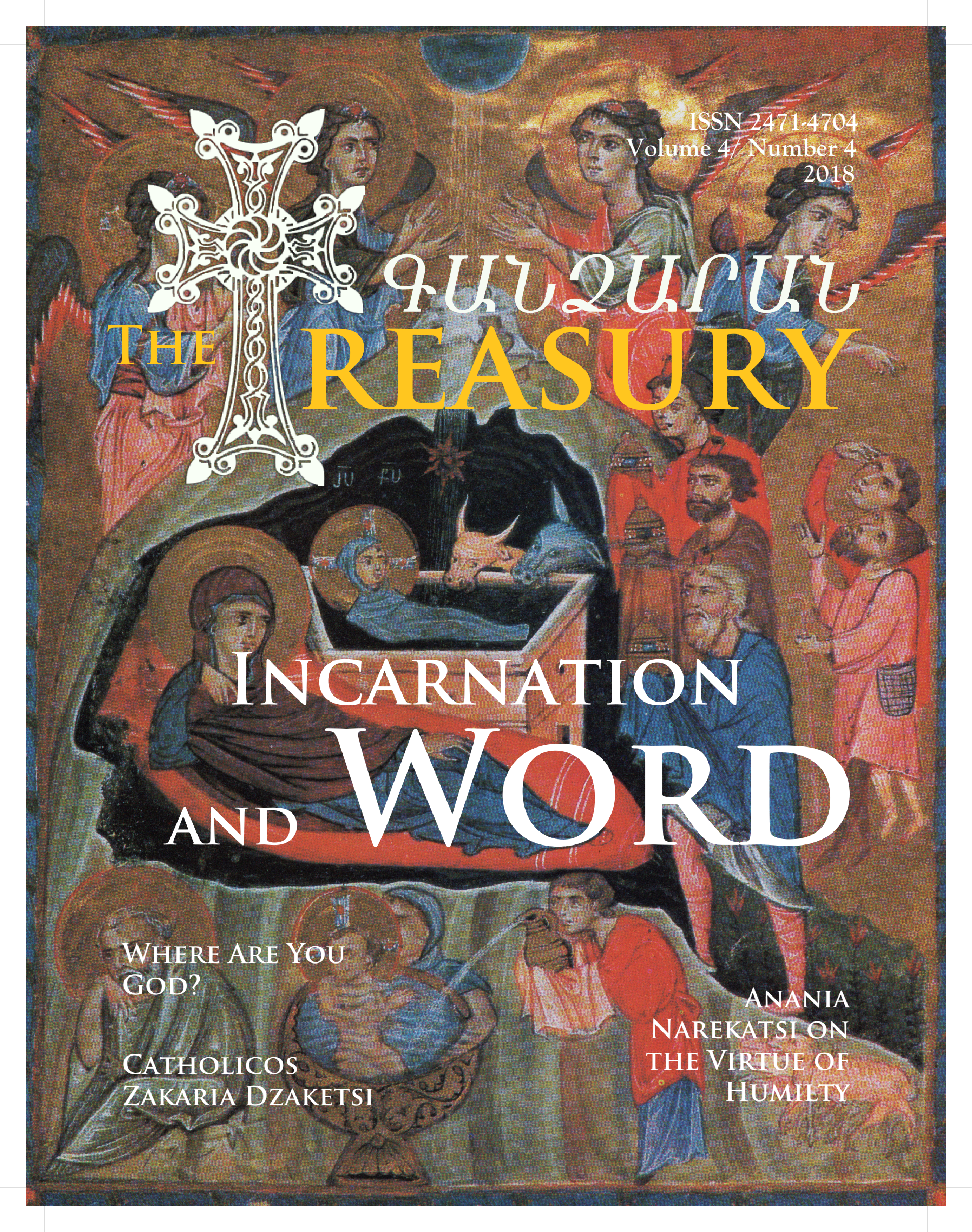




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THE REASURY

INCARNATION AND WORD

WHERE ARE YOU
GOD?

CATHOLICOS
ZAKARIA DZAKETSI

ANANIA
NAREKATSI ON
THE VIRTUE OF
HUMILITY



Volume 4
Number 4

THE TREASURY

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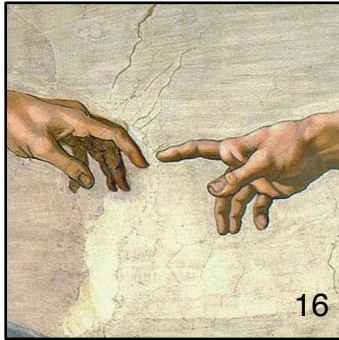


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INCARNATION AND WORD

by Dr. Christopher Sheklian



Christmas, the joyous season of family and gifts, is often presented to us as “Jesus’ birthday.” We read the Gospel of Luke, focusing on the baby in the manger and the three wise men bringing gifts to the newborn king. Our idea of Christmas in its genuinely Christian vein is based largely on the Gospel of Luke. Yet even the slogan “Jesus is the reason for the season” leaves aside the fundamental theological question: Who is this person Jesus Christ? In the Gospel of Matthew, we read that even many of the people who followed Jesus were not sure how to answer that question. Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do men say that the Son of Man is?” (16:13). After hearing the various responses, that he is John the Baptist or one of the prophets, Jesus then asks them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter replies, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Confessing Jesus truly as the Christ, as the Son of God, Peter offers us the first and most important answer to the question “Who is this person Jesus Christ?” With Peter, all Christians answer, “Jesus Christ is the Son of the Living God.”

As the Son of God, Jesus Christ is one person of the Holy Trinity. He is God, though not God the Father. This relationship vexed early Christian theologians and led to many answers the Church ultimately deemed incorrect. One early heresy was Adoptionism, that Jesus Christ was born a man and “adopted” as the Son of God at his baptism. Against this, the orthodox response was that Jesus Christ was born of God the Father through the Holy Virgin Mary and was born as the Son of God from the outset. This doctrine of the Incarnation, of God becoming human through the birth of Jesus Christ, is the theological heart of Christmas. Of course, “Jesus is the reason for the season,” but that is true because Jesus is God-become-human. The drama of salvation that leads from Bethlehem to Calgary and ultimately to the risen Christ who conquers sin and death, begins with the Incarnation. The Incarnation, the profound mystery of God-become-human, is the reason for the season.

No ancient Christian writer made this point more forcefully than St. Athanasius, who was the Bishop of Alexandria for much of the time between 328 and 373 AD. In *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius addressed some of the heresies of his time, setting out a position on the Incarnation that echoes St. Peter’s answer to the question, “Who is Jesus Christ?” Athanasius answers not only that Jesus Christ is the Son of the Living God, but that Jesus Christ is God, one person of the Holy Trinity, fully divine. He goes on to elaborate the connection between this doctrine concerning Christ to the event of the Incarnation, asking, “What, then, was God to do? What else could He possibly do, being God, but renew His Image in mankind, so that through it men might once more come to know Him? And how could this be done save by the coming of the very Image Himself, our Savior Jesus Christ?” Christmas, then, is the celebration of the birth of our Savior as the moment of the Incarnation, when God becomes human.

