

# HOLY TRADITION

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**Key Concepts:** The key concepts covered in this lesson are

- A. Holy Tradition as important part of our understanding of God, our Faith and the Church.
- B. Holy Tradition as complimentary to the Bible.
- C. Holy Tradition as a rich part of our present Church life and Community, and not just for the past.

**Objectives:**

- A. To define Holy Tradition by way of examples.
- B. To nurture an understanding and an appreciation of the Holy Tradition in the students.

**Welcome students and say an opening prayer.**

## INTRODUCTION

Today's lesson is a very interesting topic: the significance of Holy Tradition. If one of your friends asked you, "What does the Armenian Church teach?" what would be your answer? Perhaps you would respond by saying that the Armenian Church is one of the ancient Christian churches, and that we believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and also, we accept the Bible as God's Word. If you have studied our Church's history, perhaps you would even mention that the Armenian Church accepts the teachings of the first three Ecumenical Councils. But have you ever thought about the Holy Tradition as part of the faith of the Armenian Church?

**QUESTIONS** -- What is tradition? What is Holy Tradition? (direct these questions to the students just to get an idea of their understanding - take about 3 minutes).

Basically, tradition is the handing down of beliefs and customs orally.

Holy Tradition, most basically, is the accumulation of all the Church teachings, other than the writings of the Bible, handed down to us through the Prophets, Apostles and Church Fathers. The content of Holy Tradition does not contradict the Holy Bible, but includes information and details which may not be found in the Bible. Included in Holy Tradition, are the teachings of the holy Church Councils, the rituals and customs of worship, the Church canons writings of the Apostles and Church Fathers, as well as oral Tradition.

**ACTIVITY** -- Before further explanation and specific examples, in order to help the students understand the significance of Holy Tradition, and also to assist them in understanding its place in the life of our Church, the following activity will be useful. (allow about 6-7 minutes)

*Activity Sheet #1 and a pencil are needed for this activity.*

Each student should think about his or her own unique family traditions and write on the sheet of paper some examples which they will later share with the entire class. The traditions may have to do with the celebration of holidays. For example, someone

may write about the particular manner in which they celebrate Christmas. "My father always makes breakfast on Christmas morning. When my dad was my age, his father would do the same thing...".

After the students have finished filling the activity sheet, ask for volunteers to share their information with the class. (allow about 5 minutes)

*Explain to the students that just as in our own individual families certain customs do originate, certain customs have originated in our church worship throughout the centuries, such as using the kshots as part of the music; and just as family festive meals and celebrations have developed throughout the generations, our church worship service and teachings have developed and have been refined throughout the centuries. This is all a part of Holy Tradition.*

**SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OF OUR HOLY TRADITION** In order to better understand what is the Holy Tradition and its significance in our lives in addition to its relation to the Bible, let us look at some specific examples:

**1. The Ascension to Heaven of Saint Mary, the Mother of Jesus:** (Have a student) read John 19:25-27. This is a very touching account of Jesus' love and concern for His mother, even as He was dying on the cross. However, according to the Bible, this is the last piece of information we have concerning the mother of our Lord Jesus. Nevertheless, the Holy Tradition of the Church provides additional information about her and what happened to Mary after the crucifixion which is not contained in the Bible. The following is a summery of the story (*have one of the students read the story*):

*It is said that Mary lived in Jerusalem for 15 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. She possibly lived with John the Baptist's family during much of this time, since John the Baptist's mother, Elizabeth, was Mary's cousin. When Mary died, all the Apostles, with the exception of Bartholomew who was not in the area, took her body to Gethsemane for burial. (Gethsemane was the place Jesus was praying shortly before He was betrayed by Judas Iscariot and arrested). For three days and three night the songs of the angels were heard over her tomb.*

*When Bartholomew finally arrived in Jerusalem, he desired to visit Mary's tomb and see the mother of Christ one last time. The Apostles took Bartholomew to the tomb, and to their great surprise, her body was not there -- it had vanished. From this, they knew that Mary had not died, but had ascended to heaven, and that the angels who had been singing for several days and nights, had actually been celebrating her going to heaven. This event is now one of the great feasts of the Armenian Church and is celebrated in mid-August. At that time we also do the Blessing of the Grapes ceremony.*

**2. Saints Thaddeus and Bartholomew:** Very little information is given in the Gospels about these two Apostles of Christ. From the Bible we have virtually no information regarding their ministry after the Resurrection of Christ. However, the Holy Tradition provides us with much information regarding these two Apostles. This

information is especially important for Armenians since it was these two who first preached about Christ in Armenia. *(have a student read the following):*

*St. Thaddeus was the first Apostle to preach the Good News of the Gospel in Armenia. After he visited Syria, he went to Armenia and preached and taught the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. As a result of his preaching one of the people who believed in and accepted Jesus Christ, was Sandoukht, the young daughter of the Armenian king of that time. She was one of the first Armenians to be killed for accepting Christ. The year Thaddeus entered our Homeland, was 44 A.D. St. Thaddeus made many converts and he was martyred in 66 A.D.*

