



What Is Advent?

"Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand." (James 5:8)

Advent means "coming"—the coming of Christ. In Armenian it is called *Hisnag* from the word for "fifty." It is the 50-day period during which we prepare to celebrate the Nativity and Theophany of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is a time for us to think of the why of Christmas—why the greeting cards, the decorations, the gifts, the family gatherings? A time to look within our hearts to see if there is anything that stands between us and the Good News of Jesus' birth.

During Advent, we can rededicate ourselves to Christ through our actions, thoughts, and prayers. This is a good time for us to improve our habits and offer them as gifts to God. Perhaps Advent can also be an occasion to discover God's gifts all around us. We need to have an open heart to receive Christ—God's greatest gift of all!

We complain that Christmas is too "commercial," but there is a way to live out the real "reason for the season."

Special Feasts and Fasts During Advent

The Advent in the Armenian Church is approximately two weeks longer than it is in the Western churches, and that is why it is called *Hisnag*, "a 50-day period."

Fasting During *Hisnag*

Hisnag is in a sense introduced by a week of fasting. The fast is officially known as "the Fast of the Beginning of *Hisnag*." There is a second fast of a week's duration following the third Sunday of *Hisnag*. This fast is known as "the Fast of St. James, Bishop of Nisibis." The commemoration of the latter takes place on the following Saturday.

The third and final fast, again of a week's duration, precedes the Feast of the Nativity and Theophany of Christ our God, and that is how it is officially recognized in the calendar.

During the remaining weeks of *Hisnag* when there is no fasting, the Wednesdays and Fridays are regularly observed as fasting days.

Feasts During *Hisnag*

The Armenian Church celebrates a number of feasts and observes some important commemorations during the 50 days of *Hisnag*.

The Feast of the Presentation of the Holy Virgin to the Temple, as it has a fixed date, is celebrated on November 21st, even if it falls within the week of the fasting. On such occasions, the feast is celebrated liturgically, but the fasting prevails in dietary matters.

The same practice is also observed during the Feast of the Conception of the Holy Virgin by St. Anna, which is always celebrated on December 9th.

During the *Hisnag* we commemorate some of the important and major saints of the Christian Church. Among them are the 4th-century founders of Christian theology St. Gregory the Wonderworker and St. Basil of Caesarea; the Holy Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew, the enlighteners of Armenia; the Egyptian fathers; the early bishops of the church, such as St. Clemens, St. Ignatius, St. Polycarpus, St. Nicholas; St. James of Nisibis; and at the very end of the year, King David commemorated as a prophet; the Holy Apostle James, Brother of the Lord; St. Stephen the Protomartyr; the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul; the Holy Apostles James and John, both of them surnamed as Sons of Thunder.