

ARMENIAN CHURCH ETIQUETTE



DEMOKRATIK TOPICAL SERIES

BY THE ORDER OF
THE VERY REVEREND
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PRIMATE



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WELCOME TO VISITORS

We welcome you to worship God with us. Whether you are a member of the Armenian Church or not, whether you are visiting for the first time or are a returning guest, we are pleased to have you with us.

Every church is unique; and the Armenian Church is likely to be very different from other churches you have attended. This booklet is meant to guide you through the service by providing information on accepted etiquette and practices. It is **not** to be used as a basis to judge or criticize others.

We come to church to pray and to worship God above all else, and that should be our only focus. Hence, this resource aims to help us maintain an atmosphere of harmony, beauty, and reverence, so that everyone can experience worship without distraction.

A SENSE OF HOLINESS AND REVERENCE

As Orthodox Christians, we believe that the church building is not an ordinary building and what takes place inside it is not routine activity. For it is in the church sanctuary (nave) that heaven and earth unite, and where we physically meet Jesus Christ, the Creator of the universe, through the reading and hearing of

His Word and through receiving His precious and life-giving Body and Blood. For this reason, when we enter the narthex (vestibule or lobby), we leave the secular world behind us and, thus, we behave differently. This sacred space of worship is a foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven. We are encouraged to leave behind our cares, worries and fears, for we are entering not just the house of God, but into His very presence.

The church building is not just four walls and a roof, but the place where the living Body of Christ gathers. When the faithful come together, Christ is in their midst (Matthew 18:20).

WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE?

The Divine Liturgy (the main worship service held on Sundays and holy days), is called in Armenian, *Soorp Badarak* (Սուրբ Պատարագ)¹ or sometimes just *Badarak*. This literally translates as Holy Sacrifice, referring to Christ's sacrifice on the cross. We gather for *Badarak* every Sunday to remember His sacrifice for us and to glorify Him for His many blessings. We give thanks for all He provides and reaffirm our commitment to Him and to our mission in this world as members of His Body living in this world.

Note: the words Divine Liturgy and *Badarak* are used interchangeably in conversation and throughout this booklet. Both terms refer to the Holy Eucharist, the service we celebrate every Sunday morning.

DRESS CODE

Since the Divine Liturgy is not a casual or ordinary event, all the faithful, including children, should dress modestly and appropriately, out of reverence. This means that tank-tops, T-shirts with logos, shorts, mini-skirts, sweat-suits, sportswear, and jeans should not be worn. Again, the Divine Liturgy is not a common, mundane event, but a way for us to encounter Christ Himself in His home, the church.

It is also a tradition in the Armenian Church and all ancient churches for women to wear head coverings or veils during the worship services. The veil is not to be understood as an object of oppression or subjugation, as some may think, but rather as a symbol of holiness and an expression of humility in the sight of God. Similarly, those things which are considered sacred in the church (i.e. the chalice, Holy Muron, the altar, a wedding bride, etc.) are veiled. Just as celibate priests, *vartabeds* (*վարդապետ*), and the elevated ranks of the clergy cover their heads with hoods, so also women are considered holy in Armenian culture and theology, and as such, are encouraged to wear veils. Veils are available in the narthex of the church for those who wish to wear one.

BEHAVIOR

In the sanctuary, conversation and speaking should be limited to essential communication. Casual conversation should not be held during *Badarak*, especially when Holy Communion is being administered. However, speaking is permitted when explaining the Divine Liturgy to others who need guidance. Time for catching up and making new friends is encouraged during Fellowship Hour, which typically follows services in the church hall. Since we are in the presence of God, it is inappropriate to chew gum, eat or drink in the sanctuary. Cell phones must be turned off and should not be answered, and men need to remove their hats. Also, sitting with a slouching posture, crossing legs, and running, are considered disrespectful in church.