St. Athanasius unravels the crucial importance of the doctrine of the Incarnation for Christian salvation: only through a perfect sacrifice can sin be forgiven, yet none is perfect except God Himself. Therefore, God sent his Son into the world and the second person of the Trinity became human for our forgiveness. In what is perhaps the most famous—and most controversial—statement of St. Athanasius, God “assumed humanity that we might become God.” Ultimately, through baptism and forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ, we too become children of God. Not of the same status as Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God by nature, but we become children of God through adoption.

Jesus Christ is the Son of God in a very special and specific way. The Nicene Creed provides one of the most powerful images for describing the relationship between God the Father and Jesus Christ as the Son of God: “Light from Light.” The image of the sun giving off light to the world was a powerful image throughout antiquity. In a world without electricity, where candles or any form of nighttime lighting would be expensive, the radiance of the sun was a compelling metaphor for the life-giving qualities of



light. Though the sun's rays are separate from the sun, they are still light. The substance, the essence, of light, remains the same, whether it is the source of light or the rays, the emanation of that light. So, the Nicene Creed proclaims that Jesus Christ is "Light from Light, True God from True God." Though the source of the light (God the Father) is not the same in

function or mechanics as the emanation of light (Jesus Christ, the Son of God), the substance of light is the same—it is still light.

Another, more difficult way of describing the special manner in which Jesus Christ is the Son of God is found in the thundering opening words of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." St. John offers a different set of tools for grappling with the profound mystery of the Incarnation. In the Gospel of John, we never see Jesus Christ in swaddling clothes in the manger the same way we do in the Gospel of Luke. Instead, the Incarnation is offered to us instead in rich, poetic, philosophical and theological terms: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Christians have long wrestled with this version of the Incarnation. Crucially, when the Gospel of John calls Jesus Christ "the Word of God," the Greek term that is used is *Logos* (in Armenian *Pan/Բան*). *Logos* is a term with a long philosophical

tradition, one that John surely meant to invoke. For the famous Greek philosopher Aristotle, *logos* was a form of argument, namely the logical argument from reason. For his teacher Plato and his later interpreters, *logos* was the broad, rational principle behind the order of the universe. The Alexandrian Jewish thinker and exegete Philo adapted the *logos* as

rational principle of the universe to the interpretation of Scripture in a move that would be formative for later Christian thinkers. Identifying Jesus Christ with *Logos* opened a host of possibilities for Christian theology.

Liturgically, Armenian Christians emphasize the Johannine theme of the Incarnation as the coming of the Word of God into the world. During the *Soorp Badarak*, in what is often called the “Lesser Entrance,” the deacon ceremoniously brings the Gospel book around the altar. In Armenian understandings of church architecture, the right side of the altar (from the perspective of the priest looking out) is associated with heaven and the left side with earth. We see this identification later in the *Soorp Badarak* when the deacons chant a series of memorial litanies shortly before the Lord’s Prayer. They move to the right side of the altar to recite these litanies, then collectively return to the left side to chant the final litany in the series, *Kohootyoon*, which is a prayer for people who are still living, including the current Catholicos, the primate of the diocese, and the priest celebrating the *Soorp Badarak*. When the deacon brings the Gospel around the altar then, he brings the Word of God from heaven (the right side of the altar) to earth (the left side). This is a liturgical Incarnation, which prefigures the later Incarnational moment when the chalice, containing the wine and bread that eventually is transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, is also brought around the altar in solemn procession.

Another liturgical recognition of the Incarnate Word occurs when we stand for the readings of the Gospel. After the “Lesser Entrance” there is a series of readings, usually first an epistle of St. Paul followed by the Gospel reading. During the epistle reading, it is appropriate to remain seated. However, before the Gospel is read, the deacon calls the congregation to attention, saying *Broskhume*, and the choir responds, “The Word of God.” Everyone in the church who is able then stands for the duration of the Gospel reading. Every time the Gospel is read in a liturgical context we are expected to stand. Why? Through hearing the biblical words of God, often the actual

Every time the Gospel is read, the Word of God is made flesh – made physical so that we may hear it, experience it and be brought into the presence of the Lord.

words of Jesus who is the Word of God, we are in the very presence of God. Like Moses before the burning bush, we stand in awe before the presence of the Lord.

Every time the Gospel is read, the Word of God is made flesh – made physical so that we may hear it, experience it and be brought into the presence of the Lord. This is, following St. John the Evangelist, an Incarnational moment when God comes into the world and dwells among us. Liturgically in the Armenian Church, through the reading of the Gospel and ultimately with the partaking of Holy Communion during *Soorp Badarak*, we are invited to receive with wonder and reverence the Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God and Bread of Life, who is made manifest for us. We should also be reminded, every time we hear the word of God read, of the overwhelming mystery of the Incarnation of the Word of God as Jesus Christ, the possibility of our salvation that is the true reason for the season. During this Christmas Season, may we all stand in awe before the presence of the Lord.

Christopher Sheklian, PhD is Director of the Zohrab Information Center at the Armenian Diocese of America (Eastern). He is trained as an anthropologist whose research focuses on religious minority rights, the relation between theology and the social sciences, and the sensory components of liturgy.



SPIRITUAL LEA

by Dr. Roberta Ervine

When Zakaria of Dzak became head of the Armenian Church in 855, the country was on the cusp of exciting times. One way or another, prophecy was about to be fulfilled, and although he did not live to see it, Zakaria was an important part of that fulfillment. He laid the groundwork for nothing less than the restoration of an independent Armenian kingdom, after more than four centuries of foreign domination. To put it another way, a situation that would have seemed difficult if not hopeless to others was in Zakaria's eyes an opportunity in the making.

Zakaria's ascent to the throne was itself a unique phenomenon, a sign of the unusual circumstances that pertained in the mid-ninth century. His suitability to the time was so evident that the normal, slow process of rising through the clerical ranks was set aside in his case.

We do not know what Zakaria's background was — whether he was a monk, a pious layman or a member of the clergy in minor orders — but historians agree that he received not only consecration to the catholicosial rank but ordination to the diaconate, priesthood and episcopate as well, all at once. One can only imagine the liturgical marathon within which these ceremonies took place, and the excitement of those who backed Zakaria's swift rise to power, knowing that they were supporting the right man for the job.

In the larger Christian world, Zakaria (855-876) was

the contemporary and counterpart of the Byzantine Patriarch Photius (858-857, 877-893), whose rise to the throne was as meteoric as his own. The two overlapped during Photius' first tenure as Patriarch. The surviving remnants of their correspondence show that after initially underestimating him, the Patriarch quickly perceived Zakaria as an intellectual equal. Zakaria's respectful but firm defense of the Armenian faith's ancient orthodoxy in the face of Photius' insistence that Armenians place themselves within the Chalcedonian fold and under the aegis of the Imperial Church could not but inspire respect. (Ironically, Photius died in Armenia, and may have been partly of Armenian descent.)

