



WORDS AND WORSHIP

(A monthly column showing how the words of the services of worship in the Armenian Church have meaning for our daily lives both in and out of church)

This month's words: With fear and faith draw near and communicate in holiness (yergyohiv yev havadov haraj madik yev srbootyamb haghortetzarook).

These words are the "bidding to communicants" which call us all to come forward and receive the Body and Blood of Christ during the Divine Liturgy. There is much in them that is worth discussing, and for that reason *Avedis* will consider them for two monthly issues in a row, both in this issue and the coming October one.

This month, let's consider the kind of attitude that these words call for on our part as we approach the chalice. We are asked to communicate "in holiness." Certainly most of us would agree that, among other things, this word indicates that our minds must be completely on what we are doing. We cannot have a lot of irrelevant thoughts going around in our heads as we come forward; we should be concentrating on the great gift we are about to receive. We need to be ready to receive it with humble thanks to God and with a full intention to be as worthy of it as we humanly can.

One element of this "holiness" in which we approach the chalice is a kind of *silence* on our part. We put aside all our own concerns and those constant thoughts of ours, and put our full attention on God. Our own minds, our desires, our self-interest are quiet at least for this moment; we are silent and ready to receive what He gives us. In fact, most of our worship (even though we sing and pray) is done in a kind of attentive silence which makes room for the voice of God to speak to us.

Silence is not very popular in our society today. People tend to fill up any little bit of silence with conversation or a radio or the TV or *something* that will let them avoid that quiet state where there are no distractions from listening to God. Many of us are more than eager to drown out any possibility of actually hearing that "still, small voice" and the things it will say to us.

Yet, like so many things that the Church has regarded as precious for a long time, the value of silence is being discovered by the society we live in. A world which has rejected quiet in favor of noise, activity, and constant stimulation is realizing that human beings need silence and the reflection it makes possible. A recent issue of *Parents* magazine makes this clear.

In the March 1989 issue of *Parents* is an article called "Say it with Silence" by Susan Isaacs. In it she writes:

When children are offered the experience of silence, either in the classroom or at home, they tend to initiate it themselves on a regular basis. It's as if the body calls out for quiet once it has experienced the natural refreshment of being still.

The Church might add, "Yes, and once people have experienced prayerful silence in church, they tend to initiate it themselves in regular personal prayer. It's as if the soul calls out for communion with God once it has experienced the holy refreshment of being with Him."

That is the opportunity the Church gives us: to communicate in holiness with God through His body and blood. Long before any magazine or classroom discovered it, the Church in her wisdom knew that we can only do this when we are fully attentive, concentrated, and ready. We can only do it, in other words, when we put ourselves in the kind of silence that welcomes the presence of God.



WOMEN WHO FOLLOWED THE LORD

This month: Saint Queen Ashkhen

In Agathangelos' *The Conversion of Armenia*, published by the Department of Religious Education in 1985, we read of the extraordinary events in Armenia after the stubborn King Drtad had finally released St. Gregory the

Illuminator from his long and terrible stay in the pit. Drtad, his family, and his court were instructed in the Christian faith by Gregory in preparation for their coming baptism. They also built chapels for the saints who had been martyred under Drtad during his fanatical opposition to Christianity. And one who is mentioned by name as physically assisting with the building of these chapels is Queen Ashkhen, the wife of Drtad. She also literally had a hand in the building of the cathedral at Etchmiadzin, and for her devotion to the faith she has been recognized as a saint by the Armenian Church.

Ashkhen was not an Armenian by birth. Born the daughter of the king of Alans, a country near Armenia and northwest of the Caspian Sea, she married the young Drtad in the year 291 at Vagharshapat, the capital. She was with him during the most painful and important years of his life, the years when he had to change from a willful monarch who would let no one defy him to a repentant supplicant begging God's mercy and receiving baptism at the hands of Gregory, the man he had once hated more than all others. What a relief it must have been to her when her husband came to his senses and received the teachings of Christ in his heart. Ashkhen herself was very open to those teachings, as we see from her willingness to help build churches and to spread the faith throughout the land.

What were her own attitudes during this time? History books do not tell us much, but we can imagine that her marriage was never easy, since her spouse was such a strong-willed and proud man. Think of the events of his life: trying to seduce a virginal nun against her will, putting an enemy in a loathsome pit for thirteen remorseless years, being physically changed into a bestial figure in much the same way as the Biblical king Nebuchadnezzar. None of these reflect a personality very easy for other people to live with.

Yet Drtad was also loved by his people, most of whom suffered with him when he underwent his bestial change, and later willingly followed his example in becoming a Christian. So there must have been much that Ashkhen could love and admire in this vigorous Armenian she had married.

Like many women in history, we know more about Ashkhen through her husband's fame than by any facts we have about her own life. But her life must have been a good example in many ways, for the Church has recognized her as one of the saints. She certainly was helpful to the work of St. Gregory, encouraging and standing behind her husband as it went on. She gave the Armenian people a model of someone who actively pitched in to construct centers of worship for the one true God. She was the perfect helpmate to her husband at a time when his country was in the limelight and her husband was meeting with the great Constantine and other Christians in the Empire (as Agathangelos' history tells us he was.)

Ashkhen's life ended quietly in the castle at Garni in the year 341. She had had the privilege of being part of the

transformation of her people. She had received the Christian faith from a saint, and had responded by living a saintly life herself. The Church gives her to us as a reminder that we, too, have inherited the faith from the whole body of saints, and that we can respond in the same way she did.

WORDS FROM THE CHURCH FATHERS

What struggle my soul will have to sustain when its time comes to be separated from my body! What suffering I shall have to endure alone! No one will be at hand to have mercy on me. If I turn my eyes even to angels, I will be pleading in vain. If I stretch out my hands to my fellow men, I will find no one to help. Beloved brothers and sisters, let us then consider how short is our life and look up to Christ who alone grants mercy and peace.

St. John of Damascus

AS OTHERS SEE US

"One third of the entire Armenian population was massacred in the secular enlightenment of Turkish nationalism that marked the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

That fact, the events of March 1915 in Armenia, is the most suppressed episode of twentieth-century history. No other genocide in which one and a half million were killed has been passed over so lightly. And the reason for this willed, stubborn blindness needs to be recognized. The Oriental [Orthodox] churches owe their obscurity only in part to historical and geographical conditions: the rest is due to modern unwillingness to know. None of the "goods" of Christian European civilization survive acquaintance with such knowledge. And when one of those "church-nations"--Armenia--suffered holocaust, that could not be admitted either, for nationalism, liberalism and secularism were all invested in Turkey's modernization.

Armenia represents the guilty conscience of Europe and of modernity. Western civilization, whose ethical values were Christian, cruelly betrayed one of the oldest and least compromised Christian nations. Since 1915 Armenia has been, in the West's world-view, the blind spot."

From Charles Lock's review of the book *Light from the East: A Symposium on the Oriental Orthodox and Assyrian Churches*, ed. Henry Hill, which appears in the #2 1989 issue of *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, published by the faculty of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary.