

HOLY WEEK IN THE ARMENIAN ORTHODOX TRADITION

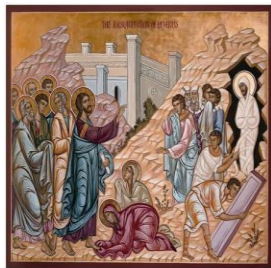
- Your Guide to Holy Week -

From the very beginnings of the Christian Church, observations of the defining moment of world history, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, have had their place within the faith life and liturgical tradition of the Orthodox believers. Beginning as a weekly commemoration of that day's events and a Eucharistic gathering in his memory on Sunday or "The Lord's Day" (*Kyriaki* in Greek or *Giragi* in Armenian), by the fourth century developed into a yearly one also, commemorating all the events surrounding the last week of Christ's life on earth. Here is a brief summary of the Week as it is observed today in the Armenian Orthodox Church:

REMEMBRANCE of the RESURRECTION OF LAZARUS

The Gospel of John recounts how six days before the Feast of Passover, Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from the dead,

in order to reveal God's unsurpassed glory and his compassion for all



mankind. The Church sees this as a prefiguring of Christ's own resurrection and of the cleansing and renewal of all human beings through it. In the Eastern Tradition, the Saturday before Palm Sunday is referred to as "Lazarus Saturday," as the resurrection of Lazarus is commemorated this day.

PALM SUNDAY

Commemorated by Orthodox faithful as the Feast of the Triumphant Entry of Jesus Christ into Jerusalem, *Dzaghgazart*



("decorated with flowers") is a dear and beloved feast day to the Armenian people. On that day we celebrate not the arrival of a triumphant, earthly king into Jerusalem (after all, the same people that hailed His entry would call for His death just a few days later), but of our heavenly king and bridegroom, come to invite all believers into the wedding banquet with Him. Following the solemn Divine Liturgy, during which palm branches are waved by the faithful, the Rite of the Opening of Gates (*Tûrmpatsék*), performed from within and without the doors of the church, mystically foreshadows our joyful entry into the heavenly kingdom to which all believers are invited by Jesus Christ.

GREAT & HOLY TUESDAY

Each day of Holy Week commemorates a certain aspect of Christ's last days on earth following His entry into Jerusalem and prior to His death and resurrection,

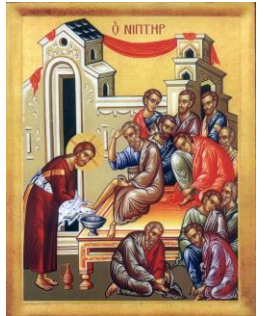


as they are recorded in the Gospels. Holy Monday commemorates the Withering of the Fig Tree by the side of the road (Matt. 21:18-22), Holy Wednesday the Anointing of Jesus at the house of Simon (Matt. 26:6-13). Yet, a most beloved tradition in the Armenian Church is Holy Tuesday's commemoration of Jesus' telling of the Parable of the Ten Virgins in the context of His discourse on the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the present age. He describes the heavenly kingdom as being like ten bridesmaids waiting with trimmed lanterns for a bridegroom, five being wise and five being foolish. The five wise bridesmaids brought along extra lamp oil to the wedding, figuring the bridegroom may be late in arriving. The foolish bridesmaids did not, and while they went out to buy more, the bridegroom arrived and took the five wise bridesmaids into the wedding banquet with him. During Vespers on this day, ten young girls bearing lit candles depict the Church as the wise and ready bridesmaids, while the faithful hear the scripture readings about God's plan to bring about an era

of a renewed and sanctified earth by abolition of the present corrupt one.

GREAT & HOLY THURSDAY

Holy or "Maundy" (French *mon* + *Dieu*, "my Lord") Thursday is possibly the most significant day of the Christian Church's calendar, perhaps even more



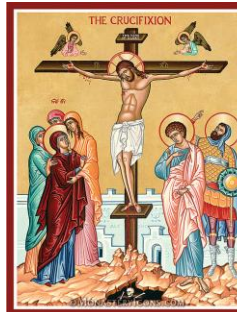
so than Easter Sunday or Christmas Day, at least judging by liturgical substance. It is, beyond a doubt the longest and weightiest liturgical day of the year, one very close to the hearts of the Armenian people throughout the centuries, and one that even in the time of Egeria the faithful waited for with great anticipation. Holy Thursday commemorates the Last Supper, passion and betrayal of our Lord. The central feature of Holy Thursday is the Holy Eucharist in commemoration of the Last Supper. Because of this, it also historically became the day when the penitents (those with an imposed excommunication because of a serious sin or crime) would officially be received back into good standing. Eventually, this extended to all members of the Church, and what evolved was a special service for this (*Gark Abashkharoghats*) performed in the morning. Following the Holy Eucharist of the Last Supper and communion of all the faithful is the Rite of Washing of Feet (*Vodûnlûva*). During

