

A Commentary on the Armenian Church's Divine Liturgy of St. Athanasius

Introduction to the Badarak

The Divine Liturgy is the main worship service of the Armenian Church. But the Badarak, as we call it in Armenian, is much more than that. It provides the most intimate encounter we can have with God in this life. In the Divine Liturgy, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, comes to his people -- to you and me -- in two forms: First, by his Word, in the reading of the holy Gospel; and second, by his holy Body and Blood, in Holy Communion. These two actions -- the reading of the Word of God, and the reception of Holy Communion -- are the two pillars or building blocks of the Divine Liturgy in all ancient, apostolic churches.

Supported by these two pillars is a magnificent structure of words, music, symbols, and rituals. For those unfamiliar with it, the Divine Liturgy can seem like a bewildering array of disjointed movements and rituals, and arcane theological terminology. The complex interplay of the celebrant priest, the deacons, the other altar servers, the choir and the people might lead one to overlook the logic and purpose of the Divine Liturgy, and to miss its very real benefits.

Back in the tenth century, the great Armenian theologian Khosrov Antsevatsi eloquently described the importance of the Divine Liturgy when he wrote: "Since those who confess and show repentance receive atonement by means of the Holy Mystery [the Badarak], and are reunited to Christ in order to become for Him Body and members, we should be eager for the great medicine." The Divine Liturgy is the great medicine that provides true meaning and direction for our lives. It offers the peace and solace that only God can give -- a free gift no less -- in an age when so many people are searching, and spending millions of dollars in vain to find personal stability and security.

The Badarak really is a matter of life and death. This guide to the Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church is something like a travelogue that leads you on your journey supplying helpful information about points of interest along the way. It is designed to accompany the new Divine Liturgy "Pew Book," *The Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church: With Modern Armenian and English Translations, Transliteration, Musical Notation, Introduction and Notes* (New York: St. Vartan Press, 1999). Page numbers from the Pew Book have been placed in square brackets [] for easy cross-reference. While it will not answer all your questions, this booklet will help you to discover the larger themes that unite the words, music and rituals of the Badarak. In this way, it is hoped, you will be drawn into deeper and more meaningful participation in the Divine Liturgy.

Before the Badarak Begins: We Prepare Ourselves

We prepare ourselves for the Divine Liturgy both physically and spiritually. The custom of the Armenian Church is to fast from all food and drink from the time we wake up on Sunday morning until we have received Holy Communion. Fasting helps us to focus our minds and hearts on the spiritual nourishment we will receive in Holy Communion. Exceptions are made, of course, for those who, for health reasons, must eat in the morning. They may have a light breakfast and still come forward for Holy Communion.

Spiritual preparation for the Badarak is by means of prayer. To participate fully in the Divine Liturgy, one should devote at least fifteen minutes of quiet time with God either on Saturday night, or on Sunday morning. This quiet time serves to help us focus on the great mystery of being with God. It can include reading of, and meditation on relevant passages from the Bible, or prayer and reflection.

As we shall see, the Badarak is a procedure with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Therefore, it is very important to arrive in Church at least five minutes before the Divine Liturgy begins, and to remain attentive until the end. When we enter the Church, we make the sign of the Cross, take a place -- preferably not in the rear pews -- and standing, recite the Lord's Prayer. Then we may be seated in silence until the celebrant and servers enter the church.

Before the Badarak Begins: The Priest Prepares Himself Alternating

For the celebrant priest, the Divine Liturgy begins in silent prayer in the vestry. There, the priest and deacon alternately recite the verses of Psalm 131, "Let your priests clothe themselves with righteousness; and let your saints exult with joy." The priest then prays to God, acknowledging his own sinfulness and the extraordinary privilege given to him by God to lead the people of God in the offering of the Divine Liturgy.

The various vestments worn by the priest are inspired by those worn by the Jewish priests in the temple, as described in Exodus 28. Each article is accompanied by a brief prayer, which the priest offers as the deacon hands it to him to put on. As he puts on each successive garment, the priest prays that God will also clothe him with the grace and virtues to preside worthily at the Badarak: "Clothe me with a radiant garment and fortify me against the influence of the evil one, that I may be worthy to glorify your glorious name..."[3].

