

S T E P   B Y   S T E P

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The Western Diocese  
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*by order of*

ARCHBISHOP VATCHE HOVSEPIAN  
*Primate*

## P R E F A C E

Although most of our church organizations feel obligated to present some type of a religious education activity during the course of their meetings, both as a matter of Christian conscience, as well as By-Law requirements, it seems that this job is more easily talked about than done.

This present small volume, STEP BY STEP, is an attempt to at least partially fill that need. Each of the various presentations is designed to take you through the Church year, step by step. Each presentation has been designed to be read aloud during organization meetings. Even the very longest of these should take no more than 3 to 5 minutes for an oral presentation.

Since most of our organizations seem to assume that the task of presenting religious education material properly belongs to the vice-chairman, he/she can easily review and then make the presentation. Also, this task can be assigned to someone else. However, in either case, the reading and presentation during the meeting should NOT be the first reading of the material by the presenter. It should be carefully reviewed and read aloud several times before the actual presentation. This will help to insure that it will be completely understood by as many as possible.

In preparing this booklet, it has been my singular purpose to make at least a small portion of our priceless Christ-centered heritage as Armenian Christians available in a convenient and readily understandable form to ever more persons. Only time will tell if that purpose has been achieved.

To that end, this booklet is dedicated to the glory of Almighty God and the strengthening of our Holy Mother Armenian Church.

Prayerfully,



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November 23, 1980  
First Sunday of Advent

For the Month of January

ARMENIAN CHRISTMAS

BACKGROUND

The feast which we normally refer to as *ARMENIAN CHRISTMAS* is more properly designated as *THEOPHANY - the revelation of God*. The proper Armenian term for this feast is simply *ASDVADZAHAYDNOOTYOON*. This simply means that this is the feast of God becoming man.

Yes ! The God of the universe and all creation became a human being. We call Him JESUS CHRIST. The Holy Scripture describes this as: ". . .the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:14)

This is the great event which we celebrate on the Feast of the Theophany.

WHY JANUARY 6 ?

We may ask why this celebration of Armenian Christmas is on January 6. Afterall, everyone else seems to be celebrating it on December 25.

To find the answer to this question, we have only to look at history.

Originally, all Christians celebrated Christmas on January 6. However, there was a Roman pagan feast known as the SATURNALIA. This holiday came around December 25. It was a celebration of the winter solstice - the birth of the sun.

This particular Roman feast, as many such Roman feasts, was more an excuse for drunkenness and debauchery than anything else. Unfortunately, some Christians also took part in this pagan observance.

In order to dissuade Christians from taking part in this licentious celebration of the birth of the sun, the Church Fathers in the West designated December 25 as the date of the birth of the SON, our Lord Jesus Christ. This happened in approximately 340 A.D.

Since Armenia was not a part of the Roman Empire, the Roman feast of the Saturnalia, even if known in Armenia,

was not observed or celebrated there. Therefore, the Armenian Church saw no need to change the date for the observance of the birth of Jesus. As a result, the Armenian Church has maintained the January 6 date from the very earliest times.

IN THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

The Feast of Theophany in the Armenian Church is really a triple feast. It commemorates:

- 1.) the birth of Jesus Christ
- 2.) His revelation to mankind
- 3.) His Baptism

We find these ideas and truths beautifully expressed in some of the hymns which are sung in the Armenian Church for the Feast of the Theophany.

For example, the Processional Hymn proclaims:

*O great and marvelous mystery  
 which was today revealed:  
 the shepherds sing with the angels,  
 and give the glad tidings to the world.  
 Christ is born and revealed.*

Also, at the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy on the Feast of the Theophany, there is a service which is called THE BLESSING OF THE WATER (Choor-orhnek). It is also often referred to as THE SERVICE OF THE BAPTISM OF THE CROSS. This service, of course, commemorates Jesus's Baptism in the River Jordan.

One of the hymns which is sung during that service states:

*How marvelous is the great mystery  
 which has been revealed:  
 God the Creator comes to the River Jordan.  
 O river, fear not, I am your Creator;  
 I am come to baptism  
 in order to wash away the sins of the world.*

PROPER GREETING

For the Feast of the Theophany the Armenian Church has a special greeting. It proclaims:

Քրիստոս ծնաւ եւ յայտնեցաւ:

Krisdos dzunav yev haydnetzav.

Christ has been born and revealed.

The proper response to this greeting is:

Օրհնեալ է Յայտնուեթիւնն Քրիստոսի:

Orhnyal eh Haydnootyoonun Krisdosi.

Blessed is the Revelation of Christ.



For the Month of February

VARTANANTZ

BACKGROUND

Undoubtedly, every Armenian, indeed anyone who has ever been in contact with the Armenian Church or community, has at least heard the name of St. Vartan and Vartanantz. Even after such an acquaintance, however, some still are unaware of who he is and what the event of Vartanantz was all about.

Let's pause for a few moments and consider the event which we call Vartanantz.

THE EVENT

- 1.) In 301 A.D., the Armenian people became the first in the world to embrace Christianity as their official religion.
- 2.) In 404 A.D., an Armenian alphabet had been compiled by St. Sahag and St. Mesrob, who by 434 A.D. had translated the entire Bible into the Armenian language.
- 3.) These two events succeeded in creating a true identity and purpose for our Armenian people. This was a purpose and identity which was thoroughly Christ-centered.
- 4.) Because of this, the Persians who had previously been culturally and religiously close to the Armenians began to fear. They therefore demanded that the Armenians renounce Christianity and become Zoroastrians as the Persians were.
- 5.) The Armenian response to this demand can be summed up in the words of the official answer of the Armenian people to the Persian King Hazgerd: *Our religion is not like a garment that we might change according to the circumstances; it is part and parcel of our bones and blood and personality. We serve you loyally in your army and pay you taxes faithfully if you leave us alone in the matter of religion. If you try to force your will upon us, we are ready*

to suffer, and to be tortured and even to die. However, you should know in advance that there is no power on earth which can force us to change our religion because our covenant is not with man but with Almighty God.