*St. Bartholomew is also known as Nathaniel in the Gospel of St. John (John 1:47). He became the second Apostle to go to Armenian with the Good News. At first he preached in Arabia and Persia before traveling to Armenia, where he was martyred in 68 A.D. Our people had constructed a tomb for this beloved Apostle, and until 1915, the year the Armenian Massacre took place, Armenians used to make pilgrimages to St. Bartholomew's Tomb. Unfortunately, the Turks destroyed the tomb during the time of the Massacre. Although Armenia was not yet a Christian nation at that time, these two Apostles formed the beginning of the Armenian Church in secret and ordained the first Armenian bishops.*

**3. Worship -- the Last Supper and Badarak:** Another good example of the role of Holy Tradition is in the area of worship. It is from the Bible (the first three Gospels and St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians) that we get our basis and model for our worship service, but it is from the Holy Tradition that we received our sharagans, prayers and unique manner of worship. Read St. Mark 14:22-26

**Last Supper** *This passage describes the last meal Jesus had with His disciples. It was a special meal -- it was the ceremonial meal of the Jewish Passover Feast. The Feast of the Passover was the celebration of the freedom of the Jewish people from slavery to the Egyptians. God punished the Egyptians with a number of plagues so that they would allow the Jews to leave Egypt and slavery. For the last plague, Moses warned the Egyptians that if they would not grant freedom for his people, that God would kill the first born child of every family. However, any family who wanted to escape that plague had to sacrifice a lamb and make the sign of the cross with the blood of the lamb of the door of the house. Therefore, when God sent His angel to carry out the plague, the angel passed over any house which had the sign of the cross made with the blood of the sacrificed lamb.*

*What our Lord Jesus did at that Passover Supper with His disciples was something totally new and unique. He revealed Himself as the Lamb of God from heaven. Jesus took bread, and told the Disciples to eat it saying, "Take, eat, this is my body". and He passed the cup of wine to them saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins". In other words, He meant to say that He is our Sacrificial Lamb, and He came to die on the Cross for our sake. Whoever accepts His Body and Blood by faith, will receive eternal life forgiveness of his sins and God's anger and punishment, will Passover that person.*

Also read I Corinthians 11:23-26.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION:** What is special about verse 23 in relation to our topic?

*Encourage the students to answer and discuss. (Answer: by the time St. Paul wrote this passage, the sharing of the Blood and the Body of Christ, now known as HOLY COMMUNION, had become part of the early Church's tradition. And St. Paul says that this [tradition] was handed down from the Lord because He instructed His followers, "Do this in remembrance of me").*

**The Badarak** *From the simple meal known as the Last Supper, we have the present day Divine Liturgy (Badarak). We follow the Lord's command, "Do this in remembrance of me", and remember His sacrifice which He made out of love for each one of us. As a matter of fact, the word "Badarak" which is the name of our worship service in which Holy Communion is administered, may be correctly translated, "the good sacrifice". But to that simple service, throughout the centuries our Church Fathers have added prayers and hymns and have elaborated the service where we not only remember the Lord's Last Supper, but His entire life. The Badarak starts with the sharagan, "Great Mystery" which has to do with His incarnation and birth. Therefore, it may be concluded that our special way of remembering the Last Supper has originated from Christ's words in the Bible, but it was embellished by way of Holy Tradition.*

**4. Creeds and Councils:** Another important aspect of Holy Tradition is in the area of belief (Church teachings). During the first 2 1/2 centuries of Christianity, there was much persecution of Christians, and the leaders of the Church did not have the chance to get together and discuss important teachings of the Bible. However, After Armenia and the Roman Empire were declared as Christian kingdoms, the Church was able to get organized and take care of certain matters such as the selection of the books which is now known as the Bible along with its correct interpretation. At various times during the early centuries of the Christian Church, the leaders of the Church from various areas met in special meetings known as Ecumenical Meetings. The specific purpose of these meetings was to clarify the teachings of the Bible and to correct certain false teachings and interpretations of the Bible. The Armenian Church accepts the teachings of the first three Ecumenical Councils and our doctrines are based on them. For example, let's take a brief look at the first of these councils, the Council of Nicea which took place in the year 325.

*The Armenian Church representative to this council was the grandson of St. Krikor, Aristakes. The important issue of discussion was the Person of Jesus Christ -- was He or was He not God? The Church was faced with a challenge because a man named Arius was spreading the false teaching that Jesus Christ was not equal to God the Father, but a created being. The central issue was that Jesus Christ died on the cross in order to save us from our sins. However, if He was not God, then He would not have the ability to save us from our sins, since only God has that power. The Bible clearly teaches that Jesus Christ is God. For example, He is referred to as "God with us" (Matt. 1:23); "God and Savior" (II Peter 1:1); and "Fullness of the Godhead" (John 10:30).*

Read John 14:5-9. What does this passage reveal about Jesus (especially verse 9)?

