

## How to be 100% Armenian Christian

(Even if you happen to be 0% Armenian)

Some who belong to ethnically based Churches have the notion that ethnicity is a prerequisite for membership in their particular Church. This of course is untrue. No authentic Orthodox Church of Jesus Christ would ever reject anyone based on their ethnic origin. The Gospel message is meant for all people and all times. Belief in the Orthodox faith is the sole requirement for membership in the one holy catholic and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ. Many on the outside looking in at an ethnic parish get a similar notion that they do not belong there due to the fact that they are not of that Church's ethnicity. This misconception is only compounded and reinforced if we allow our Churches to become nothing more than ethnic ghettos and museums, rather than what they truly are: Temples of the living God where people go for the purpose of *salvation*.

Yet the above admission is not to say that there can be no such thing as a legitimate expression of ethnic heritage in the Church. This is especially true when such a heritage is dominated by a rich legacy of religious patrimony, as is the case with Armenians. How could an ancient Church like the Armenian, which has existed since the dawn of the Apostolic era, but reflect on what God has done for our people over the last two millennia? In fact, to ignore such a rich theocentric history would be at the very least ungrateful and at worst irreverent. In other words, when an ethnic heritage has historically been so closely tied and dependent upon the faith of Jesus Christ, it is only natural for the Church of that people to remember and meditate upon this heritage. As long as things are kept in their proper order, religion and ethnicity can indeed go hand and hand. It is a false dichotomy to say that one has to choose between ethnicity and religion, whether, for example, one is a Christian *or* an Armenian? One can quite naturally be both simultaneously. Nor should religion and ethnicity ever be viewed as dependent upon one another. One does not become a follower of Jesus Christ automatically as a result of one's ethnicity. This was the error for which St. John the Forerunner rebuked the Jews of his day (cf. St. Mt. 3:7-11).

After stating these basic principles, we can go on to consider the question of one joining an ethnically based parish, while not sharing that particular ethnic background. Is such a thing allowable? Is it to be encouraged?

To answer this question, let us look back in history to a time before the advent of modern transportation and communication. What would happen, for instance, if a Latin speaking Christian moved to Armenia in the fifth century? There would certainly be no Latin Church for him to attend. Therefore on the Lord's Day, he would attend Divine Services in the local Armenian Church. What if this Latin Christian chose to remain in that locality for several years? He would experience Christianity in all the fullness of its Armenian Church expression. He would eventually learn words, phrases and even prayers in the Armenian tongue. He would learn liturgical hymns and customs full of Armenian Christian spirituality and theological emphasis. He would hear homilies on the Scriptures coupled with the insights of those Church Fathers which most impacted the Tradition of the Armenian Church. In short, he would experience the orthodox faith and

participate fully in the ordinary liturgical life of an Armenian Christian even though he was not at all an Armenian.<sup>1</sup>

I myself, for instance, through my Italian wife, over the years have developed a deep love and respect for the Latin Church Tradition. Although I am not of Italian descent, I have learned many words, phrases, prayers and hymns in Latin. I gained many theological insights as I became familiar with the writings of the great Latin Fathers (e.g., Sts. Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, etc.) and as a result I grew stronger in my Christian faith. In short, I have experienced and participated fully in the Latin Church Tradition as one expression of authentic, ancient Christianity. Even though I was not of Latin descent, through my close contacts with the Latin Church, I could become a good Latin Christian. During this time, I even came to appreciate the importance of employing “dead languages” (as is the practice of all the ancient Churches in their liturgical Church texts). It was explained to me that unlike our “living” languages, the words in these dead languages were fixed and unchanging. Utilizing a dead language became a useful tool of the Church to ensure theological precision of doctrine.<sup>2</sup>

Today, more and more, due partially to the ease of travel created by modern transportation, large populations of ethnic groups are able leave their historic homelands and set up enclaves in new lands. For instance, rather than our above example of just a few people traveling to a foreign land, its long been common in the U.S. for whole distinct ethnic communities to exist in a given area. Once a community is established, there is no reason for such a population of immigrants to abandon their ethnic and (more importantly) religious patrimony. Rather than abandoning two millennia of accumulated spiritual & theological wisdom from their fathers in the faith, they and their descendants are quite justified in wanting to preserve and pass on their own unique, authentic expression of Christianity.

Some Orthodox insist that such a view is heretical and that all Orthodox Churches in America are bound to abandon their rich heritage in order to embrace a fledgling “American Orthodoxy.” Such an insistence seems misguided and unnecessary. This is not at all to imply that such an indigenous expression of Orthodoxy is at all wrong. Nor is it to deny that the establishment and flourishing of such an Orthodox Church in America is welcomed and needed. But to insist that all resident Orthodox in the nation should be bound to conform to it and abandon their own religious patrimony, regardless of their historic roots, is not only unjustified but also unrealistic. But what if one in this country desires to be a member of an ancient Church which is still predominantly ethnic? Can one do this without being of that ethnic background? If so, how?

Quite simply, if one wishes to join an ethnic parish, he or she is welcome to do so. This is as long as that person has no illusions about changing or trying to “Americanize” it. This has to be said because there are some who wish to re-create the Church in their own image or in the image they think the Church should have. For such people the O.C.A. (Orthodox Church in America) would be a more logical choice. As the V. Rev. Fr. Daniel Findikyan, Dean of St. Nersess Armenian Seminary, once stated about the

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<sup>1</sup> This same scenario could be restated substituting the member of any ethnic persuasion who has been blessed to be a member of one of the Churches founded by the Apostles and in existence since the earliest days of Christianity.

