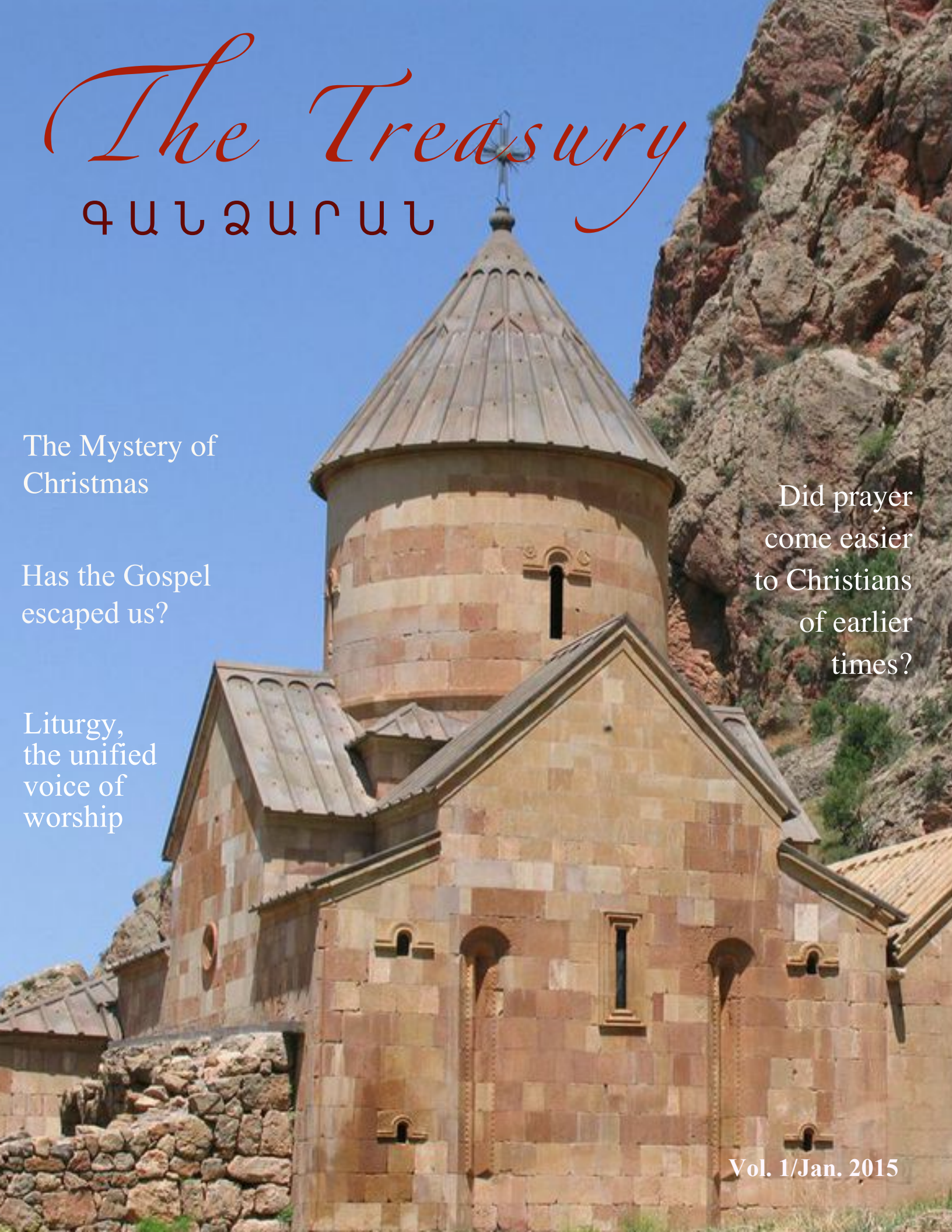


The Treasury

ԳԱՆՁԱՐԱՆ



The Mystery of
Christmas

Has the Gospel
escaped us?

Liturgy,
the unified
voice of
worship

Did prayer
come easier
to Christians
of earlier
times?

Vol. 1/Jan. 2015

The Fellowship of Saint Voski

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The Treasury is an educational outreach ministry of the Fellowship of St. Voski. It is published quarterly and features articles covering a broad base of Christian topics drawn from the Armenian theological tradition.

For more information please visit our website www.stvoski.org

Welcome from the Editor

It is with great joy and anticipation that we, the Fellowship of St. Voski (Նոր Ոսկեանք), release our first publication of *The Treasury* (Գանձարան). In the spirit of St. Voski and his companions and after years of long meetings, deep discussions and thoughtful prayer, God has graciously allowed for the opportunity to present to our readers a scholarly yet practical, user-friendly educational and devotional tool for study and for spiritual growth. Recognizing that “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17), *The Treasury* seeks to offer a fresh presentation of instructive and inspirational material drawn from the wellspring of historic Armenian Orthodox faith. We hope that through these efforts, the faithful may be reinvigorated in their everyday Christian walk, so that they may inspire all those who are earnestly searching for meaning, purpose and guidance in this life. In this first edition, we have strived to cover a broad base of Christian topics and interests to equip and challenge our readers to better understand and live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The editors are convinced that the Armenian theological tradition, having survived and persevered through almost two millennia of “trial by fire” under constant intellectual, political and social pressures, has precious much to offer its people and the Christian world at large.

These are challenging times for Christians. Churches all across the world are being laid waste by modern weapons of destruction, and Christian communities are being targeted for extermination by both old and new foes. In more peaceful environments, the Gospel message and historic Christian faith are continually mocked and marginalized in both academic and political forums. Simply put, being a follower of Jesus Christ is no longer a vocation of comfort and complacency. At the same time, from within the Church we are witnessing many telltale signs of insidious decay: lack of unity, lack of education, lack of motivation and lack of inspiration. How the Church responds to these internal and external phenomena will determine its fate for the years to come.

Fortunately, almighty God is still in control. Psalms 21:28 (Zohrabian ed.) reminds us that “For the kingdom is the LORD'S and He rules over the nations.” The Lord has entrusted all Christians with the task of guarding His truths and proclaiming them to all nations, both in word and deed. As the dried bones in the prophet Ezekiel’s dream were re-animated with flesh and breath (Ezekiel 37:7-9), so we the faithful, by God’s life-giving power, must rise up from our slumber and apathy to help reclaim what has been lost and restore the Church to a state worthy of being called the Bride of Christ. This is no simple task, but involves a unified effort of motivated, inspired and educated Christians to encourage the faithful back through the doors of our churches and onto our knees to seek God’s face and will.

It is with this hope that the Fellowship of St. Voski (Նոր Ոսկեանք) ushers in the year 2015 with its first edition of *The Treasury* (Գանձարան), steadfastly committed to achieving its goal of proclaiming the good news of the Gospel through the voice of the Armenian Church.