At home in Armenia, Zakaria shared the religious and political stage with the formidable prince Ashot Bagratuni. The two also shared a vision for the restoration of Armenia's independence under its own indigenous leadership. To this end, Zakaria carefully cultivated a warm personal relationship with the local Muslim governor of Armenia that garnered significant concessions to his spiritual authority. At the same time he used his influence and charm to forge friendships between members of the ambitious and divided Armenian nobility whose united support would be essential to the success of an independent Armenian kingdom.

Zakaria's diplomatic achievements would have been impressive in any period of Armenia's history. However, they were even more so in the contemporary situation, where important Armenian nobles who refused to deny their Christianity had recently been martyred in detention. During the early years of his reign, Zakaria also experienced the return from captivity of many who, like Vartan Mamigonian before them, denied their faith in order to escape but later converted back to Christianity. Thus feelings against the Islamic regime were high, and the natural divisions amongst the nobility were heightened by the distinction between those who

LEADERSHIP IN AN ALMOST INDEPENDENT ARMENIA

CATHOLICOS ZAKARIA I DZAKETSI

remained faithful to the death and those who chose to apostatize and live.

Thanks to the conciliatory efforts of Ashot and Zakaria, when important changes in the internal political landscape of both Byzantium and the Islamic Caliphate took place, the Armenians were ready to seize the moment. Zakaria's slow, careful work of building relationships paid off and in 885, less than a decade after the catholicos's death, prince Ashot was recognized as Armenia's King Ashot I by both the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mu'tamid (870-892) and the ethnically Armenian Byzantine Emperor Basil I (867-886). Each of the great neighboring powers sent a crown for the coronation of the new king. Zakaria would have been gratified to know his dedicated work had helped bring about the return of Armenian autonomy.

In his own time, Zakaria was highly revered. No one was surprised that when an earthquake and its many aftershocks destroyed much of the city of Dvin and caused great suffering to the population, the city's cathedral survived undamaged. It seemed a fitting acknowledgment by God of the catholicos's effective and fervent prayers and dedicated efforts on the country's behalf.

Over and above his roles as chief champion of the Armenian faith and as kingmaker, Zakaria was also Armenia's chief pastor. As such, he took his preaching responsibilities seriously. No less than fourteen substantial homilies survive from his pen, most of them devoted to the Church's major feasts. His homilies showcase the catholicos's patristic learning, as well as his sophisticated exegetical style and his talent for rhetorical drama.

In his *Homily on the Nativity*, whose translation follows, Zakaria weaves together scripture and the fathers in a way that would uplift listeners who shared his own high level of learning. At the same time, he chose images that would also provide new insights for the average believer.

The first half of the homily expresses the many won-

drous paradoxes of salvation, as God and humanity became inseparably one, incarnate in the person of the infant Jesus: God who cannot be contained is contained within the womb, the unreachable divinity is touched by human hands, the incomprehensible is known, the one without location is born in Bethlehem.

After a short discussion of the magi, the second half of the homily begins. It describes how Christ's birth fulfilled and exceeded all previous indicators of divine favor and saving grace, using a series of twenty-two contrasting comparisons, each introduced by the word "Today." Today a simple cave becomes heaven; today a fatherless child makes it possible for us to reclaim our heavenly Father; today the cherubim see in human form the one from whom they covered their faces. The list goes on, touching on the rest of the heavenly beings and the whole of creation.

In its conclusion, the homily makes allusion to three elements in the story of the Exodus. The Passover and the liberation of the people of Israel from Egypt were seen as an Old Testament version of the story of salvation. The Nativity of Christ ushered in a more universal salvation, as the one who heard the cries of the captive Israelites and came to save them, then doing the same for the entire human race. In light of this magnificent expansion of saving grace, the catholicos concluded, the only proper response is to be gift-bearers with the Magi, worship with the shepherds, and with the star light the way to the Word born bodily.

Roberta Ervine, PhD, is Professor of Armenian Christian Studies at St. Nersess Armenian Seminary.



HOMILY ON THE BIRTH OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

by Catholicos Zakaria Dzaketsi (in office 855-877)
translated by Dr. Abraham Terian

When one wishes to commemorate or celebrate the birthday of a king, or that of a sovereign ruler wielding authority over a world empire, one makes every effort to carry out his plan ingeniously, very thoughtfully, judiciously and carefully, as befitting a king.

As for us, who have been deemed worthy to celebrate the great and glorious birthday of the heavenly King of Kings, the holy and eternal God, we should rejoice exceedingly, with joy that cannot be concealed; we should exult with great jubilation. For the one who is the Image of God and the reflection of the essence of God, the Seal and the Light, who mirrors the Parent and the Cause, who is eternal and begotten of the Father, without lineage, beyond the limits of imagination, above all, without beginning, of the

Father without beginning, beyond description to humans, unknowable even to angels, the radiance and resplendence of the Uncreated, the eternal from the eternal one, the unlimited from the one who cannot be contained, the unrestrained from the unrestrained, the Son of the Father, the begotten of the Uncreated, the equal to the Holy Spirit in glory, the King of the seraphim, the ruler of the heavenly hierarchies, the equal to the Father and his Partner, in the fullness of time and by the will of the Father and of the Holy Spirit humbly relinquished the glory he had with the Father, dwelt in the immaculate womb of the holy Virgin, and taking bodily peculiarities through her, became embodied, taking the form of a servant, and growing up, he reached full maturity, integrating it into his immense divinity, consummating its two aspects fully into one....

The ancient of days became an infant, the King of the seraphim was heralded by stars and worshiped by the Magi with gifts. The unbounded Word was laid in a manger made for animals, while at the same time sitting with the Father on the glorious throne. The son of David was held in the bosom, the one who upholds all created beings by his word. In accordance with the bodily nature, he was nurtured by his physical parent, this one who feeds the creatures, who stretches his arm to sustain all created beings. For in the Virgin's womb divinity was united with humanity, and for my salvation he made the body, the soul, and the mind into one with his indescribable nature, that he may cleanse those like whom he became, becoming man in verity, bodily born of the Virgin, of whom he took body, soul, and pure mind....

The rich one became homeless like me, that I may be glorified by putting on his image. The bountiful one condescended to dwell in my empty nothingness, that I may share in his unspeakable glory.

With the eternal and shadowless Light becoming physically embodied in accordance with human nature, the inscrutable and diverse natures came together into one; they became one. Just as intermingled iron and fire is called fire, the black and purple compound of the two natures having but one appearance in this case, so also in that miraculous and new form of the one person, of the one image and one appearance, the divine and human natures were combined into one, without distraction from and without change in his divinity, for he is changeless and immutable. And God sheltered himself in the Virgin's womb, became confined to a body....

He who cannot be confined, became confined to the Virgin's bosom; the one who cannot be contained became contained; and the unreachable was touched, for "we beheld him and our hands touched the Word of life" (1 John 1:1) who came down to save the creatures.

Today, the one unapproachable to the immortal spirits became approachable to the creatures he came to save. The incomprehensible one became known to humans as a newborn child. The infinite Word of God was enveloped in a finite body in the bosom of the Virgin, the one beyond scrutiny was scrutinized, the one who cannot be borne was carried, the eternal one became one with a beginning, the Son of God

became the Virgin's Son. The one motherless in heaven became fatherless on earth, the one not made became made, the uncreated one was called into being, the immaterial appeared in a real body, the one without place of origin was born in the Judean city of Bethlehem, the one beyond time appeared at the time of the census. The unlimited one became limited, was laid in a manger made for animals. He who is without beginning assumed a beginning as a child born of the Virgin, the one beyond measure became limited because of the size of his perfect body.