- 6.) As a result, the Persians sent 220,000 troops into Armenia to resolve the question by means of sheer brute force. The Armenians, under the leadership of St. Vartan Mamigonian, with only 66,000 soldiers, met the Persian on-slaughter in 450 A.D. Tragically, St. Vartan lost his life in the Battle of Avarayr. Some 1036 Armenians were lost, as compared to 3544 Persians.
- 7.) Resistance to the Persians continued for some 30 years. Eventually, under the leadership of Vahan Mamigonian, Vartan's nephew, the Armenians emerged victorious from the struggle.
- 8.) In Vahan's victory, the Persians agreed to the following points:
  - a.) full religious freedom for the Armenian people
  - b.) home rule for Armenia
  - c.) replacing corrupt officials with men of dependable character

The event of Vartanantz, above all else, is a triumph of conscience over brute force. It is a proclamation that regardless of the consequences, our people have continually chosen God and light over darkness and death. To be sure, every age has had its traitors, its Vasaks. Nonetheless, loyalty to Jesus Christ and His Holy Church have always been ultimately victorious.

SCRIPTURE

The Books of Maccabees in the Old Testament were continuing sources of inspiration to St. Vartan and those who fought with him. In chapter 2, verse 19 of the First Book of Maccabees we find what can rightly be viewed as the traditional view and attitude of the Armenian people of St. Vartan's day and our own: *Even if all the nations that live under the rule of the king obey him and have chosen to do his commandments, departing each one from*

*the religion of his fathers, yet I and my sons and brothers will live by the covenant of our fathers. Far be it from us to desert the law and the ordinances. We will not obey the king's words by turning from our religion to the right hand or to the left.*

VARTANANTZ AND YOU

As we think about St. Vartan and Vartanantz, each Armenian Christian must decide for himself whether he will follow Christ's light and the example of St. Vartan into life; or will he follow the path of the traitor of Vartanantz, Vasak, into darkness and death and oblivion.

The memory of St. Vartan is blessed. The memory of the traitor Vasak is cursed.

Are we Vartan's or Vasak's ?

As we observe the Feast of St. Vartan in February, let's give the matter some serious thought !



For the Month of March

LENT

BACKGROUND

The season of Lent in the Armenian Church is referred to as *MEDZ BAHK - GREAT FAST*. It is the 40 day period which precedes the greatest feast of the Christian year, commemorating the greatest event in the history of mankind, the victory of Christ over death which we celebrate at Easter. Lent corresponds to the 40 day period which Christ spent in preparation for His public ministry. You can read about this in the Holy Scriptures, in the Gospel according to St. Matthew, chapter 4, verses 1 through 11.

Lent is a time of limiting our intake of food or eliminating certain foods completely. This is called *fasting* and *abstinence*. During this time, we are also called upon to give up certain pleasures. All of this is simply to remind us that the only *ESSENTIAL* for life is ultimately Almighty God.

Lent is also a time of penance. That is, it is a time to sorrow for past wrongs which we may have committed, while making a firm resolution and effort not to repeat them.

Lent, too, is a time of reconciliation. It is a time for getting things right between ourselves and our fellow human beings.

LENT IN THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

Our Armenian Church takes us through Lent, Sunday by Sunday, by bringing out and emphasizing a particular spiritual truth each and every Sunday. All of the day's Scriptural readings stress this same lesson. Let's now look at these, Sunday by Sunday.

The first Sunday of Lent is known as the SUNDAY OF GOOD LIVING. Its lesson is that as God's children, His sons and daughters, we can only be truly happy and fulfilled when we are living in accord with His will and His commandments.

The SUNDAY OF THE EXPULSION, as the second Sunday of Lent is known, reminds us that when we sin by ignoring God's will or breaking His commandments, it is we who suffer, just as Adam and Eve suffered when they disobeyed Him in the Garden of Eden. It is we who expel ourselves from God's presence by our actions.

When we reach the third Sunday of Lent, the SUNDAY OF THE PRODIGAL SON, we are shown that whenever we decide to repent and return to our loving Father, who is Almighty God, He will receive us with love and forgiveness. However, since we are the real prodigal sons, it is up to us to willingly return to our Father, God.

The great lesson of the fourth Sunday of Lent, the SUNDAY OF THE STEWARD, is that we are all ultimately responsible to Almighty God for every aspect of our lives. We are responsible to Him for everything we think, do, or say. We are responsible to Him for the use of all that He has given to us. One day, we will all be called to give an accounting of ourselves and our life to Almighty God. We are advised to always be ready.

The fifth Sunday of Lent is known as the SUNDAY OF THE JUDGE. Here, the great lesson which we have to learn is the lesson of perseverance. We must practice our Christian virtues; we must pray; we must worship continually. We are admonished to remain steadfast and constant in our total Christian life.

On the sixth Sunday of Lent, the SUNDAY OF THE ADVENT, we are shown that just as everything begins with Almighty God, everything will one day end with Him. On this Sunday, we are looking forward to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. We are shown that He stands as the complete Lord and Sovereign of the past, the present, and the future. We are reminded of the closing words of the Book of Revelation in the Holy Scriptures: *I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.* (Rev. 22:13)

AFTER LENT

When Lent finishes, we are then looking forward to the joyous celebration of Palm Sunday when we remember our Lord Jesus Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem. We then enter Holy Week (*Avak Shapat = Great Week*) when we

recall our Lord's last days on earth: His sufferings; His mock trial; His crucifixion; His death; His burial; and His wonderful and glorious triumph over death.

