



For Those Who Sleep

**Thoughts On The
Requiem Service
of the
Armenian Apostolic Church**

by order of
ARCHBISHOP VATCHE HOVSEPIAN
Primate

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INTRODUCTION

In this booklet FOR THOSE WHO SLEEP, Fr. Vartan Kasparian has presented and explained the stance of the Armenian Church regarding the dead and prayers for the dead. Its statements and views are in accord with both the Holy Scriptures and the teachings of our Holy Armenian Apostolic Church.

Our hope is that it will serve to acquaint and strengthen our faithful in the everlasting truths of our ancient Christ-given orthodox faith. To that end we heartily recommend its use.

ARCHBISHOP VATCHE HOVSEPIAN
Primate of the Western Diocese

BACKGROUND

Recently, at the conclusion of a Requiem Service (Hokehankist) for our deceased parish priests, parish benefactors, and deceased members of St. Mary Parish of Yetteem, a concerned parishioner approached me with the following comments which she reported had been made to her by a friend whom she had named: *"What's the matter with the Loosavorchagans (members of the Armenian Mother Church)? Don't they read the Bible? If they did, they would know that Requiem Services are nonsense. If a person dies believing in Christ, he automatically will go to heaven. If he dies not believing in Christ, he will automatically go to hell. So, praying for the dead is a waste!"* The parishioner followed the relating of this comment with a request that I help her with an answer to give her friend.

It is, therefore, to answer the request of this concerned parishioner that the following explanation of the Requiem Service (Hokehankist) of the Armenian Church is being given here.

It is historically interesting to note, however, that the Armenian Church has at various times been accused of supposed "errors" in doctrine by various groups. Such unsubstantiated charges have been made by the Byzantines, Roman Catholics, and Protestants. Ironically, such charges have proven to be culturally rather than theologically based. In point of fact, such accusations simply mean that the Armenian Church may be different from those who accuse Her of so-called "errors". While understanding and acceptance have often been requested of the Armenian Church, they have seldom been granted to Her. The Armenian Church has greeted other church bodies with the attitude that to be different is not necessarily to be wrong. Unfortunately, from the point of view of historical perspective, that same Christian understanding has not always be extended to the Armenian Church.

At present, the accusations of supposed doctrinal error on the part of the Armenian Church come from those who speak about the Armenian Church from a position of profound non-information; ignorance, if you will. For the most part, their Christian background consists of what can best be termed media Christianity, that is Christianity as it is heard on the radio, seen on television, or advertised in the newspapers. Such is superficial at best, in error at worst. They seldom, if ever, subject their own beliefs to the same scrutiny which they liberally apply to the Armenian Church.

It is hoped that the following will also help to give some of that much-needed information.

WHAT THE REQUIEM SERVICE IS NOT

Unfortunately, many people are under false impressions regarding the Requiem Service. At the outset, therefore, we should state clearly and unequivocally what it is NOT:

1. It is not a magic incantation to make someone get into heaven.
2. It will not cause a soul that is suffering in hell to suddenly be snatched into heaven.
3. It is not a means, if indeed any exist, of trying to force God into doing our will.

WHAT THE REQUIEM SERVICE IS

Before explaining what the Requiem Service is, let us first look at the prayer which is the highlight and conclusion of the Requiem Service. The total prayer is as follows:

PRIEST: To the souls of the departed, O Christ God, grant rest and mercy, and to us sinners, vouchsafe forgiveness of sins.

DEACON: For the souls of the departed, let us beseech Christ our Savior, that He may number them with the righteous, and that He may save us through the grace of His mercy.

