did John Calvin, from whom much of early Protestantism got its views) that it is perfectly right to call Mary "Mother of God."

So the question becomes, who is not following Holy Tradition? Modern Protestantism has all but abandoned the veneration of Mary, and yet we see that their own leaders were in favor of it, not to mention the fact that it is called for in Scripture, which they claim to follow more closely than we do.

Mary is rightly deserving of all our praise and love, and of her prominent place in our churches. It was God Himself who called her to the great spiritual task she willingly took on. We do nothing wrong—in fact we do everything right—if we do as she did, and love her for showing us the way.

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