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REASURY

*Spiritual
Champions*

Volume 2
Number 4

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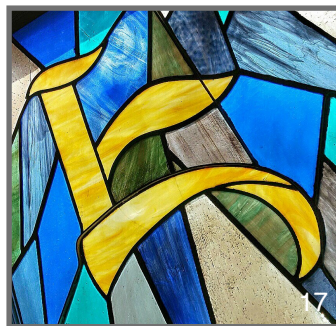


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THE FELLOWSHIP OF ST. VOSKI

Nor Voskiank/Նոր Ոսկեանք is a fellowship of men and women working toward the revival and restoration of Armenian Orthodox theology and life within the Armenian Church at large. The fellowship is named after St. Voski and his companions (the Voskians) who were a group of Christian martyrs and monastics from the first century, many of whom were students of St. Thaddeus. According to tradition, St. Thaddeus ordained as their leader a priest called Chrysos (Greek for "gold," Armenian "voski"), and thereafter the group came to be known as the Voskians.

In the spirit of the Voskians, Nor Voskiank seeks to support the cultivation of a thriving, united, worldwide Armenian Christian community through prayer, fellowship, and the publication of practical educational resources covering the entire breadth of Christian life as lived, interpreted and testified to by the Armenian Church since ancient times. The Treasury/Գանձարան is published quarterly and subscriptions are available by request. To contact us or donate, please visit us at

www.StVoski.org

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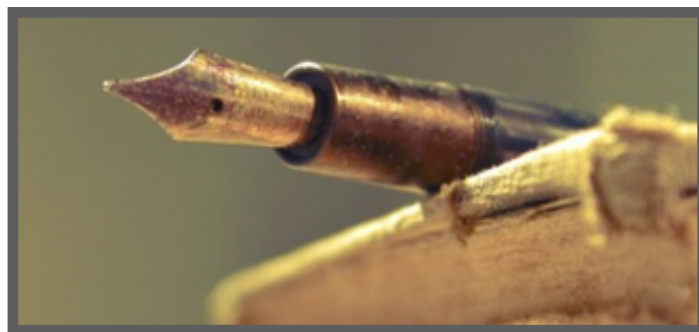
WORSHIP IS LIFE

Welcome again to the fourth and final release of Kantsaran for the year 2016. The year has certainly been filled with many blessing as well as formidable challenges. Among the many challenges that the year has presented us with, Christians all around the world and especially in the Middle East are fighting for their very survival in a political and cultural milieu of extreme hatred and violence. The Fellowship of St. Voski stands in prayer and solidarity with all our brothers and sisters across the globe who continue to valiantly resist the forces of evil with unwavering Christian faith and service.

This situation reminds me of the events recounted in the Book of Acts chapter 16, where the Apostle Paul and Silas were preaching in the Roman colony of Phillipi. These two servants of God were attacked by the crowd, beaten with rods by the magistrates, and eventually thrown into prison, bound at the ankles in stocks in the innermost part of the prison. As the Bible describes in verse 25, "About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God." Really? Singing praises to God? What manner of persons can worship God in the darkness of a jail cell, still sensing the sting of the whip on their bare backs?

Praise be to our Heavenly Father that most of us here in America have been spared the sufferings that our Christian counterparts bear in other parts of the world. Yet, there is a lesson to be learned here. In this issue and previous releases of *The Treasury*, we have featured several articles highlighting various aspects of the Armenian Holy *Badarak*, the quintessential worship service of the Armenian Church. A common misconception though is that upon exiting the church on Sunday morning, worship has concluded, soon to be crowded out by life's continued responsibilities and distractions.

On the contrary, for the Christian, *life* is an expression of gratitude and worship of God. Yes, the Armenian Church observes nine daily services (known as *jhamerkootyun/ յամերկոտյուն*) as part of its formal daily worship routine, and scattered throughout the church liturgical year are other special observances which are God-glorifying. But even beyond these observances, our day-to-day activities can and should be a means of giving to God the glory that He is due. St. Peter emphasized this fact in his first pastoral letter: "Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things



through Jesus Christ" [1 Peter 4:11].

Once we understand that each thought, each word, each deed can be a vehicle of worship, our lives will take on new meaning and purpose. After all, isn't every word we speak made possible by the grace of God (just ask an asthmatic how it feels not to be able to breathe freely)? Doesn't every action we take require God's providential will and blessing? Honoring God not only comes in the form of an artistic masterpiece, a poetic verse or a melodic hymn, but must be built into the simplest elements of our daily lives whether it is at home, school, work, the supermarket, or even in the car on the way to church. A life that is worship-oriented is sensitive to the reality that all things reflect God's beauty and goodness, and it is by His amazing love and grace that we experience the joy of being His special creation. Our blessed martyrs and current champions of the faith understand this reality, persevering in their worship of God under the most unbearable circumstances.

The Apostle Paul teaches us in 1 Thessalonians 5:18 to "give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus in you." May every detail of our lives, whether in good times or bad, be a testimony to His love and glory.

"Mighty are the acts of God, wondrous His word, Marvelous the Indescribable, in all things admirable; He who dwells in the heights of Heaven, above the seraphim, enclosed in His own light, shrouded is the Unsearchable." [Magnalia Dei, Grigor Magistros, 11th century theologian and prince]

SPIRITUAL CHAMPIONS

by Rev. Fr. Stephan Baljian

This past summer, as we do once every few years, we once again turned our attention to the greatest gathering of international athletes the world has ever known: the Olympic Games. There is an air of awe and majesty that accompanies these games. We marveled at the amazing feats the Olympic athletes accomplished. We were wowed by their physical skills and athletic prowess. We watched in anticipation as they competed on the very highest athletic level and delivered incredible performances, shattering world records and personal bests, giving it their all for the gold – the highest honor they could hope to be graced with – after a lifetime of preparation for those awe-inspiring moments.

It is no secret that as a society we love our sports competitions and, in general, highly value physical fitness and agility, admiring those among us with athletically fit bodies and penchants for exercise and physical activity. In many ways, the human physique has become everything to us, much as it became to the ancient Greeks and Romans.

While this outlook is not anti-Christian per se, it should raise some red flags for us. Firstly, we should state unequivocally that according to Orthodox theology the human being is a hylomorphic union of soul and body – meaning that they are two parts of one and the same entity. It is impossible for us to separate the two in a dualistic manner. St. Cyril of Alexandria, in his fourth century writing on the unified nature of Christ (Divine and Human), uses this very example: “Do we not say that a human being like ourselves is one, and has a single nature, even though he is not homogenous but really composed of two things... soul and body?” In other words, body and soul are not separated in human life, they are simply two sides of the same coin, two parts of the same whole, etc.

Therefore, in arguing that our society places an inordinate amount of importance on the physical *component* of our life, often times to the detriment of the spiritual (which is one of the main claims of this article), I do not mean to imply that the soul is somehow detached from or alien to the body.



Without a doubt, the body is essential to our life, a blessed creation by God, a temple and dwelling place of the Holy Spirit of God, which it becomes at our baptism. We are not among those who would denigrate the body for the sake of the soul (as some early Christian heretics did), but rather, according to the Scripture, would call this unique creation of God “good,” something a human being “tenderly nourishes and cares for” [Ephesians 5:29].

Yet, how much do we value the *human soul* enjoined to the body? The faith and character of the individual? The imprint of God’s Holy Spirit on his/her heart? While there may not be a particular “order” of importance given to body and soul, we learn from the scripture and from the Fathers of the Church that the *training* of the soul in godliness is of primary importance since a soul well-trained in godliness can, through the help of God gradually master the training of the body as part of the discipline of Christian life.

In his canon of *sharagans* for the Fifth Sunday of Great Lent (known as “Judge”), St. Nerses the Gracious (Shnorhali) composed the following in the XII century: “Grant strength to the will of my soul, to master the will of my body...” St. Paul himself writes, “I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others, I should be disqualified” [I Corinthians 9:27].

