

FAITH OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

A Brief Introduction



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Introduction

This booklet is an introduction to the apostolic faith of the Armenian Orthodox Church. The Armenian Church, like all eastern churches, does not have a formal book of catechesis, but rather the teachings of the faith are learned and lived through the daily life of the church, in particular through prayer and liturgy. In this booklet, you will find a summary and description of what the Armenian Church is and what the faithful believe.

Holy Tradition

The faith of the Church is contained in what is called *Holy Tradition*. Holy Tradition is living and dynamic and is found in the ongoing life of the Church, Christ's mystical body, on earth. 'Tradition,' from Latin *traditio*, means the handing down or transmission of knowledge from one generation to another. Holy Tradition is that which has been passed on within the Church from the time of Christ's apostles down to the present day. St. Paul refers on multiple occasions to the traditions that he imparted to the communities he founded: "Now we command you,

brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.” 2 Thessalonians 3:6

Holy Tradition is limited not only to written texts but encompasses the whole life, liturgy, ethos, and practices of the Church, inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit. St. Paul indicates as much when he writes to the Church at Thessalonica: *“So then, brothers, stand firm, and cling to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.” 2 Thessalonians 2:15*

Among the elements which make up the Holy Tradition of the Church, the Bible holds the pre-eminent place. Other elements are the Church’s liturgical life and prayer, its dogmatic decisions, canons (laws and guidelines), its church councils, the writings of the church fathers, the lives of the saints, and finally its creative expressions such as its traditions of music, architecture, and iconography.

Of course, not everything the Church does belongs to its Holy Tradition. Some things are just customary practices of an age and can be passing fads, like men wearing suits every week to church or having oil filled lanterns in the churches.

Holy Tradition is not fixed or static but develops and evolves with each age, under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, as the Church adapts and evolves to the new conditions in the world faced by each generation. Holy Tra-

dition is not to be understood as something man has created on his own but rather is the ongoing way in which the Holy Spirit is present in and with the Church “*guiding her into all truth*” (John 16:13).

The Bible

The written record of God’s revelation to mankind is the Bible, a word which comes from the Greek word for ‘books.’ In Armenian, the Bible is called *Asdvadzashoonch*, ‘breath of God’ or ‘inspired by God,’ a testament to the Church’s belief that all Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The Bible is a collection of smaller books, written over the course of thousands of years in three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) and divided into two testaments, the Old and the New (the former has 48 books and the latter 27). The Old and New Testaments together comprise two parts of an organic whole, the center of which is the person and mission of Jesus Christ.

The Old Testament tells the story of the creation of the world, the fall of humanity from Paradise, the entrance into the world of death and sin, and God’s relationship with the people He chose, the Hebrews, through whom redemption and salvation was promised to come to the whole universe through the prophesized messiah, Jesus Christ.

The most important books of the New Testament are the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which relate the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. In the Armenian Church, like all the ancient churches, all books of the Bible are interpreted through the light of Christ, since everything in the Bible leads up to Christ and speaks about Him. This is symbolized by the fact that only the book of the Four Gospels (*Avedaran*) is enthroned on the altars of our churches (and not the entire Bible).

Until the 5th century, Christian worship in Armenia was conducted in either Greek or Syriac, since there was not yet an Armenian alphabet and hence, no written language. In AD 405, St. Mashdots, a monk and *vardapet*, invented an alphabet of 36 letters. His objective was to translate the Bible, liturgy, and writings of the Church Fathers into Armenian, so that divine truth would be accessible to the Armenian people in their own language. After the invention of the Armenian alphabet, a great period of translation activity took place, rendering sacred writings from Greek and Syriac into Armenian along with new writings by Armenian Church Fathers.

The Church Fathers

God's revelation to mankind and His presence with and in the Church did not end when the last letter was written in the last book of the Bible in the first or second century AD. According to Christ's own promise, He will be "with

his people always, to the end of this age of the world" (Matthew 28:20). Throughout the centuries, the Holy Spirit has remained with God's people, raising up teachers and saints to guide the Church through the challenges faced by each new generation. These teachers and saints, some of whom are known as fathers of the church, have left inspired writings, which have become part of Holy Tradition.