May God richly bless you!

AMB





The Christmas Mystery: Shepherds and Angels in Unison

by Very Rev. Fr. Daniel Findikyan

Great and wonderful Mystery that was revealed today. The shepherds sing with the angels, giving good news to the world.

A new king was born in the city of Bethlehem. Sing praise, children of humanity, for he took on a body for us.

The One who cannot be confined by heaven or earth was wrapped in swaddling clothes. Never parting from the Father, he lay in the holy cave.

Today heaven above delights in the radiant good news, and all creatures have been clothed in salvation.

Today Christ the Son of God was presented in the cave, and the multitudes of fiery [angels] descended from heaven to earth.

Today the shepherds beheld the Sun of Righteousness, and with the angels they sang, “Glory to God in the highest.”

Baby Jesus in the manger, Mary and Joseph, chestnuts roasting on an open fire, joy to the world and Fa la la la la. If these are the refrains that invoke the spirit of Christmas, then the opening verses of the Armenian Church’s premier Christmas hymn, *Khorhoort medz yev skanchelee*, would seem to be a far cry from the merry melodies that ring in our

ears during the holidays. One has to scan the lyrics of the Armenian hymn closely to find hints of the Christmas story: “shepherds,” “Bethlehem,” and “swaddling clothes” in the first verse. And the name “Jesus” appears nowhere in the *sharagan*! Is the Armenian Church out of tune with the rest of Christendom?

Far from it. The very first words of the hymn are the clue that our Armenian hymn celebrates something deeper than snowflakes and jingle bells: *Great and wonderful Mystery*. From the Armenians’ time-honored perspective, Christmas—or as we traditionally refer to it, *Theophany-Asdvadzhaydnootyoon*, “the revelation of God”—is a *mystery*. Not a puzzle to be solved, it is rather a “great and wonderful” reality that is so powerful and intense that it draws us into itself. The lyrics summon us beneath the surface of the familiar Christmas story to reveal for us the feast’s life-and-death significance today. This is how our Armenian *sharagans* work. Through music, piercing theological insights and prayerful poetry, they invite us into a sacred place where we can perceive the true mystery of God’s presence in our midst. Was it not Jesus himself who invited his followers to ponder the deeper meaning of his words and actions when he said on more than one occasion, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen”?

Indeed, the Christmas mystery is not what many people may think: “Today the shepherds beheld the Sun of Righteousness, and with the angels they sang, “Glory to God in the highest” [verse 6]. The “great and wonderful mystery” of Christmas, in other words, is a chorus of shepherds and angels.

Solo or Symphony?

Shepherds and angels take center stage in the familiar account of Jesus’s birth according to the Gospel according to Luke (2:8-20 RSV), which has provided material for many a Christmas carol:

And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, “Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased!”

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”

And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. [1]

Notice that the only singers in this passage are the angels. The shepherds are hardly mute, but nothing in the Gospel text suggests that their “glorifying and praising” amounted to a song, much less in choir with the angels. Clearly our Armenian Christmas *sharagan* is more than a simple retelling of the Christmas story.

And so we sing on—

A new king was born in the city of Bethlehem. Sing praise, children of humanity, *for he took on a body for us*.

Those highlighted words are the key to the Christmas mystery. What Armenian Christians celebrate at Christmas is not Jesus’s birthday, not even baby Jesus in the manger, but the audacious upshot of all this: the eternal Son of God has come into the world as a human being. The eternal, invisible, intangible inner essence of God has come into this world, into time and space. Born as all human beings are born, the personal embodiment of God becomes a human being. Revealed

as God's very own Son, Jesus embraces humanity, making this physical world his home. In so doing, Jesus delivers God to us *physically* in his very own person. The famous opening words of the Gospel according to John express this mystery using the church's ancient title for Jesus—God's *Word* -- God's most authentic, powerful, personal and divine self-communication:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God... And the Word became body and made his home among us, and we have seen his glory—the glory of the only one born from the Father, full of grace and truth. [2]

Theologians refer to this as the *incarnation* of the Son of God, and the mystery of Christmas unfolded in our *sharagan* is none other than the incarnation of the Son of God.

The great fourth-century Egyptian theologian, St. Athanasius of Alexandria, who was enormously influential on the Armenian Church's theology and liturgy, understood the full consequences of Jesus's birth:

"Through the incarnation of the Word of God] the universal providence, and its giver and creator, the very Word of God, have been made known. For he was incarnate that we might be made god; and he manifested himself through a body that we might receive an idea of the invisible Father; and he endured the insults of human beings, that we might inherit incorruptibility." (De incarnatione 5.54) [3]

In other words, the Creator of the universe has sent God's inner being into human time and space. Stretching out his divine hand, as it were, Jesus grabs hold of humanity to save us from the futility of this brief earthly existence by indelibly uniting us with the Creator of the universe, the only source of life.

God With Us



Through his incarnation, Jesus Christ bridges the abyss between God and humanity. No longer is there any space between heaven and earth. Reconciled is the divorce between earthly creatures and heavenly creatures. Shepherds now sing with angels in a common chorus of praise, announcing together the Good News that God is with us. Indeed, "*Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son. And his name shall be called Emmanuel, which means, 'God with us'.*" [4]

The Armenians were not the only ancient Christians to envision the incarnation as a joint chorus of angels and shepherds, but our ancestors certainly had a particular fondness for the musical image of the beautiful union of God and humanity brought about in the person of Jesus Christ. The ancient Christian hymn, *Glory to God in the heights*, an elaboration of the angels' song in Luke 2:14, is found in the morning prayer of many Christian traditions East and West:

Glory to God in the heights, and on earth peace, good will and blessings to people. And praise to you in the heights. Blessed are you, O Lord our God. We praise you and we honor you. We confess you to be Lord and we bow down before you. We glorify you. We thank you, Lord, for your great glory. O Lord king, the holy, heavenly One, God and Father almighty.

Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of the Father and the holy Son is also Lord. O Lord God, Lamb of God and Son of the Father, you took our [human nature] from the Virgin. You showed mercy on us and took away the sins of the world. And now receive our prayers. O Holy One, enthroned on the Father's right side, have mercy on us. For you alone are holy. You alone are exalted. You alone are our Lord, Jesus Christ.

And your Holy Spirit is also Lord. He is God in glory with the Father. Amen.

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5

Promoted to the Heavenly Choir

The same image is expressed in the central prayer of the *Badarak*, known as the Eucharistic Prayer. Shortly after the Kiss of Peace, the priest begins the main prayer of the Eucharist with one of the most beautiful expressions anywhere of the mystery of the Incarnation:

It is truly proper and right to worship and glorify you always, most eagerly and intently, Father almighty. You removed the barrier of the curse by your invisible Word, your partner in Creation. Taking the Church to be his own people, he took all who believe in you as his personal possession. It was his pleasure to make his home in us by means of a visible [human] nature that he received from the Virgin. And as the divine architect building a new work, he turned this earth into heaven.

