

The Second Sunday of the Assumption – Worship

*Delivered by Rev. Fr. Ghevond Ajamian
St. Sarkis Armenian Church. Carrollton, TX
August 21, 2016
Gospel Reading: Luke 1:39-56*

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the Armenian Church, the Fest of the Assumption of Mary is a nine day feast and today is the eighth day. For this reason, the hymns, litanies, and readings all concern Mary, the Mother of God.

In today's Gospel reading, after receiving the good news that she will conceive and bear a child, who will be named Jesus, Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, who is also pregnant with St. John the Baptist. When Mary enters the house and greets Elizabeth, Elizabeth exclaims that when she heard Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb (St. John the Baptist) jumped for joy [Luke 1:41]. The Church Fathers tell us that St. John the Baptist is the first one to worship and acknowledge Christ in His presence. Our sacred hymns refer to St. John as "the one who worships Christ from womb to womb" (յորովայնէ յորովայն երկրպագող Քրիստոսի).

Worship is a vital part of a Christian's life; however, different people and cultures understand and express worship differently. For example, the Quakers (the Society of Friends) form of worship is to gather in a room and sit together in silence. When they feel the Holy Spirit moving within them, then they begin to shake and quake. Our Ethiopian Orthodox brothers and sisters have a different way of worshipping, which involves singing, dancing and drums.

This is not to say that one is better than another, but merely to stress the point that two different cultures understand worship differently.

The question then arises: how do Armenians understand worship? The answer can be found in the very word "worship". To worship, in Armenian, is երկրպագել/yergrbakel and it comes from two words երկիր/yergir, which means "ground/earth" and պագել/bakel, which in Classical Armenian means "to kiss". So for Armenians, to worship literally means, "to kiss the ground". When the priest blesses the people by saying, "Peace unto all" and the choir and faithful respond, "And with your spirit", the deacons then tell everyone, "Let us bow down to God". However, the more precise translation would be, "Let us kiss the ground before God".

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When we bow before God, we should not make a simple, slight bow of our heads, but երկրպագել/yergrbakel truly means we must get down on our knees and plainly kiss the ground before us. Pews in our sanctuaries today prevent us from correctly fulfilling this act of worship, this is why pews and seats do not exist and should not exist in Armenian churches.

This act of worship (kissing the ground) could be seen as an act of slavery and subjugation, but in fact it is a way we recognize Christ, not as our brother or equal, but as our Father, Judge, King and Creator. Worship, thus, should not be reserved to only bowing or kissing the ground.

In the Eastern Churches, worship must also be performed using all of our five senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell. We use our sight to see all the vestments, vessels and icons in a church. We use our hearing to hear the hymn, prayers and litanies. We use our sense of taste to taste the Body and Blood of Christ through Holy Communion. We use our sense of touch when we hug one another during the Kiss of Peace. And we use our sense of smell to smell the sweet aroma of incense burning. This means that we must use our entire being to worship and glorify God.

This is also why, during the baptismal service and the sacrament of chrismation, we are anointed with Holy Myron on nine parts of our body: the forehead, eyes, ears, nose, mouth, heart, back, hands and feet. With each anointing a declaration that that body part will be used to worship God and glorify His name.

So let us have a new understanding of worship, that it is not just a movement of simple bowing or even kissing the ground, but a full dedication of our entire being with all of our senses and all of our members in order to glorify Him.

Amen.