INFANTS AND CHILDREN

Through baptism, a child is made a full member of the Body of Christ and is expected and encouraged to be present during the Divine Liturgy. Naturally, it is anticipated that children may fidget or cry, and this is alright. However, if the child becomes too much of a distraction, we ask that you please escort the child out until the child calms down. As stated earlier, food is not allowed in the sanctuary, however, a light, dry finger-food type of snack for young toddlers is permitted. Bottle-feeding infants is

allowed. We ask that parents tidy up after their children and parents with strollers are asked to sit in the back of the sanctuary, storing the strollers near the rear pews.

ARRIVING ON TIME

While it is understandable that we occasionally may have cause to arrive late for services, please respect the Divine Liturgy by arriving on time. We need to begin the service together as a unified body, just as Christ prescribed for His Church and as we do when we sit together for a meal with loved ones. Late arrivals disturb those who are already worshipping. If you do find yourself arriving late, please enter quietly without drawing attention to yourself.

Upon entering the narthex, it is customary to make the sign of the cross and to make a donation for a candle. The candle is lit from one already lit and placed in the sand of the candlestand, and a personal prayer is offered. Most parishes have designated candlestands or holders for these candles. The candles should be allowed to burn all the way down, since the burning candle symbolizes the light of God in our midst. The wax symbolizes a person's heart which is softened by the light of God, i.e. the flame.

Upon entering the sanctuary, it is good to pray silently the Lord's Prayer or another prayer like this one by St. John Chrysostom, found in

the small prayerbook *Gibrianos* (Կիպրիանոս):ⁱⁱ

“Temple of God and Dwelling of the Holy Spirit, I was called by You through the Holy Font to be adopted by the Heavenly Father. Today, in You, the spotless Lamb wishes to be sacrificed. So, I have come before Your door and beg You: cleanse me and wash me anew; purify me of my sins and make me worthy to enter before Your Holy Altar in worship. Amen.”

Again, if you do arrive late or must leave the sanctuary for any reason during the course of the Divine Liturgy, please reenter the sanctuary when you are least likely to disrupt others as they worship. It’s best to enter when the curtain is closed or when the choir is singing.

USHERS AND GREETERS

Volunteers are on duty to assist you and to facilitate a worshipful environment. Please follow their directions and cues for proper times to enter the sanctuary. Upon entering the narthex (the first part of the church), they will hand you a Sunday Bulletin. Also, be sure to fill out a welcome card at the table in the narthex so that you can be added to the parish mailing list and receive notification of services and events.

Please enter the nave as directed by the ushers. The proper time to enter is any time

before the service begins. If you should arrive late, however, please refrain from entering the nave during the following times:ⁱⁱⁱ

- procession through the sanctuary (page 11)
- procession with the Holy Gospel (page 14)
- chanting of the Gospel (page 18)
- singing/reciting of the Nicene Creed (page 18-19)
- procession of the chalice (page 24)
- kiss of peace (page 27)
- homily or anytime the priest is facing the people
- confession and Holy Communion (page 48-49)

A beautiful pious custom is for the faithful to bring incense with them and to give it to the deacon to burn in the censer. The most appropriate time to do this is when the deacons and priest come down from the altar and process among the faithful (page 11).

STAND, SIT, OR KNEEL?

Armenian Churches traditionally do not have pews; thus, it is proper and encouraged to stand throughout the entire service. However, the elderly and those who cannot stand are free to sit when needed. We stand because we are in the presence of the King of kings. When someone higher in office or rank enters a room,

such as the judge in a courtroom, it is proper to stand out of respect. Likewise, when Christ is present, we stand out of respect, for He is the Judge of our souls.

The Canons of the Church prohibit kneeling on Sundays because kneeling is a sign of repentance and sorrow. Sunday is the Lord's Day, the day of resurrection and joy, not sorrow. The rite of Confession, which is typically conducted prior to the distribution of Communion is an exception to this rule. In earlier times, Confession took place outside of the Divine Liturgy, no doubt on a day other than Sunday.

