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Learning about the Holy Muron

The “Blessing of the Holy Muron” is a sacred event in the Armenian Church: an awe-inspiring ceremony, filled with deep mystery and spirituality. Thousands of Armenian faithful from all over the world are drawn to the Mother Cathedral of Holy Etchmiadzin whenever the blessing ceremony is performed.

Holy Muron itself is the sanctified oil used in the sacraments of the Church – most especially in the sacrament of Chrismation, performed immediately following the Baptism service. As such, every Armenian Christian baptized before the altar of an Armenian Church carries the seal of the Holy Muron on his or her body, as a symbol of the Holy Spirit’s presence and protection. Holy Muron unites all Armenian Christians across the world – past, present, and future – in a common mystical identity.

But what is the Holy Muron? Where does it come from, and how is it prepared? Why does it hold such a mysterious significance in Armenian spirituality? Read on to learn more.

What is Holy Muron?

Muron (also spelled Myron) is a Greek word meaning “fragrant oil” or “juice flowing from a plant.” In ancient times, especially in the East, olive oil was blessed and used in various forms of worship. Another Greek term for blessed oil is “Chrism.”

Pagan authors like Celsus and Galen describe the religious significance oil held for the ancient Greeks and Romans, and how oils would be applied to the body for curative and sacred purposes.

Blessed oil also played a prominent role in Judaism. In the Old Testament, God commanded Moses to prepare the sacred oil, with which various objects would be anointed (see Exodus. 30:22-33). After anointing, an object became holy, distinguished, and set apart from others of its kind (the literal meaning of the word "consecrated"), and could thereby be used in religious rituals and ceremonies.

The practice of anointing took on a deeper meaning with the coming of Jesus Christ. In fact, the title "Christ"-the Greek version of the Hebrew term "Messiah"-means "The Anointed One." It is related to the word "Chrism."

The books of the New Testament testify that ancient Christian practice often involved anointing with oil (see for example Mark 6:13, Acts 10:38, James 5:14, and 1 John 2:27). Early Christians used oil for sacramental purposes, as in baptismal ceremonies; but they also used it as a prayerfully sanctified healing remedy. References to non- sacramental, medicinal uses of oil are found in the works of Tertullian, Ephrem the Syrian, Theodoret of Cyrus, and other authorities of the early Church. But they also insisted that oil acquired its healing power through formal consecration and the faith of the patient.

Holy Oil in Early Armenian History

In the Armenian Church, the use of Holy Muron dates to Apostolic times. According to Holy Tradition, oil blessed by Jesus Christ was brought to Armenia by the first enlightener of the Armenian people, St. Thaddeus the Apostle. The 13th-century theologian Vanagan Vartabed refers to this tradition in his work, *In Praise of the Armenian Nation*. Another common work among Armenian manuscripts, titled *On the History of the Holy and Divine Oil*, tells how the Apostle Thaddeus, during his journey to Armenia, anointed King Abgar with the blessed oil he had brought with him, healing the king from a skin disease. The apostle then traveled to the Armenian province of Daron, where he buried the vessel of precious oil under an evergreen birch tree.

The buried holy oil was later discovered by St. Gregory the Illuminator, the patron saint of Armenia, after he had received a vision about its location. Gregory combined this oil with a larger quantity of muron and placed his own blessing over the mixture. Later, in his capacity as the first Catholicos of the Armenian Church, St. Gregory built a church named for St. John the Baptist, where he stored the oil. Armenian historical records refer to the site as Eghrdut Vank, or the "Monastery of the Holy Bottle of Oil."

This oil—first blessed by Christ, transported to Armenia by St. Thaddeus, and rediscovered by St. Gregory—became the original Holy Muron of the Armenian Church. And throughout history, whenever a Catholicos would bless a new quantity of muron, he would mix into it the remnants of the oil inherited from all his predecessors, dating back to the first Catholicos, St. Gregory the Illuminator. Mystically, the grace of Christ's blessing residing in the old oil is transferred to the new quantity of Holy Muron. Thus, the drops of oil used for sacraments in Armenian churches across the world contain deeply meaningful elements of that original oil blessed by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

When Does the Church Use Holy Muron?

