

An Introduction to the Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Apostolic Church

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Worship in the Armenian Church

In Armenian the word that we translate as “worship” is “*yergeerbakoutyoun*.” Repeated often in the Divine Liturgy, the word means literally “kissing the ground.” It says a lot about the Armenian understanding of what we do in church. The Armenian Church, like all the ancient Christian churches, worships not only in words, but also in gestures and rituals that express beyond words what we believe about God and our relationship with him. Words and thoughts alone cannot express all that we believe. The entire body and all the senses are involved. Offering incense, standing, raising our arms, bowing down, kneeling, venerating, moving in processions, elevating symbols of our faith, singing, these are the active ways in which we proclaim our faith.

Another word that all of the ancient churches use for “worship” is *liturgy* [*bashdamounk*], a word that in Armenian and Greek implies effort. (The same Greek root is found in the word “energy”). Worship in the Armenian Church is liturgical; it involves effort and energy by the faithful. Though the pews, curtain, and elevated altar might make the Divine Liturgy appear as a performance for an audience to sit and watch, it is not at all a show. In the Armenian Church, all the people officiate, celebrating their salvation by Jesus Christ in the Church.

The salvation that we celebrate is a new and never-ending condition where mankind can live in everlasting, joyous communion with its Creator. The New Testament tells how God entered human history and revealed himself to the world physically, in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. His birth as a human being, and his death and resurrection have brought about this climax in humanity’s relationship with God. God accomplished all of this out of his great love for his creatures, and he only desires that we accept it, that we recognize WHO he is, and WHAT he has done for us. This is the aim of worshipping: to proclaim and celebrate in words and rituals the new life God has given us by his Son, Jesus Christ in the Church.

Consequently, our worship is corporate. It is an undertaking of the Church, the community of people who have been blessed with God’s promises. Although private devotion also has a place in the Christian’s life, Christian faith is always based on a community of people. The first thing Christ did when he began his ministry was to gather a community of followers around him. The major theme of the Divine Liturgy, the Church’s main worship service, is the communion of the faithful of the Church with each other and with Jesus Christ in holy communion. This is why our worship services so often repeat, “Let us commit ourselves and one another to the Lord our God,” and most of our prayers use “we.”

Furthermore, our worship belongs to the entire Church. The Divine Liturgy is not just people saying their own private prayers in the same place at the same time. Worship means a community together in heart, soul and mind, praying to God “with one accord,” “with one mouth,” “with one word,” as our prayers say. So the progression of the liturgy should be known by all, not just the priest, choir director and deacons. In the Armenian

Church we do not make the service up as we go along, or substantially change it from week to week. This is so that we can pray *together*.

Moreover, our worship is a commemoration. If worship consists of proclaiming WHO God is, and WHAT he has done for us, then we must recall the Biblical history of our salvation, event by event. Already in the Old Testament, the Israelites worshipped this way, by listing all of the events in their history for which God was the inspiration (Ps 136 and Josh 24:1-15). For the Church, every service, and particularly the Divine Liturgy, is a celebration where the Church *remembers* its salvation (the word “remember” is used frequently in the Divine Liturgy). This was accomplished in the life of Jesus Christ, that is, in his incarnation (birth as a human being), baptism, healing and teaching ministry, betrayal, crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection and ascension to heaven where he reigns with God the Father. This commemoration also includes events that have not happened yet, like Christ’s second coming at the end of time, the last judgment and the fulfillment of all of God’s promises. So Christian worship is a commemoration of past, present and future: the entire history of the relationship between God and his people.

What is the Divine Liturgy?

The principal liturgical service of the Armenian Church is, as its name implies, the Divine Liturgy (in Armenian, *Badarak*). The *Badarak* is not merely *one of the things* the Church does. It is the most important expression of the Church’s faith and identity.

On the last night of his earthly life, Jesus Christ gathered his followers together for one final meal with them, a traditional Jewish ritual meal that included prayers, psalms, breaking bread and sharing a cup of wine. The accounts of this incident in the New Testament tell us that the meal was progressing normally until Jesus took the bread into his hands, and having blessed it and broken it — just as he always had — he unexpectedly proclaimed, “This is my body which is for you.” We can only imagine the confusion in the minds of Jesus’ disciples. It must have seemed like a scandal to deviate from the usual course of this traditional meal. Later, having blessed a cup of wine, Jesus held it in front of them saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” St. Paul adds, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” [1Cor11:23-26].