WHEN TO MAKE THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

In all Orthodox Churches the faithful make the sign of the cross often, as a confession of faith and as a prayer. Some of the times we cross ourselves are:

- when the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity or the name of Jesus is invoked
- when entering and exiting the church sanctuary
- at the conclusion of a prayer
- when the priest turns and blesses the faithful
- when the deacon censes in your direction
- at the beginning and end of the Gospel reading

- before and after receiving Holy Communion
- times of personal piety

There are two words Armenians use to describe making the sign of the cross. *խաչակնքուիլ* (*khachagnkveel*) which translates as “to seal the cross upon oneself” and *տեառնազրուիլ* (*dyarnakrveel*) literally meaning, “to draw the Lord on oneself”. In both cases, when we make the sign of the cross, we are declaring to God, to those around us, and to the demons, that we belong to Jesus Christ and to no one else.

HOW TO MAKE THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

- join the thumb, index, and middle fingers of your right hand
- take the right hand and touch your joined fingertips to your forehead
- then bring your fingertips down to your abdomen
- move your fingertips to touch the front of your left shoulder
- then move and touch your fingertips to the front of your right shoulder
- finally, rest your open right hand on your heart

HOLY COMMUNION

WHO CAN RECEIVE?

The Divine Liturgy in the Armenian Church is first and foremost the Eucharistic event, reserved for all Christians baptized with water and *“in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit”* and anointed with the holy myron (oil), representing the coming of the Holy Spirit to dwell in them. Those who share in Holy Communion literally become members of one body – the Body of Christ. As a rule, the Armenian Church offers Holy Communion only to baptized members of the Armenian Church or one of the Oriental Orthodox Churches with whom we are in full communion (Coptic, Eritrean, Ethiopian, Syriac and Malankara (Indian) Orthodox Churches). In exceptional cases, an Armenian priest may offer Holy Communion to a baptized member of another church for pastoral reasons. If you would like to receive Holy Communion, but are not baptized in the Armenian Church, it is suggested that you speak with the local priest before Divine Liturgy.

Those not baptized are asked not to approach during Holy Communion, but are free to take some *“mahs”* (blessed, but not consecrated, bread, mentioned later in this booklet) at the end of the Liturgy. If someone is not baptized and desires to become a member of Christ’s body, he or she should approach the

priest after services to discuss the required preparation for baptism and chrismation.

PREPARATION TO RECEIVE

True preparation for Holy Communion begins the night before with fasting from food, drink (water is permitted) and smoking. The fast, however, is suspended for those who need to eat for medical and health reasons, are small children, and for pregnant women. We should receive Holy Communion as often as it is offered, but at the same time, it must not become just “something that we do”. It is an act of communing with God and each other, truly making us one Body in Christ. The faithful are also encouraged to participate in confession, public or private, to help rectify their mistakes and sins through penance.

It is the privilege of baptized members of the Armenian Church to share in Holy Communion every time they participate in the Divine Liturgy. Our unworthiness should never cause us to abstain from sharing in Christ’s Body and Blood. In fact, it is because of our unworthiness that we participate in this divine Mystery.

HOW TO RECEIVE

We should approach Holy Communion quietly, reverently and with godly fear, in anticipation of God’s grace, realizing that we are unworthy. Despite our unworthiness, we trust in God’s grace.

- The faithful approach the altar via the center aisle, row by row, following the directions of the ushers.
- Women must have their heads covered out of reverence (if not already covered) and remove lipstick (this will also help avoid leaving a stain on the cross and gospel when they are kissed).
- When you approach the priest and chalice, make the sign of the cross and say, “Մեղայ Աստուծոյ” (*Me-gha As-doo-dzo*) or “I sinned against God”, then open your mouth and keep your tongue in. The priest will place the Holy Communion in your mouth. It is alright to chew Holy Communion.
- Then return to your pew via the left or right chancel side entries.

PARTICIPATING IN THE DIVINE LITURGY

The Divine Liturgy must never be viewed as a performance to be watched by spectators, but rather as an act that we all participate in. To truly participate and make the *Badarak* meaningful, consider the following:

1. **Follow Along** – There are books located in the pews that are meant to assist and lead you throughout the *Badarak*. As it progresses, thoughtfully read the texts, and make them your own. The prayers belong to the people and as such, you should say

“Amen” when appropriate. Saying “Amen” is our signature to the prayer, stating we agree. If at any time you lose your place in the book, do not hesitate to ask someone for assistance. Some parishes also have the page numbers on a digital display.