Although difficult, a Christian is called upon to strengthen his/her soul through training and “spiritual exercise,” and ultimately to become master over the whims and desires of his/her own body, which are sometimes completely at odds with those of the soul (more on that later). The Apostle Paul treats this subject rather masterfully in chapter 7 of his letter to the Romans. In speaking of

God's law, he asserts that it is not this law (the "training") that causes him to sin, but rather it brings awareness of sin and therefore conviction about the weakness of his flesh on account of its sinfulness: "For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" [v 22-25].

Suffice it to say that just as there is a path laid out before each Olympic athlete, contingent upon giving the utmost importance to training in his/her own event, there has to be one for us as well if we are to become spiritual "athletes" and ultimately champions of our Christian faith. And so, here are some observations on how we must undertake this training if we are to compete in the arena of spiritual life.

TRAIN FOR GODLINESS

I mentioned before that part of the process (the first step, I would assert) is realizing the primary importance of "training for godliness" as something that will be of greater value than any laurels or medals awarded for physical aptitude.

St. Paul, writing in his first letter to Timothy, states the following, "Train yourself in godliness. For while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come" [I Timothy 4:7-8].

Speaking about athletics here in only one of many occurrences (many scholars believe Paul may have been an athlete himself in his youthful days), the Apostle asserts the importance of approaching the faith with the mind and determination of an athlete, and in this case an athletic discipline whose ultimate prize is more than just a gold medal or a crown of laurels.

I may only speak for myself, but I am drawn to the Olympic Games for two main reasons. First, as I mentioned before, the incredible amount of skill and athleticism that takes place during those games are truly remarkable, so much so that I find myself wishing (as I assume many of you do) that I could be as physically fit and singularly focused as the athletes. The second reason is as a Christian, as an Armenian priest and as a human being, I am constantly

amazed by how easily and intuitively a powerful metaphor can be concocted between the physical training of an athlete and the spiritual training of a Christian. It practically writes itself (although it was most definitely coined by St. Paul the Apostle in his New Testament writings). Furthermore, the mere *premise* of this metaphorical connection is enough to remind me of the gargantuan undertaking that this "training for godliness" represents, and how often I myself fall short of key training goals!

After all, Olympic athletes didn't get to the Olympics in one day. A person cannot simply wake up one morning and decide "I think I'll go compete in the Olympics today." It takes years and years of training, hard work, determination, honing of skills and making hard decisions about coaching, training methods and time allotted, etc. before even beginning to realize the dream of competing in the Olympics.

It also takes great sacrifice. Throughout the Olympic Games' television coverage, we are constantly regaled with stories of athletes who have trained from a young age (unable to remember any other lifestyle), forfeiting a "normal" childhood, pursuit of entertainment and other hobbies or time with friends and family.

In actuality, it's the same way in our spiritual life as well. We can't expect to become champions of the Christian life in one day, and certainly not if we neglect to put in the requisite training time and exercises.

One must train daily in the exercise of prayer and meditation on the Scripture. Weekly attendance at Sunday Holy *Badarak* (the Divine Liturgy) should go without saying, because it affords us both the spiritual nourishment of our Lord's Body and Blood and the fellowship we need with our fellow athletes. Lastly, and perhaps the most difficult (although to remain persistent in prayer is no easy feat as anyone who has ever tried quickly finds out), we must train for that most gigantic of all feats, putting aside our own desires in order to serve God and others. Whew! Just take a minute and contemplate that last paragraph in its deepest meaning!

These are things that are the metaphorical equivalent of Olympic level athleticism, yet it is for these things we as Christians must train ourselves... and not only train, but be ready to compete for.

I should mention that this particular training is a team effort! Whether competing in individual events or team sports, Olympic athletes tend to train together at large

facilities equipped with all the tools needed for their respective events. Likewise, the Church – the very Body of Christ – is the facility by which we train together for all the things I mentioned above. We practice with each other, “spot” each other, encourage each other and when needed fill in for each other if one of us isn’t quite up to the challenge. The Christian faith is designed as such that individual Christians should never have to be alone, and the joy of working, training and persevering together should be abundantly evident to all who have experienced it. For the Olympic arena of the world, the Church, in all its manifestations and facets, is our great training ground, whereby we rub elbows with our fellow athletes and receive our strength and encouragement from God, the ultimate coach and trainer.

RUN THE RACE... RECEIVE THE CROWN

Once we are committed to training and competing at this level, we can expect the challenges of the Christian life – our spiritual obstacle course, so to speak – to come our way. As Christians, our whole life becomes one long competition. Don’t get me wrong... I do not imply that we are competing against each other as the word is traditionally understood, but rather, as the Apostle reminds us, “against the rulers, against the authorities... against the spiritual forces of evil” [Ephesians 6:12].

Fortunately, we have God the Father as our coach and Jesus as our mentor and inspiration (he really is the undefeated world champion, all-time record holder of godliness, you know!). The Holy Spirit is our trainer and the Holy Mother of God and all the Saints are our devoted fans cheering us on in the stands! What remains for us is to get out onto the track or the balance beam, into the pool or the ring and compete!

St. Paul emphasizes the importance of “running the race” and doing so in a ferocious manner in his first letter to the Corinthians, where he writes the following: “Do you not know that in a race, the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it” [I Corinthians 9:24]. To this he adds, “Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath [crown], but we an imperishable one” [v.25].

Notice once again how beautifully St. Paul draws the analogy between physical and spiritual training by drawing attention to the nature of the awards each one respectively earns. Furthermore, he also acknowledges that merely

being trained or being a runner does not suffice. In admonishing the Corinthians to “run in such a way that you may win it,” he reminds them to ‘get out there and give it their all,’ so to speak.

Indeed, the Christian life can be seen as one long spiritual race, at the end of which awaits us not a medal made of valuable elements or a crown weaved from fine laurel branches, but an immaterial crown, a “crown of glory” weaved from the many precious jewels of the trials of self-sacrifice and martyrdom.

From the very earliest, the ancient Church has had a class of men and women who dedicate their entire lives to

The trained spiritual athlete must be a transformed being, with little interest in what the other side of the fence has to offer.

spiritual training and competition. They are known as “ascetics” or *jknavorik* (ճգնաւոր), a term which means “athlete” or competitor (the root of the word *jknavorik*: *jikn* (ճիգն)=effort, *jkneel* (ճգնիւմ)=to endeavor or train for something, *jknavorik* (ճգնաւոր)=one who endeavors). These *jknavorik* trained both the body (through fasting, willful poverty and other endurance exercises) and the soul (through prayer, meditation, etc.). They are the living examples of what we have been discussing – true spiritual champions (*nahadag/նահաճատակ*) in godliness because they made the choice to dedicate their whole life to training!

Many of those recognized as great saints of our Church ~ from St. Gregory the Illuminator to St. Anthony the Great, St. John of Odzoon to St. Simeon the Stylite and St. Gregory of Narek ~ have been tremendous spiritual competitors in the arena of life. During the Sunrise Service (*Arevakal/Արեւակալ*), we petition the Lord with the following words: “Let us beseech the Lord through the holy ascetics, who defeated evil, endured hardships and thus became worthy of luminous, heavenly, unfading crowns; through their prayers and intercessions may he be kind to us...”

Or perhaps more familiarly, we may consider the Holy Mother of God Mary (Soorp Asdvadzadzeen/*Սուրբ Աստուածածին*), whose Dormition/Assumption we celebrated around the same time as the Olympics. Mary is the classic example of the spiritual champion. From a young age she was trained for godliness, having been dedicated to the Temple and brought up to lead a life of prayer and service to God. At a very young age still, God chose her to have a part in the salvation of the entire world, by bearing his only-begotten Son. Although I am sure it presented her with much fear and consternation, she did not hesitate to accept her Coach’s new training initiative for her – even though I’m sure it seemed like she had been bumped up a few notches in competitive categories!