Holy Muron is used in a number of rituals and sacraments performed in the Armenian Church. These include:

1. The **Sacrament of Chrismation**, which immediately follows Holy Baptism. During this ceremony, the priest uses Holy Muron to anoint nine body parts of the person receiving the sacrament, conferring the gifts of the Holy Spirit.
2. The **Ordination of Clergy** is performed with Holy Muron. During a priestly ordination, the ordaining bishop anoints the forehead and both hands of the priest. When consecrating a bishop, the Catholicos of All Armenians anoints the future bishop's forehead and right thumb, giving him the authority to perform ordinations and consecrate churches, among other things. Because clergymen have been anointed with oil and through their anointing have been given permission to hold the Body of Christ in their hands during the Divine Liturgy, the Armenian faithful kiss the right hand of anointed priests.
3. Holy Muron is also used in the **Consecration of the Catholicos of All Armenians**. Holy Oil is poured out on his head as the Armenian Church's "universal patriarch" (the meaning of "catholicos") and successor to St. Gregory the Illuminator. In ancient times, Armenian kings were also anointed with Muron in this way.
4. Holy Chrism is used in the **Consecration of a New Church**. Oil is used to anoint the cruciform stone tiles in the church's foundation; the cross of the dome; the altar; icons on the altar and in the sanctuary; as well as any pillars supporting the church. A church must be consecrated before the Divine Liturgy can be celebrated in it, since the act of consecration sets the sanctuary apart as sanctified and pure.
5. During the Feast of the Nativity and Epiphany of our Lord Jesus Christ (observed every year on January 6) the Armenian Church holds the "**Blessing of Water**" ceremony in remembrance of Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan. During this ceremony, the officiating priest pours Holy Muron into a basin of water, symbolizing the descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus Christ in the image of a dove during His baptism. The historians Aristakes Lastivertsi and Kirakos Gandzaketsi record a beautiful story about a miracle connected to the Holy Muron on this feast day. In the 11th century, Catholicos Bedros Ketatarts led the January 6 water-blessing in Trebizond, by the order of the

Emperor Basil II. When the Catholicos released a droplet of oil into the river, lights flashed and the river flow paused for a moment, as proof of the divine origin and sanctity of the Holy Muron.

The Silver Cauldron

In 1895, a merchant from Nor Nakhichevan Agha Kaspar Haroutunian Garabedoghlian donated a silver cauldron to Holy Etchmiadzin. This is the vessel that is still used in the preparation ceremonies for the Holy Muron.

The distinctive cauldron stands 130 centimeters high, with a mouth 50 centimeters in diameter; it has gilded details attached to it, and its cupola-shaped lid is topped with a sculpted dove. Exquisite pictorial reliefs adorn the surface of the cauldron, depicting (1) Christ's baptism by John the Baptist; (2) King Abgar's baptism by the Apostle Thaddeus; (3) the baptism of Armenia's royal family by St. Gregory the Illuminator; (4) the descent of the Only-Begotten Son of God on the soil of Armenia; (5) the Mother Cathedral of Holy Etchmiadzin; (6) the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Columns with winding geometric and floral form arches frame each of these images. Likewise, winding bird-forms serve as the handles. Haroutunian Yezyants financed the cost of the cauldron's engravings, while the forms for the cast and sealed thematic scenes were prepared in the printing factory of Serovpe Haroutunian.

The surface of the cauldron bears several inscriptions (translated here into English):

This cauldron for the blessing of Holy Muron was presented at the entrance of Holy Etchmiadzin by Agha Kaspar Haroutunian

Garabedoghlian of Nor Nakhichevan, in memory of his wife and their daughters, and parents and children resting in the Lord, on January 1, 1895 A.D.

The descent of the Only-Begotten from the Father, and the Light of Glory with Him; the consecration of the sanctifying grace and counsels of the Spirit of God.

His Holiness Lord Mardich I, Catholicos of All Armenians (Khrimian Hayrig) conducted the first Blessing of Muron in this cauldron on September 14, 1897.

