

# St Mary and the Armenian Church

*doctrine, rituals, feasts, customs and tradition*

**Fr Shnork Baghdassarian**

FIRST of all I would like to convey my deep appreciation to Fr Marr and the organising committee for giving me this wonderful opportunity to speak to you about the position of the Armenian Church to St Mary, our Mother of God. With great humility I would like to say that I am not a scholar nor did I have much time to prepare any profound study on the topic. I am only a simple parish priest and in this paper I would like to share with you some devotional aspects, customs and traditions connected with St Mary which exist in the Armenian Church.

St Mary is highly venerated and revered in the Armenian Church, I would say no less than in the Roman Church. Although the Armenian Church does not go as far the Doctrine of Immaculate Conception, none the less she is the first among the saints and the most venerated one. The Armenian Divine Liturgy (or Holy Mass), for instance, starts with a prayer to Virgin Mary asking for her intercessions for our supplications towards Almighty God. The doctrinal position of the Armenian Church towards St Mary, as far as I am aware, does not differ from the position of the Eastern Orthodox churches, such as the Greek or the Russian. It is based on the first three Ecumenical Councils.

As we know, during the early centuries Mary, as an archetype and most venerated among saints, became a focal point of serious doctrinal issue being debated by newly-formed religious communities. After Christianity became a state religion, ecumenical councils were being held to consider various doctrinal issues and arrive at a consensus on those doctrinal principles and beliefs.

Early in the fifth century Nestorius, who became Patriarch of Constantinople (428-31), claimed that Mary had given birth to an ordinary mortal Jesus, who then, through the Holy Spirit, became divine, as God (the doctrine of *Christosokos* instead of *Theotokos*).

The third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (431), consisting of representatives from all the churches, including the Armenian Church, formally accepted and declared the doctrine that Mary was the Mother of God and object of reverence. Patriarch Nestorius was dethroned—as a heretic.

## **Mary the Immaculate one**

In Armenian understanding, although Mary was born naturally (having both a father and mother), she is considered morally pure and immaculate. It is for this reason that the church not only celebrates her birth but also her conception, which the Armenian and the Greek Orthodox churches celebrate on 7 April.

The concept of her being morally immaculate later developed into the question of her Immaculate Conception (from Anna), a doctrine adopted by the Roman Catholic Church in 1854. The Armenian Church, on the other hand, does not accept this, as it attributes to Mary that which belongs only to Christ; only Christ was immaculately conceived. Yet, her purity is unquestioned. According to the teaching of the Armenian Church, at the time of the Annunciation, when the Holy Spirit entered her, she was cleansed of all sin (original sin) as she was to be the vessel in which God manifest was to be incarnated.

## **Feast of the Assumption of the Holy Mother of God**

The Feast of Assumption is the most important feast dedicated to St Mary. All traditional churches celebrate this feast. In the Armenian Church calendar, it is one of five Tabernacle feasts. The other four are Christmas, Easter, the Transfiguration of our Lord and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

The word assumption means "taking up" (to heaven). The Armenian word for the feast, "VERAPOKHOUM", has the same meaning. This great feast of the Church honours the Holy Virgin for the sanctity of her life and purity of her heart with which God has endowed her, our blessed Mother. This Feast, which probably is the oldest of all feasts of the Virgin, is kept on 15 August by all traditional Christian Churches, except the Armenian Church, which from the time of St Nerses the Graceful (12 AD) has made a habit of celebrating it on the closest Sunday to that date.

## **The Tradition of this feast**

The story behind this great feast is the following. All the apostles, except Bartholomew, who was absent at that time, with celebrations and torchlit procession perform the funeral of the Virgin and bury her at the side of the Valley of Gethsemane. After her burial, angelic songs are heard for three days and three nights above her tomb. After a while, Bartholomew arrives, who wishes to see the Virgin for the last time. The apostles open the tomb, where, however, they do not find her body. They conclude from this that the Virgin had not really died, but only was asleep. The singing of the angels could only mean that Jesus, as He had promised to her long ago, took up the body of His beloved mother to Heaven.