All kidding aside, Saint Mary is the shining example of spiritual fitness for us because she was called to train and compete spiritually on the highest level, with complete faith and trust in the will of God for her life, earning the admiration and devotion of her son’s followers for generations to come. She endured many hardships, overcoming unthinkable obstacles (imagine watching your son and the Savior of the world die on a cross!) with total godliness, and at the end of her life she was awarded her imperishable crown – her assumption into the Father’s heavenly kingdom and her place of honor therein. The lives of many of the other saints and martyrs throughout history serve as a similar inspiration to us.

LIVE BY THE SPIRIT

Now that we have accepted the call to train for godliness and the challenge of “running the race” for our Lord, we must be resigned to the fact that we will not be able to continue seeking after our own physical desires and the comforts of the

material world. The transformative power of God’s Spirit is such that once we are trained by Him for the spiritual life of His kingdom, there really is precious little left in the world that we should want to or even be able to give our minds, our faculties, our energies or our desires over to.

If we are intent on training for godliness and truly experiencing the joy and gratification that come from receiving the reward from our Heavenly Father, there will no longer be anything made of physical matter that can gratify us *in the same way*. This is not to say we still can’t be inspired by the beauties of God’s wondrous Creation – the Grand Canyon, a fragrant rose or the Church of St. Hripsime, for example. Surely, we may still enjoy our physical lives and be aided by our material possessions, but they will no longer be the most desirable things in our life, or those for which we strive *alone*. In fact, we will begin to see more and more that when we lived *only* according to the dictates and desires of our bodies, we were in mortal danger of becoming ensnared by those desires to live a life of servitude to sin and covetousness. Not so with those who live by the Spirit.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Galatians, admonishes them to do the following: “Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want” [Galatians 5:16-17].

The trained spiritual athlete must be a transformed being, with little interest in what the other side of the fence has to offer, much like the Olympic athlete has little to no interest in what’s taking place on the other side of the arena or in an altogether different venue. An athlete must be singularly focused on what the athlete has trained for. He rarely has interest in other sporting activities beyond what he has trained for throughout life. A swimmer is interested in swimming and refines all of his/her talents, skills and resources to be a swimmer and not, for example, to be a mountain bike racer or volleyball player. After the swimmer has spent thousands of hours learning how to make his body the most efficient in the water, practicing timed breathing, shaving time off of dismounts and flip turns and working on body placement (to name a few things), the swimmer will feel at home only in the pool, as opposed to the volleyball court or the bike track. This is not to say that he won’t ever play a friendly game of volleyball at the next family reunion, but he will never come to feel the same way *in that particular arena*.

The same is true with Christians who have honed their skill in seeking after the spiritual gifts of God's Kingdom – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, righteousness and self-control. Seeking after money, power, prestige, sex, material comforts and other temporary thrills *that serve the desires of the body* would be distracting at best and detrimental to the spiritual athlete's entire career at worst. Remember, the swimmer's place is in the pool; the Christian works the hardest in his/her own venue.

This brings me to my next point: In his pursuit of the Kingdom promised to him by his Father, Jesus gave up his very body and soul on the Cross in order to become that champion.

The Apostle Paul goes a step further and declares that not only Jesus but, “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires!” [Gal. 5:24]. How powerful a thing it must be then for him to explain it in those terms! That Jesus, the ultimate champion of life, both spiritual *and* physical, to whom was given the Kingdom itself, through his crucifixion and resurrection can bring such a powerful game as to defeat the very enemy that seemed to defeat him in the first place! After all, it was Jesus who was crucified and died in his physical body, yet so powerful was his resurrection that even those who train under him can be declared victorious over that very enemy – the “flesh” with its sinful passions and desires. Our great hope in Jesus Christ then is that just as he was crucified and emerged victorious (according to orthodox theology, Jesus's resurrection was one of soul *and* body, renewed into a transformed, incorruptible state that is eternal - and as believers in him, have the same hope in the resurrection of body and soul -see Philippians 3:20-21 and I Corinthians 15:35-57), we who belong to him in faith and worship can emerge so similarly victorious as to be able to declare that we are indeed living by the Spirit and that the passions and desires of the flesh have been subdued within us. It is a moment to moment struggle, sometimes pushing us to the far reaches and limits of our athletic capacity, but it does strengthen us in the end.

CONCLUSION

So, today we are reminded again to live “according to the Spirit,” which means to seek the Spirit of God for our lives and order them around our Lord's commandments and truths, not around our own aspirations and interests,

“Run the race” in
such a way as to
win the crown of
our Father's
heavenly kingdom.

and by doing so we will be able to elude the impending demise that comes from living *only* for the gratification of our flesh.

While most of us (including myself) will never have a shot at Olympic greatness, all of us today have a shot at achieving greatness through Christ in spiritual training. And while the 2016 Summer Olympic Games will soon become a distant memory, the images of athletic greatness and achievement that they have provided us should continue to serve as our inspiration in the future. We should keep alive the dream that if we persevere with God, train with him, remain steadfast in our faith in him, and follow the course of our Lord Jesus Christ, we will be equipped to “run the race” in such a way as to win the crown of our Father's heavenly kingdom.

Then we will be able to lend our voices to our old stalwart athlete, Paul the Apostle, who at the end of his life said, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day” [II Timothy 4:7-8].

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Armenian Apostolic Church in North Andover,
Massachusetts

For further reading: St Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*.
Translation by John Anthony McGuckin. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press,
Crestwood, New York, 1995.

THE FESTAL WORKS OF ST. GREGORY OF NAREK

Annotated Translation of the Odes, Litanies, and Encomia
Abraham Terian
Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2016

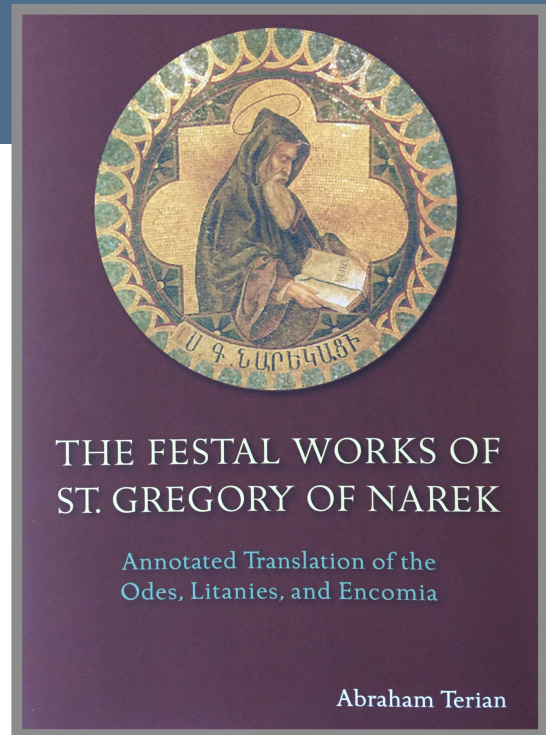
by Eric Vozzy

Dr. Terian, Professor Emeritus of Armenian Theology and Patristics at St. Nersess Armenian Seminary, has done a tremendous favor for the fields of Armenian Studies, Theology and Liturgical Studies, as well as the Armenian Church in general. His newly published book is a translation, from Classical Armenian, of all of the odes (songs of praise), litanies (petitionary prayers) and encomia (expressions of praise) composed by St. Gregory of Narek (945-1003 AD). These formerly little known works are liturgical pieces composed for the various dominical and other feasts of the Armenian Church.

Scholars actually know rather little about the life of St. Gregory of Narek, most of it having been gleaned from his own writings, and from a brief biography by St. Nerses of Lambron (1153-1198 AD). Gregory (Grigor) was born ca. 945 AD, the third and youngest son of another important Armenian theologian, Bishop Khosrov Antsevatsi. As a widower, Bishop Khosrov sent two of his sons, Hovhannes and Grigor, to the monastery of Narek. Located near the southern shore of Lake Van, and founded by Gregory's maternal cousin, Anania, the monastery of Narek is where Gregory spent his entire adult life.