The Badarak Begins: Procession Into the Church and Up to the Altar

Led by the candle-bearers and altar servers, the celebrant enters the sanctuary from the vestry while the people sing, Khorhoort khoreen, "Profound mystery." The "mystery" is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became a human being in order to fill us personally with his divine blessings, and with eternal life.

The Divine Liturgy begins not in the elevated altar space known as the bema (khoran), but among the people. Before the prayers at the altar, the priest again acknowledges his weakness and human frailty. As a visible sign that he relies on God to forgive his sins and make him worthy to worship God, the celebrant washes his hands, silently reciting Psalm 26: "I will wash my hands in innocence; and will go around your altar, O Lord." [4]. He then turns toward the people and confesses his sinfulness, asking them to pray that God forgive him. [5].

Only then, in the words of Psalm 100, does the assembly offer its first expression of praise, "Make a shout to the Lord, all lands; serve the Lord with gladness." [6]

Alternating the verses of Psalm 43, the priest and deacons go up to the altar, where the celebrant prays for the first time, "...in this dwelling of holiness, this place of praise; in this habitation of angels, this place of the expiation of mankind; before these holy signs and the holy place that hold God up to us and are made resplendent..." [7]

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The Procession and the Beginning of the Liturgy of the Word (Synaxis or Midday Office)

When the altar and the Eucharistic gifts have been prepared, the curtain opens and the deacons lead the priest in a procession around the altar and down into the nave. The priest offers incense to the main and side altars, the baptismal font, the sacred icons, and all the people. As the priest makes his way around the church, the faithful come up to him, kiss the hand cross and say, Heeshescheer yev zees arachee anmah kareenun Asdoodzo [Remember me, too, before the immortal Lamb of God]. This is an acknowledgment that during the Divine Liturgy we encounter "the Lamb of God," Jesus Christ himself. The people ask that the priest pray for them in the presence of Jesus.

The procession marks the beginning of the Liturgy of the Word. Everything until this point has been a preparation for the Liturgy of the Word and the Eucharist, the two components of the Badarak. The Liturgy of the Word concerns the Word of God, Jesus Christ. He comes to his people in the public reading of the Bible, and especially when the deacon solemnly chants a passage from one of the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John). Every prayer, psalm, hymn and ritual during this part of the Divine Liturgy is related to Jesus Christ as the Word, the supreme expression of God. This idea is inspired by the Gospel according to John: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God" [John 1:1].

A Hymn to Jesus Christ the Only-Begotten Son of God

Most appropriately, the Liturgy of the Word begins with a hymn to Jesus Christ, the Word, Meeyadzeen Vortee yev Pant Asdvadz [Only-begotten Son and Word of God]. The words of this ancient hymn express our conviction that Jesus Christ is the immortal Son of God. He became man by being born of the holy Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. He was crucified and destroyed death in order to give us eternal life. He is one person of the Holy Trinity [12].

Another hymn, called the Jashoo Sharagan [Midday Hymn] changes each Sunday according to the feast or season of the church year. The hymn always focuses on Jesus Christ and the gift of salvation that he has made available for according us.

The Gospel Procession: A Parade in Honor of the Savior

Since the Gospel contains the words of Jesus, the Son of God, it is chanted with great solemnity. The senior deacon calls everyone to attention by chanting Broskhoomeh, "Be attentive" [13]. He takes the ornately bound Gospel book from the priest and elevates it high over his head. Lifting up the Gospel book is a sign of the authority of God's Word over our lives. When we commit ourselves to the wisdom of the Bible, we find there a powerful source of meaning and direction.

The altar servers then follow the senior deacon in procession around the holy altar. Just as we honor a hero by organizing a parade, in church we worship Jesus Christ by processing around the altar with the Gospel book that contains His Word. At the end of the procession, the deacon lowers the Gospel book so that those who will be reading the day's Scripture readings may kiss it, a sign of their faith and devotion.

The hymn that is sung during the Gospel procession, Soorp Asdvadz [Holy God], is also in honor of Jesus Christ, who is holy, mighty, and immortal, and who rose from the dead for our salvation [14]. As we sing this hymn, we should take comfort in how powerful a guardian we have in Jesus Christ.