According to tradition, Mary had had a suspicion that Bartholomew might be exceedingly distressed for being denied the opportunity of paying his last respects at her funeral. Hence, she gave a portrait of herself to the Apostle John to give to Bartholomew. Tradition has it that the Apostle Bartholomew took the portrait to Armenia. Because of persecutions, he was obliged to hide it in a place called Darbnots Kar, in the province of Andzevatsiats. A convent was built on that same site, and the nuns there were to protect the portrait.

### **The Blessing of Grapes: I Khaghogh Orhnek**

On the day of the Feast of the Assumption of the Holy Mother of God, the blessing of grapes takes place immediately after the Divine Liturgy. The ceremony is rich in symbolism. Among Armenians there was an old tradition, both beautiful and righteous, that, when the harvest was ready, the first and best fruits were to be given to God in thanks and gratitude. In pagan times, a similar ceremony was performed at the time of harvest, dedicated to the Goddess of Anahit who was the Armenian Goddess of motherhood, morality, high virtues and fertility.

When, in 301 AD, Christianity became the state religion in Armenia, the Christian Church replaced this pagan feast dedicated to the Goddess of Anahit with the feast of Assumption. Hence, this tradition of blessing of grapes has been preserved in the feast of Assumption. It is also interesting to mention that, according to early Armenian historiographers, all the pagan temples dedicated to Anahit were turned into Christian churches dedicated to St Mary.

We should point out that this is not only an Armenian custom. Many ancient people, amongst them the Jews, had such a tradition, namely that of "First Fruits" being given to the Temple.

While many churches have the custom of blessing many type of fruits, in the Armenian Church it is customary to bless only grapes at the Feast of Assumption. In our Church the grape enjoys this pre-eminence among all fruits, because it is the source of wine that is used in the Sacrament of the Divine Liturgy, in the Holy Communion. Also, let us not forget the references our Lord made calling himself the true Vine, and his followers branches. Many Armenians do not eat grapes until the fruit is "officially" sanctified by the Church at the Feast of Assumption.

## **Other Feasts dedicated to St Mary**

Apart from the Feast of Assumption, there are six other feasts dedicated to Holy Virgin in the Armenian Church Calendar.

### **a) Feast of the Conception of St. Mary:**

Although chronologically the first in the events of the Holy Mother's life, this feast entered in the church calendar relatively late and has no specific hymn of its own. The Armenian and Greek Churches observe the conception by Anna on 9 December.

### **b) Feast of the Birth of the Holy Mother of God:**

The second feast of the Holy Mother is her birth, which is non-variable and celebrated alike by all traditional churches on 8 September. There is no information concerning her birth and the place of her birth, whether Nazareth or Bethlehem—nor the date. Based on the Jewish tradition of that time, it is safe to say she was between fourteen and eighteen years of age when the Annunciation took place.

### **c) Presentation to the Temple of the Holy Mother of God:**

The third feast of the Holy Mother of God is the Presentation to the Temple at the third year, which is celebrated by all the traditional churches on 21 November. The meaning of this feast is that, since Mary's parents made a vow, she was presented to the Temple at an age when she could be separated from her parents. According to tradition, she stayed there for a time and at seven was given over to the care of pious widows and maidens who lived at the Temple. One of them was the prophet Anna. After seven years, Mary became betrothed to Joseph the carpenter.

The other commemorations concerning Mary's life are recorded in the Holy Gospels, and perhaps belong more to the commemorations of Christ's life, as they are an integral part of His plan of redemptive economy. They are:

### **d) The Annunciation:**

On one hand, this is part of the fulfilment of the Messianic prophecy and plan, and on the other, the most important event in Mary's life.

### **e) The Visit to Elizabeth:**

A celebration of Mary's maternity.

### **f) Christ's Fortieth-Day Presentation to the Temple:**

This is called by some the Sanctification of St. Mary. In Jewish tradition, mothers present themselves to the temple for purification forty days after giving birth.

There are two other minor feasts dedicated to St Mary.

**g) Feast of the Discovery of the Sash:**

This Feast has been adopted into the Armenian calendar from the Greek Orthodox Church in 1774. According to tradition, the sash belonging to Mary was discovered in Jerusalem in the fifth century.