YOU AND LENT

Since we are in one of the most important seasons of the Church year during Lent, we should quite seriously ask ourselves one of the most important questions of our life: *Are we going to use the unique opportunities which are given to us during Lent in order to really, genuinely improve ourselves? Or, are we simply going to let the days pass and be substantially no different at the end of Lent than we were at the beginning?* When Easter comes and our Lord rises from the dead, will we rise with Him as a new person, a new creation, or will we still be in the grave and tomb of our old-selves?

We now have an opportunity during Lent to make a decision. We now have an opportunity, with God's help, to make a change. Will we take the opportunity which Lent gives us, or will we lose it?

Let us remember the words of the Holy Scriptures which tell us: *You are dust, and to dust you shall return. (Gen. 3:19)*

As we think about this, perhaps we will be better able to make a proper decision!



For the Month of April

CHRIST'S RESURRECTION - ULTIMATE VICTORY

BACKGROUND

The Feast of the Resurrection, or, as it is more commonly known, Easter, is the most important feast of the Christian Church. It is truly no exaggeration to say that it is the *FEAST OF FEASTS* of the Christian Church.

At Easter, we recall and relive the most important event in human history. That event is Jesus Christ's victory over death. This fact is the strongest possible affirmation that the power of God is unlimited. His power has dominion even over death.

Those who are faithful to Him are promised a similar resurrection and victory over death.

EASTER IN THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

In the celebration of Easter, we acknowledge the fact of this unique victory of Christ. Our Armenian Church's beautiful Easter hymn - *KOVYA YEROOSAGHEM - REJOICE, O JERUSALEM* majestically proclaims:

*Rejoice, O Jerusalem!  
Christ is risen from the dead! Alleluia.  
Come ye peoples, sing unto the Lord! Alleluia.  
To Him who is risen from the dead, Alleluia.  
To Him who enlightens the world, Alleluia.*

Of course, this is in keeping with the most ancient tradition of the Christian Church. We hear St. Paul saying:

*For I delivered to you as of first importance that which I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. (I Corinthians 15:3-6)*

As we greet each other on Easter, we should say:  
*KRISDOS HARYAV EE MERELOTZ. . . CHRIST HAS RISEN FROM THE DEAD. Our appropriate answer should be: ORHNYAL EH HAROUTYOUNUN KRISDOSI. . . BLESSED IS THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST.*

In our Armenian Church, this feast of Jesus Christ's victory over death is so important that all the Sundays of the year are referred to as RESURRECTION SUNDAYS. This means that each and every Sunday of the year is a "Little Easter". In every Divine Liturgy, we celebrate Christ's victory over death !

A STRANGE COINCIDENCE

In the midst of the joyous celebration of our Lord's victory over death, our people were struck with the tragedy of April 24, 1915. This date, more than any other, calls to mind the Turkish atrocities committed against our people. That date marks the beginning of what was to have been the final solution of the so-called *Armenian Question*.

In the aftermath, some two million Armenians were murdered by the Turkish government. Another 1 million or so were dispersed to the four corners of the world. In these figures, we must also count approximately 4,000 clergymen.

During the years immediately after the Massacres, the future of our people appeared bleak and hopeless, indeed. Its leaders and sons and daughters were either killed or dispersed to foreign shores. Its institutions were destroyed. Its governing bodies were overwhelmed by the necessary and challenging tasks of survival. Many, including many Armenians, forecast the imminent end of the Armenian Church and people.

Subsequent history, however, has shown them to be wrong. From the ashes of that holocaust, our people have risen to new life and vitality. We see schools, churches, organizations, and commitment and progress.

As a Christian people, we have literally come from death to life. In the words of Scripture: *For we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. (II Corinthians 1:7)*

The words of the Easter Introit ring particularly true for our people and for us as members of the Armenian Church:

*Christ is risen from the dead !  
 He trampled down death by death,  
 and by His Resurrection He granted life to us.  
 Glory to Him for all ages. Amen.*

CHRIST IS RISEN FROM THE DEAD !  
 BLESSED IS THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST !





For the Month of May

THE ASCENSION - A TIME TO GO FORTH

BACKGROUND

Most of us are aware of Easter. However, some are not aware of another important feast which goes hand in hand with our Lord's victory over death at Easter. This feast is known as *ASCENSION* or *HAMPARTSOOM*. It falls 40 days after Easter, on Thursday.

While Easter is the feast of Jesus Christ's victory over death, the Ascension is the feast of His return to God the Father in heaven. We can read about the event of the Ascension in the Holy Scriptures.

*So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. (Mark 16:19)*

*Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them, and was carried up to heaven. (Luke 24:50-51)*

*And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. (Acts 1:9)*

THEN AND NOW

There are two very important comments which we find in the various narratives about the Ascension. Let's take a moment or two to listen to them. Let's remember that these words were spoken by our Lord Himself. While they were directed to His Apostles, they are equally applicable to us. Indeed, they can be called the essence of Christian responsibility in each and every age and for every generation.

*Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. (Mark 16:15-16)*

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8)*

APPLICATION TO US

These remarks tell us in the plainest possible language that Christ and His mission are not just historical events of a long past age.

As His followers, we have been entrusted with the sacred task of carrying His message and ministry to ever new generations.

This is especially true in terms of our various church organizations. No organization exists or can exist of and by itself. Each organization exists as a means to extend the saving influence of Jesus Christ and His Church to ever more and more: to the youth; to the married couples; to the singles; to the men; to the women.

Regardless of what else our organizations may accomplish, if they have not succeeded in this task, a task which has been given directly by our Lord Himself, then they have succeeded in nothing.

In all of our organizational work and all our endeavors, let us remember the words of our Lord:

*Go into the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation. (Mark 15:16)*

*You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8)*

This is both a challenge and an invitation !

Are we truly witnesses, or are we merely disinterested observers ?