Across his lifetime, St. Gregory produced a variety of written works including homilies, hymns, biblical commentaries, and other various admonitory or cautionary letters and treatises. His most renowned work is his prayer book, commonly referred to as the *Book of Lamentation*, written with the help of his brother, Hovhannes. St. Gregory died ca. 1003 AD, but his influence lives on as one of the most revered saints of the Armenian Church. He has also gained the popularity of those outside the Armenian tradition; last year Pope Francis declared St. Gregory a Doctor of the Catholic Church.

In general, Gregory's writings tend to be extremely sophisticated and complex both linguistically and theologically, so translating his works is particularly challenging.



Furthermore, as a mystic, St. Gregory developed an extraordinarily intense sense of God's presence. Consequently, his language and worldview are rather different from most of ours today. This is surely one reason why, prior to Dr. Terian's work, many of these texts were neglected or misunderstood.

Indeed, Dr. Terian is uniquely competent in Classical Armenian, medieval theology and mysticism, and Biblical exegesis. He is also a poet, sensitive to the movement and structure of the genres in which St. Gregory thrives. As important, Dr. Terian lives a life of faith making him not only aware of the sacredness of St. Gregory's texts, but also of the Armenian Orthodox tradition from which these texts were born.

The odes and litanies vary in length ranging from 10 to 165 lines, and are in the form of poetry. The subjects apply to the various feasts celebrated throughout the church year, with headings such as *Ode for the Blessing of Water*, *Ode for the Coming of the Holy Spirit*, and *Litany for St. Gregory the Illuminator*. Given their content, erudite tone, and the fact that they call

for communal musical participation, the assumption is they were composed for public and liturgical use. Although various odes and litanies are chanted in our current liturgical worship, particularly on festal occasions, how the festal works of St. Gregory were employed, if they were used at all, is unknown. Similarly, we do not know the setting of the encomia, lengthy prose texts dedicated to praising subjects such as the Holy Virgin, the Holy Cross, and the Holy Apostles.

Gregory's poetry is replete with vivid imagery and descriptors, drawn from his panoramic view of Scripture. Employing various literary techniques, he takes advantage of the flexibility of his native tongue and creates evocative compound words to express his theology, as is his custom in his Prayer Book. Common to all three genres presented in this book is a sense of the worshipping community's joyful praise. By contrast, his famous *Book of Lamentation* contains markedly more introspective prayers written in the first person.

Read, for example, these lines from his *Ode for the Raising of Lazarus* (p. 43):

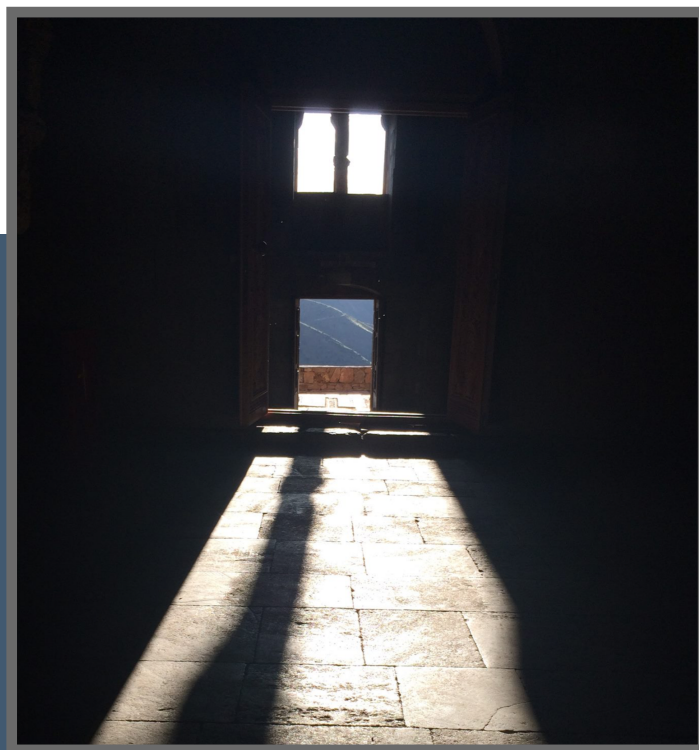
The Gift able to transform the speechless, dead body,
The dead body wrapped in burial clothes, to be clothed
and sealed with breath again by the Caller to Life.
The seal of death was broken as were the torments of hell,
The torments by the (evil) one who cannot harm
the blessed assembly.
The great Hebrew assembly, a galaxy of thousands,
praises in song the glory,
The glory of the One who bestows light, now and eternally.
Amen.

Although the subject of the ode is the raising of Lazarus, St. Gregory is able to link that event with Christ's entry into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday, and ground the entire theme in the divinity of Christ. This ode affirms that it is not the story of the person of Lazarus that draws the attention for Armenians, rather what it tells us about Jesus Christ. The raising of Lazarus becomes a visible testimony that death will be a temporary chapter in our lives because Christ is the 'Caller to Life,' the Creator who breathes us into living beings.

The festal works of St. Gregory can be read by anyone today for personal edification, while they also appeal to specialists in the field of liturgics. Reading them will not only enhance one's experience and understanding of the feasts of the Armenian Church, but will be an exercise in theology and a way to contemplate Scripture. Dr. Terian's work also raises the question of incorporating these pieces into today's Armenian liturgy, thereby allowing them to flower in a contemporary context. Thanks to Abraham Terian, we once again have the profound privilege to hear the voice and message of the Armenian Church come through St. Gregory of Narek.

Eric Vozzy has an M. A. in Philosophy and is completing the Masters of Diaconal Ministries Program at St. Nersess Armenian Seminary.

As a mystic,
St. Gregory developed
an extraordinarily
intense sense of
God's presence.



IMMORTALITY AND THE QUEST FOR NORMALCY IN POST-GENOCIDE ARMENIAN THINKING

by Dr. Roberta Ervine



As a visiting professor in the Armenian Studies program at California State University, Fresno this past semester, I had the opportunity to teach a course on Post-Genocide Armenian periodical writing. It's a whole different world from what I usually do, and so I thought it would make a nice change of pace from medieval Armenian patristics and church history, where I spend most of my time.

The two worlds turned out to be not as different as I had thought. I discovered that although they lived in very different time periods, medieval Armenian sages and modern, post-Genocide Armenian editors and journalists faced some of the same issues, and even arrived at some of the same conclusions about them. For example, they reached similar conclusions on the question of individual immortality, or eternal life. Although they followed different paths, medieval and modern thinkers reached a similar end point.

Medieval Armenian patristic writers wrestled with the question of how to integrate earthly existence and all its complex perplexities with the world of eternity, which they could not see or experience except in glimpses and indirectly. Despite eternity's relative invisibility, the ancient

fathers expressed the conviction that eternity is what brings normalcy to the time-bound present. At bottom, mortality rests on a rock-solid substrate of immortality. To put it another way, immortality is what grounds mortality. If there were no immortality, then mortal life would be a short and uncertain road to nowhere. Fortunately, the fathers said, immortality is real and the road of mortal life leads us to its light.

But that was only the beginning. The Armenian *vardapets* — the guardians, creators and teachers of traditional Armenian thought — said that immortality is not just the invisible bedrock of life. They were also certain that the boundless, limitless, immortal perfection of the Divine is also an active force in our existence. It infuses the constricted, often severely limited conditions of ordinary mortal reality and elevates temporal existence to a new and enriched sense of normalcy.

Yes, it is obvious that here and now, the realms of temporality and eternity are not yet fully and visibly integrated. Yet they constitute a seamless whole, and the boundary between the two realms is permeable. On the one hand, immortality seeps into our mortal life whenever and wherever it finds an opening. On the other hand, our mortal

life gradually merges into immortality, as the light of the immortal realm shimmers more and more brightly through it.

The great medieval *vardapets* taught their disciples how the immortal and the eternal can be channeled and enjoyed through worship, intellectual inquiry and the creation of beauty. They taught that beauty, thought and worship resonate with the deepest harmonies of the human spirit. They taught that one purpose of the Church is to embody the beauty of immortality in beautiful physical structures, beautiful communal liturgy, and beautifully shared learning.