Today, the immortal one put on the nature of mortal earthlings, the one who cannot be comprehended by the fiery souls became comprehensible, the one who cannot be confined into a place was swaddled, the one who cannot be contained was contained, the invisible one became visible. As a book has it, "Christ is born, let us glorify him; Christ came down from heaven for us, let us go forth unto him; Christ descended for us the lowly ones, let us rise up," for the darkness that settled at the beginning has been dissipated and the shadowless light was spread throughout the world; for the timeless child is born for our sake, the one who is King of Kings and prophet and priest and sacrifice and who takes away all human sins, the one who is motherless in heaven and fatherless on earth.

Today, God the Word was born in a cave, so that humans may be invited to heaven; he was wrapped in swaddling clothes, so that the leafy and skin garments may be torn away. The Lord of all settled in a manger made for animals so that we who have been reduced to the level of quadrupeds may be raised to the level of angels....

Moreover, when our Lord was born in the cave, on the thirty-third year of King Herod, at the time of the census, a shining star appeared in the east and with radiant beams shone over the land of Persia. Upon seeing it, the Magi woke up from slumber and faithfully followed the rising and the course of the star, by means of which they hastened to reach and to worship the newborn King. And the rising of the star was miraculous, magnificent, and amazing....

The Magi set out then in the direction of Ephrathah; they saw the star that led them from the east and rejoiced. The same star brought them to where the infant was. Since the Magi had heard from

the oracles of Balaam that his kingdom is superior to that of Gog, they concluded that he was a king (cf. Numbers 24:5-9). Also, "the star of Jacob shall rise" (vs. 17), from which saying they recognized that he is God. And that "He will sleep like a lion's whelp and like a lion" (vs. 9), from which they learned about his burial. Because of these inferences they brought essential things with them from the east. Entering, they fell prostrate before the infant, they bowed down and worshiped him; and opening their treasures they offered incense, as a sign of his being God; gold, as to a king; and myrrh, as for one who would die for the salvation of the world. And now, we being of one mind with the prediction given to the prophets from above, following the blessed Evangelists, agreeing with the Magi, and joining our voices with the holy angels, who became the announcers of the Lord's birth, we sing of the efficacy of the glorious day.

Today, the disembodied Word of God became embodied; with rational spirit, perfect mind, contained himself in a body made of the elements. He is both God and man, reborn in Bethlehem.

Today, the Word who is the Image of God became dense and, emanating from the unapproachable Light, came to be an infant in accordance with the laws of human nature, through the body constituted in the Virgin's womb. Nine months later he was born perfect in the cave, becoming both God and man. The natures became intermingled in an altogether new and marvelous fashion, since for our salvation the immaterial and disembodied nature of the Word became united with our material and earthly nature, so that, having put on our semblance, he would unite us with those we cannot be united with.

Today, throughout the expanse of the universe the shadow of sin is dissipated and the shadowless Light is established.

Today, the cave of Bethlehem was transformed

into heaven, the manger into a cherubic throne, and Bethlehem into a land of joy; for the one motherless in heaven, the eternal Word of God, was born fatherless on earth so that we may reclaim as Father the One who is the Cause of all.

Today, he possesses Melchizedek unto himself; from being motherless, becoming fatherless (cf. Hebrews 7:3), being born for us today as prophet, king, and priest.

Today, heaven rejoices and the earth is glad, for the eternal Word of God who was before eternal things, by his divine will condescended to put on the form of a slave through the Virgin who was sanctified and made pure. He who is God and was born as man, never ceased to be with the Father.

Today, the six-winged cherubim who sing the "Sanctus" rejoiced; for the one of whose radiance and brilliance of light they feared with trembling, of whom they were shy and covered their faces, today they beheld him in a way that defies de-

scription: a child wrapped in swaddling clothes for the salvation of the heathen. The myriads of cherubs rejoiced exceedingly, for the eternal Son, the shadowless Light, the eternal Light of the Father, became a newborn child in Bethlehem, as Christ the King, the Messiah and Ruler of the spiritual hierarchies.

Today, the principalities rejoiced by glorifying; for the one of the essence of the Father and of the Holy Spirit, the Creator of principalities and the Ruler of spiritual beings, the child who was with the Father, Emmanuel, which means God pleased to dwell with us, now descended from heaven in true humanity, becoming bread of immortality for us.

Today, the angels and the archangels rejoiced jubilantly over the Word who was embodied through the holy and immaculate Virgin, singing "Glory in the highest"; for God was born as reborn man and came to dwell in the sacred cave, having confined and

Today, the cave of
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into a cherubic
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land of joy.

limited himself in an indescribable manner into a body of superior nature and more unique than ours: of Jewish descent physically, yet being the universal God, blessed forever.

Today, heaven and the heavenly powers are rejoicing jubilantly, for the Word who is the light and the character of the unreachable Father's essence, who rests on the four-square throne not made by hand, now rests unnaturally in a manger made for animals, yet without being separated from the Father's bosom.

Today, the earth and the animals thrive with renewal, for the incomprehensible Son, begotten of the Father before the eternal beings, through the immaculate Virgin became like us in order to save humanity. Today, he is being worshiped with gifts by the mighty among the Persians.

Today, Bethlehem and the cave where he was born rejoice elatedly and the land of Ephrathah is glad, for the Father's Word without beginning was born in that cave as the child Emmanuel, through whom God is with us, the King of Israel and the Life-giver to the heathen.

Today, the universe revels elatedly over the birth of the unfathomable King, who as the Sun of Righteousness rose above the heights for us through the holy Virgin and enlightened the lowly creatures with fiery and sun-like beams.

Today, the fields and the forests are glad, for the unattainable and boundless Word who is the Character and the Image of the essence of the Father, was pleased to take today the form of an earthly servant, the timeless Son and Creator of times and seasons, who became a child in the fullness of time.

Today, the mountains are glad, the hills rejoice, and the deserts and the holy anchorites in their secluded ranks are refreshed with enlightenment, for the uncreated God and the King of glory came humbly down from heaven to save the creatures from the evil one.

Today, all the waters rejoiced with all the tributaries, for the height of glory and its radiance

came down from the Father and became man through the holy Virgin and dwelt in a manger made for animals, whereupon their shepherds brought gifts and joined the angels in singing aloud: "Glory in the highest" to him who sent the Word for our redemption. And the sun waxed brighter with its golden rays and brilliant stars, for the miracle-working Son of God, the vastness of whose nature heaven could not fully contain, is dwelling in the sacred cave for the redemption of the creatures, to save the creatures from servitude to corruption unto immaculate glory.

Today, the heathen of the whole world are glad, for by coming down the Son of God took away the effects of the curse and opened up the narrow and straight way so that man may rise unto heaven to replace the fallen angels.