For the Month of June

COMING OF THE SPIRIT

BACKGROUND

Some 50 days after Easter, we celebrate an important feast known as *Pentecost*. The English word *Pentecost* is derived from a Greek word meaning *50 days*. The Armenian term for this feast is much more to the point and more informative. In Armenian, we refer to this feast as *Hokekaloust = coming of the Spirit*.

It is on this feast day that we celebrate the feast of the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles. We can read about this event in the second chapter of the Book of Acts in the New Testament.

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Acts 2:1-4)*

JESUS' WORDS

Long before the Holy Spirit came to the Apostles, Jesus told them: *These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. (John 14:25-26)*

Speaking about the Holy Spirit, He also told them: *But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning. (John 15:26-27)*

As we can see, Jesus was telling His Apostles that the work of salvation which He had begun would be carried on by His Church, through the efforts of the Apostles whom He Himself had chosen. It would be the Holy Spirit Who would guide them and their successors in all times.

WHAT ELSE HAPPENED ?

As we read about the coming of the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts, we notice something very interesting. Before the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles were together in the upper room. They were together. However, the Christian message was not being proclaimed as Jesus had told the Apostles to do.

After the Holy Spirit came to the Apostles, they fearlessly began to publicly tell all about Jesus Christ and the fact that He is the Savior foretold by the prophets.

As a result of that first great public proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Apostles' efforts were truly crowned with success. In the Book of Acts we read: *So those who received his word were baptized and there were added that day about three thousand souls. (Acts 2:41)*

This feast, then, is really the birthday of the Christian Church.

COMING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

Just think about it ! Two of the very Apostles who were in that Upper Room on the first Pentecost, St. Thaddeus and St. Bartholomew, brought the message of Jesus Christ to the land of our forefathers, to the land of Armenia. St. Thaddeus labored in Armenia from 43 to 66 A.D. St. Bartholomew labored in Armenia from 60 to 68 A.D.

Our Armenian Church has many beautiful hymns which are sung for the Feast of the Coming of the Spirit.

One of these, *ARAKELOH AGHAVNO (The Dove Who Was Sent)*, is the processional hymn for the day. It is also sung at baptisms. This hymn says: *The Dove that was sent came down from on high with a great sound and like the flashing of light he armed the disciples with fire while they were seated in the upper room.*

Still another hymn, the Hymn of the Fathers, for this feast proclaims: *We celebrate the coming of the Spirit which comforted the Apostles by resting upon them in tongues of fire, blessed is He forever.*

There is also a special service which is conducted during the Divine Liturgy. Special hymns are sung, prayers are said, and Scripture readings are done. All of these relate to one thing - the Coming of the Holy Spirit.

COMING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

This feast of the Coming of the Spirit is not merely something which happened a long time ago in a far-away land. It is really something which happens at every baptism, every ordination, every Sacrament, and everytime the Divine Liturgy is celebrated.

At each and every celebration of the Divine Liturgy, the Holy Spirit comes again. Let's read this prayer which is said by the priest during the Divine Liturgy while the Choir is singing the hymn VORTI ASDOODZOH - SON OF GOD.

*We bow down and beseech and ask You, beneficent God, send upon us and upon these gifts here set forth, Your co-eternal and consubstantial Holy Spirit. . .*

*Whereby blessing this bread, make it truly the body of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. . .*

*And blessing this cup make it verily the blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ . . .*

*Whereby blessing this bread and this wine, make them truly the body and blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, changing them by Your Holy Spirit.*

That's right, it is the Holy Spirit Who makes it possible for us to receive the living body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ in Holy Communion.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND YOU

Just as the Holy Spirit enabled the Apostles to fearlessly proclaim Jesus' message and to become His witnesses, just as He can change the bread and wine of the Divine Liturgy into the living body and blood of Jesus Christ, He can

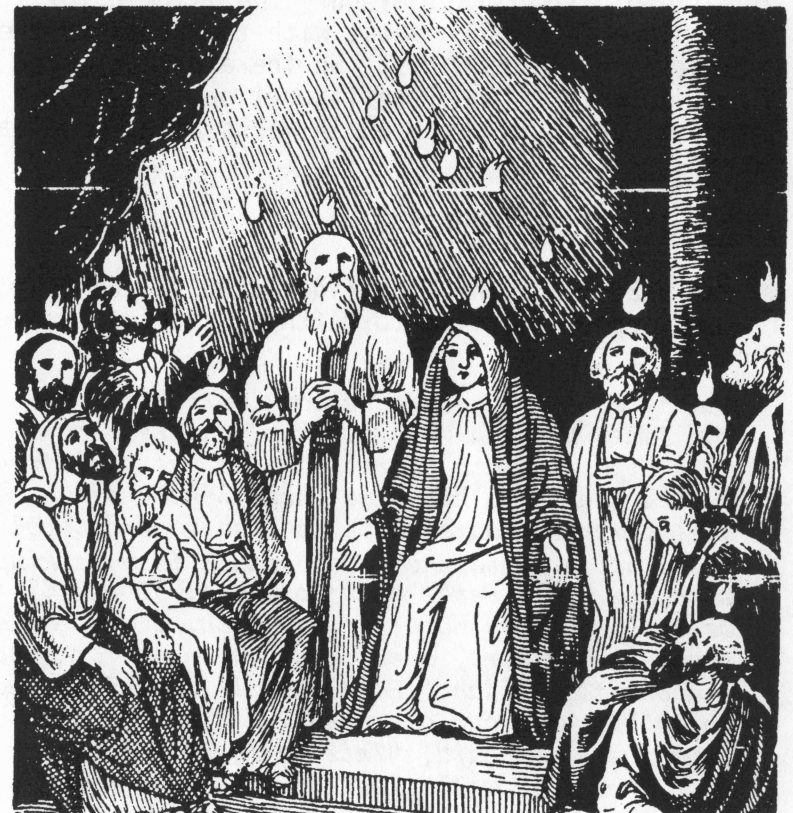
give us the courage and guidance to live as Christians. He can give us the power to change ourselves. He can do this, no matter what kind of conditions we may see around us.

