

CHRISTMASTIDE IN THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

(A Retrospective Description of Christmas Preparations)

Like other Christians, the Armenians at all times have taken great pains to celebrate Christmas in a manner suitable to the dignity and spirit of the occasion. However, it is well to know that we have no such tradition as "Santa Claus" or a "Christmas Tree." These are entirely of Western origin. Similarly, we have no "Creche" (the French word for "crib"), an essential factor of the Christmas celebrations in the Roman Catholic Church, the origin of which is ascribed to St. Francis of Assisi. These traditions, although not yet formally accepted by the Armenian Church, being in themselves innocent and merely an occasion of good cheer, have in certain countries penetrated into the family and school celebrations of our people.

The Christmas preparations in the Armenian Church have mostly had a religious character. In keeping with the significance and spirit of this Feast, the beginning of the Christmas season is marked by a week of fasting, which begins about *fifty days* before the actual day of Christmas. This week of fasting, as well as the whole period of fifty days, is considered as a reminder of St. John the Baptist's proclamations about the coming of Christ, and therefore, constitutes an earnest invitation to repentance.

The week before the last preceding Christmas is dedicated to some of the most famous saints of the Church. These commemorations are called, in our church, "Avak Doner" (Greater Festivals). The services are performed in such splendor and dignity as to give us a foretaste of the greater celebrations ahead of us; this is true particularly in Jerusalem, with which each of these Saints has some personal association. The churches are adorned with special decorations and take on a festive appearance, with brighter lights than on the days of ordinary services. The faithful come to church in greater numbers. The "Sharagans" or hymns are sung with greater solemnity. All persons bearing the name of the day's saint receive congratulations.

Almost every one of these Saints is related, in some way or another, to Jesus, and therefore, they, taken together, are known as "The witnesses of Theophany." They are:

King David, the most illustrious of the ancestors of Jesus according to the flesh. It was to David that God promised that Christ would be born of his family.

St. James, "the Brother of the Lord," is the closest relative of Jesus, being one of His cousins, who afterwards became the first Bishop of Jerusalem. It is on the site of his house that the present splendid Armenian Cathedral of St. James in Jerusalem is built.

St. Stephen, the first among the followers of Jesus to shed his blood for his Master and thus entitled to lead that galaxy of martyrs who constitute the very glory of the Christian Church. His title is "Protomartyr," the First Martyr.

St. Paul and St. Peter, the central pillars of the Universal Church. They have played the greatest role in spreading Christianity.

The two brothers, *St. James* (the Elder or the Major) and *St. John*, the Evangelist, were called "Sons of Thunder," because of their great zeal, devotion and love for Christ. They were the "Apostles whom Christ loved."

These church solemnities are followed again by a week of fasting, which is a time of devotion and preparations. These preparations take two different forms; the internal and the external.

The internal or inner preparations consist mainly of prayers, fasting, confessions, penance, and regular daily church attendance. The external are of a physical nature, although symbolically significant in their resemblance, such as cleaning of the house and everything in it. Last minute touches are given to every detail of the preparations, such as final checking of the Christmas shopping to see that everybody gets a new dress and other presents, and making sure of all the ingredients to be used in the different Christmas dishes. In short, no effort is spared so as fully to enjoy the happiness and cheer so characteristic of this most popular of all religious festivals. In spite of the fact that this last week is a period of fasting, and, therefore, of physical deprivation, one cannot fail to sense a feeling of contentment and joy in everybody.

(to be continued next month)

SAINTS AND SACRAMENTS
Patriarch Shnork Kaloustian