At its best, the Church reminds humankind of our magnificent primal origin as the image of God, created by His own hands and immortal breath. And it offers us a foretaste of our ultimate, luminous and immortal end in the glory and joy of God's eternal presence.

Armenians writing immediately after the Genocide did not have the benefit of much instruction by *vardapets*. Even before the Genocide, the ancient lineages of *vardapets* were already destroyed, with rare exceptions like the schools at Bitlis in the 17th century or Armash in the 19th. Yet just as their *vardapet* forebears had done, post-Genocide Armenian writers also sensed glimmers of the immortal through the dark clouds of their own all-too mortal experience.

They were neither as certain nor as eloquent about the topic as their medieval forebears had been, but the post-Genocide journalists were extremely prolific. At the peak of production, 600 Armenian periodicals were in print at one time. From Tiflis to Paris to India, from Greece to New York to California, Armenians were writing for other Armenians, frequently and copiously.

As I soon discovered reading through piles of Armenian papers and journals printed between 1900 and 1940, a recurring theme in their daily, weekly, monthly or quarterly writing was the medieval theme of immortality.

For the post-Genocide journalists, however, immortality was no longer the bedrock of reality or the unquestioned goal of life that it had been in medieval times. Instead, for them writing about immortality was the expression of a brave and questioning hope, in the face of what seemed like overwhelming evidence against immortality's existence.

Armenian editorials and articles sought to define immortality for their readers. What is it? Where is it? What makes it possible, if indeed it is possible at all? How does one, individually or corporately, achieve or attain it? And if immortality does exist and can be attained, what does that imply for our relationship with the people we have lost?

Is immortality just for individuals, or is there such a thing as an immortal race or group? Is it possible for a group to insure that it and its legacy will be among the

immortals? In other words, how should people who believe in immortality live here and now?

To answer these and other related questions, the post-Genocide writers turned not to Scripture, as the medieval *vardapets* would have done, but to science, history, and the burgeoning realms of paranormal studies and psychology.

Many of the post-Genocide writers were European-educated. They were the intellectual children of the 19th century. They shared its insistence on reproducible experimental proofs and its resistance against anything that smacked of non-empirical religious faith. And yet, even limited by the spiritual impoverishment of the broader thought-world, the Armenian writers of the survivor generation reached conclusions about immortality that made it possible for their mortal life to go on, for hearts to heal, and for a new normalcy to sprout again in Armenian communities far from their original soil.

Immortality, they concluded, is real. On scientific, historical, philosophical and psychological grounds, it must be so.

The reasons the Armenian journalists gave in their dozens of articles on the subject can be boiled down to five:

- 1) communication with the dead is a verifiable occurrence
- 2) belief in immortality is both universal and instinctive
- 3) our deepest aspirations are for ideals that can only be realized outside the mortal realm
- 4) matter and energy are themselves immortal: they cannot be created or destroyed
- 5) humans love, and love is immortal

Briefly, what did the post-Genocide Armenian periodical writers say about each of their evidences for immortality?

The conviction that
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COMMUNICATION WITH THE DEAD IS A VERIFIABLE OCCURRENCE

In the early 20th century, the world was enthralled by spiritist mediums who evinced an ability to contact the dead. Séances were very popular. Like many prominent and learned Europeans and Americans, Armenians were captivated by the chance to peep behind the veil that separated them from their dead. They not only wrote about séances, but translated into Armenian the writings of others who had experienced them. An excerpt from spiritist-scientist Sir Oliver Lodge's 1928 book, *Raymond, or Life and Death* appeared in the pages of *Sion*, the official periodical of Jerusalem's Armenian Patriarchate. Sir Oliver was a respected physicist and served as rector of Birmingham University, in addition to holding patents for his research on radio waves. His book resulted from contacts he had with his son Raymond, who died in

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World War I. Although some of his colleagues scoffed, Sir Oliver made it his mission in life to console other bereaved parents with the knowledge that their deceased children were living an immortal life in the next world.

In one especially touching case, an Armenian spiritist became the channel for such departed luminaries as Ghevont Alishan, Ashugh Jivani, Bedros Tourian, Khrimian Hayrig, and Nerses Shnorhali. His work, *Echoes from the Other World*, conveyed their messages to the bereaved Armenian nation. The author produced it in part to comfort two sisters whose brother had died tragically, unbeknownst to them. They should not grieve inconsolably, he told them; their brother was still recognizably himself living in the immortal world, as were Armenia's most inspiring figures.



Khachkar near Okhty Ekhtsy monastery - Artsakh

BELIEF IN IMMORTALITY IS UNIVERSAL AND INSTINCTIVE

In support of their belief that immortality is real, Armenian writers often pointed to depictions of the afterlife in prehistoric cave paintings, Egyptian tombs, and ancient Chinese philosophical texts. If the same belief is found in many disparate cultures, far removed from one another in time and space, then the likelihood of its universal truth becomes all the greater, many Armenian essayists asserted.

Not only is belief in immortality universal, said these writers, it is also instinctive. The belief exists, even where it is not formally taught. Instinct exists independently of the specific organism that houses it. Thus, the instinctive belief in immortality is itself immortal. It is like the universal will to live, or the ability of young birds and butterflies to find their way with inerrant precision to destinations they have never before visited, thousands of miles away. The knowledge is a part of their essence, the Armenians said, just as the knowledge that we are immortal is built into our human essence.

OUR DEEPEST ASPIRATIONS ARE FOR IDEALS THAT CAN ONLY BE REALIZED OUTSIDE THE MORTAL REALM

The tragic story of Abp. Ghevont Tourian's assassination in New York in 1933 has overshadowed the fact that he was known in his lifetime as a deep thinker, homilist and writer. In his articles, Abp. Ghevont pointed to human desires as one of the best evidences for human immortality. Of all our desires, three struck him as particularly important.

Humans desire justice. Why? It cannot be because they have seen or experienced it in their mortal existence! As everyone knows, real justice does not exist in this life. Armenians had special reason to know that justice was illusory if not outright unattainable in this world, and yet they yearned for it and made it the focus of their efforts. True justice must exist, said Tourian, or we would not know to seek it. So if it exists, but it does not exist here in the temporal world, it must exist in the immortal realm.

By the same token, humans desire and crave perfection. Never having seen perfection, we know what it is if only by its absence.

Humans also aspire to ideals of truth and beauty. Yet we see none of these things in its fullest form here in this life. Tourian said that true perfection, truth and beauty must exist in their fullness somewhere, otherwise we would not aspire to them. And the only place for them to exist is in the world of the immortals.

If there were no
immortality, then mortal
life would be a short and
uncertain road to nowhere.

EVEN MATTER AND ENERGY ARE IMMORTAL

Writing in the pages of *Hay Khosnak* in 1927, S. B. Manougian drew his readers' attention to the laws of physics. Specifically, he cited the *law of the conservation of energy* and the *law of the conservation of matter*. According to these laws, neither energy nor matter can be created or destroyed within a system. They can only be changed, or recycled. In other words, both energy and matter are immortal. Although they change state or shape, they are not done away with. They do not die. Since human beings are composed of immortal matter and immortal energy, Manougian said, it is literally impossible for us to be anything other than immortal.

HUMANS LOVE, AND LOVE IS IMMORTAL

Having laid out his argument from science, Manougian went on to offer a gentler, more psychological proof of immortality. Whether or not we care about the cold principles of physics, he said, we all love. And love does not die. When our loved ones pass away, whatever the means of their departure from this mortal life, we do not cease to love them. Quite the contrary; we may find that we long for their presence all the more. As he said,

We all have departed loved ones; death has separated them from us.

And yet, we love them still.

Long years cannot distance them from us, or cool our love for them.

We long to see them once again; to live again with them and to share the sweetness of our love.

Our nature naturally and rightly insists on this.

We demand to love.