The Holy Spirit can enable us to overcome not only the world, but He can give us the ability to overcome the most difficult adversary of all . . . ourselves.

Truly, the Holy Spirit can change us. He can make us into a new people. He can enable us to become what our Creator intended !

As we celebrate the Feast of the Coming of the Holy Spirit, let us remember the words of another of the beautiful hymns which our Church has for this feast:

*Today, O new people, rejoice with the coming of the Holy Spirit by praising the One Who has come from the Father.*



For the Month of July

THE TRANSFIGURATION

BACKGROUND

During the month of July, there is a major feast of the Armenian Church called the TRANSFIGURATION. The proper Armenian term for this feast is *BAYDZARAGERBOOTYOON*. However, it is more commonly known in Armenian as *VARTAVAR*.

In ancient Armenia, the feast of Vartavar was dedicated to the pagan goddess Anahid. The temple of Anahid was decorated with roses (*vart*). It is from this that the feast received its ancient name: *Vartavar = vartov varel = to decorate with roses*. People would also loose pigeons to fly and would sprinkle water on each other.

After Christianity became the state religion of Armenia in 301 A.D., it was St. Gregory the Illuminator's desire to displace this pagan feast with the Feast of the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ. He therefore replaced it with the observance of the Transfiguration. This feast in the Armenian Church is observed 14 weeks after the feast of Easter.

A LOOK AT THE SCRIPTURES

We can read about the Transfiguration in the Holy Scriptures, in the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 17, verses 1 through 7:

*And after six days, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." When the disciples heard this, they fell on*

*their faces, and were filled with awe. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. (Matthew 17:1-7)*

WHAT DOES IT MEAN ?

From the event of the Transfiguration, we know that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the law (Moses) and of the prophecies (Elijah) of the Old Testament. This means that He is the Son of God and the Savior of all mankind. Our salvation is because of Him and through Him. It means that He is the fulfillment of our most basic needs and longings.

TRANSFIGURATION IN THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

During the procession in the Divine Liturgy on the feast of the Transfiguration, the faithful are sprinkled with water. This reminds us that God showers us with His love and blessings just as He gives us life-giving rain, freely, as a gift.

Let's look at the beautiful statements of the day's processional hymn which gives a summary of the events and meaning of this feast. The processional hymn says: *You Who transfigured on the mountain showed Your divine power; we glorify You, O knowable Light.*

Also, the SOORP ASDVADZ verse for the day proclaims:

*Holy God; holy and mighty; holy and immortal  
Who was revealed on Mt. Tabor, have mercy on us.*

YOU AND THE TRANSFIGURATION

When we stop and realize that in the feast of the Transfiguration our Lord Jesus Christ is revealed as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets of the Old Testament, we realize that He is truly the Son of God and the Savior of all mankind.

We realize that truly He is "the Way and the Truth and the Life" (John 14:6)

Our Lord, then, is the ONLY standard which we can have in

life. Our life is to be lived in accord with His will and His commands !

When we have Him as the foundation and direction of our life, we can see the fads, fickleness, and false values of life just for what they are - false !

Once we have Him, we need nothing else !



## For the Month of August

### THOUGHTS ABOUT ST. MARY

#### BACKGROUND

Among all the saints of the Church, St. Mary, Jesus' mother, is held in the highest of esteem. In Armenian we refer to her as *ASDVADZADZIN = BIRTH-GIVER OF GOD*. This refers to the fact that St. Mary is the Mother of Jesus Christ, the One Who is God become man. It is for this reason that she is especially honored by all the ancient, apostolic churches.

One of the main feast days dedicated to her falls on the Sunday nearest to August 15. In Armenian this feast is referred to as *Asdvadzadzin*. However, in English it is commonly known as *the Feast of the Assumption of the Holy Mother-of-God*.

#### THE ASSUMPTION

Briefly, the story behind this feast is as follows: When St. Mary died, the Apostle St. Bartholomew was away from Jerusalem. Upon his return, he was deeply saddened to learn that she had died. He then asked to see her. He was taken to her tomb. When the tomb was opened, the Apostles were unable to find her body. From this, they concluded that she had been bodily taken (assumed) into heaven.

#### THE ASSUMPTION IN THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

The Feast of the Assumption of the Holy Mother-of-God is one of the five major feasts of the Armenian Church. Briefly, the others are: 1.) Theophany (Armenian Christmas); 2.) Resurrection (Easter); 3.) Transfiguration; and 4.) the Elevation of the Holy Cross.

Let's look at one of the hymns for this feast day to see an indication of the high esteem and respect which the Armenian Church has toward St. Mary. We will be looking at the processional hymn for the Feast of the Assumption.

The processional hymn proclaims:

*Today the saints gathered together:  
the blessed Apostles;  
and the holy virgins  
bright with their torches,  
light their lamps.  
And with one voice say:  
"Blessed are you,  
O most blessed among women.*

At the conclusion of the day's Divine Liturgy, grapes are blessed and then given to the people to be eaten. Then the priest concludes the long prayer for the Blessing of the Grapes with the following words:

*O Lord, protect the vineyards and the farms  
from all accidents which come upon us because  
of our sinful acts. Keep them free of hail,  
frosts, sunburn, and harmful insects,  
so that through Your bountiful mercy,  
we may be deserving of sharing in the  
product of Your vinestock, at Your Father's  
heavenly table, and to glorify the Holy Trinity,  
Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now  
and forever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.*

Perhaps one of the easiest ways to understand why there has become a connection between the grape as the first fruit which is blessed in the church on the Feast of the Assumption and St. Mary is to realize that from the vineyard we get the grape from which we get wine. Within the Divine Liturgy, that wine becomes the living blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Similarly, St. Mary can be viewed as the vineyard from which we get our Lord Jesus Christ, the shedding of whose blood is the means of our salvation.