<sup>2</sup> See my essay: On the Use of Classical Armenian

Armenian Church, “Our Badarak [or Liturgy] is Traditional, i.e. ‘handed on.’ All historic Churches have this; we don’t make it up. We pray the same prayers as St. Gregory of Nareg and St. Nersess Shnorhali. If they were good enough for them, they are good enough for us.” In other words, our Divine Worship has been passed down to us from ancient times. We do not change this to copy the latest fads. Rather, we preserve the same historic approach of worship of God handed on to us from the Apostles and developed by our Armenian Church Fathers. After all, “the Law of Prayer is the Law of Faith.” As Orthodox Christians we take serious the maxim that “we pray what we believe.” To alter the prayers is to tinker with and risk altering the Faith. This is something we, as Orthodox Christians, just don’t do.

So, much like my own example with Latin Christianity mentioned above, one *can* be a good Armenian Christian while not at all being ethnically Armenian. Some practical suggestions for an English speaking person becoming an Armenian Orthodox Christian include first and foremost learning the Divine Liturgy. Since the time our Lord Jesus Christ said to His disciples, “This is My Body... this is My Blood” and “Do this in memory of Me,” the ancient Churches have kept the Lord’s command and celebrated the Divine Liturgy as **the central act of Christian worship**. Today we are very blessed to have numerous aids available to help us understand the format and actual text of the Armenian Divine Liturgy of St. Athanasius.<sup>3</sup> The most important of these is the book, “The Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church” published by St. Vartan Press. It has four translations of the Divine Liturgy, including a transliteration for those who can’t read Armenian.<sup>4</sup> It also has a very good English translation of the entire Divine Liturgy so that one can understand its meaning. Many other study aids are available from St. Nersess Seminary. As Fr. Findikyan has said, many people don’t understand the Armenian “Soorp Badarak” because they don’t understand the Bible. Hayr Soorp explains, “The terminology of the Badarak, though not our own, is the terminology of the Bible. Ninety to ninety-five percent of the Badarak is verbatim from the Bible. The remaining percentage is reflections on Biblical passages.”

Another helpful step is reading good basic catechisms about the Orthodox faith. Books about the liturgical life and history of the Armenian Church are also indispensable. For more advanced students of the faith, the “Teaching of St. Gregory” is a classic statement of the basic doctrine which was given to our Church by St. Gregory our Holy Illuminator. Books by other Armenian Church Fathers are also highly recommended.<sup>5</sup> There is much information on the internet and also numerous compact disc recordings of the Divine Liturgy to help one become more familiar with the Soorp Badarak.<sup>6</sup> St. Nersess Seminary in New York has helpful programs including summer work-shops for adults, young adults and those studying to become deacons. Books on the Orthodox faith from our brethren of the Byzantine Orthodox Tradition can also be very inspiring and

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<sup>3</sup> The Anaphora of the Armenian Divine Liturgy is historically attributed to St. Athanasius the Great.

<sup>4</sup> Transliteration means putting the Armenian words into Roman letters so that someone who is unable to read Armenian script can still pronounce the Armenian words.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., St. Gregory of Nareg’s Book of Prayer and St. Nersess Shnorhali’s “Jesus, Son Only Begotten,” to mention a few.

<sup>6</sup> My own website on the Armenian Orthodox Church is one such source available @ <http://www.geocities.com/derghazar/index.html>

instructive as we grow in our faith as Armenian Orthodox Christians.<sup>7</sup> Many excellent Armenian Church books are available in English at local parish bookstores. Many more can be found through the Diocesan bookstore in New York and through the internet.<sup>8</sup>

The most basic form of Church service is weekly attendance to assist in Divine Worship of the All Holy Trinity. This is a duty of all Orthodox Christians. Attending liturgical services on feast days and the Lenten services during the Great Fast are also good and important ways to serve the Church. Supporting the Church financially is also a basic Christian duty. From there, one can volunteer for many different services in the Church: everything from lecturing to ushering or teaching children in the Church school. Attending Bible studies and retreats are also good ways to grow in one's faith. We all are given gifts for the service of the Church.<sup>9</sup> It might take some time to discern where one's own gifts lie. A talk with the pastor might help one to discover his or her own gifts and how they might fit with the parish's needs as well.

Thus it is evident that one can be an 100% Armenian Christian even if he is 0% Armenian. I dare say that a non-Armenian full of faith and dedication to the Church, who seeks to follow God in the fullness of Armenian Orthodox Tradition, can be a **better** Armenian Christian than one who is full-blooded Armenian yet half-heartedly committed to the Church of his Fathers. Sadly, some only attend Church when it is convenient and show very little commitment to Jesus Christ and His Church. May God give them and us all the faith to become 100% Armenian Orthodox Christians, cherishing the faith which was entrusted by the Holy Apostles and St. Gregory the Illuminator to our historic people and Church.

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<sup>7</sup> This is as long as they are not hostile to our Oriental Orthodox Tradition as some of them are.

<sup>8</sup> I have a list of the books that personally most impacted my conversion to Holy Orthodoxy on-line @ <http://www.looys.net/bibli.html>

<sup>9</sup> Cf., St. Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthian Church, chapter 12.