And the soul that desires to reach those it loves is, by that very desire, immortal.

Go to them we must! and we will!

The conviction that unfulfilled and unfulfillable desires are evidence of immortality is a beautiful thought.

The idea that all the unfulfilled potential latent within every individual who died in the Genocide was destined not for the grave but for the immortal ages is one that medieval Armenian *vardapets* would have assented to. After all, for Gregory of Narek, Armenia's great 10th century mystic *vardapet*, eternal life meant the eternal unfolding of goodness, truth, beauty, love and understanding. He saw immortality as an ever greater revelation of perfection; a perfection not static but living, in the truest sense of that word.

The continuity between medieval and modern Armenian faith in the truth of immortality is surely one of the strong threads that stretches backward through time to unite post-Genocide Armenians with the Armenian sages of their past. As the ancients knew and the modern writers discovered, to be truly mortal, to live a normal and fulfilling human life, Armenians must also know that they are immortal.

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THE MAGI IN ARMENIA

by Rev. Dr. George A. Leylegian

As we prepare to celebrate the Feast of the Nativity and Revelation of Jesus Christ on Jan. 6, it might be interesting to know an important part of history that involves the Magi who followed the Star to Bethlehem, and then traveled to Armenia. What? The famed Magi in Armenia?

In Matthew 2:1–12, we read that when Jesus Christ was born during the days of Herod, Magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem. They told Herod that they had seen the Star, and had followed it with the hope of finding the one who was to be born as the new King. The Jewish scribes confirmed that the Prophet Micah foresaw that the new King would be born in Bethlehem, and so the Magi set out from Jerusalem, following the Star. The Star led them to the place where the newborn Child was, and the Magi entered into the place, and found the Child with His mother, Mary. The Magi bowed down to the earth in adoration, and then, opening their gifts, presented gold, frankincense, and myrrh. *And then, having been warned in a dream not to travel back through Jerusalem and encountering Herod there, the Magi returned to their homeland using a different way.*

The Gospel account contains many beautiful facts, but alas, does not provide certain crucial information. We do not know how many Magi there were. Supposition indicates that each Magus presented one of the three gifts, and therefore, there may have been three, but we do not know

for certain. Nor do we know the exact location of their ancestral homeland “in the East.” Because the word “magus” may be interpreted as “astronomer” or “astrologer”, many suppose that they originated in either Babylon or Persia, which were famous centers of astronomy and astrology. Lastly, the Gospel does not supply the names of the Magi. Later traditions assigned to them the names of Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. In Western Armenian, the names are pronounced Kaspar, Melkon, and Baghdasar.

In a rare book named *Kavazanakirk* that includes a history of the Armenian Monastery of Saint John the Baptist (Sourp Garabed Vank) located outside the ancient city of Moush, a fascinating document can be found which houses the text of a *Gontag* (an official encyclical from a church functionary), asking for donations for repairs needed for a dilapidated sanctuary outside one of the villages of Moush. This *Gontag*, sadly, does not include a date or the name of the official who issued it. Nevertheless, the text, written in Classical Armenian, provides a piece of information that is both beautiful for Armenians and critical for Christianity.

As Matthew 2:12 confirms, the Magi decided to return to their homeland via a different way. According to the *Gontag*, the Magi struck northward from Bethlehem and arrived on a plain outside the ancient city of Moush. There they set up camp to rest from their weary travels. In the middle

of the night, Gaspar, who was apparently the eldest of the Magi, passed away peacefully. Melchior and Balthasar were naturally grieved by the passing of their older friend, and set upon the solemn task of arranging his proper burial. Local people were commissioned, and Gaspar was buried at the brow of a hill overlooking the plain where they had encamped. The local people then constructed a sepulcher over the burial place. After a respectful period of mourning, Melchior and Balthasar resumed their journey home.

For 300 years, the local people continued to maintain the sepulcher, and passed on the oral tradition that a wise man had seen a great star, traveled to Bethlehem, witnessed the birth of a great king, and had passed away on his return journey.

The tradition of the Magi in Armenia may also have been known to King Abgar of Edessa (Urfa) who, according to church history, wanted to know more about Christianity, and wrote a letter to Jesus Christ, inviting Him to come to Edessa to heal the king and remain in that city (see Eusebius, *History of the Church*). After the Resurrection, the Apostle Thaddeus journeyed to Edessa, preached about Christianity, healed Abgar, and baptized him, making Abgar the first known Christian king of Armenia.

Before Gregory the Illuminator returned to Armenia after being consecrated a bishop in Caesarea in Cappadocia, he was entrusted by Bishop Leontius with several venerated relics. As Gregory traveled back to Armenia, he stopped outside of Moush. He ordered that a monastery be constructed there to house the great relic of Saint John the Baptist. Until May, 1915, the famous Sourp Garabed Vank stood as a sentinel of Armenian Christianity.

While Gregory was sojourning in the area, the local people told him about the burial place of the wise man. At that time, the vast majority of people living around Moush were still pagan. They understood that the sepulcher contained the relics of an important person, but they were unaware of the specific connection of Gaspar and the Magi to the theology of Christianity. Gregory immediately journeyed to the place, and recognized the sanctity of the sepulcher. He ordered that a monastery be built around the sepulcher in order to preserve and protect the relics of Gaspar. The monastery was henceforth known as “Sourp Kaspari Vank” or “Kasparavank.”

Every year on Theophany, when the Christmas Star appeared in the night sky, the priests, monks, and pilgrims would gather at Sourp Kaspari Vank and offer the first Holy Eucharist of the feast-day on the altar-table that was constructed over the sepulcher of Gaspar the Wiseman.



In the West, many believe the relics of the Magi were discovered in the fourth century in Milan, Italy, and were later transferred to Cologne/Koln, Germany. To this day, visitors to Cologne may see the beautiful golden shrine inside the cathedral that, according to Western tradition, preserves the remains of the Magi. For centuries, pilgrims from all over the world have flocked to Cologne at both Christmas and Epiphany to venerate these relics.

But what about Armenia? If the *Gontag* account is accurate, then it would indicate that the more important relic—the entire body of Gaspar—has been preserved and venerated in Armenia in Sourp Kaspari Vank since at least the time of Gregory the Illuminator. Sourp Kaspari Vank appears to have functioned both as a monastery and a place of pilgrimage for Christians from the 3rd century until the early 19th century. The monastery was still visited up through 1915, although the building was apparently pillaged and ruined in the early 1800’s during a series of raids by Kurdish tribes. Nevertheless, the traditional resting place of Gaspar continued to be venerated by Armenians from all around Moush and the surrounding areas.

As we gather to celebrate Theophany and Armenian Christmas, I hope that you will take a moment to offer a prayer for the Magi, and also to remember the many pilgrims who traveled to Sourp Kaspari Vank year after year to celebrate Armenian Christmas Eve upon the altar-table that was constructed over the sepulcher of Gaspar. Blessed is the Revelation of Christ’s Nativity brought to the Armenians by the Magi!

Rev. Dr. George A. Leylegian is a scholar of liturgy, mentor to seminarians, and Archdeacon in the Armenian Apostolic Church.

True Stories from the Calendar of the Armenian Church

The Armenian Church's calendar is one of the most ancient, most complicated, and most unusual in all of Christendom. Not infrequently the true stories of how the feasts of the Armenian Church came into being are at odds with our conventional wisdom. Their background and relevance for us are often fascinating: much more compelling than what we learned in Sunday School, hear in sermons, or even read in the Bible. More to the point, these true stories from the calendar of the Armenian Church also carry us directly into the heart of what it means to be a Christian and how the Armenian people understood and lived that awesome calling, a tradition that can be life-giving for Armenians and non-Armenians today.

“ADVENT” IN THE ARMENIAN CHURCH?

By Eric Vozzy

Most of us are at least familiar with the season of Advent, the period of time in the church calendar when many faithful prepare and look forward to the coming of Christ, celebrated on Christmas. Some of us may even participate in various Advent activities, such as keeping an Advent calendar, a daily prayer journal, or perhaps lighting an Advent wreath.

