

CHRISTMAS IN THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

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FEAST OF THE THEOPHANY OR EPIPHANY
(Christmas in the Armenian Church)



It is misleading to use the word "Christmas" for the feast which the Armenian Church celebrates on the sixth of January all over the world, and which for reasons of convenience, is celebrated in America on the Sunday following the sixth of January. It is misleading to call this feast Christmas, because it is more than Christmas. It is the celebration of the two important events in the life of Christ, namely, *His Nativity*, and *His Baptism* in the River Jordan.

This combined celebration of Nativity and Baptism we call with a long compound Armenian word, "Astouadz-a-haytnoutiun," which means, "appearance of God" (among men), Theophany or Epiphany in English. The Baptism of Christ is as important as His Nativity as far as his "appearance" among men, as the Son of God, is concerned. As Christ's Birth is the starting point of His human life, so also His Baptism is the starting point of His public life, and ministry. Besides, it was at His Baptism that the divine voice from heaven revealed, "He



is My Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). Therefore, the first thing we have to know about the so called "Armenian Christmas," is that it is celebrated on the sixth of January, secondly that it is the celebration of all events connected with the Birth of Christ, up to His public ministry; the *Birth* and *Baptism* holding the chief place among these various events. In the Armenian Church, on this holy day, a popular ceremony is performed. It is called "Jur-orhnek," "blessing of waters." It is performed in commemoration of Christ's Baptism.

The question which I am sure will be asked by almost everybody in this connection will be: Even granting this united celebration of the Nativity and Baptism of Christ, why is it that Armenians are the only Christians celebrating this feast on the sixth of January and not on December twenty-fifth, as all the other Christians do? The answer briefly is this:

The exact day and year of Christ's birth have never been satisfactorily established, because nothing definite is said about the date in the Gospels. *But it is a historical fact that the celebration of Christ's Birth on January sixth in all the Christian Churches goes further back than that of December twenty five.*

A Catholic book, defending the Catholic form of Christianity, while giving the approximate dates of the institution of various church festivals, mentions Christmas in these words: "Christmas celebrated first on January sixth, kept on December twenty-fifth in Rome about 340." The reason for changing is given as follows, again by another

Catholic author: "The Lord was born in the month of January on the same day on which we celebrate Epiphany, (i.e. on sixth of January), for, of old, the feast of the Nativity and Epiphany were kept on one and the same day. The reason why our Fathers changed the solemnity celebrated on the sixth of January, and transferred it to the 25th of December is as follows: It was the custom of pagans to celebrate the birthday of the Sun on this very day, December 25th. In these solemnities and festivals the Christians too were tempted to participate. The leaders of the Church, therefore, decided that the Birth of Christ, be kept on this date (i.e. 25th of December) to overshadow the pagan festival, and on January sixth, the feast of Epiphanyes. (Catholic Encyclopedia: Articles, "Christmas" and "Epiphany")."

This change, having begun in Rome, spread very quickly to the East and all over the Roman Empire. The change did not penetrate into Armenia, because the Armenians, having no such pagan festival on December 25th to suppress, did not see any reason for following the new practice; besides, as they were living almost isolated in their own mountains, no practical inconvenience was arising from their not following the general change. Most of all, however, the Armenians wanted to remain faithful to the ancient custom; so they have kept the old date through the centuries to the present day.

Therefore, the Armenians have a good historical reason for celebrating this festival on the sixth of January. They may have a practical reason, too, in America.

Christmas, as people celebrate it in America, although a most joyous occasion, is nevertheless, so full of excitement and commotion, that they are in danger of losing the real meaning of the day. We have always to keep in mind that Christmas is a religious and spiritual festival, and social festivities connected with it are incidental. To give more prominence to these worldly aspects of the feast than to the real thing is like, cultivating cotton for its seeds rather than for that white precious stuff, the cotton itself. After everything has calmed down and even the New Year has gone by with all its distracting attractions, we can in true spirit, settle down to celebrate the feast which in Armenian is "Astouadza-haytnoutiun," the appearance of God among men; always remembering that it is the "appearing" of a God on earth which has brought to this world that wonderful spirit with which almost everybody feels himself filled.