What follows next in the Eucharistic Prayer is another angelic song, which the Prophet Isaiah heard when he was given a brief glimpse into the inner workings of heaven [Isaiah 6:1-4]:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.

“Holy, holy, holy” [Ἁγίῃ, ἁγίῃ, ἁγίῃ *Soorp, soorp, soorp*] is the signature hymn of the Seraphim, one of several species of heavenly beings mentioned in the Scriptures. “Holy” is the unique attribute that applies only to God. Only the angels, from their heavenly vantage point, instinctively recognize God for Who God is. We feeble human beings, who are too often distracted from the greater realities of heaven by our own inflated sense of self-importance, are all too quick to bypass God for other enticements.

And yet as a result of the incarnation of Word, the true Christmas mystery, the Son of God has embraced this world and its sinful creatures, infusing us with “the grace, the love, and the divine sanctifying Power” [7] of God himself. In so doing, God promotes us—like the shepherds of old—to the angelic choir to sing their signature song of praise with them in unison.

Our Eucharistic Prayer continues:

Even the assemblies of vigilant angels could not bear to stand in his presence, frightened by the blinding light of his divinity flashing like lightning. Yet the Word, becoming human for our salvation, gave us the privilege to sing with the heavenly ones in their spiritual choirs. So that in one voice with the seraphim and the cherubim, we should sing the Song of the Holies and, confidently calling out, shout with them and say—

Holy, holy, holy Lord of powers;
Heaven and earth are filled with your glory.
Blessing in the highest.
Blessed are you who came and will come in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.

Another hymn from the *Badarak* makes the very same declaration and highlights the startling reality that the God and Creator of heaven and earth, “of all things visible and invisible,” is delighted when we frail mortals add our voice to the massive chorus of angels:

God, you have filled your holy church with an angelic hierarchy. Thousands and thousands of archangels stand in your presence, and myriads and myriads of angels worship you. Yet you are pleased to receive praise from human beings in the mystical song: “Holy, holy, holy, Lord of powers.”



Impossible Realities

Through the incarnate Son of God, holiness and divine life flow through the veins of humanity and this changes everything. God is not somewhere else. In Christ, God is here. God is in us. God is with us, healing us from within, and working from within us, empowering “all that believe in him” to be forces in this world for peace, hope, life, love, and all of the eternal qualities of heaven. Our Armenian Christmas hymn proclaims the mystery of the Incarnation by means of a series of impossible realities: “The One who cannot be confined by heaven or earth was wrapped in swaddling clothes. Never parting from the Father, he lay in the holy cave” [verse 3]. “Creatures have been clothed in salvation” [verse 4]. “Today Christ the Son of God was presented in the cave and the multitudes of fiery [angels] descended from heaven to earth.” [verse 5].

So the challenge for us is not to find God, nor to discover ways of reaching out to a God who resides in some other distant realm or unreachable dimension. God has already found us. God has already reached out to us and taken hold of us, making us his own in Jesus and through Jesus. Even in prayer and liturgy, we are not calling out to someone who is apart from us. In our church’s worship, the incarnate Son of God prays with us from within us, personally lifting our prayers to God the Father. What remains for us is to recognize this mysterious reality and to open ourselves to it; to tune our heart and mind to a divine frequency that is already broadcasting strongly from within us; to perceive the heavenly music within us all and to join the angels’ choir. And that is something to sing about!

Very Rev. Fr. Daniel Findikyan, PhD, is a Professor of Liturgical Studies at St. Nersess Theological Seminary and is a founding member of the Fellowship of St. Voski.

References:

1. Luke 2:8-20, Armenian Tr.
2. John 1:1-2, 14, Armenian Tr.
3. *St. Athanasius the Great of Alexandria On the Incarnation*, preface by C.S. Lewis, translated and introduction by John Behr (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011) 107.
4. Matthew 1:23, Isaiah 7:14 Armenian Tr.
5. *The Armenian Gospel of the Infancy with Three Early Versions of the Protoevangelion of James*, tr. and ed. Abraham Terian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 10.2, pp. 47-48.
6. From the blessing before the Eucharistic Prayer of the *Badarak*: «Շնորհք, սէր և անստեղծալիս սրբադարձութիւնն հօր և որդւոյ և հոգւոյն սրբոյ եղիցի ընդ ձեզ ընդ ամենեւեանդ»: *The Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church with Modern Armenian and English Translations, Transliteration, Musical Notation, Introduction and Notes*, Daniel Findikyan, ed. (New York: St. Vartan Press, 28).
7. *Hreshdagayeen*, the hymn accompanying the procession with the chalice. *Divine Liturgy*, 24.

Hovhannes of Erznka

by Roberta Ervine

In this column, we will introduce you to some of the Armenian Church's most interesting and influential people. Ancient, medieval or modern, these thinkers and doers challenge us today to match the breadth and depth of their experience, and their sincere engagement with the issues of people living in their time. Even when the issues they wrestled with are not our own, we have much to learn from their attitudes and their approach.

and the catholicosate at Hromklay was destroyed. To Hovhannes, that Armenian religious life as he had not, nor did they resemble my heart's Ancient, medieval or modern, these known it was ending. What, after all, desires?"

Ultimately Hovhannes did enter a monastery and begin his studies — Born just before the middle of the 13th century, Hovhannes grew up in the perhaps following the death of his mother. The monastery he chose was between Armenian mother. The monastery he chose was Cilicia and the greater Armenian St. Minas, located on Mt. Sebu, the hallowed place where Gregory the Illuminator had died in seclusion. Erznka had an ancient Armenian pedigree. It lay in what had Later in life, Hovhannes wrote several hymns and a sophisticated panegyric in praise of St. Gregory. [1]

Hovhannes Erznkatsi, the first once been known as Byzantine figure to grace these pages, was not an Armenia near the provinces of Tayk and Taron, lands made sacred by the presence of St. Gregory the Illuminator, evangelist, a hierarch or a martyr. Hovhannes's teacher, Vardan Mamikonian and Mesrop spiritual father and namesake was Instead, he was known for his Mashtots. He seems to have been martyred, "slain with the sword, by the musician. Judging from his nickname, related to important people: he lawless." Hovhannes left the *Bluz*, and a drawing of him in one mentions Erznka's Armenian leader monastery, came down to the city, and manuscript belonging to the Jerusalem Baron Hovhannes and its hierarch began a long period of intensive, self-Patriarchate, he was a short person Bishop Sargis as being "from the same directed study. He delved into the with unusual, light-colored eyes. clan." manuscripts his relatives had collected,