Some articulated Christian teachings on God, good and evil, and free will against competing views of other religions and philosophies. A famous such Armenian father was *Yeznik of Kolb* who presented the Christian view on these topics and argued against the teachings of pagan Greek philosophers, Zoroastrians, an early heretical group known as the Marcionites, as well as pre-Christian Armenian traditions and beliefs.

Other Church Fathers were teachers and guides to the spiritual life, or life of faith, offering instructions and an exemplary model for the faithful to follow, in order to experience communion with God through prayer and living after the pattern of Christ. The greatest such Armenian father was St. Gregory of Narek, whose collection of mystical prayers written in the 10th century, has been treasured and prayed by every generation since.

Others reflected on the mysteries of the Christian faith, unfolding their meaning in ever deeper and more profound ways, such as the Catholicos *St. Nersess Shnorhali* (Grace-filled) in the 12th century, beloved for his profound poetic meditations and hymns (*sharagans*).

The Saints

The doctrine of the Armenian Church comes alive in the lives of its true believers, the saints. The saints are those who share in the holiness of God (like English, the Armenian word for saint, ‘*soorp*’ has the meaning of holy or pure). The lives of the saints are an incarnation of the authenticity and truth of the Christian gospel, the sure gift of God’s holiness available for all people.

The *Haysmavoork* is the large volume of saints’ lives, that arranges for biographies of the saints to be read on each day of the year. Traditionally, the day’s reading would have been read aloud publicly before Evening Service, commonly called Vespers. The word *haysmavoork* is derived from the sentence that introduces these readings: “today is the commemoration of...” (*haysmavor hishadag eh...*).

Saints are not just exemplary models and sources of inspiration, but they are also living advocates for us. The Armenian word, *parekhos*, means “speak well of” and is used with reference to the saints, who are alive in Christ and abide with him (Matthew 22:32). We ask them to pray for us to God, just as we ask our friends and trusted loved ones to pray for us in times of need.

What We Believe - The Nicene Creed

The Creed is the quintessential explanation of what the Church and Orthodox faith believe.

Different creeds were used in the early centuries and one was first used during the rite of the sacrament of Baptism. In AD 215, the Church Father and historian Hippolytus, in his work entitled the Apostolic Tradition, recorded that the Creed was recited in its entirety during the sacrament of Baptism.

The Nicene Creed (which can be found on pages 18-19 in the Divine Liturgy pew books) is a confession of our Christian faith. The creed contains twelve articles of Faith, each one written by one of the apostles. When members of the Church began to teach heretical or incorrect opinions, it became necessary to elaborate on the Creed, based on the teaching of our Lord and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in order to refute false and misguided teachings. The Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (AD 325) adopted a Creed that came to be known as the Nicene Creed, which was then expanded at the subsequent Ecumenical Councils of Constantinople (AD 381) and Ephesus (AD 431).

At the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, 318 bishops from across Christendom gathered to compose a creed which would state clearly what was revealed in Christ, proclaimed by the apostles and preserved by the Church. Among

those bishops were St. Nicholas of Smyrna (Santa Claus), St. Athanasius, St. James of Nisibis (Սաղոր Մծրնայ Յայրապետ), St. Marcarius of Jerusalem, and St. Aristakes (a son of St. Gregory the Illuminator).

The Creed is followed by an anathema, which refutes heretical teachings. St. Gregory the Illuminator added to the Creed by adding a doxology — a short expression of praise of thanksgiving to God — which appears following the Anathema. A doxology is a short expression of praise or thanksgiving to God.

The saying of the last word of the Creed, “Amen”, is postponed in the Armenian Divine Liturgy until after the doxology of Saint Gregory. It is encouraged that everyone in the sanctuary say Amen at the conclusion of the Creed because the word, Amen, means “let it be”. This is the way all the faithful sign on or agree to what has been stated.

This is the Creed we recite every Sunday during *Badarak*. In Armenian, it is called the *Hankanag Havado* (‘Symbol of Faith’) or, more commonly, the *Havadamk*, after its first word (‘we believe’). The Creed provides the Church’s answer to the fundamental questions of mankind. Where do we come from? How should we live and what we are to look forward to? What hope is there for us? What will become of us? The Creed has a very logical and dramatic composition. It starts with God the Father, creator of all things and father of all people and ends with the glorious destiny of those who will be judged

and found worthy. It relates the drama of the life of our Lord from his birth to his ascension. And it teaches that the work of our Lord saves us, namely, makes us capable of living with God.