Today, the holy Church exults with gladness, for the unattainable and inscrutable Word of the Father's essence became the miraculous Sun of Righteousness for our sake, was confined to a body in such a way that is incomprehensible, for which reason heaven is declaring the earth blessed, joyfully praising the one equal to the Holy Spirit in glory.

Today, the heavenly Jerusalem exults with gladness and the mother-church Zion rejoices, for the one who originated the shining light is wrapped in swaddling clothes so as to clothe beautifully with the radiant garment those who became naked because of the deception of



Today, throughout
the expanse of the
universe the shadow
of sin is dissipated
and the shadowless
Light is established.

the first-born man, promoting them to the rank of the angels in heaven.

Today, the King of glory, of whom the myriad armies of angels trembled with fear, was born of the incorruptible Virgin; the unseen and inscrutable one, the one above the four heavenly beings, was wrapped in swaddling clothes and was worshiped with gifts from the east.

Today, Christ the King of Kings was born of the incorruptible Virgin, and the creative gifts which he has at his disposal he spread them throughout the universe; and the heathen, warmed up by their brilliance, shook off their chronic sadness; for which reason they glorify him in unending song with the four heavenly beings who do his will.

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 Decalogue, 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. At that place Moses said, "Let me come and see that awe-inspiring sight" (Exodus 3:3), whereas here, the shepherds were saying, "Let us go to Bethlehem and see what sight is that" (Luke 2:15). Whom Moses was unable to see, even though he often drew near to him and once, being shut in a cave, was able to see his back dimly (cf. Exodus 33:18-23), today, in the fullness of time, he is

being seen by all in the Judean city of Bethlehem. And upon beholding him, the entire universe rejoiced and was invited to join the unending joy.

In times past, in the wilderness, he fed with manna and quails the countless armies of Israel; today, he is offering his incorruptible body and sacred blood for the salvation of the world and the remission of sins, as a down-payment for the impending eternal life.

In times past, he led the army of Israel by a cloud and a pillar of fire, today he leads the Magi from the east to the cave by a shining star and governs the universe by a luminous and resplendent cloud—the heavenly Jerusalem, the eternal abodes of the righteous in great Zion. The one who often told Moses "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; I came down to save the children of Israel from Pharaoh's hand, for their cries of distress, which they suffer because of the Egyptians, has reached me" (Exodus 3:6, 8), today he says, "I heard the cry of the human race and came down to save them from the incorporeal Pharaoh who has besieged them with bruising sin." The one whom Elijah saw at times as superior light on mount Horeb but was unable to draw near to this unapproachable God, instead he had to cover his face with a veil, at the end of the ages has been revealed in Ephrathah, veiling with a body his incomprehensible divinity, this Christ dwelling in our hearts through faith.

Now that we have been privileged to celebrate this glorious and most sublime feast, let us proceed with the stars, let us be gift-bearers with the Magi, let us worship with the shepherds, let us bless and glorify with the heavenly hosts the Word born bodily, to whom be glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and always, unto the ages. Amen.

(from *Ejmiatsin* 1997/1:38 - 44)

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Հաց

= HATZ BREAD

by Rev. Fr. Ghevond Ajamian

Bread, in all its various forms, is the most widely consumed food in the world. It is portable and compact, which helps to explain why it has been an integral part of our diet for thousands of years. It is no surprise then that Christ specifically mentions it in the Lord's Prayer.

Christ teaches us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," but what bread are we really asking for? Many Church Fathers have interpreted this word differently. Some have said it is physical bread, while others said it is spiritual bread. Others have said it is Holy Communion, and yet still others have said it is Christ Himself. Although there is much truth in all of these interpretations, Armenians also understand 'our daily bread' in a very particular and immediate way.

St. Gregory of Datev, who lived in the 14th century, says the Armenian word for bread (Հաց/hatz), comes from the Armenian word for request/demand (Հայց/haytz), because that is exactly what we are requesting (or demanding) when we pray the Lord's Prayer. When we ask for bread, we are asking that God answer our requests, demands, and needs. In essence, we are saying, "You said you'd do it, so do it!"

Of course, to some this may come across daring and brazen, but God tells us to do this – He wants us to pray this way, and in turn, He will show us how true His Word is. Christ preached, "Ask and it will be given to you" (Matthew 7:7) and "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours" (Mark 11:24).

These requests which we make should not be focused on tomorrow's things, or next week's things, or things in the distant future, but only those which are in the present. We must not worry about tomorrow's

bread, but today's bread. He stresses this on the famous "Sermon on the Mount" when He preaches "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day" (Matthew 6:34).

A perfect example of this is a story in the Old Testament (Exodus 16). When the Jews were wandering in the wilderness and were growing hungry, God answered their prayers by providing manna, heavenly bread, every morning on the dew of the fields. They were commanded to only gather enough for that day and no more. Naturally, the Jews gathered more than they needed, keeping some for the next day (just in case there was not any the next morning).

Yet the next morning when they went to eat the manna saved from the previous day, they found it spoiled, infested with worms and stinking. God did this to teach the Jews that they needed to depend on God's constant and daily assistance alone and nothing else. This same trust is demanded of us and requires we put our faith in God that He will provide for us and answer our requests on a daily basis.

God maintains our lives as our Creator and Sustainer, because He gives us plenty when we ask for it. When we ask for a glass of water, He gives us a gallon of water. When we may ask for a jacket, He gives us a suit. We may ask for a piece of bread, yet He gives us an entire loaf. God gives us more than we ask for in order that we share with others. We are given our daily bread, but we must take that bread to others. Perhaps that very bread we have received and take to others will be their daily bread and an answer to their daily prayers.

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WHERE ARE YOU GOD?

by Dr. André Markarian

Although the basic message of Christianity is both beautiful and simple enough for even a child to understand, it does open the door for many difficult and often unanswered questions. Among his greatest pedagogical accomplishments, 14th century Armenian Church educator and ecumenist St. Grigor of Datev compiled answers to some of the toughest questions on Scripture and theology in a two-volume work known as *Keerk Hartsments* (Գորգ Հարցմանք). Carrying on his bold legacy, in this article we will attempt to provide a thoughtful response to one of the more difficult questions of our ancient Christian faith.

Q: Since our God is the source of all truth and revelation, why does He not make himself more obvious to everyone? Why would God not want us to be absolutely certain that He is there, but rather hide from us, leaving room for doubt and even disbelief? Why would a loving God who wishes to make himself known to us seem to hide in the shadows?

A: In a nutshell, from the Christian perspective, God is completely obvious! Romans chapter one points out that the glory of God is revealed everywhere in nature. “Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse” (v20). Psalm 19:1 also reminds us that “The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.” God’s self-revelation in nature (referred to as “general” revelation)

is almost intuitive – whenever the hustle and bustle of life becomes too overwhelming, most people seek the peace and solitude only found in the natural world to calm the soul. By examining and experiencing the grand splendor, aesthetic beauty, and mathematical precision contained within the Book of Nature, we readily perceive the presence, majesty and creative genius of God. It is the natural world that for many of us bridges the gap between the physical and spiritual realms. This explains why, in part, some of the most remarkable monasteries in Armenia are nestled in secluded countrysides or along dramatic mountainous precipices.