This hymn is followed by a litany chanted by the deacons. A litany is a series of chanted petitions, or prayer requests, in which the deacon invites the people to pray for various intentions: for peace in the world, for the bishops of the church, for the Catholicos, for the clergy and faithful, for the deceased [15-16]. The deacon ends each petition with the words, uzDer aghachestsook [Let us beseech the Lord]. The choir and people respond, Der voghormya [Lord have mercy].

During and after the litany, the priest prays that God will answer our prayers; that he will "accept the supplications of us [His] servants and be merciful to us according to [His] great mercy..." [17].

The Reading of the Scriptures: We are Nourished by the Word of God

The focus of the Liturgy of the Word is the public reading of passages from the Old and New Testaments. In the Armenian Church every Sunday specific Bible passages are read. They are selected according to an ancient system that has its roots in fourth-century Jerusalem, the cradle of the Church. The Scripture passages should be read by ordained tubeerk, "readers."

The Reading of the Holy Gospel: God is Speaking

The Gospel reading is the culmination of the Liturgy of the Word. It is not read, but chanted from the elevated bema by an ordained deacon. Before the deacon begins to chant the Gospel, the priest makes the sign of the cross over the people, saying Khaghaghootyoon amenetsoon [Peace to all]. An altar server advises the people to "Be attentive." The fathers of the Armenian Church emphasize that the solemn chanting of the Gospel during the Badarak is not only a lesson for our minds, but a real meeting with Jesus Christ. This is why the choir proclaims, Aseh Asdvadz [God is speaking] right before the deacon chants the Gospel. It also explains why Park kez Der Asdvadz mer [Glory to you, O Lord our God] is sung both before and after the Gospel is chanted [18].

The Nicene Creed: Our Common Faith

Another component of the Liturgy of the Word is the chanting of the Nicene Creed by all the people [18-19]. The Creed is the official declaration of the principal doctrines of the Church. It was composed by all the churches at the ecumenical Council of Nicea in 325 AD. We solemnly chant the Nicene Creed at every Divine Liturgy as a formal declaration that those participating in the Badarak are unified by the same understanding of who God is, and who we are relative to Him. In the articles of the Nicene Creed there is no room for diversity of opinion.

And yet each time we thoughtfully recite the Nicene Creed, the same declaration of faith that has united Christians throughout the world for 1700 years, we can sense our inclusion in the great, universal Church that extends beyond time and space. We begin to realize that our own faith is not strictly a personal affair. It is rooted and nourished by the "one, catholic and apostolic holy Church" [19] with Jesus Christ as its head [Colossians 1:18].

The End of the Liturgy of the Word

The Liturgy of the Word ends with a litany [19-21] and a prayer [21-22]. The closing prayer is specifically for those who are not yet baptized members of the Church. Since they are not yet permitted to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion, the unbaptized were originally dismissed at the end of the Liturgy of the Word. Speaking on their behalf, the priest prays, "Make us equal to your true worshipers, who worship you in spirit and in truth." This quotation from the Gospel according to St. John reminds us that being a

baptized Christian is a privilege, not a right: "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him" [John 4:23].

The Liturgy of the Word concludes with the priest's blessing over the people and is sealed with their acclamation, "Amen" [22].

The Liturgy of the Eucharist Begins

As the Liturgy of the Word concludes and the Eucharist begins, the priest takes off his crown and slippers following God's command: "Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" [Exodus 3:5]. Just like Moses at the burning bush, the priest prepares himself to come into the presence of God [22].

The Eucharist is the sacrament of the Lord's Body and Blood, offered exclusively to those who have made a life commitment to God and sealed it in baptism. St. Paul says as much when he warns that, "Any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself" [1 Corinthians 11:20]. This is why at this point in the Divine Liturgy the deacons dismiss the unbaptized and others who have not committed themselves fully to the Church, saying, "Let none of the catechumens, none of little faith and none of the penitents or the unclean draw near to this divine mystery" [23].

A Hymn about Holy Communion -- Marmeen deroonagan

Like the Liturgy of the Word, the Eucharist also begins with a hymn to Jesus Christ. This first hymn of the Eucharist asserts that when we receive the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion, we are being joined to the same Son of God who is praised by the angels in heaven: "The body of the Lord and the blood of the Savior are present before us. The heavenly hosts invisibly sing with unceasing voice: Holy, holy, holy, Lord of hosts" [23].