It also explains who God the Father is, who Jesus is in relation to the Father and His life on this earth, and who the Holy Spirit is. It strongly emphasizes that we believe in the three persons of the one God, equal in power and glory and also basic tenants of our faith, including the Church, baptism, repentance, resurrection and eternal life.

This is the Creed of the Armenian Church, which is based through and through on the teachings and revelation of the Scriptures.

Creed:

We believe in One God (Deut 6:4, Mk 12:29, 1 Cor 8:6), the Father Almighty (Rev 16:7, Eph 4:6, Mt 6:9), maker of heaven and earth, of things visible and invisible (Gen 1:1). And in one Lord, Jesus Christ (Luke 2:11, 1 Cor 8:6, Jas 1:1), the Son of God (Mt 3:17, 17:5), begotten of God the Father (Psalms 2:7), only-begotten (John 1:18), that is of the substance of the Father (John 10:30, Heb 1:3). God from God (John 10:30, 11:42), light from light (John 8:12), true God from true God (John 10:30, 17:3), begotten and not made (Ps 2:7); of the same nature of the Father (John 10:30, Heb 1:3), by whom all things came into being in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible (Col 1:16, John 1:1-3); Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven (John

6:38, Mt 1:21), took body (John 1:14), became man (John 10:33, 1 Cor 15:47), was born perfectly of the holy Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). By whom he took body, soul and mind and everything that is in man, truly and not in semblance (Luke 24:39, 1 John 1:1, John 11:38, Luke 23:46). He suffered (Heb 2:18, 13:12) and was crucified (Mk 15:25) and was buried (Mk 15:46, 1 Cor 15:3-4) and rose again on the third day (Mt 20:19, 28:6) and ascended into heaven with the same body (Luke 24:51, Mk 16:19) and sat at the right hand of the Father (Mk 16:19, Acts 7:55, Eph 1:20). He is to come with the same body (Acts 1:11) and with the glory of the Father (Mt 16:27) to judge the living and the dead (1 Pt 4:5, Mt 16:27); of His Kingdom there is no end (Luke 1:33, John 18:36).

We believe also in the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:20, John 14:15-17, Heb 3:7, Heb 10:15, 1 Tim 4:1), the uncreated and the perfect (John 15:26); who spoke through the Law and through the Prophets and through the Gospels (Heb 1:1-2, Nehemiah 9:30); who came down upon the Jordan (Mt. 3:16, John 1:32), preached through the apostles (Acts 2:4) and dwelled in the saints (1 Cor 3:16, Acts 4:31).

We believe also in only one catholic and apostolic holy Church (Mt 16:18, 1 Cor 3:11, Eph 1:22-23, 2:20, 5:23-27, Rom 12:5, Mt 28:19); in one baptism with repentance (Acts 2:38) for the remission and forgiveness of sins (1 John 4:10, Mt 26:27-28); in the resurrection of the dead (John 5:28-29), in the everlasting judgment of

souls and bodies (1 Cor 15:51-54, 1 Thes. 4:13-18); in the Kingdom of Heaven (Luke 23:43) and in the life eternal (1 John 5:20). Amen.

Anathema:

“As for those who say there was a time when the Son was not, or there was a time when the Holy Spirit was not, or that they came into being out of nothing; or who say that the Son of God or the Holy Spirit are of a different substance and that they are changeable or alterable, such does the Catholic and Apostolic Holy Church anathematize.”

Doxology of St. Gregory the Illuminator:

As for us, we shall glorify Him who was before the ages, worshipping the Holy Trinity and the One Godhead, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and always and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

The Sacraments

The word sacrament comes from the Latin *sacrare* which means “to consecrate; set apart for religious usage.” A sacrament is a rite or ritual which not only signifies a specific grace, but which imparts that grace to the person on whom it is administered. What is grace? It is that which is freely given to us and allows us to fulfill our calling as children of God. It is a power that comes from God and regenerates, nourish-

es, heals, and empowers us.

The Armenian word for sacrament is *khorhoort* or “mystery.” This implies that the fruits of the sacraments (such as being born to a spiritual life in baptism) are received mysteriously, that is to say, the fruits are given in secret and not out in the open. Sacraments are special and sacred events, not to be viewed as something mundane or regular for all to see.