When and How is Holy Muron Prepared?

The preparation of Holy Muron begins weeks before the blessing ceremony. Forty days prior to the blessing service, the Holy Muron cauldron is filled with pure olive oil, placed on the main altar of the Mother Cathedral, and covered with a woven veil. In the past, seven layers of veils would be used to cover the cauldron.

Then all the necessary materials are brought to the Mother See from various parts of the land. Holy Muron has two essential ingredients: olive oil and balsam. These are mixed with the blended liquid

of more than forty different aromatic flowers, incenses, plant roots, flower waters, oil juices, and leaves.

The ritual manual of the Armenian Church, known as the Mashdots, records under the heading "Blessing the Muron" that "The main ingredients of Holy Muron are pure virgin olive oil and the oil of balsam." Balsam is a fragrant liquid that comes from the bark of an evergreen tree, such as an oleaster. If not softened, it will stay at the bottom of the cauldron and not integrate with the rest of the muron mixture. Meanwhile, the olive oil is boiled on its own. The Mashdots advises that "More balsam is commendable. The more balsam, the more praiseworthy it is." Once the boiling process has been completed, the balsam is poured into the olive oil and boiled again to properly unite them. This mixture is kept separate from the other ingredients until the day of the blessing service. All necessary supplies for Holy Muron are blessed by the Catholicos and poured into a large container, which is then boiled over fire for three days, accompanied by prayers and readings from Scripture. After it is taken off the fire, the muron is left alone for a few days, so that all the undissolved sediment can settle to the bottom. The clarified liquid that remains is strained through a clean cloth and kept apart until the day of the Muron blessing. The initial prayer service begins a forty-day process of psalms, hymns, Scripture readings, and prayers. On the Eve of the Blessing of the Holy Muron, a vigil is held beside the cauldron; and the next day the official celebration of the Blessing begins.

Who Blesses the Holy Muron?

Traditionally in the Armenian Church, the Catholicos of All Armenians retains the exclusive right to bless the Holy Muron. However, in recent times the Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia has also performed a muron-blessing for certain church jurisdictions.

In earlier times, the blessing ceremony would take place during Holy Week, on Holy Thursday: the day marking the Last Supper of our Lord. But editions of the Mashdots ritual manual published over the last two or three centuries give greater latitude for scheduling the ceremony, stipulating that it may take place on Holy Thursday, Pentecost, or "another suitable day." In the past century, to accommodate the vast number of pilgrims who travel to Armenia for the blessing service, and also perhaps to take account of the optimal weather conditions in the Ararat Valley surrounding Holy Etchmiadzin, the Blessing of the Holy Muron has been conducted in the autumn.

Recent custom holds that the muron blessing should be held every five to seven years; but that pattern can be modified if necessary, and blessings are often inaugurated to coincide with some major development or occasion in Armenian life, like the independence of Armenia in 1991, or the centennial of the Armenian Genocide in 2015.

Without doubt, it is a blessing for a Catholicos to have the opportunity during his pontificate to preside over a muron blessing ceremony and bestow his fatherly blessing on the worldwide Armenian faithful. However, several catholicoi of the 20th century were not so fortunate. Catholicos Mattheos II Izmirlian (1908-1910) did not manage to hold a blessing service, because the ceremony scheduled for 1909 had to be postponed due to an outbreak of cholera in the Caucasus. Likewise, Catholicos Khoren I Muradbegian (1932-1938) and Catholicos Kevork VI

Chorekchian (1945-1954), were denied the opportunity to bless the Holy Muron due to the oppression of the Church under the Soviet Union.

At last, on October 8, 1955, a twenty-nine- year period of inactivity came to an end, when the newly elected Catholicos Vasken I Baljian (1955-1994) led his first Blessing of the Holy Muron. During his pontificate, by God's grace, His Holiness Vasken I performed five more blessing ceremonies-the last of which, on September 29, 1991, was the first such ceremony to be held in an independent Republic of Armenia. On that occasion, Catholicos Vasken I named the sacred oil the "Muron of Independence." His successor Catholicos Karekin I Sarkissian blessed the Holy Muron on September 8, 1996, calling it the "Muron of Renewal."

