

Why a "Repose of Souls" for the Deceased?

From times long ago, and still today, many have asked, and still ask, "Why is it that the Armenian Church conducts a "Repose of Souls" for the deceased?" Without taking into account what foundation they may have had in religious education, both those who have no comprehension of church canons, and the faithful members of the church might ask that same question. No doubt the thinking behind the question might differ between the two, but the question still has the same scope. It is, "Why Repose of Souls when the individual has lived his life, whatever it may have been, and is now dead?"

The concept of immortality has a pre-Christian origin, as recorded in history, and as confirmed through archeological excavations that show some ancients believed that the deceased will live once again. The early Egyptians, and others, had a practice of burying along with their dead not only objects belonging to the deceased, but also even weapons that might later be put to use.

Christianity gave the concept of immortality a new overlay, bringing light to dispel the darkness that had enshrouded man for centuries concerning the life beyond. It was this concept of Christianity that infused the faithful with that respect we now hold toward our deceased. With the respect we felt toward their lifeless corpses gradually becoming better and better delineated, our brightening of their memory and keeping it untarnished became a primary commitment. It is that reverential esteem that leads the bereaved family conscientiously to have a memorial service, the Repose of Souls (in Armenian, "hokehankist") conducted at the right time – after forty days, after one year, and annually thereafter. It happens that the family of the deceased, filled with worry, ask their pastor if there is any harm, or danger, in having the forty-day memorial service a day earlier, or a day later. They worry also, is the forty days figured from the date of death or the date of burial. Such concerns about details show how fastidious families are about the memorials, and it is to be admired. Of course, the forty days is figured from the date of death, but the repose of souls should be conducted on the nearest Sunday.

But what purpose is served by offering prayers after a person has died? We should make it clear that we, as Christians, and according to Christian theology, are duty bound to pray for the Whole Church. That Whole Church consists of two fundamental aspects, the "Triumphant Church" and the "Militant Church". The Triumphant Church consists of all those of the same faith as ours that have died. The Militant Church consists of us, we who are of the same faith. The church founded by Christ, in contrast with other institutions, is one whose members do not cease being members when they die. Accordingly, there is only a change in status that takes place. The most important duty of the living faithful of the Militant Church is to pray. But that prayer is not to be only for the living, nor for the health of one's family, but for the Whole Church. It follows in this sense that it is part of the duty of a Christian to pray

also for the souls of the deceased. That is, for those who are members of the Triumphant Church.

According to the theology of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Triumphant Church serves as INTERCESSOR for us toward God. Thus, the service of the Repose of Souls conducted in their memory acts as an expression of our gratitude toward them. The Apostle Paul refers to the intercession by departed souls when he says, "But you have come to Mt. Zion and the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect" (Heb 12:22-23).

There are numerous examples in the Old Testament concerning prayers for the deceased. Solomon prayed for the soul of his father David. "O Lord God, do not turn away the face of thy anointed one! Remember thy steadfast love for David thy servant" (2 Chron 6:42). The Hebrews even fasted in the memory of their deceased, in mourning. The inhabitants of Jabeshgilead fasted for seven days for Saul (1 Sam 31:13).

In its prayers dedicated to the deceased, the Armenian Church asks God to forgive them their forgivable and their unknowingly committed offenses. Of course, these prayers of the Repose of Souls have no connection with the doctrine of Purgatory enunciated by the Roman Catholic Church at the end of the seventh century. According to that doctrine, the soul that is separated from the body is immediately judged on its works and goes on to the heavenly kingdom, or is sent to hell. But if the sins are minor, and the sinning individual had not been able to atone for them during his life, he will remain in Purgatory, where he finally becomes inculpable and cleansed, after which he goes to heaven. That will, of course, still be followed by the Last Judgment.

The Armenian Apostolic Church does not accept that arrangement of a partial judgment in Purgatory. Instead, it believes only in the Last Judgment, in accordance with the decisions of the first three ecumenical councils. In the theology of the Armenian Church, the souls of those deceased who had committed minor sins go to a place called the "Way Station of Souls," where they remain until the Last Judgment. The souls of those who were just will be rapturous, looking ahead to future blessedness, while the souls of the sinful will know only the terror of future torture.

The answer to whether the Armenian Repose of Souls is different from others may be found in the Divine Liturgy, the "Badarak". The celebrant priest of the Divine Liturgy recites quiet prayers for the deceased, some of which may already be hallowed and just, as established by the Holy Bible. Thus, the priest says, "Of the Mother-of-God the Holy Virgin Mary and of John the Baptist, of the protomartyr

Stephen and of all the saints, to be mindful in this holy sacrifice we beseech the Lord," to which the choir, in the name of all the people, sings, "Be mindful, Lord, and have mercy." Are we able to say the soul of the holy Mother-of-God is here, or there and if it has been justified or not? It is natural to say that her soul is just. Nevertheless, we still pray for their souls. Therefore, the Repose of Souls service is a prayer to God, asking for grace for the souls of all the deceased, not only for all the sinners or those in the process of being cleansed. The hymns written by our church fathers to bring repose were for the same purpose, that of asking for grace. "Have compassion, O Lord our God, for the souls of our deceased, and with your mercy remember them, for we are the price of your holy blood . . ." (Hymn).

In these times, the ritual of the Repose of Souls, more than offering a prayer for the deceased, has come to serve, in a ritualistic way, for bringing comfort to the bereaved. This is so to such an extent that even the number of worshippers in the church can be related to the number of requests made for the Repose of Souls.

It is peculiar to hear that for some, to say "repose of souls" is to mean the memoria meal. We have learned that a "hokehankist" sometimes takes place in a restaurant without even the prior service in the church, and not even with a murmured prayer at the meal, but simply the meal and drinks. The Repose of Souls, more than a meal and much above it, is PRAYER. And that prayer is our Christian duty, performed for all the "Church", the people.

Respect your deceased with prayers so that they may be intercessors for you before God, the just judge.