The briefest and maybe the most complete message of Theophany would be this: The Son of God has appeared on earth, becoming a son of man, in order that sons of men may someday appear in heaven as sons of God. May the Good Lord make us worthy of this glorious destiny.

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 preceding Christmas fast is dedicated to some of the 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. For example, fathers feel happy because they have had the joy of buying something new for every member of the family, in addition to the surprises they hold for the actual day of Christmas. Children are happy speculating on the toys and other presents they know they will receive. They try hard to be good, for on their behavior depends whether or not they will receive the presents promised to them. Housewives hustle about the house grumbling about small trifles so as to hide their inner joy and satisfaction—for after all is not this a week of fasting and are they not expected to observe it strictly? And what glowing joy when the numerous Christmas preparations move on to completion without a hitch! But above all wives are happy because they can get from their husbands almost everything they ask for, since during this season mankind feels kindly toward its own, and husbands hardly ever refuse a pleasure to their wives or children. This is a time when men seem to forget their hardships, for a smile flickers on every face.

On Christmas Eve everybody hurries to Church. Many have been fasting the whole day, neither eating nor drinking, in order to be able to take Holy Communion after the Divine Liturgy, celebrated in the evening. The long readings from the Old Testament—bearing on the coming of Christ—do not seem too long, for it is not the clergy, but the ordinary members of the Church who read these lessons and who bring out their best selves on this occasion. Even the mistakes they make, and their often wavering voices, add a charm to the occasion. Then follows the Evening Liturgy, which is sung with special enthusiasm. After the Divine Liturgy, everybody hurries home, because there is not very much time before the long awaited Christmas dinner. The Eve of a spiritual feast within the Church now becomes an occasion for family rejoicings round a table decked with all the delicacies of the season. This is a great day for family reunions, the family table is almost sacred.

In the small hours of the next morning, when most people have only had a short nap or no sleep at all, the bells of the churches toll in the night, ringing out the good news of Christ's Birth. The "Jamgotches" (those who "call" people to church) sing in the streets, "Aysor Don e Sourp Dzununtian, Avedis . . ." (Today is the feast of Holy Birth, glad tidings), "Ov pari Christoniayk, egayk i Sourp Egeghetsi" (O ye pious Christians, come to church). Everybody is up and ready for church. Those coming from afar carry lanterns. The churches are full. Sometimes, people cannot find room in their own church, so they try other churches. All the churches, however humble they may be, are tonight at their best. In the darkness of the night the flickering lights of the candles and lanterns create an atmosphere of heavenly rejoicing in God's house. The air rings with the glorious notes of the Christmas carols, sung with great fervor and solemnity: "Khorhourt Meds yev Skanchely" (Mystery grand and wonderful) and others. Children's thin but merry voices send back echoes. "Christos Dsunav yev Haytnetsav" (Christ is born and manifested). Then the whole congregation sings in unison the "Park i Partzouns" (Gloria in Excelsis).

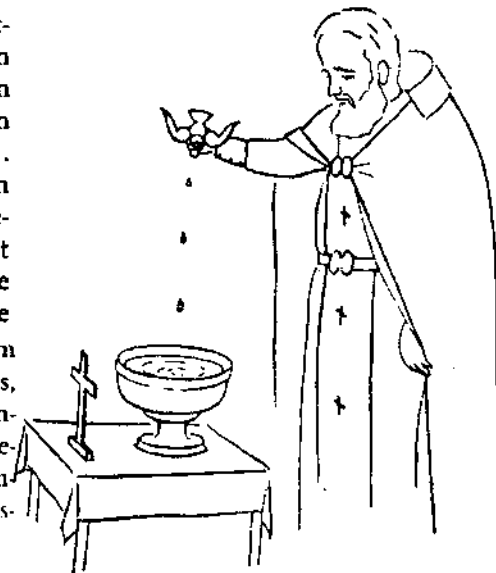
Towards the end of the Divine Liturgy, practically the whole congregation approaches the Holy Altar to take Holy Communion. It is at this supreme moment that unity is manifested inside the church through the giving of the kiss and greeting of reconciliation and brotherly love. Every Christian leaves the church, carrying with him this same spirit of love into the world. Outside the church, in the faint light of approaching dawn, he expresses his joy in more informal ways. The day's greeting is "Christos dzunav yev haytnetsav," or, "Shnorhavor sourp Dzunount" (I wish you a Christmas full of grace). Thus is