PRIEST: Lord, have mercy; Lord, have mercy; Lord, have mercy. O Christ, Son of God, forgiving and compassionate, have pity as a loving Creator, upon the souls of Thy departed servants, especially upon the soul of Thy servant (name), for whom we are offering these prayers. Remember them on the great day of Thy coming into Thy kingdom; make them worthy of Thy mercy, expiation, and forgiveness of sins. Number them among Thy saints who will be assembled at Thy right hand. For Thou art Lord and Creator of all beings, and Judge of the living and dead. And to Thee are due glory, dominion, and honor, now and forever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen

From the above text, the following points should be readily apparent:

- 1.) The Requiem Service or prayer is a solemn supplication or request to Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Second Person of the Holy Trinity.
- 2.) It asks the following:
 - a. rest for the souls of the departed
 - b. forgiveness of sins for us (living) sinners
 - c. pity and compassion for the souls of the departed
 - d. remembrance of the departed at Christ's Second Coming
 - e. remembrance of the departed with mercy, expiation, and forgiveness at the time of judgment
- 3.) It acknowledges Jesus Christ as the Lord and Creator and as the Judge of the living and the dead.

So far, I personally see nothing un-Christian in any of these expressions. In short, the Requiem Prayer is asking the Divine Judge, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, to be merciful and compassionate when He comes to judge the living and the dead.

The prayer is looking forward to two events of crucial importance for all Christians:

- 1.) The Second Coming of Christ
- 2.) Christ's judgment of all

It is a simple fact that neither of these events has yet occurred. Therefore, our prayer is directed toward a future event or events.

From the above, we might be moved to ask two questions:

- 1.) Is it legitimate to pray regarding future events?
- 2.) Is it legitimate to pray for the dead in terms of those future events?

As will be shown below, the overwhelming answer to both questions in terms of the Bible and the earliest usage of the Christian Church is YES.

THE BIBLE

To answer the first question, we need look at only a few Scriptural texts to make our point:

- 1.) "Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you." (I Samuel 12:23)
- 2.) "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land." (II Chronicles 7:14)
- 3.) "Then the children were brought to Him that He might lay His hands on them and pray." (Matthew 19:13)
- 4.) "And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart." (Luke 18:1)
- 5.) "Rejoice always, pray constantly." (I Thessalonians 5:17)

After considering the above Scriptural texts, we can safely state the following conclusions:

- 1.) It is appropriate to pray.
- 2.) It is appropriate to pray for self and others, whoever they might be.
- 3.) Christ prayed.
- 4.) We should always pray.

In these terms, certainly our first question can be answered with a resounding YES.

As we consider our second question regarding praying for the dead, let us also consult Scripture. We read: "For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen asleep would rise again, it would have been superfluous to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore, he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin." (II Maccabees 12:44-45)

The above should be sufficient. However, the Books of Maccabees were among those books of the Bible which were dropped from what is known as the PROTESTANT CANON of the Bible. Therefore, a word of explanation would seem to be in order. The Books of Maccabees are part of what is now referred to as the Apocrypha and was/is a part of the Biblical canon of the Septuagint Bible. This was a Greek language version of the Hebrew Bible. It was this Septuagint Bible which was the very first Bible of the apostolic Christian Church. To this day, its canon or ordering of the Books of the Bible is the Biblical canon of all the ancient churches of apostolic origin. The major representatives of this group of churches are the Eastern Orthodox Churches, of which the Armenian Church is part, and the Roman Catholic Church.

Bearing this in mind, the comment from II Maccabees should be sufficient. However, we will pursue the matter still further in an effort to

give a more complete understanding of the Requiem Service of the Armenian Church, as well as that of all the ancient churches which trace their origin to the evangelization efforts of various of Christ's chosen Apostles.

Let us look at the Old Testament of the Holy Bible. In the Book of Ruth we read, "An Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, 'Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead.' " (Ruth 2:20).

Also, in the Book of Chronicles, we read a part of Solomon's prayer for his father, King David, "O Lord God, do not turn away the face of Thy anointed one! Remember Thy steadfast love for David Thy servant." (II Chronicles 6:42).

FAITH ALONE?

As mentioned above, critics of praying for the dead generally couch their criticisms in terms which can easily be reduced to the idea that if the deceased has died believing in Christ, he is automatically assured of heaven, therefore, any prayer on his behalf is unnecessary.