Marmeen deroonagan reminds us that in Holy Communion we become one with Almighty God. We literally tap into the divine power of God, for whom "All things are possible" [Matthew 19:26].
The Procession with the Gifts of Bread and Wine

Another similarity between the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Word is that both begin with a procession. The deacon processes around the altar elevating the veiled chalice above his head. Like the procession with the Gospel in the Liturgy of the Word, this procession draws our attention and devotion to the bread and wine, which become for us the Body and Blood of Jesus. While the deacon processes around the altar the priest prays once again that God will make him worthy to preside over this sacrament: "...Cleanse my soul and my mind from all the defilements of the evil one; and by the power of your Holy Spirit enable me ... to stand before this holy table and to consecrate your spotless body and your precious blood" [24].

At the end of the procession, the deacon hands the gifts to the celebrant as they alternate verses from Psalm 24. Yet again, the words of the Psalm express our faith that the contents of the chalice will become for us the Lord, "strong in his power ... mighty in battle." As the deacon hands the chalice to the priest he says: "This is the king of glory!" [Sa eenkn eh takavor parats] [25].

The Procession with the Gifts concludes with a proclamation by the deacon, leading into a prayer by the priest. On behalf of all those present he asks God to "grant this bread and this cup to be for us, who taste of them, a remedy of forgiveness of our sins" [26].

The Kiss of Peace

St. Paul routinely directed the members of the Christian communities to "greet one another with a holy kiss" [Romans 16:16, 1Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, 1Thessalonians 5:26, 1Peter 5:14]. This was a

visible sign of their unity and their common vision of love in Jesus Christ. It was also an evocative reminder of Jesus' warning: "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" [Matthew 5:23].

A ritualized greeting of peace and reconciliation is found in the Eucharist of all ancient churches. In the custom of the Armenian Church the person offering the greeting inclines his head first to the right, and then to, and the left of the person being greeted. The person offering the greeting says *Kreesdos ee mech mer haydnetsav* or "Christ is revealed among us." The one receiving the greeting responds, *Ornyal eh haydnootyoonun Kreesdosee*, "Blessed is the revelation of Christ."

The Kiss of Peace reminds us of our personal responsibility to "live peaceably with all" [Romans 12:18]. This is the necessary condition for us to enjoy the blessings of the Divine Liturgy. We must ask ourselves: "Does my brother or sister have something against me? What can I do to restore peace in our relationship?" The Bible reminds us: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" [1John 4:20]. All of this is summarized beautifully in the Hymn of the Kiss of Peace [27]. Christ, the Son of God, is revealed among us in the bread and wine. When we seal our love for one another with the Kiss of Peace, and when we receive Christ in Holy Communion, then Christ unites us in a bond of love and the Church becomes "one soul." The task of creating "one soul" in the church parish belongs to each one of us.

A Call to Attention: Let us Stand in Awe

After the Kiss of Peace the deacons invite the people to give their undivided attention to the Eucharistic Prayer, the main prayer of the Badarak. In the course of this long prayer [29-39] the celebrant, praying on behalf of all the people, asks God to do for us just what Jesus promised at his last Supper: to fill us with His Body and Blood, the sacrament of His holiness and divine life, in the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

In preparation for this important prayer, the deacons call on us to "lift up your minds in the fear of God;" to "give thanks to the lord with the whole heart" [29]. This is our cue to clear our minds of extraneous thoughts. We must now focus on God. At this moment nothing is more pressing and urgent than He.
The Eucharistic Prayer

The Eucharistic Prayer of the Armenian Church is attributed to the great fourth-century Egyptian theologian St. Athanasius, who strongly influenced Armenian theology. The Eucharistic Prayer of St. Athanasius is more than a simple prayer in the usual sense of the term. It is a poetic, highly theological declaration of the Armenian Church's understanding of God's intervention in human history, mostly in the person and deeds of Jesus Christ. The prayer retells the whole story of our salvation [29-32], focusing on the beginning and the end of Christ's life: his birth as a human being [29-30], and his death on the cross [30-31] as a sacrifice to God the Father for us. Christ's crucifixion led to his resurrection, by which he destroyed the permanence of death and replaced it with a new and never-ending life with God for those who choose to accept it.