2. **Sing** – The entire congregation is encouraged to sing with the choir as one voice all the hymns and responses, with the exception of the solos. It is, however, not appropriate to sing along with the priest and deacons.
3. **Kiss the Cross** – During the procession through the congregation (page 11), the faithful kiss the priest’s hand-cross as an expression of faith in the loving sacrifice of the Son of God. The priest, descending from the altar, walking among the people and returning to the altar, symbolizes Christ’s descent from heaven through the incarnation, walking among humanity and returning to sit at the right hand of the Father.
4. **Recite the Creed** – All should sing or recite the Creed (page 18-19) together because it expresses the fundamental beliefs of the Christian Church. While reciting the Creed, join your palms and fingers together, with your right thumb crossed over your left thumb.

5. **Kiss of Peace** – Partake in one of the most ancient of Christian rituals. Anyone sharing in Holy Communion should first be reconciled with others. Through this act, the whole congregation is bound first with its mystical head, Jesus Christ, and then with one another in one sacred bond of love and forgiveness. When the Kiss of Peace is given, by the priest to the deacon and then to the congregation, hug the person next to you, showing genuine love. You may not know the person giving the kiss to you or receiving it from you. It doesn't matter, because we are made one in Christ. The one extending the greeting says, “Քրիստոսս ի մէջ մեր յայտնեցաւ” (*Kreestos ee mech mer haydnetsav*) or “Christ is revealed among us”, and the response is, “Օրհնեալ է յայտնութիւնն Քրիստոսի” (*Orhnyal eh haydnootyunun Kreedosee*) or “Blessed is the revelation of Christ”.

6. **Crossing Oneself and Bowing Before God** – When the priest blesses us with the sign of the Cross, we cross ourselves. When the deacons call upon us to bow before God, we respond with heartfelt worship. Bowing is a sign of respect and acknowledgement that we submit ourselves to God and His will. The traditional way to bow in the Armenian Church is to kiss the ground, but since pews render this impossible, a simple bow at the waist is acceptable.

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7. **Kiss the Gospel Book** – After the final blessing (page 55 or 61), come forward to kiss the Gospel Book as an expression of faith in the Word of God, Jesus Christ, the highest authority in a Christian's life.
 8. **Pray as a Church** – During the *Badarak*, we are asked to pray as a community. Listen to the biddings of the priest or deacon as they ask for our specific prayers. Think deeply about what the deacon asks us to pray for. These petitions often begin with the Armenian word *Vasn* (Վասն), which means *for*, and can be found on pages 15-16.
 9. **Give to the Church** – Besides donating time and talent, by donating financially from the gifts that God has blessed us with, we become sharers in the mission of the Church.
 10. **Receive Holy Communion** – This is the main reason why we attend *Badarak* and is the climax of the entire Liturgy. The moment of reception is to be a very meditative and contemplative moment as it is the most intimate encounter we can have with God in this life. Therefore, it is not proper to greet and talk to others while in line to approach the chalice. It is also not proper to greet or thank the priest while approaching or stepping away from the chalice.

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11. **Reverencing the Clergy** – If there are other clergy (besides the celebrant priest) in attendance at *Badarak*, they will be seated or standing in the chancel. When passing in front of them before or after receiving Holy Communion, it is appropriate to place your right hand on your heart and to slightly bow towards them. It is not proper to approach to kiss their hand (at this moment of the liturgy) nor is it ever correct to make the sign of the cross in front of a clergyman.

 12. **Receive Mahs** – *Mahs* “Մահ” means “portion” in Armenian. It is blessed, unconsecrated bread (not Holy Communion) that is given to the faithful at the end of *Badarak*, to take to those who were unable to share in Holy Communion. It becomes their “portion” of the *Badarak*. When you receive mahs, you should extend your right hand so that a small piece of bread can be placed on the back of your hand. As you receive the *mahs*, say, “Բաժին իմ Աստուած յախտեալն” “*Pazheen eem Asdvadz haveedyan*” (God is my portion forever). Those who receive Holy Communion, should not consume the mahs, but should take it to those who were unable to attend *Badarak*.

