

Saints' Days



he word saint in the church means just and God pleasing. In the early days of Christianity believers called one another saints. That soon fell into disuse and the term 'saint' was reserved for those who lived a virtuous life, who became renowned for their faith and service to the church, those who became martyred for the faith and those worthy of heavenly favor.

The most obvious measure of sainthood is 'martyrdom' since for mankind the greatest sacrifice is the relinquishing of one's life for the love of one's faith and beliefs. When offered willingly and with devotion and faith this sacrifice sanctifies one's past transgressions. It is for this reason that the 'baptism of blood' is considered sufficient for those martyrs who had not received the sacrament of baptism prior to their martyrdom. Another measure of sainthood is 'to bear heavenly witness' which is made manifest through miracles. There are references, as well, to pious and worthy individuals in the Holy Scriptures. Our church does not possess a vehicle of canon law as does the Roman Church in order to canonize saints. Generally, it has been through the piety of faithful believers and through their acceptance of the exemplary spiritual strength of an individual that the faithful themselves recognize and honor them. Whereupon, the proper ecclesiastical authorities, after being likewise convinced of their spiritual strength and exemplary behavior through miracles or martyrdom, canonized them through inclusion in the Directorium. There are still those, however, who have been honored by the faithful, whose graves or relics venerated, yet who still remain uncanonized and are not remembered in the Directorium (Donatzooytz).

There are two categories of saints in the Armenian Church: those that are 'celebrated' and those that are 'commemorated.' The former are celebrated by means of recollection during the Hours Services and during the Divine Liturgy, the latter by the daily reading of their biographies and/or martyrdom from the Haysmavoork (Book of Martyrologies and Lives of the Saints). Naturally there are those saints who have remained unknown. It is for that reason the church celebrates 'ALL SAINTS DAY' commemorating all saints, "old and new, known and unknown." By old and new we are not to understand the Old and New Testaments but the saints who have remained unknown to us from the time of our Lord until the present. This feast, which is celebrated in all traditional churches and which is viewed as a major feast by Roman Catholics, is listed in our ancient Directoria to be celebrated only those years when the season of the Holy Cross is extended by one week. (The reader should remember that the period preceding the Feast of the Holy Cross is based on Easter and is thus variable.)

According to the apostolic decree, "The martyrdom of His saints are honorable before the Lord," therefore it is their martyrdom that is most often commemorated. It would be logical to commemorate Saints' Days on the anniversaries of their martyrdom. However, more often than not it was impossible to accurately record those dates and for that reason it has been impossible to do. It has been especially difficult in our church to do so since, from ancient times Saints' Days have not been commemorated on Dominical Feasts or on Days of Abstinence. And since the remaining 100-120 days of the year are insufficient to include all the saints' commemorations, the Canon of the Day of Martyrdom is incorporated in our church only in the reading of the Haysmavoork.

Important incidents from the lives of the saints, which have impact on our lives as Christians, are commemorated as well. Accordingly, in our church we do have a small number of such parallel commemorations: for example, the commemorations of the Birth of St. John the Forerunner (Baptist), his beheading and the translation of his relics. Likewise with the Holy Apostles and prophets, we commemorate them as a group, then in pairs or singly. Again, we have three feasts of commemoration dedicated to St. Gregory the Illuminator, two for the Holy Translators, commemorations to the twelve great patriarchs of the church in general as well as separate commemorations for each one, etc.

In the canon of the commemoration of the saints, the practice of group commemorations is peculiar to our church, with those saints who bear strong similarities to one another being commemorated together, for example: forefathers, patriarchs, prophets, apostles, teachers (vartabedatz), sons and grand* children (St. Gregory), Vartanantz, the Holy Translators, etc.

Although some may find fault in the Armenian Church for its commemoration of saints outside her own tradition, one must bear in mind that these all belong to the first through fifth centuries when the Universal Church was still in existence and had not been divided into specific churches. Therefore all those saints, which all ancient churches still commemorate presently, are considered saints by all of traditional Christendom. By retaining the commemoration of those early saints, the Armenian Church accents the fact that in its mission to its people, as the mother and fortress of the faith of the Holy Gospels, It is and shall remain "Apostolic" and "Universal," augmented by its strong national spirit. In view of this, the Armenian Church has always maintained its original position in matters of faith and creed. In matters of national commemorations, it has exercised economy as is clear from the Directorium. After the fifth century the saints' commemorations that have been added are less in number than those preceding and then only when the worthiness and God-pleasing conduct of the saint was well established and unquestionable.