ST. MARY'S GREATEST ATTRIBUTE

In order to see the greatest attribute of St. Mary, indeed of any who profess to be Christians, we must read about her in the Gospel according to St. Luke.

There we read: *And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. . ."*

*. . . And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?"*

*And the angel said to her, ". . . For with God nothing will be impossible."*

*And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."*

Here we can see that perhaps Mary's greatest attribute was her unquestioning obedience to the will of God. We see this in her answer to the Angel Gabriel when she said, "Let it be unto me according to your word."

YOU AND ST. MARY

As we think about St. Mary, we must remember that she was a complete human being just as you and I are. Yet, there is one area in which we are called to imitate her and to follow her example. She was obedient to God's will. As a result, Jesus Christ was born into the world.

As individuals and as the Church, we, too, are called to be obedient to God's will. It is through our example of obedience that the world can again see the saving influence of Jesus Christ upon all of mankind.

We honor St. Mary, the Mother-of-God, because of her very special motherhood. We also honor her because in her we see what we are all called to become and can become, that is saints. However, there is a requirement for this sainthood. That requirement is obedience to the will of Almighty God !



For the Month of September

THE HOLY CROSS

BACKGROUND

Whenever we see a cross, be it a large or a small cross, we think of Christ and Christianity. Truly, the cross of Christ is THE symbol of Christianity. It proclaims all of the following:

- 1.) The Only Son of God, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ willingly became man.
- 2.) He willingly suffered and died on the cross for the salvation of each and every one of us.
- 3.) He overcame death on the cross by His Resurrection from the dead.
- 4.) As we are committed to Him, to His Crucifixion, and to His victory over death, we are victorious here and now and in the world to come.

For the Armenian Church, therefore, the cross is viewed as THE SIGN OF VICTORY. This is why it is always elaborately decorated in the Armenian Church.

SCRIPTURES

Speaking about the Cross, the Scriptures tell us:

- 1.) "He who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." (Matthew 10:38)
- 2.) "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24)
- 3.) "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (I Corinthians 1:18)
- 4.) "But far be it from me to glory except in the cross Christ." (Galatians 6:14)

Truly, the cross of Christ which was once a sign of condemnation has been changed into THE sign of victory.

IN THE CHURCH

Because the Armenian Church, following the spirit of the Scriptures, holds the cross of Christ in such honor, the making of the Sign of the Cross is a prominent feature in all services; churches are built in the shape of a cross; and crosses are used as decorations in the churches.

In addition to this, the Armenian Church has several feast days which are dedicated to the Holy Cross. These feasts are:

- 1.) The Feast of the Appearance of the Holy Cross - This feast is celebrated on the Fourth Sunday After Easter. It recalls the appearance of the cross in the skies of Jerusalem in 351 A.D.
- 2.) The Feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross - This feast is celebrated on the Sunday nearest to September 14. It reminds us of the liberation of the Holy Cross from Persian captivity and its return to Jerusalem in 628 A.D.
- 3.) The Feast of the Holy Cross of Varak - This feast of the Holy Cross is celebrated only by the Armenian Church. It is observed two weeks after the Feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross. On this feast, we are reminded of the appearance of the Holy Cross in Armenia in 643 A.D.
- 4.) The Feast of the Discovery of the Holy Cross - This feast is celebrated on the Sunday nearest to October 26, six weeks after the Feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross. It recalls the discovery of the Holy Cross by Queen Helena in Jerusalem in 327 A.D.

Of all these feasts, the Feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross is observed with the most solemnity.

A cross which has been decorated with rehan (sweet basil) is carried around the church in procession. During the procession, stops are made facing the West, East, South, and North, respectively. During the course of the procession, special hymns are sung and Scripture readings are done from I Corinthians 1:18-24; John 12:28-33; John 3:13-21; Matthew 24:27-35; Mark 15:20-26; and John 14:1-13.

One of the very beautiful hymns which is sung for the Feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross says:

*O Christ, our God,  
You spread Your spotless arms  
upon the Cross,  
and gave us a sign of victory;  
through it keep our lives.*

YOU PERSONALLY

Since the Feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross is one of the five major feasts of the Armenian Church, each and every one should make every effort to be present for the day's Divine Liturgy and to receive Holy Communion.

Each of us should endeavor to make the Holy Cross the symbol and the goal of our lives.



For the Month of October

THE ARMENIAN TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE

BACKGROUND

The month of October was designated as the *MONTH OF ARMENIAN CULTURE* by His Holiness Karekin I, when he was the Primate of the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of North America, from 1939 to 1944. This designation is most logical when we realize that it is during the month of October that we observe the *FEAST OF THE HOLY TRANSLATORS*, St. Mesrob, Yeghishe, Moses of Kertogh, David the Invincible, St. Gregory of Nareg, and St. Nersess the Graceful.

Each of these was a renowned and able leader in his own time. However, standing at the zenith is St. Mesrob, through whose efforts the Armenian alphabet was compiled. As a result of this wonderous work, it became possible for a truly Armenian culture and heritage and identity to develop.

WHY THE ARMENIAN ALPHABET ?

During St. Mesrob's time, Scripture readings in the church and services were conducted either in Greek or Assyrian. They were then translated into Armenian by a special group of clerics known as *translators-tarkmanich*. However, these should not be confused with the HOLY TRANSLATORS.

St. Mesrob was acutely aware of the need to have the Armenian people "hear" and "understand" God in their own language, if Christianity were to make the greatest possible progress among the Armenian people.