After an interval of just five years, in 2001, the ceremony would go forward again, to coincide with worldwide celebration of the 1700th Anniversary of Armenia's conversion to Christianity, in A.D. 301. By that time, Catholicos Karekin II Nersissian (1999-present) had ascended to the pontifical throne, and he would lead the Blessing of Muron again in 2008 and 2015.

Features of the Blessing Ceremony

During the muron blessing, the Catholicos of All Armenians takes the concentrate made from flowers and pours it into the ceremonial cauldron filled with olive oil, then adds the balsam in the same way. Then he pours the remnants of the old Muron into the new, after which the hymn Arakelo Aghavno- "The Dove [the Holy Spirit] From On High "- is sung.

The Catholicos next blesses and mixes the Holy Muron with three sacred relics of the Armenian Church: The Relic of Christ's Holy Cross; the Holy Lance of Keghard; and the relics of the right hand of St. Gregory the Illuminator. As he does so, he repeats three times: "May this Holy Oil be blessed and sanctified with the sign of the Holy Cross [or alternatively by the Word of the Holy Gospel, with the Holy Right Hand, or by the Holy Lance of Keghard] and by the grace of this day in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." After these patriarchal blessings, the cauldron is again covered with a fine cloth.

In its composition and meaning, the Holy Muron prepared in the Armenian Church differs from the oil blessed by other churches. For Armenian Christians, its meaning goes

much deeper, and it has held a national- ecclesiastical significance for the Armenian people over the course of many centuries. No wonder, then, that a rich literary tradition pertaining to the Holy Muron has been preserved in Armenian manuscripts, which explores the muron's mystical meaning, its ingredients, and other matters related to this sacred element.

Of particular interest are the detailed descriptions of the ingredients needed to create the Holy Muron. The oldest surviving manuscript on the topic dates back to 1461, and lists some forty plants and substances.

Other manuscripts list as many as fifty- eight ingredients. Interestingly, there is no mention of olive oil anywhere in these manuscripts-presumably because it was clear to everyone that without olive oil, it would not be possible to make Holy Muron. Analysis of geographical distribution of

other elements (like flowers, incense, and spices) shows that most of the source plants are native to tropical and subtropical climate zones.

The Life-Giving Cross of the Lord: In the course of the blessing ceremony, the Catholicos first blesses the Holy Muron with a large ceremonial cross, which is also a reliquary containing a fragment of wood from the True Cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified.

The 10th-century mystical poet St. Gregory of Narek makes reference to this vessel in the 93rd chapter of his Book of Lamentations, which is entirely dedicated to the Holy Muron. Narek writes that the sacred oil will not benefit a person if it is not blessed with the life-giving Cross of the Lord. The relic-bearing cross used in the Blessing of Holy Muron was made in 1652, especially for Catholicos Pilibos | Aghbaketsi (1632- 1655). It is only one of several vessels in the possession of the Mother See, which contain relics of the True Cross of Christ.

The Holy Lance of Keghard: In accordance with a centuries-old Armenian tradition, the Catholicos blesses the Holy Muron with the relic known as the Holy Lance of Keghard. This is the tip of the spear used by a Roman soldier named Ghunkianos (the Armenian form of the Latin "Longinus") to pierce the side of Jesus when He was still on the cross. The Gospel attests that water and blood flowed from the resulting wound (John 19:34).

Tradition holds that the Holy Lance was brought to Armenia by St. Thaddeus the Apostle. Historian St. Movses Khorenatsi relates that the terminally-ill King Abgar, a contemporary of Christ, heard about the Lord's miracles, and wrote to Jesus asking him to visit Abgar and heal his affliction. After His Resurrection, the Lord sent Thaddeus to heal King Abgar with the Keghard-the Holy Lance-as well as the Crown of Thorns worn by Jesus.