Jesus’ apostles did repeat this ritual in commemoration of their Lord. The four gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the epistles of St. Paul and other ancient Christian writings tell us that the young Christian community considered the regular observance of this ritual, instituted by Jesus Christ himself, to be their most important Christian obligation. It was for them a way to “be one” with Jesus Christ and to recall the mystery of perfect and everlasting life with God that he brought about for them, the life that he himself was: “I am the way and the truth and the life” [Jn 14:6].

As the Christian faith grew and spread throughout the world, this ceremony developed according to the various cultures that embraced it, a symbol of the very identity of the Church. The earliest known writings in the Armenian language show that the Armenians considered the principal expression and proclamation of their Christian faith to be the Divine Liturgy, the service centered on communion of Christ’s Body and Blood. The fifth-century Armenian historians known as Faustus and Agathangelos describe Armenians celebrating the Eucharist in monasteries and other settings, and they

quote from prayers which are still used today. Those prayer fragments and scenes from the liturgy form a link between us and the earliest Armenian Christians.

Two Halves of the Badarak:

In all of the ancient Churches, the Divine Liturgy consists of two large blocks: the Synaxis [*Jashou Zham*], and the Eucharist [*Kohapanoutyoun*]. In the Armenian *Badarak* these two halves are preceded by a preparatory introduction and end with a brief conclusion, both late additions to the ancient two-part structure.

The Synaxis, which means “Assembly,” or “Gathering together,” is often called the “Liturgy of the Word,” because this part of the Divine Liturgy center on the reading of passages from the Bible, especially the Holy Gospel. The Armenian Church fathers always emphasize that in the reading of the Gospel Jesus Christ himself is revealed. Around the turn of the eighth century, the Armenian theologian Stepanos of Siunik (†735) wrote, “...It is not a delegate who pronounces the Gospel, or even an angel, but the Lord of heaven and earth himself, saying, ‘I came from the Father and have come into the world’ [Jn 16:28].” So Christ is revealed in the Gospel reading and this corresponds to his revelation by his body and blood in Holy Communion.

The Synaxis has its roots in the ancient Jewish synagogue service. The earliest Christians were Jewish converts, and at least until the early second century, they continued the liturgical traditions of their forefathers, reorienting them, however, in the spirit of the new Christian faith. St. Justin the Martyr (†c. 165) describes a Christian synaxis of scriptural readings, sermon, common prayers and kiss of peace followed by the Eucharist; an outline similar to ours today.

In Armenia, Stepanos of Siunik (cited above) gives the earliest and most complete account of the Synaxis. He describes a ceremony at the third hour (9:00 a.m.), on the “great day of the resurrection of our Lord” (Sunday). That service begins with a procession into the Church to the altar, a procession with the gospel book around the altar while singing “Holy God...” [*Soorp Asdvadz*], a litany, scripture readings, alleluia, the gospel reading, recitation of the Creed, and a closing litany and prayer. This ancient outline corresponds to our Synaxis, except for some minor additions made by the twelfth century.

Eucharist: Giving Thanks

The second block of the *Badarak* is called the “Eucharist,” a Greek word meaning “thanksgiving.” We give thanks to the Lord because he has saved us and cares for us. The heart of the Eucharist in all ancient Christian traditions is called the Anaphora or Eucharistic Prayer [*Khorhrtamadooyts* or *Kohootyan Aghotk*]. This long prayer is recited by the priest on behalf of all the people.

Each of the ancient Churches has its own repertory of individual Eucharistic prayers which are similar in literary structure and theme, but vary in content. Most of them are quite ancient and bear the names of great Church Fathers. The Eucharistic prayer printed in this book and used every Sunday in the Armenian Church throughout the world is attributed to St. Athanasius, the great fourth-century Egyptian theological who so greatly inspired Armenian theological thinking. The Anaphora of St. Athanasius reflects the individuality of the Christian faith as experienced in Armenia. It brings

together all of the these of the Divine Liturgy: thanksgiving, worship, commemoration, sacrifice, Holy Communion, and the celebration of our salvation.