It is certainly no exaggeration to say that the single greatest motivation which St. Mesrob had in compiling the Armenian alphabet was his desire to translate the Holy Bible into Armenian.

THE TRANSLATION

The work of compiling an alphabet suitable to the Armenian language was completed in 404 A.D. St. Mesrob and his students immediately began the work of translating the entire Bible into Armenian. This herculean task was finally



completed in 434 A.D. Their translation was based upon the Greek language text of the Bible in common use in the early Christian Church. It is still the standard for all the ancient, apostolic churches. As an historical aside, we should state that the canon or ordering of the books of the Bible has been kept in tact by the ancient, apostolic churches to the present day. However, in the aftermath of the Protestant movement which was begun by Martin Luther, he and his followers eliminated some of the books as found in the Septuagint Bible, which was the basis of the Armenian translation.

The translation of St. Mesrob and his students was so beautiful and such a faithful rendering of the original languages that the Armenian translation of the Bible has become known as THE QUEEN OF THE TRANSLATIONS.

The first section of the Holy Bible to be translated into Armenian was the opening section of the Book of Proverbs: "THAT MEN MAY KNOW WISDOM AND INSTRUCTION." (Proverbs 1:2)

We can proudly note that the Armenian translation of the Holy Bible was completed in 434 A.D., while the first English language translation was not completed until 1380 A.D., more than 900 years later !

YOU AND THE BIBLE

The Holy Bible is more than a book, it is a veritable library, with books of history, law, poetry, songs, and philosophy. In Armenian, we refer to these as ASDVADZASHOUNCH - THE BREATH OF GOD. Truly, the Holy Bible gives us the word, the breath of God, as the only unfailing guide and explanation of life and our relationship to Almighty God.

The Holy Bible is divided into two major sections, the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament*. The Old Testament is mainly the story of God's interaction with His chosen people, Israel, while the New Testament deals with the "New Israel," the followers of Christ and the establishing of His Church to continue His saving work.

The Old Testament has 47 books, beginning with Genesis and ending with Malachi. In the New Testament, we find 27 books, beginning with the Gospel according to St. Matthew and ending with the Revelation of St. John. In

all, the Bible has some 74 books.

Truly, the Holy Bible or Breath of God is the written record of God's communication with and guidance of mankind. The regular reading of the Bible is both a spiritually and intellectually rewarding experience. Each of us should set aside a 10 - 15 minute period each day to read and think about the eternal message of His Holy Word.

As Armenian Christians, we can never forget that the very real source of our Armenian culture and heritage was a burning desire to have the BREATH OF GOD in the Armenian language. To ignore the Bible is to ignore the greatest and most enduring and most valuable part of our heritage as Armenian Christians.



For the Month of November

THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH

BACKGROUND

In speaking of our Church, we call it the *ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC CHURCH*. Yet, do we really understand what we have said? It seems that the word *ARMENIAN* is relatively self-explanatory, that is *of or pertaining to the land of Armenia*. However, what about the word *APOSTOLIC*? We justly and proudly identify our Church as *APOSTOLIC*. In fact, in the Armenian community, we are described as *THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH*! What does this mean?

To begin with, the English word *apostle* comes from the Greek word *apostolos*, meaning *one who is sent*. Similarly, the Armenian word for apostle, *arakyal*, also comes from the word *arakel* which means *to send*.

WHO IS DOING THE SENDING?

We know that Jesus Christ Himself chose 12 men to preach His Gospel to the world. Let us look at the following Scripture from the Gospel of St. Matthew: *The names of the twelve Apostles are these: first: Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James, the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. (Matthew 10:2-4)*

Jesus gave these Apostles definite authority, as the following Scriptures show:

*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide. (John 15:16)*

*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age. (Matthew 28:18-20)*

*He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me. (Luke 10:16)*

*And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained. (John 20:22-23)*

INTO THE WORLD

The very same Apostles who were chosen by Jesus Christ and to whom He spoke these words, then went out into the world and carried His message of love, forgiveness, and salvation with them. Their journeys and areas of evangelization took them to the full extent of the then known world. St. Peter journeyed to Rome; St. Andrew labored in Northern Greece, Spirus, and Scythia; St. John went to Asia Minor; St. James the Major stayed and labored in Jerusalem; St. Matthew's journeys took him to Persia and Parthia; St. Thomas carried Christ's message to South India (Malabar); St. Philip worked in Asia Minor; St. Thaddeus's evangelization efforts took him to Armenia, Syria, and the northern part of present-day Iraq; St. Bartholomew went to Armenia, Arabia, and Persia; St. Simon the Zealot evangelized in North Africa and Persia; St. James the Lesser labored in Palestine and Egypt; and St. Matthias, who was chosen to replace Judas, carried Christ's message to Ethiopia.

IN ARMENIA

As mentioned above, we know that two of these Apostles, St. Thaddeus and St. Bartholomew, carried Christ's message and light to the Land of Our Fathers, to Armenia. They established the Armenian Church there. St. Thaddeus labored in Armenia from 43 A.D. to 66 A.D., and St. Bartholomew from 60 A.D. to 68 A.D. These two Apostles were the first Chief Bishops of the Armenian Church.

DOWN TO OUR OWN DAY

The present Chief Bishop of the Armenian Church is His Holiness Vazken I, the Supreme Patriarch-Catholicos of All Armenians. He is the 140th successor to St. Thaddeus

and St. Bartholomew who were chosen by Jesus Christ Himself.