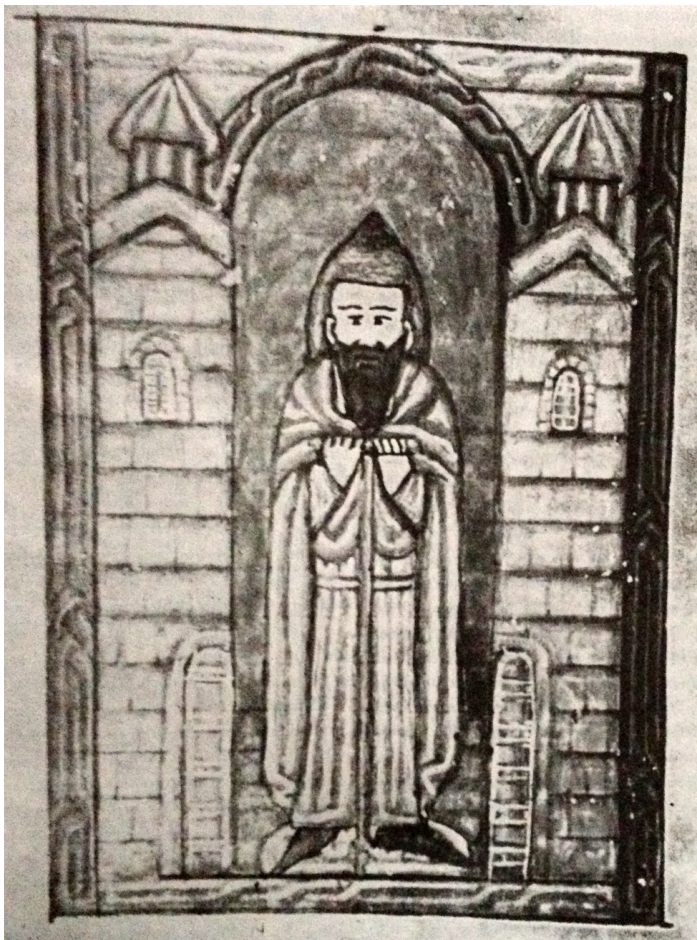
Through the lens of his writings, As a bishop's relative, it may seem made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and we see Hovhannes as a very human natural that Hovhannes entered the traveled to study with the great figure. He spent his formative years church. He tells us that, in fact, this was teachers of his day.

living through perilous times that to his earliest desire. Gifted with a Yet no matter how many him seemed all too normal, as the remarkable voice, his dearest wish was opportunities he availed himself of, his Mongols carried out their takeover of to become a musician — one of the learning was never quite enough to the region. At the close of his branches of learning in which the satisfy Hovhannes. Although his relatively short life he survived an monastic schools specialized. However, contemporaries speak of him as having earthquake, and described himself as Hovhannes's road to Church learning the voice of an angel, Hovhannes suffering from unspecified pains and and monastic life was not smooth. In himself felt that by the time he began frustrations. In the final year of his poetic work *On the Heavenly* to study music, the window of Hovhannes' life (1293), the Armenian *Cosmos*, he says that his parents opportunity for real virtuoso catholicos Stepanos was carried into wanted him to pursue a secular career preparation had closed captivity in Egypt, where he died, and so, as a dutiful son, he honored "imperceptibly." In his own eyes, he

was never as good as he could have been.

Hovhannes hesitated to speak about his understanding of music as therapy, but he alludes to the psychological and physical effects of vibration on body, soul and mind. Perhaps his expertise in using music to create or alter spiritual states is why Hovhannes's hymns are among the most beautiful in the Armenian Church. His Christmas composition, "Fear not, O river," is both musically challenging and theologically deep. In it, Christ addresses the Jordan River, in which he is about to be baptized. In Psalm 103/104:32 it is said that when God touches the hills, they smoke, and creation trembles at his presence. The river is fearful, knowing Who is about to enter its waters, and so Christ explains to it the necessity for His baptism, and the river's role in the salvation of creation and humanity. It is no accident that the melody of this hymn is high in the tenor range, the vibrational area that Hovhannes understood to be the counterbalance to water.

On his return from Jerusalem in 1281, the Cilician Catholicos Hakob tapped Hovhannes to teach in the catholicosate school. His foundational course in grammar actually offered his students an introduction to the great



ideas of incarnation and creation. [2] For Hovhannes, the embodiment of ideas in speech, and of speech in writing was a natural, human counterpart to God's own mode of operation. After all, Christ the Word is embodied in flesh and the word of God was embodied in creation. Not only do humans create because they are in the image of God, they embody their thoughts as God embodied His Word.

Teaching in monastic schools was one side of Hovhannes's educational mission. The other side was his involvement with lay youth who were members in what were called the Fraternal Union of Erznka. In this time period, both Muslim and Christian youth gathered together in fraternities based on the skilled trades they aspired to learn. Members lived together under the supervision of youth directors who encouraged them to maintain high standards of behavior, and show hospitality to the city's visitors, especially to people from whose experience they could learn more about the outside world. [3]

In 1280, Hovhannes was asked to write a constitution for the Erznka brotherhood. [4] He chose to divide it into three areas of consideration:

First, how should members behave as individuals? All behavioral expressions of faith, whether daily prayer, chastity in marriage, community worship or the honoring of elders spring from one source:

“Hear, brethren and young men who join together in this union: [5] this is your first law — you shall love God your Creator, and for the sake of His love, forsake all other worldly love.”

Second, how should they relate to one another?

“Because this world is an ocean and people are tossed by the waves on it, by various occurrences that happen, if people from our brotherhood fall into trials and are troubled by oppressors, all the brethren shall do their utmost to get him out of the troubles that have come upon him, because Christ, who became our brother, will say, ‘I was in prison, and you visited me’.” [Matt 25:36]

And finally, how should they act in society at large?

“Our brothers should be peace-loving in the midst of this world. Let them in love conduct their speaking and listening to wise people of every race, honor them and benefit from their wisdom without antagonism, with meek manners, gentle behavior, modest bearing, remaining spotless and bright as a gold coin amid the mud of this world. Remaining like the sun’s light amidst repugnant odors, they should give of their goodness to others just as the sun gives its light, but without absorbing the defilements of others — just as the sun does not take on the defilements of other things.”

From Hovhannes’s writings as a whole, we see his vision of Christian life now and in eternity - the vision he sought to share in all his educational and musical endeavors. For Hovhannes, the Church is the symbolic representation of heaven; saints like St. Gregory are its light-giving constellations; music is its angelic voice reaching into the hearts and souls of the faithful; its writings remind human beings that all of us, secular, cleric and monk alike participate with the Divinity in creating a world where people honor one another and participate in one another’s support and healing.

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5. There is here a clear echo of Deut 6:4.