Each sacrament has an inward and outward reality. For example, the external reality in baptism is the water. The inward reality is the rebirth and cleansing of the child’s soul. In Western Churches, a theology of counting seven sacraments developed in the Middle Ages and sometimes creeps into the Eastern Churches. However, in the Eastern Churches, including the Armenian Church, everything which is in and of the Church is sacramental, which help us on our spiritual journey towards Christ. Sacraments should not be counted and limited to a checklist of things to achieve, but rather instruments through which we grow closer to Christ and have the Kingdom of Heaven revealed to us. Some such sacraments are:

- 1. Baptism:** It is through baptism, one is adopted, becomes a co-heir to the inheritance of the Kingdom of Heaven, and a temple of the Holy Spirit. This is seen and confirmed in the baptismal moment, when the priest, immersing the child in water, says,

“(Name), this servant of God, coming from the state of catechumen to baptism, is now baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Redeemed by the blood of Christ from servitude to sin, s/he receives adoption as a child of the heavenly Father, to be joint-heir with Christ and a temple of the Holy Spirit.”

In the Armenian Church’s understanding and teaching of baptism, it does not need to be preceded by a conscious act of faith, which some churches believe and teach, for God has already chosen us and entered our lives (Galatians 4:6). But it is through baptism that a new Christian is brought into the life of the Church and the hope of salvation. Thus, it is an act of the people of God and not a single individual.

It is not a washing away of “original sin” either. The Armenian Orthodox Church, along with many other Orthodox churches, do not follow the teaching of “original sin”. Rather, the service represents Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection and our adoption as children of God.

For this reason, the Armenian understanding of baptism draws upon the evidence of Scripture and Tradition to baptize infants—who are pledged to a life in Christ by godparents and community—as well as parents. Individuals who have

not been baptized are always warmly invited by the church to do so. Baptism, Chrismation, and Holy Communion are all given at the time of baptism. Together these make the new believer ready to fully participate in the life of the Church.

The child is immersed in sanctified water three times in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, which symbolizes the three days Christ lay in the tomb following the Crucifixion (Romans 6:4).

2. **Chrismation:** In the process of growing up, the child needs strength of body and mind. Chrismation, or the anointing with oil, seals him or her with the Holy Spirit, promising spiritual strength as a member of the Church. The Armenian word for this sacrament is either “*լնննք/ gnoonk*” or “*դրոշմ/ troshm*”, both meaning “seal”.

Chrismation is usually performed at the time of baptism. However, if one is baptized in another denomination and wishes to join the Armenian Church, one can speak with the local priest about one’s desire to be chrismated.

Chrismation is the anointing with Holy Chrism (*myuron*) and is a physical, outward sign of the Holy Spirit coming upon an individual which Christ promised in John 16:13 and happened to the apostles on Pentecost in Acts 2, which we hear in the hymns of chrismation.

It is through the “sealing” of the Holy Spirit that we are equipped and ready to truly be called Temples of the Holy Spirit. This act of anointing or chrismating is also in accord with the canons of the Council of Laodicea (AD 343), “*Those illuminated should after baptism be anointed*”.

The *Holy Myuron/Chrism* which is used during this sacrament is prepared once every seven years in one of the Holy Sees (Etchmiadzin or Antelias). It is prepared from over forty types of local plants and flowers and then is boiled in a large cauldron for forty days and nights, the entire time having psalms read by deacons and priests. On the fortieth day, the cauldron is brought to the altar where the Catholicos and eleven other bishops bless the *Holy Myuron/Chrism*.

The *Holy Myuron/Chrism* remaining from the previous years is added and mixed to the new *Holy Myuron/Chrism*, thus connecting the previous generations with the present generation. This is a physical connection with the past and one day the future, using the same Holy Chrism. Thus, every individual who is chrismated in the Armenian Church has the same exact chrism upon his or her body.

It is then stirred with the spear that pierced Christ’s side (which was brought to Armenia by St. Thaddeus the Apostle) and blessed with the right hand of

St. Gregory the Illuminator. It is then distributed to all the Armenian Churches throughout the world.

