

SACRAMENTS OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

Sacraments are outward or visible signs and ceremonies to give us God's invisible graces. They are channels by which the Christian graces enter into our souls to feed, to nourish and to strengthen our spiritual life.

There are seven sacraments in the Armenian Church, which consist of the following:

1. Baptism
2. Confirmation
3. Holy Communion
4. Holy Matrimony
5. Penance (confession)
6. Holy Orders (Ordination of clergy)
7. Extreme Unction (last blessing given to a dying person)

BAPTISM

Baptism is the first sacrament which a Christian receives. Unless we are baptized, we are forbidden to receive any other sacraments. Any other sacrament received before receiving Baptism, will be invalid. That is why Baptism is called "the door of the Church".

By Baptism we are made Christians, and are incorporated into the church. Baptism gives new life to our souls. Through Baptism we become children of God, and co-heirs of Christ.

This sacrament, as well as each one of the others, was instituted by our Lord Himself. He gave us the first example by being Himself baptized by John the Baptist. On leaving this world the last order which He gave His disciples was: "Go and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

CONFIRMATION

The sacrament of Confirmation is actually the completion and perfection of the Sacrament of Baptism, and that is why Confirmation immediately follows Baptism in the Armenian Church. By Baptism a new principle of spiritual life is given to the neophyte by Confirmation he is endowed by all the gifts of the Holy Spirit which are necessary for the growth and progress of that life. By Baptism a new road is opened for the Christian; by Confirmation he is strengthened for this long course of spiritual conflict in the Christian warfare as a soldier in the army of Christ.

In the Armenian language the name of the sacrament Confirmation is "Gunounk" which means sealing, referring to the spiritual fact that by Confirmation we are sealed as possessions of God. "He (God) has put His seal upon us and given us His spirit in our hearts as a guarantee" (2 Cor. 1:22) A Christian character is given to us by this sealing.

The chief sacramental act at the Confirmation is the anointing of the various members of the body of the baptized with the sanctified oil called Chrism, hence the name of "Chrismation" given to this sacrament. This oil is called "Sweet Oil" in Armenian or "Miuron." Holy Miuron is blessed only by the Catholicos, the head of the Armenian Church, and distributed freely to all Armenian Churches. Holy Miuron is made of olive oil and of the essence of some forty kinds of flowers and other sweet smelling herbs as ingredients.

Like Baptism, Confirmation also is not repeatable. When a child receives the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation he is then taken to the altar to worship God. There Holy Communion is given him by touching his lips with a particle of reserved sacrament. Thus, almost all the necessary Sacraments for salvation, Penance, Baptism, Confirmation and Communion are administered in one continuous act of making a person a member of the Christian Church.

PENANCE

Penance is the Sacrament by which sins committed after Baptism are forgiven through absolution by the priest.

We must receive the sacrament of Penance:

- (a) Because our Lord Jesus Christ commanded it when He said: "Repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mark 1:15) "Unless you repent you will all perish" (Luke 13:3)
- (b) Because we need it. It is true that by the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation we are saved. However, it is well known that after Baptism we do not always stay in the state of grace; in other words we commit sins. As a remedy for these sins after baptism, the sacrament of Penance has been established.
- (c) Because it increases the graces of the Holy Spirit which we already possess. The greater our knowledge about our sinfulness, the stronger become our desire and willingness to be sanctified and to be saved.

In order to receive this sacrament properly, we must:

- (a) Examine our conscience. We must make a sincere effort to recall to mind all the bad things we have done in thought, in word or in deed. We can make a good examination of our conscience by reviewing the commandments of God and the precepts of the Church, in order to see whether we have omitted to practice any of God's commandments or committed any acts against any one of them.
- (b) We must be sorry for our sins, expressing to God our grief at having been disloyal to Him. This act of being sorry for one's sins is called Contrition. Contrition is very important in the act of penance. God will not forgive us our sins unless we make a true and sincere contrition.

- (c) We must be firm in purpose not to sin again. Our day of good resolutions is not necessarily the New Year's day. On every occasion when doing penance, we must sincerely promise God not to fall again into the same sins. After this sincere resolution, we must honestly avoid sin and everything which causes us to sin.
- (d) The last act of Penance is Confession. Confession is an important part of the sacrament of Penance. If we do not feel well physically, we go to a doctor, or if we do not feel good mentally, we would perhaps consult a psychiatrist. Likewise, when we do not feel peaceful in our souls, we should go to a priest to regain our inner peace and spiritual health. This is the aim of the Confession. Doctors cannot give you the right form of medicine unless they know your trouble. Likewise a priest should know your spiritual troubles in order that he may give his advise or guidance according to your need. Therefore, confession is based on the teachings of the Gospels and of the Church, as well as common sense and in the need of our soul.

It is obligatory to go to confession before Holy Communion. That is the rule of the Church. It is true that many Christians do not commit serious sins, or mortal sins, which is the technical word for heavy sins. Nevertheless, we must confess our little sins, too. If however, somebody says I have no sin, he is lying, as the Scripture says, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." (I John 1:18)

Penance therefore, is the Sacrament through which we receive that sanctifying grace for the soul which we have lost through sin. No matter how grave our sins may have been, they are forgiven if we make a sincere contrition and a good confession.

HOLY COMMUNION

Holy Communion is THE Sacrament of the Christian Church. It is the most essential means for our salvation, and for our progress in the way of Christian perfection. It is the Sacrament through which we receive the Body and the Blood of Christ, under the forms of consecrated Bread and Wine, for the remission of sins and for the reception of eternal life. In the Armenian Church we use the terms or names "Holy Sacrifice" or "Soorp Badarak" to describe the ritual of Holy Communion.

The account of the establishment of the Holy Communion is explicitly recounted in the first three Gospels (Matt. 26:26-28, Mark 14:22-24, Luke 22:19-20). It is also clearly referred to in the Epistles of the Apostles. For our purpose we consider it worthwhile to bring forth verbatim the account of the foundation of this Sacred Institution, as it is given by St. Paul, which is

chronologically the first written account about the Holy Communion. "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me'" (I Cor. 11:23-24)

Holy Communion is not only a Sacrament but also a Sacrifice. "As Sacrifice, it is the continuation of the sacrifice of Golgotha." The very words used by our Lord clearly show this: "My body given or Broken for you," "My Blood shed ... for many for the remission of sins." "These expressions indicate that this Institution is itself a propitiatory sacrifice." It is not simply a representation of the death of our Lord, but actual and real sacrifice, in which "The Offerer and Victim are one and the same, our Lord, even if the sacrifice be offered by the priest." It is not simply a reminder or commemoration of the historical fact of Golgotha, but an actual and objective sacrifice.

It is also a Sacrifice of Thanksgiving, Worship and Praise, which we offer God, for His Goodness and loving kindness. In this Sacrifice of Thanksgiving the congregation joins with the priest, taking part in the singing or following it in spirit.

All those who would take Holy communion must prepare themselves by repentance and obtain absolution by confession. Willful indifference to the Holy Communion or carelessness in regard to it deprives us of its benefits.

The Armenian Church requires from regular practicing members the reception of Holy Communion on the following Holy Days of the year: Easter Sunday (Spring), Transfiguration and / or St. Mary's Day (Summer), Holy Cross Day (Autumn), and Christmas (Winter). There is no limitation as to how often one may approach the Holy altar. There is however, strict ruling about delinquency in receiving the Holy Sacrament.

Any member of the Church desiring to take communion must previously make preparation. The first step in this preparation consists of examination of conscience, the reading of the Bible, refraining from certain pleasures, and reconciliation with your fellowman. This last is the most important requirement.

The next step is to go to the Church and make confession to the priest and receive absolution a week or a few days before taking Communion.

It is necessary to fast during the morning of the day when Communion is to be taken. The fast should be observed from twelve o'clock midnight until the time of Communion, which would be the first thing taken in the mouth on that day.

The prospective communicant must attend the Divine Liturgy early and devoutly on the day in which he desires to communicate. Toward the end of the service he should come into the chancel, when the curtain is being withdrawn, and the deacon calls: "With fear and with faith draw near and communicate in holiness" (Yergughiv yev havadov harach madik yev surpoutiamp haghortsarouk) When the priest turns and comes to the edge of the bema (altar stage) the communicant should approach him, and make the sign of the cross, say, "Megha Astoudzo," and standing should open his mouth, slightly protruding his tongue, on which the priest lays a small particle of the Host (Sacred Body) dipped in the Cup (Precious Blood)

The communicant should then go back, take his seat and say his private prayers.

MARRIAGE- HOLY MATRIMONY

Marriage is a contract to form a family, and the family is the foundation of Human society. The stronger the foundation, the stronger will be the structure over it. God Himself is the author of marriage. He instituted it in the Garden of Eden saying, "Increase and multiply and fill the earth." Adam, receiving his inseparable companion from the hands of God, pronounced these important words: "This now is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh, wherefore a man shall leave father and mother; and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall be two in one flesh.

The purpose of the sacrament of Holy Matrimony is to sanctify the union of man and wife for the preservation of the human race, for the increase of the members of the Church, for the promotion of mutual helpfulness and for the upbringing of the children as Christians.

The sacrament of the Holy Matrimony or marriage is the most important event in ones lifetime. The interests of society and of nature meet at this moment. Therefore, every society, recognizing the importance of marriage, has clothed not only the bride and groom in beautiful garments but has also made the ceremony itself beautiful and impressive. We can say that, properly performed, the marriage ceremony of the Armenian Church is one of the most beautiful of rituals.

HOLY ORDERS (Ordination of Clergy)

The Church is an organized society. It is composed of all the baptized persons who are united in the same Faith, the same Holy Communion, the same Sacraments, and under the same Ecclesiastical Authority. Those who exercise this ecclesiastical authority form the ministers or officers of the Church who serve God, teach and sanctify the faithful, and govern the Church. This authority to Serve, to Teach, to Sanctify, and to Govern is not given by elections or appointment, but by a sacred ritual which is called Ordination.