What is the Gospel?

by Eric Vozzy

Words change their meaning. They get redefined. Due to modern assumptions, historical circumstances, and philosophical underpinnings, it's a common course within any language. For example, over time the word *idiot* has changed meanings. It once referred to someone who was uneducated or ignorant, and so an idiot could be a respectable citizen who just lacked professional skill. By contrast, today an *idiot* is someone who has overall bad judgment and is *stupid*.

But so what? Is the evolution of a word according to its influence within a cultural context a negative thing? The word *idiot* might not have detrimental impact, but what happens when church language evolves? Consider the word *fellowship*. In its biblical sense (I Corinthians 10:16), *koinonia* [κοινωνία] is the communion and unity of believers through their love for one another and their common union in Christ. The Armenian word for this is *haghortooyoon* [հաղորդութիւն], which is also the word for 'communion' as we partake of the Body and Blood of Jesus. Today, the term in English has been reduced to conversation over coffee and doughnuts and socializing of

church members at gatherings and events.

What about the word "Gospel"? Has it been redefined? What is the Gospel? Is it an idea? As "good news" [աւետիս] is the Gospel just a message? Is the Gospel the first four books of the New Testament? Were Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John just biographers? Are not the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John merely historical narratives of the story of Jesus? Common beliefs and modern perspectives these may be, but the fathers of ancient Christianity emphasized a different way of perceiving the Gospel and the Holy Evangelists.

The Gospel, in fact, is *not* an idea or a message, and the Holy Gospel-writers should not be remembered as being mere biographers of historical narratives about Jesus. The Gospel, according to St. Paul, is not an idea to be thought about or conceptualized. He writes, "*For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ.*" (Galatians 1:11-12) Instead, the Gospel was *received* and it came by way of revelation,



or an encounter with Jesus Christ.

In a recent blog post, Fr. Stephen Freeman, a priest of the Orthodox Church of America, explained that the Gospel is to be understood as an event, not the story of an event. [1]

The books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are not a text *about* the Gospel – they *are* the Gospel. Supporting this thought, in *The Teaching*, Saint Gregory the Enlightener's presentation of the core content of Armenian Christian theology, he writes, "*Then those who had seen God and were filled and imbued with the Spirit took the divine gospel and established it in writing and defined the one tradition as four gospels...*"[2] In other words, the four gospels are the Gospel presented as text. The Gospel is the Person of Jesus Christ, who is the "Good News", and the Holy Evangelists are witnesses to that Event; to the saving action and Life of Jesus Christ. That Event is to be received and encountered. The Gospel changes us, as we are saved by it, or rather by Him; by Jesus Christ. We are not saved by the *story* about Christ.

Even within the *Badarak*, chanting the Gospel is not only a lesson for our minds, but a real meeting with the person of Jesus Christ. The Choir's proclamation before the Gospel is chanted, "*Aseh Asdvadz [God is speaking]*," reflects this. When the deacon elevates the Gospel book over his head or whenever we kiss the Gospel book, we are lovingly acknowledging its value and authority in and over our lives.

When Badarak is not being celebrated, the Gospel book stands in the center of the altar, conveying its

place in the life of the Church and our lives as Christians. The Gospel, the Event, or Person of Jesus Christ, is that by which we live and are judged.

Again, words change meaning, and sadly, "Gospel" has often been reduced to just that, a word, a message, a Christian philosophy, and something we *talk* about. But the Gospel is not a word. Instead it is *the Word*; the Word of God, which is not words on a page. The Word of God is the Person of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, and this Word does not change, because "*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever*" (Hebrews 13:8). It is us who are called to change; to be like Him in order to incarnate, embody, and proclaim the Word, Jesus Christ, through the sacramental life of the Church and into the world.

Thus, when we commit ourselves to the Gospel, we are committing ourselves to Jesus Christ. This is the meaning of Christmas! On January 6th, we celebrate Theophany, when the Gospel was revealed as a living Person. In his commentary on Matthew, the honorable Catholicos Zak'aria Jagec'i (d. 876) writes,

"Today, Bethlehem has been revealed in place of Mount Sinai, and the Gospel has been granted to us in place of the tables of the Ten Commandments, for the one who at one time appeared to Moses in the burning bush in the desert, whom he did not dare to approach, and to look at his face, now is being revealed wrapped in swaddling clothes to all humanity."[3]



As Christians, we are called to *be* the Gospel and *live* the Gospel, not as a text or a vague idea, but as the image of Jesus Christ. God has chosen us collectively, as His Church, to be His evangelists and witnesses for others to receive and encounter the Gospel, which is Jesus Christ. We are His Altar, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, and so the Gospel should stand at the very center of our lives.

Pray the Gospel doesn't escape us, becoming reduced to words and trapped into definitions, dogmas, regulations, and traditions. Instead, participate in the sacramental life of the Church. Practice true, reconciling fellowship and share the kiss of peace with believers. Clothe the poor. Feed the homeless. Visit the sick. Forgive your enemy. Glorify Jesus Christ, the Son of God, with all things. And Love. That is the Gospel.

*"For it is not a minister
who pronounces the Gospel,
or even an angel, but the
Lord of heaven and earth
himself, saying, "I came
from the Father and have
come into the world".*

~ Step'anos Siwnec'i
(d. 735)

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Spiritual Etymology

The Narrow Path

by fr. Gevond Ajamian

շաւիղ = shaveegh “a narrow path”

The Armenian word, “շաւիղ/path” enters the Armenian language from Syriac and is purely Semitic in origin. The Semitic peoples who used this word, were people who lived their lives traveling the deserts of the Middle East. For travelers in ancient times, and even more for desert travelers, following an already created “շաւիղ/path” was very important. If a traveler wandered off the already established “շաւիղ/path,” he could very soon be killed by thieves, the weather or even thirst.



When someone walks in a field or through a forest, they create a “շաւիղ/path.” If enough people follow that person’s “շաւիղ/path,” it can become a major roadway. Today, we don’t really think of “շաւիղներ/paths” because we live in a world of paved roads and highways, cement sidewalks and signs leading us to our destinations. Unless we are involved in Boy/Girl Scouting or go hiking in the woods, we don’t really know the importance of “շաւիղ/paths.”

When snow falls, and before the sidewalks and roadways are paved, we look for other footprints in the snow and if we find them, we follow them. We follow that “շաւիղ/path” that has already been made for us. We choose this already made “շաւիղ/path” because we know it is safe. As long as we see the footprints in front of us, we know that that person arrived at their destination safely and we put our trust in that person’s “շաւիղ/path.”

So often, as we travel along the “շաւիղ/path” of the Lord, like in a forest, we may see things that scare us or even invite us to come off that “շաւիղ/path.” Sometimes we think we might be safer if we make a new “շաւիղ/path” and travel along that one. This, unfortunately, is how we get lost and require Christ to come looking for us.