The Prayer is called "Eucharistic" because the story of our salvation in Christ pivots around Christ's last Supper [31-32]. It was during that meal in the Upper Room, on the night before his execution, that Jesus gave his disciples bread and wine, declaring them to be his Body and Blood. More important, Jesus told them that in this ritual meal, he had established "the new covenant in my blood" [32] a radically new relationship of love and fellowship between God and humanity. "Do this," he told them, "in remembrance of me" [1 Corinthians 11:24-25].

When we celebrate the Eucharist and receive Holy Communion, we recall and recommit ourselves to this new covenant in the Church. We rededicate ourselves to Christian life as children of God and heirs of eternal life with him. We renew our oath of baptism. Filled with Christ himself, we say, "Yes, Lord. I want to follow

you and be with you in this life and for all eternity." Through the Eucharist, the Church offers us true inner peace, a real sense of belonging, and the true security that comes from being with God.

The Eucharistic Prayer is therefore the Church's prayer of life in Christ. It is the unique ministry of the priest to offer this prayer to God on behalf of all the faithful. Over the centuries this prayer, the heart of the Divine Liturgy, has been covered over by deacons' litanies and hymns so that today much of the Eucharistic Prayer is offered inaudibly by the celebrant. It is important, therefore, that we realize that this Prayer is not "private," and it is not "the priest's prayer." It is the prayer of all the children of God, the Church, to their Father in heaven.

The Preface

Theologians refer to the first part of the Eucharistic Prayer as the "Preface" [29-30]. The Preface praises God for sending his son, Jesus Christ, into the world to be born, and to take on the condition of humanity in order to cleanse it and reconcile it with God the Father. This is the mystery of Christ's incarnation. It is the teaching of the Armenian Church that in the incarnation the process of our salvation already began as Jesus embraced humanity, purifying it and infusing it with his divinity." Like the divine master-builder building a new work," our Eucharistic Prayer declares, "[Jesus] made this earth into heaven" [29].

We see the same mystery revealed in the bread and wine of the Badarak. As the twelfth-century Armenian St. Nersess Lambronatsi wrote, "For our sake you became earthly that we may become heavenly. For our sake you became bread that we, by partaking of you, may be sanctified."

The Hymn of the Angels: Holy, Holy, Holy

When the Son of God became man, he restored humanity to its original state of holiness. By doing this, he effectively promoted us to the level of the angels. According to the vision of the Prophet Isaiah [Isaiah 6:1-5], the angels worship God in heaven without ceasing, singing their own hymn of praise: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory. [Isaiah 6:3]

Through his incarnation, our Lord has given us the privilege to "join the heavenly ones in spiritual choirs, and in one voice ... [to] sing holy songs and make melodies and, boldly crying out, [to] shout with them and say Holy, holy, holy..." [29-30].

The angelic song of the three holies known as the "Sanctus," Soorp, soorp, soorp, is sung in the Eucharist of all ancient churches. When we sing this hymn, we are reminded of the extraordinary privilege of being a Christian.

The Last Supper

After the Sanctus, the Eucharistic Prayer describes "the outpouring of [Jesus'] infinite loving-kindness to us" [30]. The Prayer recalls God's repeated attempts, detailed in the Old Testament, to coax mankind back from the vain and sinful distractions of this life to the loving security of God. This culminates in the sacrifice of God's only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, who died on the Cross as a redemption for our sinfulness.

"The world-saving Cross...the occasion of our redemption" [30] is perpetuated for us in our celebration of the Lord's Supper. The Eucharistic Prayer narrates this event, quoting Christ's own words: "Take, eat; this is my body...Drink this all of you. This is my blood" [31]. Our celebration of the Badarak rests on the authority of these words of the Lord. We repeat the Lord's Supper in the Divine Liturgy not by any human authority, but because our Lord told us to do so [Mathew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24, Luke 22:19-20, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26]. Our Eucharistic Prayer declares: "Your only-begotten, beneficent Son gave us the commandment that we should always do this in remembrance of him" [31].

The Epiiclesis

"Epiiclesis" (eh-pi-lee'-sis) is the term theologians use to describe the next part of the Eucharistic Prayer. In the Epiiclesis we call on God's Holy Spirit to come down "upon us and upon these gifts," so that they may become "truly the Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" [34]. This is our main supplication in the Eucharistic Prayer.