Second, when God first created humans, He was very intimate with and obvious to us. We see this described very vividly in the third chapter of the Book of Genesis: “And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” (v8-9). What eventually distanced us from God was not God estranging himself from us, but rather our rueful decision to sin against him, starting with our proto-parents Adam and Eve and continuing on to this very day in our own sin-laden lives.

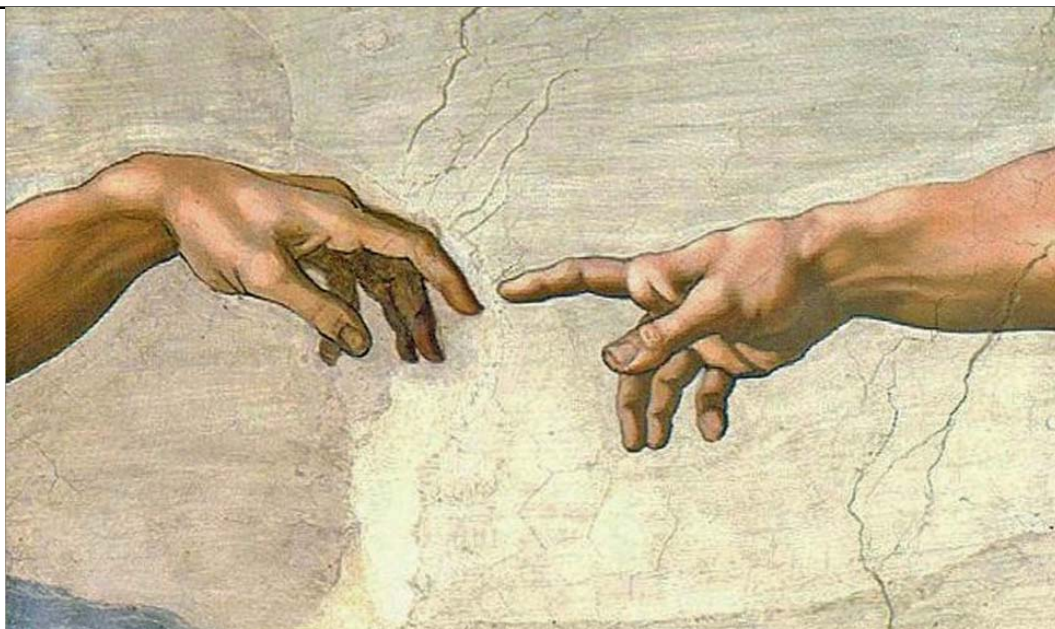
Furthermore, God **has** provided us a detailed historical account of his miraculous activities and personal revelation in the pages of Scripture (referred to as “special” revelation, contrasted with his “general” revelation found in nature). The Old Testament provides numerous examples of God’s direct involvement in the lives of the people of Israel, often through wondrous signs (burning bush, pillar of fire) or meetings with particular individuals at specific times and places. In the prophetic books of the Old Testament, we read how God regularly spoke directly to chosen messengers, who then in turn proclaimed to the nation of Israel, “*Thus saith the Lord.*” The New Testament then records how God the Father sent his only-begotten son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to provide undeniable proof in tangible form that He is real and the one-true God of all eternity. Jesus’s life, his words, his miracles, his fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies of the coming Messiah, and finally his death and bodily resurrection provide

more than sufficient evidence of his divinity revealed to us in the flesh. Finally, the continuous activity of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians since Pentecost throughout the centuries is the conclusive personal testimony that the Supreme God of the universe is still alive and well, transforming lives through individual miracles on a day-to-day basis.

Still remarkably for some, this is simply not enough evidence that God truly exists! They say, “If God wants us to *really* know that He is there, isn’t He powerful enough to ensure that everyone sufficiently knows He is real, especially since we can’t see or hear him? Couldn’t He just write his name in the sky or plant a thought in our minds that He is God?”

Realistically though, aren’t we being a little unfair to require from God more definitive degrees of “proof” of his existence, when we readily accept the reality of so many other important invisible realities (electrons, gravity, love, justice, consciousness, etc). Moreover, when we understand (as the science of quantum mechanics is slowly revealing) that humans are living only in a portion of the totality of reality, a slice of time and space, we realize then that the fullness of God’s presence simply cannot be seen or experienced. The Bible teaches that when Jesus Christ returns to judge the world and create the New Heaven and Earth, only then will we more completely “see,” “know,” and “experience” God in his full divine glory: “Beloved, we are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as He is” (1 John 3:2).

Despite the aforementioned points, our psychological (and perhaps spiritual) frailty refuses to allow this nagging question to fade away. Why can’t/won’t He be more obvious **now**? Well, another approach to this question is to ask what could God’s goal be that He chooses to not make his presence more fully known to us in this current existence? If his desire for us is to simply perceive him physically (like we would a mountain), or believe in him intellectually (like we might know a historical fact, a scientific principle or philosophical concept), He could simply appear to us regularly in some physical form or perhaps write his name *Yahweh* in big letters in the clouds for everyone to see all the time. But wouldn’t this be considered such an imposingly miraculous way for him to reveal



were not achieving the outcome that Jesus truly desired.

So then, what if the goal of all Jesus's miracle-working was to achieve a deeper relationship with him as friend, savior and God? What if God's definition of "belief" in him is not simply intellectual assent, but more importantly *relational*? If we examine how the word "be-

himself to us that we would have no other option but to accept his existence as intellectual fact confirmed by our physical senses? Essentially, we would be overpowered by his presence and be effectively *forced* to believe in him. Asking for an even more imposing physical revelation might be pushing it, as Scripture reveals to us that God's holiness is so pure, that for created beings "you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live"(Exodus 33:20).

But is that really God's goal for us in this life, to be forced into sensory or intellectual belief in him? Does God just want us to blithely experience him as we would experience trees and mountains, looming over us almost unnoticed as we go about our daily business? Is intellectual assent to his existence sufficient for God's purposes in this temporal life? Interestingly, when we look back at the life of our Lord Jesus Christ as recorded in Scripture, we are struck by the fact that even while he openly demonstrated god-like powers, the religious leaders of the day still questioned his deity and even desired to kill him: "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of these do you stone me?"(John 10:32). From this we realize that intellectual certainty does not necessarily lead to the outcome that God desires. The Pharisees and other antagonists of Jesus had no problem recognizing that true miracles were taking place at the hand of our Lord - healings, exorcisms, walking on water, transforming substances, controlling the weather, and even raising people from the dead. But these amazing demonstrations of control over nature

lieve" is used in the New Testament (*հավանում/ havadam* in Armenian), we could easily argue that "trust" or "rely on" are equally acceptable ways of translating the essence of what the New Testament authors were getting at when they refer to belief in God.

If in fact this is the case, then we might ask ourselves, how can God, who is the all-powerful creator of the universe and all things in it, get us to trust him in the context of personal relationship? Clearly it is no great feat for an omnipotent God to overpower us with his presence, or coerce us into believing in him intellectually, but how can he bring about genuine relationship with us again (like we first had in the Garden of Eden) by allowing us to freely desire to trust and love him without backing us into a corner with his sheer awesomeness?