But when it comes to liturgy, things are not always as they seem. Often we assume that where two things appear similar they must be the same. This is what we find with the season of Advent, which, contrary to common assumptions, does not exist in the Armenian Church.

WHAT IS ADVENT?

In the Roman rite of the Catholic Church and some Protestant traditions, the season known as Advent begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. The word “advent,” from Latin *adventus*, means “coming,” specifically the coming of Christ into the world. So liturgically and in custom, the season of Advent focuses on the two comings (or advents) of Jesus Christ: his first coming in the flesh at his birth, and his final coming in glory and majesty.

As a liturgical season, Advent is purely a Western Christian phenomenon that came into existence only after Christmas itself was established on December 25. (Throughout the Christian world, except for the city of Rome, January 6 was the earliest date of Christmas, as it is today in the Armenian Church). In other Eastern Christian traditions, year-end seasons show great variety in theme and purpose, some of which, most notably those of the Syriac language, devote the season to Mary, the Mother of God.

In fact, a growing number of scholars even question whether Advent in the West originally had any connection with Christmas at all, believing that Advent's proximity to Christmas is more accidental than deliberate. It is possible that Advent originally functioned as a time of preparation for baptism, when the Feast of Epiphany was an important day to conduct that sacrament, just as Easter is today in many Christian traditions.

WHAT ABOUT THE ARMENIAN CHURCH?

In the Armenian Church, we do not have the season of Advent, nor do we have a period that resembles it. Often confused as "Advent," our church calendar includes a year-end period referred to as Հինսակ / *Heesnag*, from the word հինսոն / *heesoon*, which means "fifty." *Heesnag* is the period of about 50 days at the end of the Armenian Church year between the season of the Cross and the Feast of Theophany. It begins on the Monday nearest November 18 and ends on the Eve of Theophany, January 5. Depending on how close the Sunday of the Exaltation of the Cross is to September 14, the first day of *Heesnag* falls between November 15 and 21 and consists of exactly 50 days only in certain years. Otherwise the exact duration of *Heesnag* fluctuates between 48 and 52 days.

Rather than being one continuous period of fasting, *Heesnag* contains three short, five-day bursts of fasting, which are not connected liturgically or thematically. Equally spaced in the beginning, middle, and end of *Heesnag*, the following ancient one-week fasts ultimately give some shape to the 50-day period:

- Fast of *Heesnag* (Հինսակամե պահք / *Heesnagamdee bahk*), beginning on the Monday closest to November 18. An inauguration of *Heesnag*, this fast may just function as the threshold of one period of the church calendar to another.
- Fast of St. James of Nisibis (Ս. Յակոբայ պահք / *Soorp Hagopah bahk*), the five days preceding the commemoration of St. James of Nisibis. Originally an ancient winter seasonal fast, in popular imagination it became associated with St. James, the Bishop of Nisibis (308-338).
- Theophany Fast (Աստուածայայտնութեան պահք / *Asdvadzahaydnootyan bahk*), the five days preceding the Feast of Theophany set aside to prepare for the celebration of the revelation of Jesus' divinity at His baptism and the revelation of His humanity in His birth.

The structure of the period suggests that these three one-week fasts *preceded* the conglomeration of the entire period that came to be known as *Heesnag*. In other words, at a later stage these fasts came to define the entire period between the season of the Cross and Theophany. This would explain why the commemoration of saints continues during most of the period of *Heesnag*, because in the Armenian Church, as a rule, fasting is incompatible with the commemoration of saints.

HEESNAG IS NOT ADVENT

Outside of the five-day Fast of *Heesnag*, there is no evidence that the 50-day period known as *Heesnag* ever functioned as a liturgical season of the Armenian Church. That is, there exist no designated customs, hymns (*sharagan*), course lectionary readings, or liturgical variables that would serve to unify this period. [Although the *Տօնացոյց* / *Donatsooyts* (the directory of feasts) designates Sundays during *Heesnag* as "First Sunday of *Heesnag*, Second, Third, etc.," liturgically, they are Sundays "of the Resurrection"]. During Great Lent, for example, the Armenian Church appoints families of hymns to be sung, along with consecutive Bible readings to be read from one day to the next. These hymns and readings, as well as liturgical variables, give the period of Great Lent a "seasonal" character with a specific theological and catechetical message, or function. *Heesnag*, on the other hand, has no such organization or cohesiveness, and as a result, does not have the character of a church "season."



Instead, *Heesnag* is simply a transitional period that takes place between the season of the Cross and the Feast of Theophany. It is filled with three intense fasting weeks, two dominical feast days (the Presentation of the Mother of God to the Temple on November 21, and the Conception of the Mother of God by Anna and Joachim on December 9), and the commemoration of some of the greatest heroes of the Christian faith, saints who provide flesh and blood examples of how to believe and follow Jesus Christ. Sadly, these heroes are largely unknown by many Christian American-Armenians. One reason is perhaps that *Heesnag* is often obscured by “Advent.” So rather than celebrate a liturgical season that is foreign to our tradition, let us participate in the designated fasting periods, as well as turn our attention and devotion to the great saints who are commemorated during *Heesnag*.

St. James, the Bishop of Nisibis, was a miracle worker and much-loved saint of the Armenian Church, who is mentioned in every *Badarak*. According to Armenian tradition, St. James was the first cousin of St. Gregory the Enlightener. He is credited with attending the Council of Nicaea as a signatory in 325, and also with discovering a piece of Noah’s ark. St. Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra (who has been morphed into the character of Santa Claus), was also much-loved by Christian Armenians, and is actually commemorated twice in two weeks due to a quirk in the Armenian Church calendar.

Other saints from this period worth getting to know better include, Sts. Thaddeus and Bartholomew our First Illuminators, St. Abgar the First Christian King, St. Ignatius, The 20,000 Martyrs of Nicomedia, The Holy Fathers of Egypt, St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and the beloved St. Ephrem the Syrian. Just before the Fast of Theophany, four days are designated for the commemoration of major saints, those who are “witnesses to the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ”: Sts. David the Prophet and the Apostle James, St. Stephen the First Deacon and First Martyr, Sts. Peter and Paul, and the “Sons of Thunder,” Sts. James the Apostle and John the Evangelist.

In the Armenian Church, we do not have the season of Advent, nor do we have a period that resembles it.

When we overlook our own tradition, we overlook distinctive aspects of the life experience of the Armenian Church’s Christian witness, subtleties which the Armenian Church found important. As attractive as the customs of other Christian traditions may be, with *Heesnag* the Armenian Church offers her people a distinctive Christian vision, which we must believe is not only unique and beautiful, but also instructive and life-giving in its own way. In part, *Heesnag* shows us how the Armenian people since antiquity have uniquely experienced the Christian faith and Jesus Christ himself.

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Չմեռնի = TSMERN “WINTER”

By Rev. Fr. Ghevond Ajamian

Winter is a cold time of year, when nature slows down and we have to bundle up. It can be a miserable time of year for those who are not prepared for the cold, snow and ice that come with it. In the ancient times, and even until recently, the entire year was used to prepare for the winter and the lack of food that would come. During winter, people would impatiently wait for spring to arrive. Spring was viewed as a time of joy, growth and life, for it was during springtime that animals were born, flowers would bloom and trees would give fruit. Thus, winter was always associated with death.

St. Gregory of Tatev explains that the classical Armenian word for winter, “ts’mern” is comprised of two words, “ձիւն/tsyoon/snow” and “մեռնել/mernel/to die.” St. Gregory writes, “Everything dies in the winter. That is why its name translates as: ‘snow-death’; for it is from the snow that everything expires, plants grow dry, trees are stripped, waters freeze and the earth stops giving birth.”

Today we prepare for the winter by purchasing salt and shovels, dressing in warm clothing, and turning the heat up in our homes. For our ancestors in centuries past, they would store grains, can meats and vegetables, collect firewood, and weave wool sweaters throughout the entire year in preparation for the time the earth would “die” from snow.