The Intercessions

After the Epiiclesis, in the presence of Jesus Christ in his Body and Blood, we pray to our heavenly Father for all of our daily cares and concerns. The Prayer lists them one by one. These subsidiary requests of the Divine Liturgy are called "Intercessions." We pray for peace in the world, for the stability of the Armenian Church, for our Catholicos, Bishops and clergy, for civil leaders, for travelers, prisoners, captives, for the sick and suffering, for temperate weather and sufficient food, for those who help the poor, for all the living and all the dead [35, 37,38-39].

We should never underestimate the power of prayer. Jesus said, "If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven." [Matthew 18:19]. There is no better time to ask our heavenly Father for whatever we need than during the Badarak, when we are assembled in the presence of Christ as the Church.

While the priest silently makes these intercessions in the Eucharistic Prayer [35, 37, 38-39], the deacons chant a litany in which they recall the names of the great saints of the Church [34-37]. We remember that the saints already live in the presence of God in heaven. But they also invisibly participate in our liturgy. We ask them to intercede with God -- literally, to put in a good word for us -- so that He may hear our prayers and answer them. All of this is expressed in the refrain, Heeshya Der yev voghormya, "Be mindful, Lord, and have mercy."

The Conclusion of the Eucharistic Prayer

The great Eucharistic Prayer ends with a final reference to Holy Communion, a closing doxology in praise of the Holy Trinity, and of course, the seal of all prayers, Amen: "And having cleansed our thoughts, make us temples fit for the reception of the Body and Blood of your Only-begotten, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, with whom to you, O Father almighty, together with the life-giving and liberating Holy Spirit, is befitting glory, dominion and honor, now and always and unto the ages of ages. Amen" [39].

Prayers and Hymns before Holy Communion

Originally at this point Holy Communion was distributed, the people were dismissed and the Divine Liturgy ended. But over the course of the centuries, new hymns and prayers were added between the end of the Eucharistic Prayer and the distribution of Holy Communion. These rites developed as further preparation for receiving Holy Communion. Theologians call these liturgical elements "Pre-Communion Rites."

The first pre-communion rite is a deacons' litany for Holy Communion: "By the holy, divine and immortal sacrifice offered on this holy altar ... that the Lord our God, who has accepted it at his holy, heavenly and intelligible altar, may in return send down upon us the grace and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, let us beseech the Lord" [39-40].

This litany leads into a prayer in which the celebrant gives thanks to God for giving us the grace to call him "Our Father" In the Lord's Prayer, and to open our hearts to him as we would a loving father [40].

The Lord's Prayer is then sung by all [41].

Two Hymns of Praise

The priest's exclamation, Ee surpootyoon surpots, "Holiness for the holy" [42] is the original invitation for the faithful ("the holy") to come forward to receive communion ("holiness"). It is a relic from an earlier time when Holy Communion was distributed at this point in the Divine Liturgy.

Eventually, two hymns were added here, before the distribution of Holy Communion. The first is addressed to Christ: Meeayn soorp, "The one holy" [42]. It is sung while the celebrant elevates the Eucharistic bread and the chalice over his head. The hymn is an acclamation that they are the Body and Blood of Christ. The second hymn is sung in praise of the three persons of the Holy Trinity: Amen, Hayr soorp, Vortet soorp, Hokeet soorp [43].

Following this hymn, the priest turns toward the people with the chalice and proclaims it to contain "the holy, holy, and precious Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who, having come down from heaven, is distributed among us." The celebrant continues with an incisive affirmation of the power of the sacrament: "This is life, hope of resurrection, expiation and remission of sins." Finally, the priest asks the people to "Sing psalms to the Lord our God ... our immortal heavenly king" [44].

Before Holy Communion

At one time the people would come forward for Holy Communion while the choir and people sang the communion hymn Ornyal eh Asdvadz, Kreesdos badarakyal. [47] . This hymn is based on Psalms 150 and 34. It corresponds with the priest's (and deacon's) exhortation to "Sing psalms to the Lord our God..." [44].

In more recent times, further development has taken place at this point in the Divine Liturgy. The hymn Der voghormya "Lord, have mercy" [45] is a stirring prayer that asks God's forgiveness for our failings. The hymn also asks for his help in our lives both individually and as a Church and nation.