The final answer to this question lies with us. As the entirety of Scripture demonstrates, God has done his part by pursuing us relentlessly. It is not as if God has been secretly lurking in the shadows, quickly withdrawing from our view whenever we detect his presence. Nor has God thrown us in some tortuous maze whose walls are 20 feet high, then asks us to somehow discover the way to him at the very end of the maze while we labor to evade all sorts of traps and fiends within the maze. God has remained at enough of a distance so as not to overpower us, but has given us enough obvious indications to his whereabouts that the only thing that separates us from discovering the fullness of his presence and love is our own selfish

will. Upon arriving at the holy city hours before he would be crucified, Jesus exclaimed “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Matthew 23:37). After all, relationship must be chosen from both sides. Using the rational faculties that our Creator has given us to discern his existence, we are all placed at the same starting point of belief, yet not ever forced to trust in him as our loving Lord and Savior.

In his “Litany for the Coming of the Holy Spirit,” beloved Armenian mystic, theologian and poet St. Gregory of Narek describes how God graciously responds to those who readily seek him:

You made yourself known to those
who were waiting for you,
Revealed yourself quickly to those
pleading with uplifted arms,
Arrived speedily for their
supplications with sighing.
You made glad those submerged in
fear, sent them to the (whole) world.
As witness to the fullness of grace, the
promised good news by the Messiah,
you led (many) to the water of the
(baptismal) font.
Having come to the light of your
heavenly grace, you registered them
kindly as heirs to eternal life in
heaven.

(Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek.
A. Terian, Liturgical Press, 2016. Page 86)

Note that God simply wants to be found and is ready to shower upon us all the graces of his Fatherly love. Yet we turn our faces away from him and complain that “if God only did this or that I would believe!” We proclaim that we don’t have sufficient evidence to believe more passionately in him, yet we eagerly commit ourselves to other pursuits and idols with far less certainty simply because we desire them more.

Our sinful human natures do not yearn to “see” God, and almost assuredly would not believe even if He did write his name in the sky. Jesus aptly described this stubborn resistance to belief in him when he told the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-21): “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.”

In conclusion, God **has** given us enough reasons to believe in him rationally but has not given us so much evidence that we can believe in him based on reason alone. We should first look around us – the universe and all that is contained within it – its remarkable beauty and specified complexity, which screams the reality of an omniscient and omnipotent Creator. If we are looking for God’s name written in the sky, there you have it! Next, consider the Bible, God’s glorious record of activity and personal revelation over history, miraculously contained in the pages of a single book compiled over the course of several thousand years, yet having the cohesiveness of a detailed biographical epic. Finally and most importantly, look at the person of Jesus Christ. His life and ultimate sacrifice on the Cross convincingly reveals a God who loves us enough to die for his creation, in order to heal and restore our cursed world and broken relationship with him that once was intimate and perfect. Jesus’s resurrection from the dead, one of the most well-attested events of ancient history, was God’s most dramatic demonstration of his power and presence in our world and continues to challenge even the most ardent of skeptics. For those who accept the testimony of all this conclusive evidence and fall to their knees in humility and repentance, God has promised not to plant an imposing thought of his existence in our minds, but rather He commits not only to reveal himself to us more fully, but also to dwell in our hearts and nurture a loving relationship with us for all of eternity.

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ANANIA NAREKATSI

ON THE VIRTUE OF HUMILITY

by Dr. Michael Papazian

Often when I teach a class on ethics I am asked what distinguishes the moral teachings of Christianity from those of other religions or philosophies. Principles like the Golden Rule—*Do to others what you would want them to do to you* (Luke 6:30)—are expressed in some form by virtually every world religion. We would have to look somewhere else to find a distinctively Christian teaching that radically changed the way that people thought about what a good and virtuous life is. I usually respond that one revolutionary feature of Christian ethics is that it turned humility into a virtue. When we compare the Christian ideal with the ethical attitudes that prevailed at the time of the Christ's birth, we find a striking contrast. The ancient world did not include humility in its listings of virtues. The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), whose moral philosophy both reflected and shaped ethical thinking for many centuries, regarded humility as unbecoming of a free aristocratic Greek male such as himself. He considered humility as appropriate for slaves and those whom the prevailing

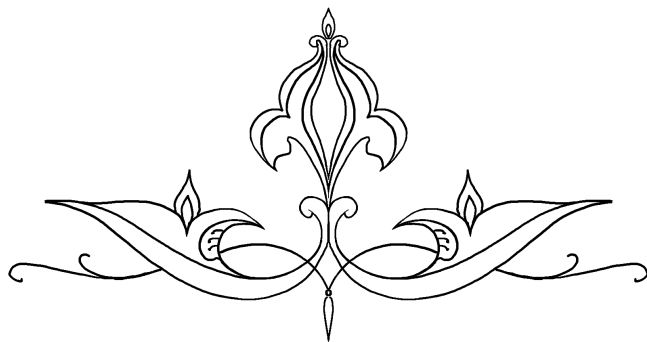
social norms classified as inferior due to their race, class, or sex. For Aristotle, the ideally virtuous man exhibits pride and satisfaction in his status and achievements.

Given this traditional disdain of humility in the ancient Mediterranean world, one can easily imagine how upsetting the Christian characterization of pride as a sin and of humility as a virtue would appear to those in positions of power. The new faith overturned older ideas of order and decorum; it threatened the established structures of authority. Baptism in Christ did not just wipe away sin but also challenged the social divisions that a philosopher like Aristotle thought necessary for a well-run society. As St. Paul exclaimed in one of the more subversive verses of the Bible, *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus* (Galatians 3:28). For now we are all slaves of God. As such, we are expected to humble ourselves before our true master who has freed us from the bonds of sin in this world.

Many Christian theologians have written on the topic of humility. One of the most eloquent works on

humility in the Armenian tradition is a short treatise by Anania of Narek (Մանասի Նարեկացի), the tenth century abbot and founder of Narekavank, the monastery of Narek. This monastery is especially renowned because of Anania's most famous pupil, St. Gregory of Narek (Սուրբ Գրիգոր Նարեկացի). Anania's writings clearly inspired Gregory's work, but they are also worth reading for their intrinsic value as insightful works of theology. Anania wrote a series of *parenese*s or works that instruct their readers in morality and virtue. In contrast to the more complex poetry of his student's masterpiece, the *Book of Lamentation* (Գիրք ողբերգութեան), Anania's works are written in a plain and easy to understand Armenian. That simplicity coheres with the mission of Narekavank, which was to train monks who would bring the church closer to a laity that had grown increasingly disengaged and indifferent. Anania's exhortations are models of clear moral teachings that would help monks and vardapets to preach in the churches and educate the people in Christian morality.