achieved the ultimate aim of Christmas—the fraternization of all, for, on this day, all those who have been on bad terms with others, are brought together, disputes are settled, wrongs are forgiven, ill feelings are forgotten. Even the sinners feel a certain purification. Almost miraculously, if only for a short time, the angelic wish "Good will amongst men" becomes a reality. It is, therefore, all the sadder, that many of these beautiful traditions and the spirit embodied in them, are daily becoming a thing of the past and their memory growing dimmer and dimmer.

DESCRIPTION OF A HISTORIC "JUR-ORHNEK" (The Blessing of the Waters)

The celebrations of Christmas in the Armenian church culminate in what is called in Armenian "Jur-orphnek" which means "the blessing of waters". It is a symbolic commemoration of Christ's Baptism. This ceremony was celebrated in ancient times by the riverside or by the seashore. But, because of the difficulties caused by Moslem neighbors and for other reasons, it was later confined to the interior of the churches. This religious ceremony was accompanied by popular joyful festivities.

The following is a description of "Jur-orphnek" in the thirteenth century Sis, the Capital of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia, during the reign of the Armenian king Levon the Great (1190-1220), the most glorious figure of this kingdom. We are indebted for this description to a European monk by the name of Canon Willebrand. In 1211 a group of European princes, going on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, passed through Cilicia. They stayed there for four months, enjoying the hospitality of the King. Canon Willebrand was one of them. On the Armenian Christmas the King invited his noble guests to the celebration service of "Jur-orphnek". This is how the Canon describes it.



"During the feast of Theophany we came to Sis, where we were invited by King Levon to attend their celebrations. Sis is one of the principal cities and has a great number of rich inhabitants. The feast of Theophany was celebrated thus: At first, for twelve days they did penance, fasted and abstained from fish, wine and oil. On the day of "Jrakalouyts" (i.e. Christmas Eve) they fasted the whole day. In the evening Mass was celebrated, and this was followed by a divine service and vigil the whole night.

"The next morning they all came to the riverside near the city. King Levon rode on a magnificent horse. His suite rode ahead of him, splendidly dressed and carrying flags, and a thousand men surrounded the King. Roupen, the Heir to the throne, rode behind the King with all the nobles of the land. Then came a host of soldiers, all in splendid garments suitable to the occasion. The soldiers shouted in unison, 'Holy King!' Then the trumpet sounded and the musical instruments struck their notes. Upon this, the King alighted from his horse and entered the tent which had been pitched for him on the bank of the river. Then came the Greek Metropolitan with his suite, and the Armenian clergy, headed by their Catholicos, in great pomp.

"They began to bless the water of the river. The Gospels were read in Armenian and Greek, the cross was lowered into the water, and at the same time, on the right, a pigeon was flown. One person entered the water and when he got to the middle of the river, he called out in a loud voice, 'Long live our King!' Then he called out again saying, 'Let all Christendom never cease to be strong and lofty', and all in unison replied, 'Amen'. Then the King and others sprinkled this blessed water on their persons, and the Assyrians, who were present bathed in the water. After the blessing of the waters, the clergy went back, but the king and those with him went to the races, for a course was laid out near the city of Sis. The refined amusement afforded by these entertainments, I must confess, I am not able to describe. The sons of the nobility took part in fencing and arrow throwing tournaments.

When the days of Theophany were over, the Great King saw us off with royal honors. We visited other cities over which King Levon ruled".