- 3. Holy Communion:** We all need nourishment to live. The soul needs spiritual food to keep alive and to grow in the Kingdom of God. Holy Communion, is the most important sacrament and the center of the Church's life; this union with the Lord is indeed the ultimate purpose of Christian life as a whole. Communion (*haghortooyoon* in Armenian) refers to the sacramental union of people with God and each other as they gather, pray, read the Bible, remember Christ, and share in his redemption of the world through the bread and wine that become truly His body and blood. The faithful are encouraged to take communion as often as they can.

The term eucharist, which is also used for Holy Communion, means thanksgiving in Greek. This name is given not only to the sacred meal (Holy Communion), but to the whole act of gathering. This includes praying, reading the Holy Scriptures and proclaiming God's Word, and remembering Christ, eating and drinking His Body and Blood in communion with Him and with God the Father, by the Holy Spirit. The word eucharist is used because the all-embracing meaning of the Lord's Meal is that of thanksgiving to God in Christ and

the Holy Spirit for all that He has done in making, saving, and glorifying the world.

The Armenians also use the word *Badarak*, to refer to Holy Communion and the Eucharist. *Badarak* means sacrifice referring to the eucharistic gifts: bread and wine. It calls the service a “mystery” and the sacrifice of the liturgy a “spiritual and bloodless sacrifice.”

Partaking in Holy Communion is the most genuine act of love we can show to God and our brothers and sisters. Holy Communion is administered during the sacraments of baptism and chrismation for the newly baptized.

This sacrament draws on Christ’s Last Supper with His twelve disciples, when He took bread, blessed it, gave thanks, broke it, and shared it with his disciples, saying, “This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” Then He took a cup, blessed it, offered thanks, drank from it, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Matthew 26:26-28, Mark 14:22, Luke 22:19).

In his book *The Saints and Sacraments of the Armenian Church*, the late Archbishop Shnork Kaloustian, following countless Church Fathers, explains that the phrases “This *is* my body; This *is* my blood” are not metaphorical. “The verb IS does not mean ‘shows’ or ‘represents.’

In the institution of the greatest sacrament of the New Testament . . . our Lord would have taken care that the terms He used in the founding and establishing this sacrament should be clear and free of possible misinterpretation.”

“Therefore, the words of the Lord must be taken in their obvious and usual sense, and not metaphorically. It is plainly said in the New Testament, and it is clearly taught by the Church from the earliest times, that ‘the Bread and the Wine’ should not be considered as ordinary elements, but the very Body and Blood of the Lord.”

Any baptized member of the Armenian Church can receive Holy Communion. Baptized members of our sister churches—which include the Coptic, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Syriac, and Malankara Churches—are also welcome to receive Holy Communion in the Armenian Church. Baptized members of other denominations that wish to receive Holy Communion in the Armenian Church should speak with the priest beforehand.

A member of the Church, wishing to receive Holy Communion, must prepare for the sacrament because this is not any ordinary meal, but the precious Body and Blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ. This involves cleansing the body upon waking up that morning, through prayers and fasting (those unable to abstain from food due to health reasons may obtain

permission not to fast). It is also important for the faithful to take part in the entire Divine Liturgy when receiving Holy Communion.

- 4. Penance:** Penance is the sacrament by which an individual turns back to God and receives forgiveness. Very often, with our Western minds, we think penance or repentance must involve some kind of punishment or suffering – believing that God will love us again if we suffer. This cannot be further from the truth.

In the East, the Greek word for penance is *metanoia*, which means “the changing of one’s mind” and the Armenian word, *abashkharootyoon* can be translated as “the act of no longer lamenting/crying”. In both cases, Greek and Armenian, there is no sense of paying a penalty, but rather coming out of the wallows of our sorrow and changing what we think/do/live.

Sin is anything that distances us from God and penance, therefore, is a way to come back to Him. It is a common misconception that the act of penance is a one-time event, where one moment we are in sin and unforgiven and the next moment (in the blink of an eye, if you would), we are forgiven and our sins are wiped away. Penance is an on-going process that can take minutes or can take years, depending on the gravity of the

sin. True penance is a life-style change made to make us better and closer to God.

The Church Fathers speak of sin as an illness and penance as the cure. Depending on the illness, the doctor prescribes a certain remedy. He will not prescribe the same cure for a cough and for a headache, likewise, each sin has a certain way of curing it. This is why private confession is crucial to spiritual growth and renewal. It has become a common practice in the Armenian Church to have general confession and general absolution. This may be good for the conscience, but not for the soul because a remedy has not been prescribed.