At this point the curtain is closed [44]. Behind the curtain the priest offers two personal prayers before he himself receives Holy Communion. It is an ancient custom in all eastern churches that when the priest celebrating the Eucharist receives Holy Communion, this should be done out of the sight of the faithful.

One of these two prayers is attributed to the great church father St. John Chrysostom [46]. Not only the celebrant, but anyone receiving Holy Communion may silently offer this prayer while the choir sings Der voghormya, in preparation for the sacrament. Especially moving is the last phrase of the prayer. Quoting Jesus' words [John 6:56], the prayer asks the Lord to fulfill the promise he made to his apostles and to us: "Be with me always according to your unfailing promise that, 'Whoever eats my Body and drinks my Blood abides in me and I in him.' You did say so, you who love mankind. Uphold the words of your divine and irrevocable commandments. For you are the God of mercy and of compassion and of love toward mankind..." [46].

Confession and Absolution

Sin is anything that distracts us from "undivided devotion to the Lord" [1 Corinthians 7:35]. In a stress-filled and secular world Christians tend to deviate from God, forgetting their responsibilities, but also their abundant blessings as baptized children of God. St. Paul writes that we must be "blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world" [Philippians 2:15].

When we fall short of this high calling, as we are bound to do, the Church provides a sacrament by which we can demonstrate our remorse and desire to return to the path that leads to God. The Armenian Church has many forms for reconciliation with God. The most direct vehicle is Holy Communion itself, which is given "for the expiation and remission of sins" [31]. There can be no closer meeting with the Lord in this life than receiving Him in the Eucharist.

It is an ancient tradition of the Church that even before receiving Holy Communion the faithful have opportunities to examine their lives and confess to a priest whatever they have done that has distracted them from the life in Christ. The priest prays that God will absolve them of their sinfulness and restore their status as children of God.

Today mental health professionals recognize the value of liberating ourselves of painful thoughts and feelings by sharing them with someone we trust. When we divulge our inner demons to someone, we can take control of them and be renewed. Confession offers all of this and more, the assurance of God's abiding acceptance and love.

In America it has become the custom to offer a general confession and absolution immediately before Holy Communion is distributed [48]. Led by the deacons, the people read a prepared examination of conscience that helps each person reflect on whatever sins he or she has committed. Then the priest, not by his own authority, but by the "very word" of Jesus Christ [49], absolves the sins of all who have made confession.

Holy Communion

In the Armenian Church Holy Communion is distributed in the following manner. The communicant stands before the priest, makes the sign of the cross and says Megha Asdoodzo, "I have sinned against God." The priest then places a small particle of our Lord's Body and Blood -- the bread having been dipped into the wine -- directly into the mouth of the communicant. The communicant again makes the sign of the Cross and steps aside for others to approach the blessed sacrament.

After all have received Holy Communion, using the chalice to imprint the sign of the Cross over the communicants, the priest imparts the blessing of Psalm 28:9: "Save your people, Lord, and bless your inheritance; shepherd them and lift them up from henceforth until eternity" [50].

Two Thanksgiving Hymns following Communion

In the early Church, the blessing above marked the end of the Divine Liturgy. There was no need for additional thanksgiving prayers since the Eucharistic Prayer is already the preeminent offering of gratitude to God for all of his blessings.

Nevertheless, over the course of the centuries, it seemed right for the Church to further elaborate its praise and thanksgiving to the Lord I for having given us the great sacrament of His Body and Blood. This takes the form of two hymns, Lutsak ee parooyants kots Der "We have been filled with your good things, O Lord" [50]; and Kohanamk uzken Der "We give thanks to you, O Lord" [51].

While the choir and people sing these songs, the celebrant offers another prayer of thanksgiving on behalf of all the people [51-52].

The curtain is closed during this period while the priest and deacons clean the chalice and paten, and return all the liturgical vessels to their proper places.

Conclusion of the Divine Liturgy: Prayer and Gospel

Yet another beautiful prayer of St. John Chrysostom is offered at the end of The Divine Liturgy. It asks God to protect those who have come to worship Him, and to build up His holy Church [52-53].

The Badarak concludes with the Word of God in the Gospel according to St. John [1:1-14]. This custom came to the Armenian Divine Liturgy from the medieval Roman Mass, which the Armenians came to know when the Crusaders passed through Cilician Armenia on their way to the Holy Land in the middle ages.