Let us put our faith in the Lord’s “շաւիղ/path” which he has prepared for us. The next time we think that traveling off His “շաւիղ/path” may be quicker or more direct to our destination, let us remember that the Lord knows His “շաւիղ/path” better than we do.

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Photo: Mesrob Mashdots and his student, Goryun

A Primer on Prayer by Catholicos Nersess Shnorhali

by Very Rev. Fr. Daniel Findikyan

One of the most persistent topics in the New Testament scriptures is prayer. The vital importance of prayer for all Christians is a recurring theme in the Gospels as it is in the general epistles and the writings of St. Paul. Jesus not only speaks often about the urgency of prayer, but he teaches us how to pray (“Our Father who art in heaven...”) and shows us by example, retreating periodically “by himself to pray.” As for St. Paul, he goes so far as to urge us to “pray without ceasing.”

And yet in our day, many would acknowledge that their efforts at prayer fall far short of the high standard advocated in the Scriptures. Today’s cold, corporate culture with its superhuman expectations, and the incessant beeps and burps of our smart gadgets can leave us with little time or patience to devote to higher things. Those who manage to carve out a moment for prayer may be at odds as to how to begin. Many give up when their prayer amounts to no more than grim silence or narcissistic, mental ramblings seemingly bouncing off a wall. Worst of all, the times when we most feel the need for God’s consolation and guidance—sickness, anxiety, betrayal, guilt, exhaustion—can be precisely the times when not only words, but faith itself may fail us.

Did prayer come easier to Christians of earlier times? Evidently not, if we judge from the introduction that Catholicos Nersess Shnorhali prefaced to his magnificent chain of 24 short prayers for the hours of the day. In what amounts to a short primer on prayer, the Catholicos candidly justifies why he felt compelled, as the Father of the Church, to compose the prayers. Adjusted for cultural inflation, the Armenians of St. Nersess’ time more than 1200 years ago faced the same hurdles to prayer that many of us do today.

St. Nersess the Gracious served as the Chief Shepherd of the Armenians from 1166-1173 AD. A zealous follower of Jesus Christ, St. Nersess was also an erudite theologian with a deep-seated yearning for pan-Christian unity. He was cherished by his people and held in the highest regard by leading bishops and patriarchs of other churches.



His *24 Prayers for the Hours of the Day and Night* is well known to those who attend evening worship services in the Armenian Church during Great Lent, when, in many places, the prayers are read by the congregation. The first prayer begins, *Havadov khosdovaneem yev yergeer bakanem kez* (“I confess faithfully and worship you...”) and each prayer ends with the refrain, *Yev voghormya ko araradzots yev eents pazmameghees* (“Show mercy on your creatures and on me, a great sinner.”).

While the 24 Prayers have been published many times and translated into countless languages, St. Nersess’ preface to the prayers is rarely encountered and is virtually unknown. The current translation was made by Dr. Abraham Terian from the text printed at the end of *Girk’ Saghmosats’ Dawt’i* [The Psalter of David] (Jerusalem: St. James Press, 1873), pp. 341-344. In future issues of *The Treasury*, the editors intend to publish serially fresh English translations of St. Nersess’ prayers, for the spiritual benefit of our readers and companions.

Admonitory Preface to the Prayer Written by Lord Nerses the Brother of Catholicos Grigor of the Armenians

A prayer for every Christian, to the old and the young, which all ought to learn and to teach one another: priests to the people, fathers to sons, mothers to daughters, and friend to friend. And they should pray using this [prayer] five times a day, kneeling down twelve times at the hour [of prayer], that is: in the morning, at noon, in the afternoon, in the evening, and when retiring. But if one becomes slothful and lazy to pray five times, let him pray four times, or three times, or two times, or once a day; at least to realize that one is a Christian, and to come to know oneself that he is a creature of God and worshiper of Him. And if one is slow to learn every word of the prayer (there are those who learn demonic songs with much eagerness), let him learn half of it or less. If they were to learn three of its stanzas and to pray kneeling down three times at the hour [of prayer], it would be acceptable to God. But if any Christian is indifferent about learning and praying this, he should be rebuked and [deemed] as of the company of the Gentiles. Those who teach this prayer to others shall not succumb even in war, much less in peace.

As for our people, they never mention the name of God outside a place of worship, for they do not care about the canons of prayer as befits worshipers of God; rather, they prefer vain talk over prayer. And if at times some were to come to pray in the presence of a priest, they either stand with their mouths shut or chatter with one another; for they neither know the words of prayers nor allow the priests to concentrate on psalms and worship. For this reason we wrote this prayer in simple and clear words so as to be easily understood—even by those who are slow to understand. In not too many words, it has twenty-four stanzas, in accordance with the hours of day and night and the number of prophets, and it is conceptually powerful—since it encompasses more than the needs for which we petition God.

And we offer it to our people to learn, that every Christian may learn this. And wherever they meet at the

hour of prayer, they may speak with God through it—whether in church or at home, whether at rest or at whatever work, or when traveling. And all those who learn it and pray attentively, with a passionate heart and with tears, they shall have every request written in it fulfilled to them in life as well as after death. But those who despise it and neither learn nor pray, they shall themselves see the harm done to themselves. We have exhausted our reasons for coming up with this prayer—so that they will no longer make excuses that “We don’t know a prayer’s words, therefore we don’t pray.” Let such people know that Satan makes no greater effort to prevent our various good deeds as [he does to prevent] prayer, for he knows that only through prayer he is chased away from us and God comes to dwell in us. We shall therefore ask the benevolent God to open the eyes of your minds, that you may willingly learn and pray this, and be loved of God.

And when you pray, remember Grigor the Catholicos of the Armenians and his brother Nerses, the author of this prayer, before Christ. And those of you who copy this prayer in writing, copy also these words of the admonition. And those who copy this shall be registered in the book of eternal life. And those who shall learn and pray shall receive mercy from Christ. Those who teach their friends shall be rewarded by God. And those who copy it, let them not confuse any letter or word, departing from the original copy, or omit [anything] when copying, lest the words become distorted. Rather, let all [copies] be alike, whenever copied. As for those not skilled in lettering, let them give it to those trained in orthography to copy.

Glory to Christ, forever. Amen.

Introduction by *Very Rev. Fr. Daniel Findikyan, PhD*, Professor of Liturgical Studies at St. Nersess Theological Seminary

Translation by *Abraham Terian, PhD*, Professor Emeritus of Armenian Theology and Patristics at St. Nersess Armenian Seminary.

