

“Martyrdom” in the Armenian Church

“But watch out for yourselves, for they will deliver you up to councils, and you will be beaten in the synagogues. You will be brought before rulers and kings for my sake for a witness to them. ...And you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But he who endures to the end shall be saved.” -Jesus Christ
(St. Mark 13:8, 13)

Ever since the death of St. Stephen the Proto-Martyr (or First-Martyr), the Armenian Church along with all the Orthodox and Catholic Churches has had a deep reverence and veneration for those who witness to the Gospel in this ultimate way. In fact, the Greek word *Martyros* (from whence we get our English “Martyr”) literally means “to witness.” This great reverence is indicated by the fact that in our own Divine Liturgy during the Diptychs (or Intercessions) we invoke the name of St. Stephen in company with the Church’s two most glorious saints, the Asvadzadzin (Mother of God) St. Mary and St. John the Forerunner. It is beneficial for us to reflect on the Church’s understanding and honor for those who endure martyrdom for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Asdvadzashunch (Breath of God) or Holy Bible gives ample reflection on the great witness of martyrs. Indeed, the Armenian Church’s Calendar remembers the great Old Testament Martyrs, the Holy Maccabees who endured unspeakable tortures and death for their fidelity to God’s law and their rejection of pagan false religion (see 2 Mc 6:18-7:42). In the New Testament St. Paul in his “Epistle to the Hebrews,” states the following (in a passage which should be hauntingly familiar to every Armenian)

“Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented -of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.”

Then St. Paul draws out of their example of martyrdom the lesson all Christians are to learn, stating,

“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the originator and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (11:35b-38, 12:1-2).”

Furthermore, in the story of St. Stephen (Acts 6:8-7:60) there is a clear implication that martyrdom is the ultimate act of the imitation of Christ. Thus, like

Christ, before St. Stephen “falls asleep” in the Lord, he prays God will receive his spirit and then prays also for his persecutors who are stoning him (Acts 7:59-60). The lesson of the martyrs, therefore, is made manifest. They are profound examples of fidelity to Christ for the rest of the Christian faithful. If they can manifest such fidelity by their deaths shouldn't we also by our lives? Not only this, they are also intercessors unto the Lord on our behalf. This is the clear faith of the early Church and the book of Revelation shows the righteous Martyrs in heaven interceding on behalf of those on earth, crying out unto the Lord for His justice to be executed therein (Rev. 6:9-11, 20:4-6). It was the Martyrs willingness to give their lives for Christ -who first died for us- that makes them worthy of such great veneration.

To further underline all that has been said above, let us close by contemplating some references from the work entitled “Teaching of St. Gregory.” This is the very St. Gregory who was the Illuminator of the Armenian people. In this work -which if not being an exact quotation of him, surely is a faithful summary of the faith he brought to Armenia- there are some very elevated teachings regarding martyrdom. These teachings manifest the Orthodox understanding of Martyrdom present in the Armenian Church from the very beginning. They are worth quoting at length.

Thus St. Gregory taught the King St. Drtad about the beloved martyrs Saints Hripsimeh and Gayane (which Drtad had himself martyred):

“They gave their bodies as treasure for the Lord that they might receive them again and renew the outworn. Filled with the divine words they labored, and with great travail preached and rained on you the rain of heavenly profits, and thundered on you light and fire together, and more than the divine cloud poured assistance on you. Instead of the awesome rain and thunder with clouds, God thundered on you even more awesome things and willed your life and salvation.

“They who hated this world and all that is on earth, and loved heaven and the commandments of the king the Creator, wait on Him who received them and their souls in the upper realms of light; they have been taken up into the heavenly city and have become sharers in the joy of those in heaven. They are alive and have been changed from weakness into power, from corruptibility to incorruptibility from death to immortality. For they overcame the desires of the flesh and have shared in the divine glory and have been renewed into ineffable glory and saved from evil. Their bones have become temples of the Spirit of the Godhead because they are living with their God, and their holy souls have been cared for and preserved alive.

“Their bodies and their bones are temples of God in your midst, for in no other way can you reconcile God with yourselves and approach God, except by the intercession of their prayers, and unless you accept this faith by which they lived and became worthy to ascend to the living sea, from there to pour on you rivers of preaching of the divine words and to serve you the cup of creative love, if you can accept it...”

“Although yesterday you killed them, yet they are God's and now are living and will live for ever. By their intercession you will be reconciled with

God according to the instruction of the companion apostle to these apostles of yours, the great Paul, who said: ‘Through us be reconciled with God by the death of his Son (II Cor. 5:18).’ For the Son of God died and lived, and likewise his beloved martyrs are alive and intercede for you.” (The Teachings of St. Gregory, par. 562-564, 572)

As St. John the Theologian records in the Book of Revelation the Angels sing:

“Now have salvation and power come, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers is cast out, who accuses them before our God day and night. They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; love for life did not deter them from death. Therefore, rejoice, you heavens, and you who dwell in them.” (Revelation 12:11-12a)

In memory of the Armenian Martyrs,
Wm. DerGhazarian

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