After the final blessing the faithful come forward to kiss the Gospel book, saying, Heeshestseh Der zamenayn Badarakus ko, "May the Lord remember all your sacrifices" [55].

It is truly proper and right

The Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church has sustained the Armenian people continuously for more than 1700 years. Our ancestors found stability and hope in the regular celebration of the Badarak. Their faith in Christ and their ability to persevere with courage, joy, and grace were nourished by regularly receiving the miraculous medicine of life in Holy Communion. Above all, they took to heart the opening words of the Eucharistic Prayer: "It is truly proper and right with most earnest diligence always to adore and glorify you, Father almighty" [29].

Like our blessed ancestors, the saints of the holy Armenian Church, let us today make Almighty God the priority of our lives, worshiping Him and receiving Him in the Divine Liturgy this Sunday and every Sunday until the last day of our lives. To do so with all our heart, soul, and mind, we will become beneficiaries of extraordinary riches in heaven and on earth. We spend so much time, energy, and money investing in the few years we have on this earth. Why not invest ourselves in the life which lasts for eternity? After all, to do so is "truly proper and right."

Sacred Music in the Armenian Church

Armenian Church music originated in the fifth century a.d., but its roots lie even further back, in Jewish biblical cantillations, Zoroastrian ritual melodies and pre-Christian folk songs. The earliest known examples of Armenian liturgical chant are credited to such figures as St. Mesrob, deviser of the Armenian alphabet (for example, the chant "Anganim arachi ko"), the catholicos St. Sahag ("Aysor kolov i petania"), and the historian Movses Khorenatsi ("Khorhourt medz yev skancheli").

The crown jewel of Armenian sacred music is the sharagan, or canonical hymn, and the sheer volume of sharagan created over the centuries indicates how beloved the genre was among Armenian monks. Eventually, these hymns were compiled in the sharagnots (or "book of sharagan"), and were canonized by assigning specific sharagan to particular days in the church calendar.

Arguably the most eloquent creator of Armenian Church music was the twelfth-century Catholicos Nerses Shnorhali, who perfected the sharagan form and added several hundred by his own hand (e.g., "Norahrash") to an already large repertoire. Like other hymnographers, Shnorhali created both the melody and the text, and chanted the music he authored.

Traditional Armenian music is distinctive not only in terms of its sound, but also in its structure, which differs in major ways from the more familiar Western forms. It is monophonic, consisting of a single melodic line without support of harmony. It is built on melody-modes, as opposed to the major and minor scales used in the West. Its rhythm is organized in intricate cyclical forms, rather than in regular metric divisions. The most ancient chants were written as prose, with versified hymns becoming prominent later. The setting of the text evolved over time from syllabic (one note to a syllable) to neumatic (a few notes to a syllable) to melismatic (extended melodic patterns to a single syllable). Armenian Church music is traditionally chanted by men alone, without accompaniment by musical instruments.

Despite such differences, Armenian musicians did eventually adopt Western compositional methods, but not until the mid-nineteenth century, when liturgical chants along with music of all kinds underwent substantial changes. Curiously, it was an Italian composer, Pietro Bianchini, who first set the music of the Armenian Divine Liturgy for four-part mixed choir, in a work published in Venice in 1877. Makar Yekmalian's familiar setting of the liturgy first appeared in an 1896 Leipzig edition. In Calcutta, India in 1897, Amy Aparcar arranged the melodies of the Divine Liturgy for four parts; Komitas Vartabed employed Aparcar's

setting as a model for his own. Komitas was still working on his version (arranged for a cappella male choir) in 1915, but in the wake of the Armenian Genocide he was never able to complete it. The Komitas liturgy was eventually published in Paris in 1933, after editing by his student Wardan Sarxian. Various versions of the Armenian Divine Liturgy abound today, including those by Ara Bartevidian, Egdar Manas, Parseh Atmaciyan and Khoren Mekanejian.

Unlike Western church music—with its rich variety of large-scale masses and oratorios—Armenian sacred music is more compact in dimension. Whether the form is common prayer or the high mass, Armenian services generally consist of brief spoken or intoned exchanges among the priest, deacon and choir.