**h) Feast of the Discovery of the Reliquary:**

This Feast, on the other hand, has been adopted in the 18<sup>th</sup> century into the Armenian calendar from the Latin Church. The Reliquary, a chest containing a veil belonging to Mary, was discovered in the fifth century in a village of Galilee.

**Hymns Dedicated to the Holy Mother of God**

In the ancient Armenian Hymnals there are hundreds of Hymns dedicated to the Holy Mother of God. These hymns differ from other hymns with their poetic references to the Holy Virgin and with their moderately fast and joyous music. In these hymns the Holy Virgin is referred as Barekhos (Intercessor) and Amenorhnyal ee Kanays (Most blessed of Women). Other names include Sirahayats (The Vision of Love), Kaghtsrahayats (The Vision of Sweetness), Bartsrahayats (The Vision of Highest), Hogyats Tiramayr (The Mother of the Lord for Souls}, Charkhapan (The Failure of Evil), etc.

**The Holy Mother of God and the Armenian Family**

The Holy Mother of God is regarded as the special guardian of the female sex. As perfection of virtue in women and purity of love and spotlessness, the Holy Mother of God has become the ideal in the minds of females. From the earliest centuries, the reverence and supreme feeling of Love shown in Armenian families for Mary have had their expression. For instance, there is a popular custom of celebrating on the Feast of Assumption the name-days for those bearing the names of Mariam, Marie, Maria, Marine, Maro, Mayranoush (Sweet Mother) and Maritza. There are also many names related to the Virgin Mary:

**Takouhi, Takouk:** The queen, the pride, the love, the principle of womanhood.

**Srbouhi, Srbouk, Sourbik:** Sanctity of such a level to be worthy of bearing God the Son, through the Holy Spirit.

**Makrouhi:** The spotless being of faith, love, sincerity and dedication.

**Iskouhi:** Truly combining those spiritual virtues in a woman that generations of training and teaching have sought to ingrain.

**Arpenik, Arevik:** Being as necessary as the Sun for life.

**Aghavni:** Dove; Gentle as the bird that symbolises peace, innocence, joy and harmony in life.

**Margarit:** Pearl; Being sacred, spotless, priceless and forever worthy, like the Holy Virgin.

**Yeranouhi, Yeranik, Yeranyak:** Blessed.

## **Some Legends, Tales and Traditions**

### **Astvatsatsni Tat (Mother of God—Root)**

During her childbirth the Mother of God held a root in her hand and was quickly relieved of pain. A root is soaked in water, and the water is given to a woman in extended labour in order to ease her pain.

### **Astvatsatsni Kar (Mother of God—Stone)**

The Mother of God's milk was so plentiful that the nursing infant Jesus was unable to consume it all. Therefore, Mary would go to a cave and release the excess milk to bring comfort to her breasts. According to tradition, the milk produced the clay-like stones, which pilgrims visiting Jerusalem often bring back with them.

### **Pshateni (Oleaster Tree)**

Once John the Baptist happened to come upon Mary in the street. In order to hide from her son's Godfather, Mary went under a nearby oleaster tree and bent down some branches to cover herself. From that day on, the branches of the oleaster tree are bent downward.

### **Origin of the Crocus Flower (Chiytem or Chiktam)**

When Mary, Mother of God was spreading egg yoke over unleavened bread she heard that her beloved Son had been betrayed and arrested. Without pausing to wash her hands she ran to learn about her son's condition. Along the way, thousands of flowers sprang up from the spots where drops of the yellow yoke had dripped from her hands. These flowers come up every year at Easter time.

### **ARTER Island, near the Village of Narek**

St Gregory of Narek, the famous ninth-century Armenian poet, had a burning desire to see the Mother of God with the infant on her lap. Once, the view of his desire appeared to him from the little island that lay just opposite the chapel. Fascinated, he went over the water and knelt before the Mother of God, who spoke to him, saying, "Ar zter ko zor khndreir" (To your Lord, according to your wish). From this, the island has been known as Ar-ter.

### **Disappearance of the Devils**

When Christ's mother and her sister, with heads bent over the Grave of the Lord, were deeply mourning their great loss, devils (which in those times lived among the people, and were visible) were seeking to attract the attention of the mourners and were banging on them. The Mother of God turned to them and said "Anerevouty linek" (Be ye invisible). From that day on, devils have been invisible to people.