Worship and the Armenian Church

by André Markarian

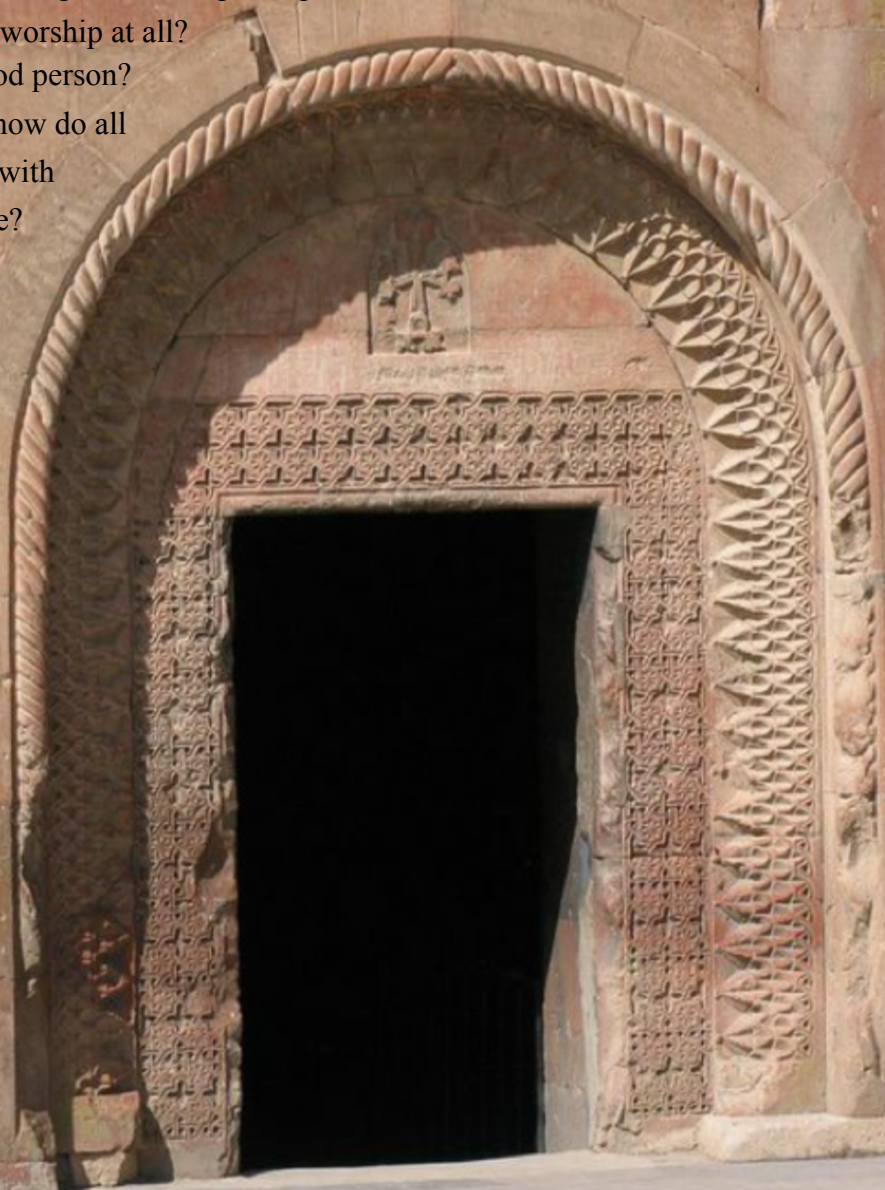
“Worship is the submission of all of our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness, nourishment of mind by His truth, purifying of imagination by His beauty, opening of the heart to His love, and submission of will to His purpose; and all this gathered up in adoration, is the greatest of human expressions of which we are capable.”

When one reflects on this definition of worship by the Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple in the mid 1900's, the simple beauty and totality of the worship experience contained in this description inspires feelings of wonder as well as inadequacy. Yet, how many of us seated in the pews during a Sunday morning church service have thought to ourselves “what is all this about anyway?”, or even worse, “how much longer before this finishes so I can watch the football game?” Has the worship experience in the Armenian Church (and the Church at large) suffered a serious setback over the years? Have issues like a dwindling interest in matters of faith, loss of relevance of spiritual topics, and increasing social commitments during times designated for participation in Church activities rendered worship uninteresting or even obsolete? Why the need to worship at all? Doesn't it suffice to be baptized and just be a good person? Does God really expect us to worship Him, and how do all those rituals in church really help me to connect with God? Can't I just stay at home and read my Bible?

In the current age where the secularization and privatization of one's religious beliefs have become the norm, these questions are becoming exceedingly relevant and require a response. By taking a closer look at authentic Christian worship, this article hopes to provide some insight into these questions as we collectively strive to rejuvenate current Church life and activity to a level worthy of the great God we have.

Wonderful Worship

Webster's dictionary defines the term “worship” as “extravagant respect or admiration for or devotion to an object of esteem”. Who among us has not felt the attraction towards the superlatives of the created order: a surreal sunset, a majestic wild animal, an exceptional athlete, a brilliant musician, an incredible mentor? Our very created nature dictates that we are



drawn to the awesome, to fall at its feet in amazement and trepidation, to express a profound wonder and delight at its greatness and simultaneously recognize our unworthiness in comparison. For the Christian, none other than God can be the object of our complete reverence and adulation. Although God does not demand worship from us, the Christian cannot resist the inclination to profoundly admire his maker and savior. But worship (Arm. *yergrbakootyun*) of God for the Christian goes beyond personal amazement. Authentic biblical worship discovers itself in the reality of what God has done for humanity through his Son: making us members of His divine family and His mystical Body. To quote orthodox liturgical scholar Dr. Robert Taft,

“Christian worship...is a celebration of how God has touched us, has united us to Himself and is ever present to us and dwelling in us. It is not a reaching out for a distant reality but a joyful celebration of a salvation that is just as real and active in the ritual celebration as it was in the historical event.” [1]

For the Christian, there is a particular awareness of how God has directly acted to touch His people. This recognition motivates an intentional response of gratitude for God’s goodness where we the Church present ourselves as a tangible offering to Him. It is a sacrificial offering joyfully and rightfully presented to God during communal worship for who He is, for what He

has done in the past, and what He continues to do. As 10th century Armenian bishop and theologian Khosrov Antsevatzi reflected in his commentary on the Badarak, “*Only our response should be worthy of all that He has done. The creature honors the Creator and is bound to His service and worship*”. [2] This collective response becomes a *living* metaphor



and is nothing less than authentic Christian worship, taking its form as the visible corporate activity of the Church which we may properly call *liturgy*.