 13. **Fellowship** – After *Badarak*, join the congregation in the designated area for fel-

lowship and refreshments. This is your opportunity to deepen your relationships with members of the community grounded in the love of Jesus Christ. Please wait for the priest to come and bless the food before you begin enjoying the refreshments.

WHAT SHOULD I SAY?

As already mentioned, the Divine Liturgy is not a performance to be watched by spectators, but an event to actively participate in. For this reason, there are a few short phrases (requests or prayers) that we recite during and at the end of the Divine Liturgy. These may be said in either Armenian or in English.

Opening Procession (page 11)

When the priest censes the sanctuary and offers the hand-cross to be kissed, say:

Յիշեսցիր եւ զիս առաջի անմահ Գառինն Աստուծոյ:

Heeshescheer yev zees arachee anmah Kareenun Asdoodzo.

Remember me, also, before the immortal Lamb of God.

To which the priest will respond:

Յիշեալ լիջիք առաջի անմահ Գառինն Աստուծոյ:

Hishyal leecheek arachee anmah Kareenun Asdoodzo.

May you be remembered before the immortal

Lamb of God.

Kiss of Peace (page 27)

When you offer the greeting, say:

Քրիստոսս ի մէջ մեր յայտնեցաւ:

Kreesdos ee mech her haydnetsav.

Christ is revealed among us!

When you receive the greeting, say:

Օրհնեալ է յայտնութիւնն Քրիստոսի:

Orhnyal eh haydnootyoonun Kreesdosee.

Blessed is the revelation of Christ!

Receiving Holy Communion (page 49)

As you approach the chalice, cross yourself and say:

Մեղայ Աստուծոյ:

Megha Asdoodzo.

I have sinned against God.

The celebrant responds either saying:

Մարմին եւ արիւն Տեառն մերոյ Յիսուսի

Քրիստոսի:

Marmeen yev aryoon Dyarn mero Heesoosee

Kreesdosee.

The Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

OR

Սա եղիցի քեզ ի քաւութիւն եւ ի թողութիւն մեղաց:

Sa yegheetsee kez ee kavootyoon yev ee toghootyoon meghats.

May this be for you for the expiation and forgiveness of sins.

Kissing the Gospel Book (at the end of Badarak) (page 55 or 61)

As you approach the Gospel Book, cross yourself and say Psalm 19:14:

Յիշեսցէ Տէր զամենայն Պատարագս քո եւ զուխտս քո ընդունելի արասցէ:

Heeshestseh Der zamenayn Badarakus ko yev zookhdus ko untoonelee arastseh.

May the Lord remember all of your sacrifices (Badaraks) and make your vows acceptable.

The priest will respond with Psalm 19:15:

Տացէ քեզ Տէր ըստ սրտի քում եւ զամենայն խորհուրդս քո նա կատարեսցէ:

Datseh kez Der usd srdee koom yev zamenayn khorhoortus ko Na gadarastseh.

May the Lord grant to you according to your heart and may He fulfill all your aspirations.

Distribution of Mahs (as you leave the church)

Մասն եւ բաժին եղիցի քեզ ի Սուրբ Պատարագիս:
Masun yev pazheen yegheetsee kez ee Soorp Badarakees.

May this be your portion and share in this Holy Sacrifice.

Բաժին իմ Աստուած յաւիտեան:

Pazheen eem Asdvadz haveedyan.

God is my portion forever.

FESTAL GREETINGS

Greeting at Christmas time (not for the Kiss of Peace)

When you greet one another, say:

Քրիստոս ծնաւ եւ յայտնեցաւ:

Kreesdos dznnav yev haydnetsav!

Christ is born and revealed!

The response is:

Օրհնեալ է յայտնութիւնն Քրիստոսի:

Orhnyal eh haydnootyoonun Kreesdosee!

Blessed is the revelation of Christ!

Greeting at Easter/Resurrection (not for the Kiss of Peace)

When you offer the greeting, say:

Քրիստոս յարեաւ ի մեռելոց:

Kreesdos haryav ee merelots!

