

On the Erroneous Practice of Attending Sunday School Instead of the Divine Liturgy

As I lay in the bed at three in the morning pondering the question of how our Church ever got to a point that it excludes so many from the Sunday Badarak in order for them to attend Sunday School, I was compelled to write this message and ask “how did this happen?” I wondered to myself, “Do all Armenian parishes throughout the world do this or is this just a local phenomenon?” It seemed painfully obvious to me that what we have created is a non-liturgical sub-group of members within the Church who almost never attend Liturgy. The very first lesson of any Orthodox Church School should be the inestimable and irreplaceable value of the Divine Liturgy -something which should never be missed except for the most serious of reasons. Instead the lesson we teach our children (and adults) is that the Holy Sacrifice is optional, not really important, and that any other worthwhile endeavor can be substituted in its place. And yet no one speaks out against this practice -even though such a notion is a grave error, an abandonment of an essential dogma of our Faith and ultimately sinful. What other ancient, Orthodox or Catholic Church has such a practice? Indeed, other Orthodox and Catholics are shocked to hear of this. Fr. Thomas Hopko, former Dean of St. Vladimir Orthodox Seminary, summarizes the importance and significance of the Divine Liturgy for Orthodox Christians:

“The word liturgy means common work or common action. The Divine Liturgy is the common work of the Orthodox Church. It is the official action of the Church formally gathered together as the chosen People of God. The word church, as we remember, means a gathering or assembly of people specifically chosen and called apart to perform a particular task.

“The Divine Liturgy is the common action of Orthodox Christians officially gathered to constitute the Orthodox Church. It is the action of the Church assembled by God in order to be together in one community to worship, to pray, to sing, to hear God's Word, to be instructed in God's commandments, to offer itself with thanksgiving in Christ to God the Father, and to have the living experience of God's eternal kingdom through communion with the same Christ Who is present in his people by the Holy Spirit.

“The Divine Liturgy is always done by Orthodox Christians on the Lord's Day which is Sunday, the 'day after Sabbath' which is symbolic of the first day of creation and the last day -- or as it is called in Holy Tradition, the eighth day -- of the Kingdom of God. This is the day of Christ's resurrection from the dead, the day of God's judgment and victory predicted by the prophets, the Day of the Lord which inaugurates the presence and the power of the 'kingdom to come' already now within the life of this present world...

“As the common action of the People of God, the Divine Liturgy may be celebrated only once on any given day in an Orthodox Christian community. All of the members of the Church must be gathered together with their pastor in one place at one time. This includes even small children and infants who participate

fully in the communion of the liturgy from the day of their entrance into the Church through baptism and chrismation. Always everyone, always together. This is the traditional expression of the Orthodox Church about the Divine Liturgy.

“Because the Divine Liturgy exists for no other reason than to be the official all-inclusive act of prayer, worship, teaching, and communion of the entire Church in heaven and on earth, it may not be considered merely as one devotion among many, not even the highest or the greatest. The Divine Liturgy is not an act of personal piety. It is not a prayer service. It is not merely one of the sacraments. The Divine Liturgy is the one common sacrament of the very being of the Church Itself. It is the one sacramental manifestation of the essence of the Church as the Community of God in heaven and on earth. It is the one unique sacramental revelation of the Church as the mystical Body and Bride of Christ.”

As recently as our parish Lenten retreat, Vartabed Vahan Hovhanessian reiterated the above teaching in the clearest of terms. Every Sunday, all Orthodox Christians have a duty (and privilege) to take part in the Holy Sacrifice of the Divine Liturgy. As Vartabed Hovhanessian said, this is a commandment from the Lord Himself: "Do this in remembrance of me" (St. Lk. 22:14-20). As St. Paul writes, "For as often as you eat this Bread and drink this Cup you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes (1 Cor 11:26)." We should "not forsake the assembling together as Church as is the practice of some" (Heb 10: 25-27). Attendance of Sunday School classes does not fulfill this commandment. As Fr. Vahan said, we should all be in the Badarak at the latest by the time the Holy Eucharist begins (when the deacon's sing the "mi vok").

Instead of our children growing up with the Holy Eucharist as the center of their lives, they are growing up without it being a real part of their lives at all. No wonder so many of our members do not understand the meaning of the Holy Sacrifice and eventually drift away from the Church. I pray and humbly suggest we change this erroneous practice as soon as possible. The cost is inestimable.

Trusting in Christ's Inextinguishable Light,
Sub-Dn. Lazarus W. Der-Ghazarian,
Holy Apostolic Orthodox Church of Armenia, Eastern Diocese USA

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