*The great and famous statement of faith which resulted from the Nicean Council was the Nicean Creed, known in our church as the "Havadamk". This is a summery of the most important teachings of the Bible -- about God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, about salvation and the second coming of Jesus Christ. This creed is a part of our Holy Tradition and was developed from it. Read the first two sentences of the Nicean Creed (Havadamk) and you will notice that it teaches the Deity of Jesus Christ as does the Holy Bible.*

### Complete Activity Sheet #2

After completion of the activity sheet, conclude the lesson with brief discussions (as time allows) of the following questions:

1. What are the criteria for valid Holy Tradition (in other words, how can we determine if something is really a part of the Holy Tradition)?

*Answer: A. True Tradition is compatible with the Holy Bible -- it cannot contradict it (Galatians 1:8). B. True Tradition does not contradict other Church traditions. C. True Tradition is accepted by all the Christian Churches.*

2. What is the value of the Holy Tradition in our lives today?

*Answer: - Through Holy Tradition, we have a proper understanding of Holy Scriptures (Bible).*

*- Through Holy Tradition we have developed and received our unique rituals, sharagans, prayers and teachings of our Church Fathers and Saints.*

*- Holy Tradition kept our Church intact by preserving the correct Faith from generation to generation to this very day. Because the interpretation is not left up to each individual, we do not have numerous sects and denominations. The Armenian Church, for example, has remained preserved and unified through all kinds of difficult times.*

*- And it is through Holy Tradition that we kept the customs of the Apostles and the early Christians, such as worshiping on Sundays and receiving Holy Communion during the Sunday worship service.*

*- We have so much to learn and benefit from the experience and teachings of our Church Fathers.*

### CONCLUSION

We must preserve the Holy Tradition because the Apostles have commanded us to do so. St. Paul writes:

"Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught (II Thess. 2:15). He also said, "But we command you brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us" (II Thess. 3:6).

## Activity Sheet #1 - HOLY TRADITION

*This activity is designed to help the students understand how some traditions originate and are then handed down to the future generations*

Choose one of the following holidays and answer the questions in regard to it: Christmas, Easter or Thanksgiving.

\_\_\_\_\_ (name of holiday)

1. What kind of foods are prepared by your family on that day? Are there any special dishes your mother or relatives prepare? Where did the recipes come from?
2. Describe some of the activities you and your family do on this day. What do you do as a celebration which is different from that of any other family?
3. In regard to your celebration of this holiday, is there anything which is an old family custom? If so, where and when did it originate?

Now in regard to our Armenian Church, what are a few of the traditions or customs that you like?

Do you know how the custom of candle holding started in our church? If so, explain.

Do you know the origin of the kshots (the round fans with bells on the altar) and why they were originally used for in the church?

## Activity Sheet #2 - HOLY TRADITION

Based on what you have learned from the examples of Holy Tradition, read each of the following facts and indicate whether that information is from the Bible or from Holy Tradition. Indicate your answer by putting a check mark by \_\_\_\_\_ T (Tradition) or by \_\_\_\_\_ B (Bible)

1. Just before He died on the cross, Jesus left the care of His mother to the Apostle John. \_\_\_\_\_ T \_\_\_\_\_ B (answer: B)

2. Mary, the Mother of Jesus, lived for 15 years in Jerusalem after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.  
\_\_\_\_\_ T \_\_\_\_\_ B (answer: T)

3. Mary ascended to heaven.  
\_\_\_\_\_ T \_\_\_\_\_ B (answer: T)

4. St. Thaddeus was the first Apostle to preach in Armenia.  
\_\_\_\_\_ T \_\_\_\_\_ B (answer: T)

5. St. Bartholomew preached in Armenia and was martyred there in 68 A.D.  
\_\_\_\_\_ T \_\_\_\_\_ B (answer: T)

6. During the Last Supper with His disciples, Jesus took the bread and said, "Take, eat, this is my body".  
\_\_\_\_\_ T \_\_\_\_\_ B (answer: B)

7. Holy Communion represents the Blood and the Body of Jesus Christ.  
\_\_\_\_\_ T \_\_\_\_\_ B (answer: T)

8. Jesus Christ is "God with us"  
\_\_\_\_\_ T \_\_\_\_\_ B (answer: B)

9. Jesus Christ said, "If you had known me, you would have known my Father also".  
\_\_\_\_\_ T \_\_\_\_\_ B (answer: B)

10. The Nicene Creed is the summery of the most important teachings of Holy Scripture.  
\_\_\_\_\_ T \_\_\_\_\_ B (answer: T).