In the Divine Liturgy, the Church takes unleavened bread and wine and offers them to God. We ask that he sanctify them by his Holy Spirit and change them into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, a means for our communion with him. The Armenian Church believes that when we receive holy communion, we are not eating mere bread and wine. By the power of God, we are receiving Christ himself, as He commanded us, in a manner which, we admit, is beyond our comprehension.

Holy Communion is a sign of the union of each member of the Church with the other and with God. When a piece of bread is broken into small pieces and distributed to the members of a group to eat, it is an act of unification: that piece of bread that was once whole is now shared by the members of the group. It brings them together. Sharing a single cup of wine has the same meaning. When that bread is not just bread, but Christ himself, and when that cup of wine is not just wine, but Christ's life-blood, then we can see the power of this ritual as a real communion ("co-union") with each other and with the Son of God. Having done this, we become the Church, the body of Christ, in the fullest sense. And this is what Christianity is all about: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." [1Cor 10:16]

We participate most fully in the Divine Liturgy when we receive holy communion. It is the greatest Christian privilege, and ideally, baptized members of the Armenian Church should receive communion whenever the *Badarak* is celebrated.

How to Participate Meaningfully in the Divine Liturgy

1. **Make a commitment.** Liturgy is active. Those who desire to make it more relevant in their lives need to be willing to make the effort to learn it and understand it. This is the path to faith, to the knowledge of God, and to participation in the Divine Liturgy. Like faith, worship is not easy and it does not come automatically.
2. **Go to Church every Sunday** and be part of the Divine Liturgy. We do not learn the Divine Liturgy by reading or talking about it, but by doing it regularly. Worship in word and in ritual: Imprint yourself with the sign of the cross every time the Lord's name is mentioned, at the beginning and end of prayers, and at any other time that you wish, as a sign of faith. Bow down to the Lord when invited by the deacon ["Let us bow down to God" *Asdoodzo yergurbakestsook*]. Recite the Nicene Creed and make the effort to live out that confession of faith. During the hymn "*Der Voghormya* [Lord of mercy]," pray for every person in the Church, by name if you can. Personalize the deacon's prayer petitions by silently adding the particular people and causes for which you would like to pray. Greet the person next to you lovingly with the Kiss of Peace, the sign of our unity as children of God.
3. **Learn the Badarak.** Thoughtfully read the texts and know them by heart. The prayers offered by the priest are not private and they are not *his*. He is a spokesman for the people. The prayers belong to the people. You participate in the Divine Liturgy to the extent that you understand the prayers and endorse them with your signature, "Amen."

4. **Read the Bible.** It is the textbook of the Divine Liturgy. Liturgy is in the Bible in action. Every word you hear in the Divine Liturgy is inspired by the Bible, often verbatim. Every ritual you see has its roots in the Bible. The hymns are commentaries on the Bible.

Is the Divine Liturgy biblical? Of course. Not only that, the *Bible is liturgical*. Christ's apostles were celebrating the Eucharist long before St. Paul wrote down the earliest biblical account of the Last Supper [1Cor 11:23-26], and before the gospel accounts of that event. The psalms and biblical hymns in the Old and New Testaments were sung in the early Church before they were recorded in the Bible.

We need to know the Bible to worship actively.

5. **Prepare yourself spiritually.** Like any party of holiday, half the satisfaction of a celebration is in the anticipation. The same is true of the Divine Liturgy. Starting on Saturday evening and especially on Sunday morning you should begin to focus on the mystery of the Divine Liturgy by prayer and fasting. Fasting is a physical aid to prayer. A slight feeling of hunger helps us to remember that our real fulfillment is not in the pleasure of eating, but in Christ and the spiritual nourishment he offers us.

6. **Receive Christ in Holy Communion** at every Divine Liturgy if possible. There is no better way to participate in the Divine Liturgy, and to make it a meaningful and powerful force in our lives than by receiving the Body and Blood of the living Son of God into our bodies, and allowing him to work on us from the inside.