- 5. Marriage:** The sacrament of Holy Matrimony, or Holy Crowning, is the sanctification of the union between a man and a woman for a life in marriage in Christ. As in all Orthodox Churches, the Armenian Orthodox Church refers to this sacrament as, “Սուրբ Պսակ/*Soorp Bsak/* Holy Crown”.

The main part of this sacrament is when the bride and groom are crowned as king and queen of their small kingdom, which is their newly established family. They are called to faithfully love each other until the end of their lives and to rule their kingdom with faith and wisdom. In the Prayer of Crowning, we ask that the bride and groom “*from now*

on may not be called two, but one body, united in a spirit of gentleness, to love one another with a modest lifestyle, a pure spirit, without shame, without indecency, being ready to perform good works."

The rite of crowning is followed by the blessing of the common cup of wine. A cup of wine is blessed in remembrance of the marriage at Cana of Galilee in the presence of Christ. Both the bride and groom drink from the same cup. This is the first act that the newly-wed couple does together. It is also a reminder of what marriage is: something that is sweet, but takes years to become sweet. As the bride and groom drink from the cup they are called on to share everything in life from that moment on.

- 6. Holy Orders:** Also known as ordination, or the laying on of hands, is the sacrament through which a man usually enters the holy priesthood of Christ, which He bestowed on His Apostles. There are three biblical ranks of ordained ministry in the Orthodox Church: deacon, priest, and bishop. The sacrament of ordination is administered by a bishop of the Church.

There are also minor ranks, namely *tbir* (clerk) and sub-deacon. Within the rank of *tbir*, there are four ranks, generally given at once: doorkeeper, reader, exorcist, and candle bearer.

When a deacon is ordained a priest, he is given the power to perform the divine offices and the rituals of the Church, including administering Holy Communion and performing all sacraments (except ordination). During the service, the candidate for the priesthood is anointed with holy chrism (*myuron*) and given a new priestly name. This places him in the Apostolic Succession, linking him back to the Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew (who brought Christianity to Armenia) and back before them to Christ Himself.

In the Prayer of Ordination, it says, *“Together we your servants supplicate you. Receive our prayers and concede to us your abundant mercy. And grant to this your servant, (name), the order of priesthood; so that he may with pure conduct and virtuous works offer you thanks.”* The prayer shows that it is at the request and recommendation of the people that a man joins the rank of priesthood and not by his own personal wants or desires.

- 7. Anointing of the Sick:** Anointing the sick is an ancient tradition. From ancient times, even until today in many other countries, oil is used as a salve or a remedy for burns and other illnesses. The act of anointing with oil is a reminder to the sick that just as the oil is a salve to our illness, so too is Christ our salvation.

During the service, the healing prayers from St. Gregory of Narek are read and the Healing Gospel is read, giving hope and comfort to the sick. The Gospels of Healing (Matthew 9:18-31; Mark 1:29-2:12; Luke 4:31-44; John 5:1-15) express particular miracles with many different types of illnesses.

Worship in the Armenian Church

The Armenian Church has always placed great emphasis on worship. Its main worship service—the Divine Liturgy or *Soorp Badarak*—has captured that element of sheer joy in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ that is found in the worship of the early church. The great theologian, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann wrote that “*worship, in her [the Church’s] liturgy – the sacrament of the world, is the sacrament of the Kingdom.*”¹ This is what the Divine Liturgy is: the sacrament of the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is from these services that the modern Armenian *Badarak* derives much of its form and content. There are dozens of *Badaraks*, or Eucharistic texts, in our tradition, but for various reasons, only one is performed today. It is the hope of many clergy that these other *Badaraks* be resurrected and celebrated on different occasions.

Liturgy literally means the common work or action of a group of people. Thus, the Divine Liturgy of the Christian Church means the common

work of God done by the people of God. The living experience of both our worship service (even the hymns are sophisticated theological statements in song), and the liturgical celebrations (the feasting and fasting) of the Church year is a primary source of Christian doctrine.

The essential event of the liturgy is the descent of the Holy Spirit into the bread and wine, transforming these elements into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, making the appearance, and the divine presence of the resurrected Christ, in the Holy Communion.

The Divine Liturgy appeals to the whole person through all the senses: through the visual beauty of the vestments and religious paintings, through the incense and the music, the sacrament of Holy Communion, in the actions of crossing oneself, kissing the cross and the Gospel, and lighting candles.