Christ is risen from the dead!

The response is:

Օրհնեալ է յարութիւնն Քրիստոսի:

Orhnyal eh harootyoonun Kreesdosee!

Blessed is the resurrection of Christ!

HOW TO GREET CLERGY

It is customary in the Armenian Church to greet the clergy by kissing their right hand. This is a sign of respect for the clergyman's office and calling. A slight bow with your hand on your chest is also appropriate, if you feel uncom-

fortable kissing his hand. However, the right hand of a bishop and of the Catholicos should always be kissed upon greeting them.

When greeting a Married Priest, say:

Օրհնեցէք Տէր Դայր OR Օրհնեա Տէր:

Orhnetsek Der Hayr OR Orhnya Der.

Bless, Father.

He responds:

Աստուած օրհնէ:

Asdvadz orhneh.

God bless you.

When greeting a Celibate Priest/Monk, say:

Աստուած օգնական, Դայր Սուրբ:

Asdvadz oknagan, Hayr Soorp.

May God be your helper, Father.

He responds:

Աստուած պահապան:

Asdvadz bahaban.

May God be your protector.

When greeting a Bishop, say:

Աստուած օգնական, Սրբազան Դայր:

Asdvadz oknagan, Srpazan Hayr.

May God be your helper, Your Grace.

He responds:

Աստուած պահապան:

Asdvadz bahaban.

May God be your protector.

When greeting the Catholicos, say:

Աստուած օգնական, Վեհափառ Տէր:

Asdvadz oknagan, Vehapar Der.

May God be your helper, Your Holiness.

He responds:

Աստուած պահապան:

Asdvadz bahaban.

May God be your protector.

REQUIEM “HOKEHANKISD” (MEMORIAL) SERVICE

Often families request a special prayer service at the end of *Badarak* for loved ones who have passed away. This is a short service, usually done on the fortieth day or the yearly anniversary of the passing of a loved one. When we pray for our deceased loved ones, we pray that God have mercy on their souls, forgive them of their sins, and raise them up on the final day to the resurrection of life.

DEPARTING THE CHURCH

Before leaving the church at the end of the *Badarak*, it is customary to approach the priest, who will be holding the Gospel, and kiss the Gospel while saying Psalm 19:14 (see above). If you must leave the church early and are unable to kiss the Gospel, it is encouraged that prior to leaving the sanctuary, you face the altar and recite the following prayer silently,

“Heavenly King, preserve Your Church unshaken, and keep the worshippers of Your name in peace.”

On certain feast days the priest will not be offering the Gospel to be kissed, but rather will invite the faithful to come forward to receive a blessed gift to take home such as blessed water, basil, grapes, and palm branches.

DISPOSING OF BLESSED ITEMS

During certain church services, *mahs* (unconsecrated bread), flowers, water (with *Holy Muron*), palm leaves, butter (or oil), grapes, basil, or *madagh* (memorial meal) are blessed and distributed to the faithful. The proper way of disposing of such blessed items (if they are not consumed), is that they either be buried in the ground (including a garden or flower-pot) or burned. They should never be disposed of in a common way such as in a garbage can or through the public drainage system. Note that the water used to clean the chalice and dove is always poured into the baptismal font, which drains directly into the earth.

Learning to participate in the *Badarak* may seem overwhelming and confusing at first, but the more you attend, the more you will become

accustomed to the traditions and practices. Again, whether this is your first time visiting or you have been a life-long member, we are blessed to have you in our parish worshipping God according to the ancient liturgical tradition of the Armenian Church. Always remember, that all we say, do, and have, is for the glory of God! Amen.

NOTES

NOTES

REFERENCES

i *The Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church*, St. Vartan Press, New York, 2000.

ii *Gibrianos*, Soorp Asdvadzadzeen Church of Malatia, 2004.

iii All page references refer to the book *The Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church* published by St. Vartan Press, 2000.

Cover Image: Presentation, miniature from a gospel book of 1311). Artist: T'oros the Deacon (Armenian, act. late 13th–early 14th century). Credit Line: Purchase, Giorgi Family Foundation Gift, 2020



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