For the Armenian Church, to be *APOSTOLIC* means all of the following:

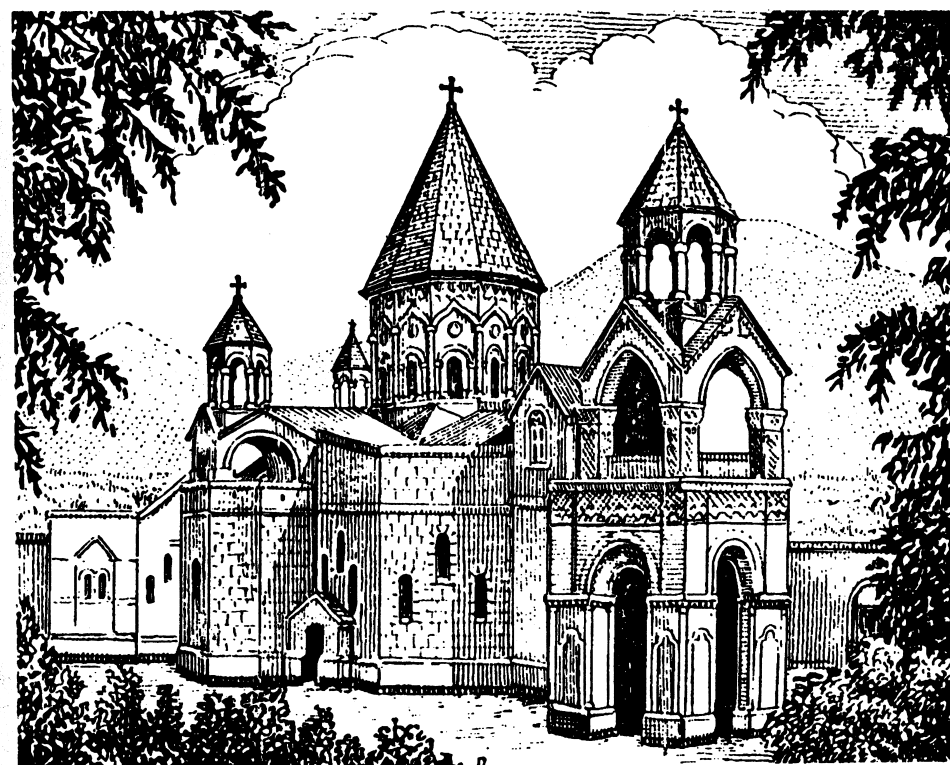
- 1.) Jesus Christ Himself chose and authorized His Apostles who would carry forth His message and mission of salvation.
- 2.) The Apostles then chose and authorized those who would come after them in doing the work which Jesus Christ had given them.
- 3.) As time went on, those successors chose and authorized still others to carry on the very same work. This has continued right down to our own day.
- 4.) This same authority which Christ gave to His chosen Apostles is here today in all the ancient apostolic-orthodox churches.
- 5.) The Armenian Church is one of these, and, as such is part of the One, Holy, Universal, and Apostolic Church which our Lord Himself established.
- 6.) In our day and age, it is reassuring to know that our Armenian Apostolic Church speaks and works with the very same authority which Jesus Christ Himself gave to His chosen Apostles.
- 7.) With this kind of reassurance, there is no need to have to rely upon the ever-changing opinions of man. We have a church which was founded upon and continues to function on the basis of authority given by Christ Himself. Our's is not a church which was founded on the basis of human opinion.

### TEMPTATIONS

Christ warned that there would be false Christs and false prophets who would try to win away His chosen. He said, "For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ, and they will lead many astray.'" (Matthew 24:5)

In our present age of cults and fads, it is reassuring and a sign of God's love to be able to belong to an APOSTOLIC CHURCH which was founded on the very authority of Jesus Christ Himself.

We should learn it; love it; and live it !



For the Month of December

THE SEASON OF ADVENT

BACKGROUND

Even before we were ready to celebrate Thanksgiving, we were aware that Christmas was on the way. We saw local merchants beginning to put up their Christmas decorations. We were greeted with the daily count-down that there are only so many shopping days left until Christmas.

It is evident that commercially we begin to prepare for Christmas early. In fact, it seems as though this commercial preparation begins earlier and earlier each year. Such preparations: decorations, cards, gifts, parties, however, severely tempt us to forget that Christmas is not just Santa Claus, gift-giving and receiving, cards, wrappings, tinsel, and such.

WHAT IS CHRISTMAS ?

If we pause for a few moments, seriously thinking about Christmas, we realize how inadequate such commercial preparations really are.

On Christmas, we are observing the fact of God becoming man.

The Babe of Bethlehem is not just a cute little baby who happened to be born in a manger. He is the Lord of the Universe Who, in His love of mankind, humbled Himself to become one of us. He became one of us to begin the process of our own salvation.

The best expression of this truth is to be found in the Holy Scriptures:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)*

Truly, the oft-heard and seen quip that *JESUS IS THE REASON FOR THE SEASON* is not just a clever saying. Rather, it is a statement of the profound and over-riding fact of the Christmas season.

HOW SHOULD WE PREPARE FOR CHRISTMAS ?

In preparation for the great feast of Christmas, the Church has set aside a 50 day period which is most commonly known as *ADVENT*. Advent is a period which is most easily compared with the period of *GREAT LENT* which precedes Easter.

Advent is a time when we should put our spiritual house in order. We should spend extra time reading God's word in the Holy Scriptures; devote extra time to prayer; and generally get things into proper perspective between ourselves and Almighty God and ourselves and our fellow human beings.

In doing so, we aren't just preparing for the holidays. We are, rather, preparing for one of the greatest and most moving feasts of the Christian year, *the Feast of God becoming man.*

YOU AND CHRISTMAS

In the all too quickly passing days before Christmas, we should take a long, hard, and sincere look at ourselves and ask whether we are truly ready to kneel with the angels and the shepherds and the wise men to worship the newly born King and Savior. Have we prepared ourselves for that unique event, or for something else ?

Have we really put our spiritual house in order, or have we merely swept the dust under the rug and decorated it with tinsel ?



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