The church building itself reflects the journey to the kingdom, with the vestibule (narthex) symbolizing the world; the nave, the people of God; and the altar area, the Kingdom of God. In fact, traditional Armenian Churches do not have pews, except a few for the elderly and sick. Rather, the faithful stand for all the services because Christ, who is invisibly enthroned at the holy altar, is both our king and judge and we stand in the presence of the king and judge.

The Cross

The cross in the ancient world was a symbol which struck terror and fear in everyone who saw it. It was an instrument of torture, death and execution, but through Christ's crucifixion and resurrection it became a symbol and instrument of life, resurrection and salvation. Thus, it is the central symbol for Christians as the constant testimony to the fact that we cannot be Christians unless we live with the cross as the very content of our lives in this world. *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me"* (Mark 8:34).

For many Christians, especially for Armenians, the cross has become the tree of life (Genesis 2:9; 3:22, 24). This is seen in the design of the Armenian cross with budding flowers on the corners of the cross. Some Armenian crosses can also be seen with vines and grapes growing from beneath the cross. This shows that the cross is not a dead piece of wood, but a living tree. If this is the case, then the fruit which hangs from the tree of life is the fruit of eternal life, which is Christ, who hangs from the cross – the tree of life. We then eat the fruit of the tree of life, Jesus Christ, every Sunday in Holy Communion.

For this reason, Christians see the cross throughout the church building and cross themselves before and after prayers and when receiving a blessing from the priest during liturgy. This is the sign that our hearts, minds, and strength are given to the love of God and humanity.

Prayer, Fasting, and Almsgiving

Prayer is essential to Christian life. Jesus Christ Himself prayed and taught others to pray and fast. The prayers of the Armenian Church are addressed to the Holy Trinity, to God the Father, to Jesus the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. There are times when we ask in our prayers that the saints, as fellows-members of the Church, already glorified with God in His divine presence, remember us and pray for us. The foremost among the saints is Mary, the Mother of God, *Asdvadzadzin*. Prayer is a dialogue with God. It can be spoken or silent, carried on in the quiet of our hearts; it can be an awareness and remembrance of His name, His existence, His power, and His love.

Prayer is both private and communal. Christians pray privately, at home, at meals, before an undertaking, etc. to enable themselves to know God and be made capable of accomplishing His will. In communal prayer at church, we unite our concerns and ourselves to the prayer of the whole Church, to the eternal prayer of Christ, the Holy Mother of God, the saints, and the brothers and sisters of our own church community.

Divorced from prayer, unaccompanied by acts of compassion and almsgiving, fasting can become legalistic. This is seen in Biblical fasting, which is always combined with prayer and divine revelation (Exodus 34:38 and 1 Kings 19:8-12).

When we fast, we are making a conscious declaration that we depend not on physical items but on the spiritual presence of God. Fasting usually entails abstaining from food, but it

can include other things too: shopping, gossiping, toxic relationships, work, sex, etc.

Fundamentally, if we are not able to say no to eating a hamburger or buying a dress, we become a slave to that hamburger or dress. When we cannot abstain from physical objects, we become slaves to those things and that is the worst type of slavery, because it is slavery to inanimate objects. These objects become idols and through fasting and abstaining from these things, our worship of God becomes pure. Fasting helps strengthen our will to combat these temptations and be free from this world.

Almsgiving (helping the needy) is another way to depend on God while at the same time helping our brothers and sisters in need. Almsgiving takes certain finances and money away from things we may want or need, gives them to the needy, and helps us to put our trust in that God will provide for us. Through almsgiving, we share the blessings which God has given us with others. It reminds us that God has given everything we have for a time and He will ask it back.

The Early Church Fathers understood that a man was made of soul, body, and mind. As such, man must use these three tools, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, to help strengthen his spiritual life and temper his soul, body and mind. Prayer strengthens and fortifies the soul against demonic influences. Fasting cleanses and purifies the body against dependence on worldly objects and idolatry. Almsgiving restores and refocuses the mind on God and others and off of ourselves.

NOTES

NOTES

REFERENCES

i Schmemmann, Fr. Alexander, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1998.

Cover Image: Rublev's famous icon showing the three angels being hosted by Abraham at Mamre.



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