this service, twelve young men beautifully portray the Apostles while the celebrant portrays Christ himself, taking off His outer robe and washing their feet as a sign of humility and servitude. During this time also, olive oil is blessed and used for the anointing of feet. The faithful are given a portion of this oil to bring to their homes at the conclusion of the service. Undoubtedly the most spiritually compelling and moving of all the Armenian Church's services is that of Tenebrae (*Khavaroom*), which is the festal vigil (Nocturnes & Matins) for Good Friday (liturgically part of Good Friday, but in actuality performed late on Holy Thursday). During this service, we keep vigil along with the Apostles, who did so while Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. They are represented by twelve candlesticks placed on the altar. During the vigil portion, six Gospel readings are read while interspersed with Psalms and hymns. Following each Gospel lesson, the candles are extinguished two by two, until the whole church is left in darkness. Then is sung a most beautiful and haunting poetic ode (*dagh*) about the sufferings of Christ, entitled "Where are you, my mother?" (*Oor és mayr im*). Customarily, during the reading of each Gospel lesson the faithful tie one or two knots on a string, which they will later tie around their wrist or bedpost, keeping the blessings of the Gospel with them until the Feast of the Ascension Christ forty days after Easter. At the conclusion of the service,

the Worship of the Holy Cross (*Khachi Ko Krisdos Yérgirbakanémk*) is conducted on bended knee. Traditionally, Armenians have always attended *Khavaroom* in large numbers, with the seeming attitude "the longer and the later, the better!" While indeed, this important vigil service in many places throughout the world can be of great length, lasting into the late hours of the night, for practical purposes we have condensed much of it to a more suitable length.

GREAT & HOLY FRIDAY

Good Friday (as it is called in the West) commemorates the crucifixion and burial of Christ. In the afternoon, the Rite of Crucifixion (*Gark Khachélootyán*), a service of Psalms, hymns and readings commemorating the crucifixion, final hours and final sayings of Christ, is performed. The Worship of the Holy Cross is performed once again, but this time with all standing, as there is no liturgical kneeling allowed on Good Friday during the daytime. Later in the evening the Rite of Burial (*Gark Taghman*) is also performed, this being also one of the more beloved services of the Armenian people. During this service a "tomb" is draped in black and decorated with candles and flowers, which the people bring as an offering to the crucified Lord of glory. During this



service, a very beautiful and haunting rendition of the hymn "Soorp Asdvadz" is sung. The Worship of the Cross is performed once again, while kneeling. At the end of the service, the faithful are invited to approach and venerate the tomb, and to receive a flower. Truly, one should not miss out on this most moving service!

GREAT & HOLY SATURDAY

On Holy Saturday, in the evening, the Vigil Office of Lighting of Lamps (*Jûralooyts*) commences at sundown, the entry into Easter Sunday. During this service of scripture lessons, the faithful hear the prophecies, prescriptions proud heralding of Christ's resurrection. The crossing of the Israelites through the Red Sea, the taking up of Elijah in the Chariot of Fire, the story of Jonah the Prophet and the salvation of the Three Young Men in the Fiery Furnace are all among those readings which foreshadow mankind's salvation, the victory over death and the destruction of hell brought about by Christ's resurrection. The vigil readings give way immediately into the Vigil Divine Liturgy, the first to be celebrated in triumphant commemoration of Jesus' resurrection from among the dead. Here we first hear the joyous and life giving proclamation "Christ is risen from among the dead!"



HOLY PASCHA

On this day, the entire world rings out with the proclamation "Christ is risen from among the dead!" The faithful gather for solemn Divine Liturgy, bring the good news to all through their joy. After the Liturgy, it is customary to crack eggs and eat *choreg* made with the blessed butter from Holy Thursday. The celebration of Holy Pascha (*Soorp Zedig*) continues every day for forty days, and in light of the promises it brings, the faithful should attend church frequently during that time!



PASCHA MONDAY/ REMEMBRANCE OF THE DEAD

As with all the other major feast days of the Armenian Church calendar, the Second Day of Holy Pascha is set aside to honor and remember all the departed faithful. This is traditionally done by performing Divine Liturgy and Requiem service, and by blessing graves in the cemetery.



Prepared by Rev. Fr. Stephan Baljian
North Andover, Massachusetts
2015