From the way people in the past prepared for winter, we learn that we must prepare for the death which awaits each of us. Just as the winter months could not be avoided, likewise our figurative “winter” cannot be avoided. Throughout our lives we must aim to constantly prepare for our death. We do this not by acquiring riches or gathering material things in this life, but through seeking the Kingdom of God [Luke 12:16-31].

We must not put off to the last minute serving Christ either. Our forefathers could not afford to wait until the final weeks before winter’s first snow to begin to prepare. No one must wait until his or her “final weeks” to begin seeking the Kingdom of God. Christ gives this same warning to His listeners in the Parable of the Ten Virgins [Matthew 25:1-13]. When the five foolish virgins return from the store, after purchasing more oil for their lamps, they see that the bridegroom has already come. They were not prepared for the arrival of the bridegroom.



Our Church Fathers, realizing the importance of this parable and the lesson that is learned, purposefully made the Tuesday during Holy Week as the commemoration of the Ten Virgins. Every year, as the faithful emerge from a long, trying winter and as they hopefully anticipate the Feast of the Resurrection of Christ, they are reminded again that, though winter has ended and the next winter is months away, they must prepare for it, no matter how far away it may seem.

Just as St. Paul advises Timothy in his second letter to “be diligent to come before winter” [4:21], so too let us make haste to bring our life, soul and being to God and His service before the “winter” comes and it is too late, lest we hear the ominous words of Christ from within the wedding banquet saying, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you” [Matthew 25:12].

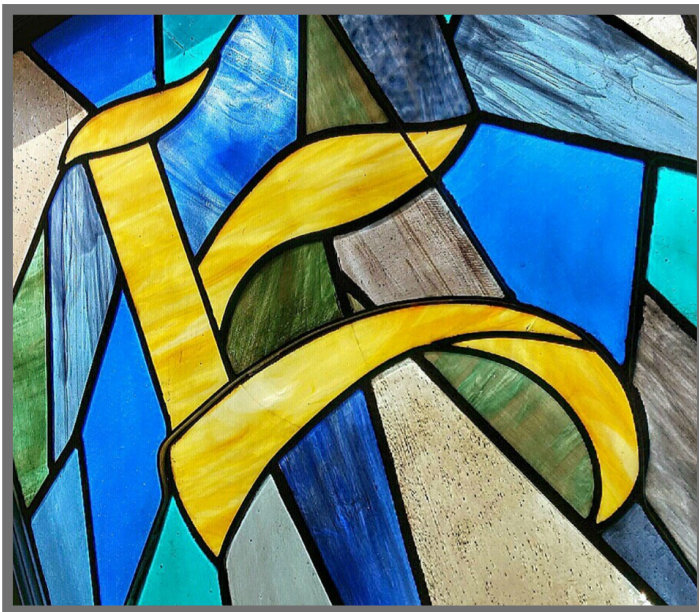
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“THE GRACE, THE LOVE AND THE DIVINE SANCTIFYING POWER...”

A BLESSING AND A CHALLENGE

By V. Rev. Fr. Daniel Findikyan

Yawn, glance down at your phone, or otherwise zone out for even a moment and you will miss one of the holy *Badarak*’s most precious gems. It is tucked within the dialog between the deacons and the choir in the wake of the Kiss of Peace and its accompanying hymn, *Քրիստոս ի մէջ մեր յայտնեցաւ* / *Kreesdos ee mech mer haydnetsav* [Christ is revealed among us]. The priest diverts his attention away from the altar for a moment and, as he does so often, he turns to face the people and trace the sign of the Cross in the air over their heads. This blessing is different however. Instead of the usual



Խաղաղութիւն ամենեցուն / *Khaghaghootyoon amenetsoon* [Peace to all], the celebrant says this: “The grace, the love and the divine sanctifying power of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

This blessing, really a prayer, is a natural sequel to the Kiss of Peace. We just sang, “Christ is revealed among us.” Now the priest prays that all of us might share in the gifts of the Savior’s real presence, his “grace, love and divine sanctifying power.”

St. Paul invoked similar heartfelt blessings on the young Christian communities that he established and corresponded with: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” [2 Corinthians 13:14]. “Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love undying” [Ephesians 6:24]. “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word” [2 Thessalonians 2:15-17]. Once again we see that the words of our liturgy are the words of Sacred Scripture.

Some people think of God’s *grace* (*շնորհ* / *shnork*) as something to be acquired, a kind of mysterious, heavenly dust that is imparted to us through the sacraments, and which somehow makes us better off than we were before. Others assume that the priest’s blessing emits some sort of positive energy. In reality, *grace* is not a substance to be received, nor an abstract spiritual energizer. *Grace* is the quality of God’s lavish

generosity toward us. It is God's natural and surprising eagerness to share everything that God is and has with us frail creatures. In the end, grace is *God's life*. The ultimate expression of God's *grace* was the incarnation of God's very own inner being, the Son of God, who enters a wayward world and mortal humanity, and sacrifices his life to heal it. When the priest prays that the *grace* of the Holy Trinity *be with* us, we ourselves are challenged to become self-giving people, generous toward one another in word, deed and attitude.

Շնորհք, սէր եւ աստուածային
սրբարար զօրութիւնն Հօր եւ
Որդւոյ եւ Հոգւոյն սրբոյ
եղիցի ընդ ձեզ ընդ
ամենեւեանդ:

Grace is really a synonym for *love* [սէր/*ser*]. The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is so entirely engrossed in *love* that John the Apostle can starkly assert, “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” [1 John 4:16]. The reality is that God's love for us is unconditional. Do not think that when the priest turns and blesses us, he is turning on some divine faucet of God's love. God poured that love out on us long ago and continues to do so whether or not the priest turns to make the sign of the Cross. In fact, the priest offers the blessing not in order to release the flow of God's love—but to wake us up to the startling reality that the Church—the vessel of God's love—is already overflowing with it. So the priest's blessing is a reminder and a prophetic challenge. When the celebrant faces us and prays that “The love...of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” be with us all, he is summoning us to discover and acknowledge God's love, each one for himself; and consequently, smitten by that love, to love everyone around us. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” [John 15:12].

This leads us to the *divine sanctifying power* [աստուածային սրբարար զօրութիւնն/*asdvadzayeen srparar zorootyoonun*]. To discover and acknowledge God's gracious love is to find true power. Our world peddles powers that are fleeting, easily

Shnork, ser yev asdvadzayeen
srparar zorootyoonun Hor yev
Vortvo yev Hokvooyun srpo
yegheetsee unt tsez unt
amenesyant.

corrupted, corrosive, and available to precious few: financial power, political power, physical power, corporate power and the like. By contrast, God's power is invincible and eternal. It cascades upon all people without distinction. And most important, it is *sanctifying*. It changes us. It makes us *holy*, like God—but only if we recognize it in faith and make ourselves receptive to it. As commanding as God's love is, God will never force it on us. We are free to plug into it, to brush it off, or to deny and defy it.

Grace. Love. Divine sanctifying power. These three qualities are actually one reality, and they are personified in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. These Godly attributes became incarnate in Jesus the Savior, whose deepest desire is to share those qualities with us. This is just another way of saying that God desires that we share eternal, divine life with Him, through Jesus the Christ. And what is the purpose of our *Soorp Badarak* if it is not to recommit ourselves to, and to celebrate a real and tangible Holy Communion with the Son of God?

And let us not forget the Cross, inscribed by the priest over us as he offers the blessing. For it is through the Cross that the Son of God fully surrendered himself for our life. The Cross is the sign of utmost love. “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” [John 15:13]. That cross traced in the air is the silent appeal to each one of us, in our own daily circumstances, to surrender everything—ego, money, time, patience, possessions—for the sake of serving others in love.

God loves us to death. Literally. In the *Badarak* we have the privilege of discovering for ourselves, time and again, that the almighty Creator of the universe longs desperately for us to love Him as he loves us.

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