After being cured, King Abgar became a Christian, and encouraged his uncle Sanadruk, King of Armenia, to do the same. Sanadruk, however, failed to do so, and even executed his own daughter Sandukht when she refused to deny the Christian faith she had embraced as a follower of Thaddeus. The ill-fated Sandukht is still revered as Armenia's first martyr for Christ.

The Holy Lance has been a subject of legends and storytelling across the Christian world since the Middle Ages, and today there are several relics in Europe and elsewhere that purport to be the "authentic" article. However, the Armenian Church's specimen of the Holy Lance of Keghard is extremely ancient, and its claim to authenticity is fortified by the many healings and miracles associated with this cherished holy relic.

The Godfather of the Holy Muron: Armenian tradition asserts that when St. Gregory the Illuminator offered the first Blessing of the Holy Muron, he bestowed the honor of "Godfather" on King Drtad III-Armenia's first Christian monarch-who was charged with protecting and watching over the Holy Muron.

Likewise, in Armenian services like the Blessing of Water or the Blessing of the Holy Muron, it is common to appoint a faithful individual to participate in the ceremony as a "godfather" of the blessing. For the Blessing of Water, that guardian role is referred to as the "Godfather of the Cross," and for the Blessing of the Holy Muron, the title is "Godfather of the Holy Muron." In

recent times, the godfathers of both services have come to represent the laity of the Church, signifying the prayers of the faithful.

The Godfather has an essential role during the ceremony of the Blessing of the Holy Muron. He wears a clerical robe and leads the procession headed by the Catholicos to the altar. During the ceremony, he helps open the cauldron. As mentioned above, the Holy Muron is generally blessed once every five to seven years by the Catholicos of All Armenians, and one individual represents

all Armenians as the Godfather of the Holy Muron. The Blessing of Water, by contrast, occurs in all Armenian Churches every year on the Feast of Christ's Nativity, with each church appointing its own Godfather of the Cross.

A National Celebration

For centuries, it has been a great wish of many Armenian Christians to witness the Blessing of the Holy Muron at least once in their lifetimes. The faithful would converge on our homeland from the four corners of the world, to not only participate in the magnificent event, but also to give their generous gifts to the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin as a sign of their loving support for the Armenian Church.

On September 14, 1897, when Catholicos Khrimian Hayrig performed his first Muron blessing at the Mother See, the Ararat magazine of the time described the details of the ceremony. "In the courtyard of the monastery, one could hear every dialect and language of the Caucasus," it said, adding at the end:

That evening there were fireworks in the courtyard of the monastery and in the seminary. The soldiers were playing music and competed with the ashughs [professional bards] in the singing of their national folksongs. For three days, the cathedral was full of pilgrims who made every effort to kiss the cauldron containing the Holy Muron. The vessel was on the Altar of St. John the Baptist, and new pilgrims from surrounding places would arrive every day to kiss the cauldron of green Muron. In a year when the political situation was hardly good, special caution had to be observed. Nevertheless, our people, ignoring everything, rejoiced from their hearts because they unquestionably believed in the spiritual center of the Armenians, the steadfastness and power of Holy Etchmiadzin.

Due to the war and blockade in Artsakh in 2023, the Blessing of the Holy Muron had to be postponed until 2024. When this significant event takes place, Armenian pilgrims from all over the world will once again gather at the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin to experience days filled with spiritual renewal and joy as His Holiness Karekin II, the 132nd Catholicos of All Armenians, blesses the Holy Muron. The sacred green oil is getting warmer now with prayers and preparations.

It awaits all the faithful members of the Armenian Church to be renewed and to transform our lives with its miraculous power, filling our lives with hope, faith, and love.

The Blessing of the Holy Muron will be a wonderful opportunity to draw closer to our holiest of holies, the Mother Cathedral of Holy Etchmiadzin, established by God to convey our united

prayers to Heaven for the steadfastness of the Holy Armenian Church and the well-being of its homeland. The Holy Myron, filled with the abundant grace of the Holy Spirit, calls us to gather around the Mother Church, to kindle its divine warmth every day in our hearts, through our prayers and our virtuous Christian lives.

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