Living Liturgy

The word liturgy comes from the Greek word “*leitourgia*” used several times in the New Testament, [3] often translated as “public work or ministry” or “work of the people”. The term liturgy is familiar to most, often simplistically described as a formal,

rigid, repetitive form of religious expression. Although it is easy to interpret liturgy as synonymous with the rituals of the Church, this is mostly an incorrect notion. While liturgy certainly incorporates prescribed ritual as the “language” of its activities, liturgy is much more than the predetermined ceremonial actions so often associated with the ancient Christian churches. However nuanced the definition of liturgy may be, in its current form we can understand it today as the visible work or activity performed by the whole Church. As integral members of one unified body in Christ, worship cannot be sufficiently understood as an individual undertaking or experience but rather as a collective expression of the community of God. That is not to say that there is no role or place for individual worship, which certainly plays an integral role in cultivating one’s relationship with our personal God. Rather, the perfection of Christian worship is manifested in the unified communal response of the Church to God’s glory and generosity. Liturgy therefore comprises both the recognition as well as the living out of our salvific relationship with the Divine. Because Christ is ever-present with us in our communal worship, the liturgy is not so much symbolic as it is alive, nourishing and sanctifying its participants. It is through the liturgy that the assembly of the Church re-experiences exactly what it is celebrating, being nurtured through the very means with which it acts.

To help better understand this idea, recall how since the inception of the early Church, God's people assembled together for fellowship and worship. St. Luke chronicles this for us in the first chapter of the Book of Acts v42-47:

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (NRSV).

As one can plainly see, the fullness of the mystery of their new reality as Christians was finding itself in the collective expression of their unity in Christ. The risen Lord had not left his disciples with a set of formal doctrines to follow, but rather with a shared experience of spiritual transformation. As Christianity spread around the world, this transformation was articulated in different ways for each group of believers, dictated by their



respective historical, geographical, and cultural influences. This articulation assumed the form of the liturgical experience, not as a set of ritualistic acts, but rather as a living, reaffirming, self-actualization of God's completed work in history. And just as God's entire creation is understood and appreciated by the senses of sight, sound, smell and texture, these basic elements of the human experience naturally came together to adorn the ceremonial patterns of the liturgy, creating the beautiful tapestry of Christian liturgical traditions that we observe today, each with its own unique images and metaphors which converge to celebrate the shared mystery of salvation in Christ.

A Unified Voice

Despite the variety of worship practices that exist across the liturgical landscape, undoubtedly several basic elements of Christian practice are retained in all the ancient traditions, reflecting the shared reality of all the members of the Body of Christ. These include certain initiation rites like

baptism with chrismation, the public reading and commentary upon Scripture, regular patterns of daily prayers in accordance with the cyclical patterns of time, a specific structure of corporate prayer based on remembrance and invocation (known respectively as *anamnesis* and *epiclesis* in the Greek), and celebration of the Eucharist and special feast days (Easter, Christmas, etc). [4] Starting with these core elements, with each passing generation the liturgy grew into its own distinctive forms to reflect the heart, mind and soul of each group of believers. Specifically for Armenian Orthodox Christians, the basic worship practices include the Divine Liturgy or *Badarak* (for Sundays), the Nine Daily Hours (known as *Jhamerkutyun*), Feast/Saint Day celebrations and fasting observances, all organized together under the umbrella of the Armenian Orthodox Liturgical Year. For Armenians, how this liturgy has evolved and coalesced over the centuries to assume its current form is truly something to marvel at, and is a testimony to the fact that liturgy is truly “alive”. As the oyster gradually lays layer upon layer of its pearly coating on a simple kernel of sand over decades, a similar organic yet mystical process has provided us with the beautiful Armenian Christian liturgical worship practices that we have today. Just as a painter meticulously arranges his chosen paint colors and brush strokes to create his final masterpiece, in the same way with each generation, prayers, hymns,

and other meaningful elements were added to and removed from the developing liturgical repository of the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit himself. Whether it be the ornate priestly vestments worn during a Badarak celebration, or the floral scents of smoky incense during *Antasdan* [5], or the poignant eastern notations of the *Hokehankisd sharagans* [6], all the senses are quickened to His majesty and bless His holy name. Through all these elements, the Armenian liturgy like no other creation speaks to the mind, heart and soul of the Armenian people from whom it was born. Within it is contained its joys, its fears, its aspirations and hopes, a coalescence of everything that keeps the Armenian spirit alive to this day. Every gesture, spoken word and musical note within the liturgy has its root within the Armenian ethos, effectively unifying all Armenian Christians, past, present, and future, in one harmonious offering to the King of Kings. Our liturgy then can be thought of as the official expression of the Armenian Church's

self understanding. Through the traditional ordering of sacred scripture, prayers, rituals and music, God's people recall, celebrate, proclaim and give thanks to Him through the Holy Spirit for the mystery of our salvation which has already been accomplished by Christ, continually recommitting ourselves to God for His Glory. Wherever in the world Armenians are gathered to worship the Lord, this same liturgy unifies its collective voice as they stand before Him proclaiming *“Holy, holy, holy and powerful God, heaven and earth are filled with Your glory.”* [7]

*“Holy, holy, holy and powerful
God, heaven and earth are
filled with Your glory.”*

Taste and See

In summary, we have attempted to explore the intersection between worship and liturgy and how it relates to the spiritual life in the Armenian Church. We have seen how worship is not an act of groveling before a self-absorbed deity. Rather, by praising and blessing our Father in Heaven with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, [8] we are made alive and whole by the very same blessings which we offer to Him. It is with this attitude that we must approach worship. Like a loving family, God gathers all of creation around Himself to share in the joy and generosity of His goodness and grace. The liturgy through which we worship is “*nothing less than the common expression of the Church’s personal relationship with God*” [9] and is our visible, tangible, spiritual life in action. Whether we are gathered for a Sunday morning Badarak or participating in a Blessing of the Grapes ceremony, we are joyfully exclaiming His majesty. The symbols and actions which make up public worship during the liturgical year of the Armenian Church are born from the language and events of God’s own action and revelation in time, as they specifically speak to our own identity and faith as Armenians. Our liturgical

celebrations arise directly out of the awesome mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ, and are the very means by which we participate in that mystery, and function as the foundation for the spiritual life of the Armenian faithful. The liturgical year is the majestic spiritual robe that clothes the Armenian Church, whose fabric informs and organizes our celebration of God’s divine activity in time and space. In the end, the liturgy becomes most efficacious not merely as a vehicle of expression of our unified gratitude to God, but as a means of communing with Him to receive and impress His spirit upon us as His Church and Bride. Our communal liturgical celebrations sustain and strengthen us so that we can have the fullness of God’s presence in our lives to carry out His purposes, both as individuals and as the Body of Christ. Yes, the liturgy is alive, as is the One to whom it is directed, and it grows and evolves according to the needs of its participants and the wisdom of its clerical charges. In the end of course, God knows best how to speak with His people and we count on Him to guide this evolution. All that is asked of us is to show up, participate and “...*taste and see that the Lord is good*”! [10]

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