If we look at this attitude more carefully, we see that what is really involved is a question of what is necessary for salvation. Are we saved if we merely believe? Once again, let us look to Scripture:

- 1.) "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy in your name and do many mighty works in your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.'" (Matthew 7:21-23).
- 2.) "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But some will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe — and shudder. Do you want to be shown, you foolish fellow, that faith apart from works is barren?" (James 2:17-20).

It should be evident from the above that belief of and by itself guarantees nothing. God also requires works from us. To be sure, there is no action which we can perform that would require God to grant us salvation. As a further testimony that salvation is not completed by the act of believing, we need only look at the following Scripture which portrays salvation as a continuing process: "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (I Corinthians 1:18).

LAST JUDGMENT

For the Christian, there are two events which are inextricably intertwined — the Second Coming of Christ and the Last Judgment. The former necessarily precedes the latter. Let us look to Scripture for a description of these events. The first selection is one which is read at every funeral in the Armenian Church.

- 1.) "For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words." (I Thessalonians 4:15-18).
- 2.) "When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. The king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'

Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.'

And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matthew 25:31-46).

We now pause to review the Requiem Service in the light of the above. The relevant points can be easily summarized as follows:

1. Prayer is always in order.
2. We should pray for everyone.
3. When we pray for the dead, we ask God to be merciful and compassionate toward them when He judges them, so that they will be among His righteous, that is those to whom He will say, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom which has been prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The fact that praying for the dead has been a part of Christian belief and practice from the very earliest times can be shown from the following brief excerpts from the early liturgies of the Church.

1. **From the Liturgy of St. James**, we read: "Remember, O Lord, the spirits of all flesh, of whom we have made mention, and of whom we have not made mention, who are of the true faith, from righteous Abel unto this day; do Thou Thyself give them rest there in the land of the living, in Thy kingdom, in the delight of Paradise in the bosom of Abraham and Isaac, and Jacob, our holy fathers; whence pain and grief and lamentation have fled away..."
2. **From the Liturgy of St. Mark**, we read: "Have mercy, O Lord, on those who have slept and rested in the faith of Christ. Give rest unto all their souls in the bosom of our holy fathers Abraham, Issac, and Jacob... Remit their sins, for there is no one clean and without blemish; give them rest and make them worthy of the Kingdom of Heaven."
3. **From the Liturgy of St. Basil**, we read: "Remember, O Lord, and have mercy and bless according to Thy great mercy, the souls of Thy departed, whose name(s) we have remembered in offering this sacrifice to God, and grant him(her) rest among Thy saints."
4. **From the present Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church**, we read: "Be mindful, Lord, and have mercy and compassion on the souls of them that are at rest. Give them rest and enlighten them and reckon them among Thy saints in the kingdom of heaven and make them worthy of Thy mercy. Be mindful, Lord, also of the soul of Thy servant (*name*) and have mercy upon him/her according to Thy great mercy and by Thy visitaion give him/her rest in the light of Thy countenance."

CONCLUSION

After having studied the Scriptures and liturgical texts of the ancient apostolic churches, the following conclusions regarding Prayer for the Dead or Requiem Service seem inescapable:

1. Prayer for the Dead is Scripturally sound.
2. Prayer for the Dead can even be said to be demanded, when viewed against the background of the Last Judgment and Christian concern of brother for brother.
3. Prayer for the Dead has been and is a part of the orthodox, apostolic Christian worship ever since the very earliest days of Christianity. It continues to be so today.
4. In praying for the dead, our singular purpose is to beseech our Eternal Judge for compassion and mercy when He comes in His kingdom to Judge the living and the dead.

Bearing this in mind, as well as the following admonitions of Scripture; "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35) and "Love never ends." (I Corinthians 13:8), let us always be willing to follow the direction of the Deacon during the Liturgy when he exhorts us all, "For the souls of those who are rest, let us beseech Christ our Savior, that He may reckon them with the righteous."

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