Anania's parenesis on humility (Նրբատ վասն խոնարհութեան) is addressed to an unknown monk who had asked the abbot to expound on the various dispositions and actions that mark a person of perfect humility. Anania provides numerous examples of humility, each supported with a biblical verse or some other quote, though sometimes it is only a loose paraphrase of scripture. I offer here a translation of a portion of this important Armenian contribution to moral theology. The excerpt ends with a brief poem. Anania often included poetry in his prose writings. Scholars believe that he was the first Armenian sacred author to compose non-liturgical poetry, a genre that would be taken up and perfected by his illustrious student. The English translation is based on the Armenian edition by Hracheay Tamrazean printed in the *Matenagirk Hayots* [Armenian Classical Authors], vol. 10, p. 342-46.



PARENESIS ON HUMILITY BY ANANIA VARDAPET

Now you asked me how many parts of humility there are that when taken together make a person complete in humility. You requested that I, Anania, write about this in a book. As the apostle said: *with all humility regard others as better than yourselves* (Philippians 2:3). By saying "all," he makes clear that there are many parts of humility. There are some who only have a few of these, some who have many, and others who have all of them. Now first and foremost it is humility when a man esteems himself less worthy than everyone else, like the tax collector who did not want to lift his eyes up to heaven and whom the Lord praised (Luke 18:13). Humility is also submission, by which one considers oneself in the ranks of servants and serves one's companion, as the apostle says: *submit to one another in the fear of God* (Ephesians 5:21). Humility is sadness and tears through which one does not count oneself among the hired hands even when one acts virtuously, but hopes through prayer to receive the kingdom. This is why the Lord said: *when you have accomplished all these virtues, say, 'We are worthless servants, we have done only what we ought to have done'* (Luke 17:10).

Humility is when one has patience toward one's brother in a time of anger and considers oneself at fault, for to become enraged and oppose him is pride. As Solomon said: *The proud man does not bear indignities* (Cf. Proverbs 14:17, but there it says "The wise man bears many [indignities]"). Humility is silence, in which one does not consider oneself worthy to stand and speak before a multitude. For as the Lord said, *He who speaks on his own seeks his own glory* (John 7:18).

Humility is when people honor your friend and neglect you, and yet you are not displeased but instead say "I am not worthy even of that which I have." As Solomon said: *Do not toil to be with the rich but restrain yourself and you will find favor with God* (Cf. Proverbs 23:4). Humility is when one does not hold one's friend in servitude but serves him oneself, as the Lord says: *The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve* (Matthew 20:28).

Humility is also loving one's brother. For these

are the commandments of love: to humble oneself before one's companions, to share their pains when they are sick, to comfort them when they mourn, to give yourself in service to them. The proud person does not do this and does not regard his brother to be worthy of his humility but regards himself superior to all. This is why it is written: *Like salt, humility seasons every virtue, and where there is neither love nor humility, virtue loses its flavor and is discarded* (Cf. Matthew 5:13 and St. Isaac of Nineveh (seventh century): "As salt is to all kinds of meat, so is humility to all the virtues" (from *On True Knowledge and Temptations* 335)).

Humility is when men praise you and give you gifts, yet you do not consider it a reflection of your own worth but you glorify and praise God and say, "This comes from your mercy and not according to my own merit." As Solomon said: *As much grandeur as you achieve, if you remain humble you will find mercy and grace before God* (Proverbs 16:3, in the Armenian version).

Humility is the wearing of plain clothing, not what the celebrities and glorified people wear. For men chase after glory with their clothes. This is why

it is written: *Do not become soft through your dress nor adorn yourself with delicate finery; for their beauty is vain* (Cf. 1Peter 3:3).

Humility is when the day passes by peacefully and you arrive at evening and praise God, saying:

*Many people—even among the saints—
Are anxious and in need.
Yet I, who am unworthy,
To me you gave bread and nourishment,
And made my day pass in peace.
This now is due to your mercy,
And not according to my merit.*

This is why the prophet said: *Who am I, O Lord, my Lord, and what is my house, that you have loved me this much?* (2 Samuel 7:18)

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SECOND HALF OF LIFE

by Rev. Fr. Hovnan Demerjian

"And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' " (Matthew 3:16-17)

It is a great blessing to worship in the Armenian Church during Christmas time, though at first the way our church does things seems out of line with how the rest of the world celebrates Christmas. We celebrate Christmas on January 6th, while most other Christians celebrate on December 25th. Christmas in other churches is all about baby Jesus. On Christmas day in the Armenian Church, we effectively skip over the childhood of the most important man who ever lived, and instead focus on his baptism, when he was already thirty years old!

But though we may be out of sync with much of Western Christianity, we are on solid theological ground in deemphasizing baby Jesus, as our Holy Scriptures do much the same. The four Gospels have a total of eighty-nine chapters, but only four of these chapters are dedicated to baby Jesus. The Gospels are almost totally silent on Jesus' life from his infancy to his baptism as a fully grown adult. We know nothing of how Jesus did in school, whether he was up and coming in the family business, or what his neighbors, peers or family thought of him.

And that—says our Bible and our church tradition—is just how it should be. The Gospel's disregard of Jesus' childhood is not because Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were bad writers, or because some pages accidentally dropped out of their manuscripts. We focus on Jesus' adult baptism on purpose during Christmas—and if we are mindful of why we do—we can recover some life-giving perspective on each of our spiritual journeys today.

In celebrating Jesus' birth as an adult, our church acknowledges a truth about each of our spiritual journeys—that there are two halves of life, and the second half is much more important (Fr. Richard Rohr). The task of the first half of life, from youth till around 30 years old in Jesus day (till around 40 in our day), is to create a proper container for one's life and answer some central questions. "Who am I?" "What makes me significant?" "How can I support myself?" "Who will go with me?" We all must make a container for our lives; Jesus did too, but that's just the first half of life. The great tragedy, however, is if we stop there. Because if we do, we miss out on the second half of life, which is quite

simply, to find what fills and fulfills the container of our lives with the Holy Spirit it is meant to hold and share.

Jesus could have, and maybe did, build up quite a life for himself by the time he was thirty; we don't know. We do know that wherever he went people followed, and that he was an unparalleled motivator, coach and teacher. 'Never has anyone spoken like this!' (John 7:46) and 'He does all things well' (Mark 7:31) were a couple of his reviews. Yet Jesus' great temptation and ours, which comes in the wilderness crisis of mid-life, is to cling to the success, wealth, and influence we build—the container of the first half of life—instead of moving on to its proper contents. This Christmas season, we are asked to follow our Lord in renouncing this great temptation; to renounce our success and instead seek our significance. We are asked to follow Jesus through adult baptism—through rebirth into the second half of life—where God desires to fill the container of our lives with his Holy Spirit; which we in turn pour out in love and service of others.

In the end, the first half of Jesus' life just wasn't that important; where he came from, how he was raised and how he did in life. It is to be the same for us. In the end, no one will care about your or my position at work, whether we were deemed successful, or what neighbors, peers or family think of us. What is important, what is the true starting point of life, is when we let go of who we say we are, and open ourselves to who God says we are; "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). This day is to be the first day of the rest of our lives, where following Jesus, we are baptized, confirmed and brought into communion with the Holy Spirit of God. On this day we recall and embody the continuing miracle of the birth of Christ, of Christmas, which happens not when we are small, but when we come to know in the biggest sense, who God is calling us to be, now and always; amen.

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