Ordination or Holy Orders is one of the important sacraments of the Church. Through ordination men receive the power and grace to perform the sacred duties of a minister of the Church.

It is true that by Baptism all Christians are endowed with the "priesthood" of laymen, who have thus the obligation to offer up to God the spiritual sacrifices of Thanksgiving, prayers and acts of faith, hope, and charity. But only those men who receive the sacrament of Holy Orders are ministers of God in the full sense of the word.

The Sacrament of Ordination is administered always by a Bishop. There are various orders in the Church, and consequently, there are various forms of ceremonies by which each one of these orders is conferred. However, the one act that is common to all of these various orders is the Imposition of Hands by the Bishop. That is why Ordination is also called "The Laying on of Hands," "Tzernatroutiun" in Armenian

For the ordination of any cleric, except the bishop, one bishop is sufficient to administer the Sacrament. The consecration of a Bishop, according to the rules of the Armenian Church, is performed by His Holiness the Catholicos, having at least two other Bishops assisting him. at the Ordination. The consent of the laity is expressed formally at the service of Ordination by the Choristers when they sing: "he is worthy".

There are three basic main orders in the Church: Those of Deacons, Priests, and Bishops. These three orders have been instituted in the Church since the time of the Apostles.

At present Deacons assist the bishop and priest in the church during the divine offices, by singing, censing, and bringing the gifts to the holy altar during the Divine Liturgy.

The Priests administer all the sacraments except the Holy Orders and are the shepherds and the leaders of local churches under the bishop.

Bishops with the full power of the Apostles, are the governors of various Dioceses of the Church. They alone minister the Holy Orders. According to the canons of the Armenian Church, Bishops alone are authorized to consecrate churches, altars and baptismal fonts.

In addition to these three basic orders, there are in the Church many other ranks and offices: some of them are higher, others lower.

The higher ranks are those of Arch-bishop, Patriach and Catholicos. They have higher authority and jurisdiction in administrative matters.

At present in the Armenian Church, "Archbishop" is only an honorary title given by his Holiness the Catholicos to those bishops who are distinguished by their position or good record of activity.

The office of Patriach, is the highest in the Greek Church. In our Church, however, the Patriach is an archbishop, who occupies one of the historical patriarchal Sees of Jerusalem or Constantinople. Patriachs are independent in all administrative matters within the area of their own jurisdiction.

The office of Catholicos is the highest office in the Armenian Church. The Catholicos is the head of the whole Armenian Church. It is a Greek word meaning General. The fulltitle of the head of the Armenian Church is "Supreme Patriach Catholicos of All Armenians."

The Primate or the Ordinary of a Diocese (Arachnort) is a high ranking clergyman who holds the highest position and authority in a given diocese. He may have a lower order than that of a bishop, and even if there are retired bishops or even archbishops in his diocese, they come under his jurisdiction in matters of administration.

Vartabed is an academic Church title given to a celibate priest who has the necessary education.

Dzayrakoun Vartabed is an honorary title given to those Vartabeds who have been elected primate, or who have distinguished themselves by their learning in the fields of theology, religious teaching, and Holy Scripture, etc. It corresponds to Doctor of Divinity in the Western Church.

Apegha is a celibate priest, attached to a monastery.

Archpriest is also an honorary title given to those priests who have fruitfully served their church for long years or who have distinguished themselves in outstanding service to the church.

Minor Orders of which there are as many as six, are given to those who take care of the material building of the church and assist in the Divine Office, by singing, reading lessons, etc. They are Doorkeepers, Psalmists, Readers, Acolytes or candle bearers, and Exorcists, whose function is to read prayers over sick people. Subdeacons have the highest rank among the holders of minor orders. For each one of these minor orders the proper symbols of the office are given to the candidate at his ordination.

EXTREME UNCTION AND UNCTION OF THE SICK

1. The Unction of the sick is a Sacrament administered to an Orthodox Christian when seriously ill; the priest laying his hand on him recites the lessons and prayers appointed for the occasion and makes the benediction of the Holy Cross*
2. What Grace does the Sacrament Confer?
It strengthens the sick person to bear patiently and with courage his sufferings, inspires him with the hope of immortality, fortifies him against death, and gives him a hope that if He should deem it expedient, God will grant him bodily recovery. (St. James 5:14-17)

*Note - This Sacrament is called by the Latin Churches "Extreme Unction", because the priest anoints the eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, hands, and feet of the sick with special consecrated oil, according to the words of the Apostle (St. James 5:14). Unfortunately, except in the case of our clergy, the Anointing of the sick has fallen into disuse among us for various reasons and the laying on of hands and the Prayers, which are the most important part of the Sacrament, are preserved. St. James the Apostle says: "And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up, and if he have committed sins they shall be forgiven him." (James 5: 14-15. Acts 28:8)