

Commemorations in the Armenian Church during the Great Fast

First Sunday: Eve of the Great Fast “Poon Paregentan”

Poon Paregentan is the last Sunday, which precedes the six week period [40 days] of Great Lent. It falls seven weeks prior to the Resurrection [Easter], from February 1 to March 7. [24] The theme of this day recalls man’s existence while living in perfect harmony with God in the Garden of Eden. The hymns and odes of the day recall the story of God creating mankind in His image and likeness, placing man in a beautiful garden paradise without sin and allowing man to share in His divinity.

Poon Paregentan ushers the faithful into the Lenten period of strict fasting, penance and reconciliation, with its ultimate destination of Easter, the Feast of the Glorious Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ. [25]

In the Armenian Church all Sundays of Lent have a theme. The Church provides these themes for the purpose of communicating the reality of Christian life and to prepare the penitents for communion with Jesus Christ.

First Sunday - Sunday of the Eve of the Great Fast of Lent

Second Sunday - Sunday of the Expulsion

Third Sunday - Sunday of the Prodigal Son

Fourth Sunday - Sunday of the Steward

Fifth Sunday - Sunday of the Judge

Sixth Sunday - Sunday of the Advent

Monday: 1st Day of Great Lent

Great Lent [Arm. *Medz Bahk*, Eng. *Great Fast*], is also called *Karasnortk* [literally, *Fast of the Forty*; Latin, *Quadragesima*; Greek *Tessarakoste*] since it lasts forty days. The days of lent are referred to as *Karasnortagan* and the Sundays, *Karasnortagan Giragi*. Great Lent is the longest of the fasts prescribed in the liturgical calendar and it begins on the Monday following *Poon Paregentan* and lasts for forty days [six weeks] up until the Friday prior to *Lazarus Saturday*.

Great Lent is therefore “the” preparatory spiritual journey with its destination of Easter, “the Feasts of Feasts.” It is the preparation for the “fulfillment of Pascha, the true Revelation.”

-The Liturgical Structure of Lent:

Lent originated in the very earliest days of the Church as a preparatory time for Easter, when the faithful rededicated themselves and when catechumens were instructed in the faith and prepared for baptism. By observing the forty days of Lent, the individual Christian imitates Jesus’ withdrawal into the wilderness for forty days and rededicates himself to the church through prayer, fasting and learning. [Matthew 4:2]

To understand the various liturgical particularities of the Lenten period, we must remember that they express and convey to us the spiritual meaning of Lent and are related to the central idea of Lent, to its function in the liturgical life of the Church. It is the idea of repentance. In the teaching of the Armenian Church however, repentance means much more than a mere enumeration of sins and transgressions to the priest. Confession and absolution are but the result, the fruit, the “climax” of true repentance. And, before this result can be reached, become truly valid and meaningful, one must make a spiritual effort, go through a long period of preparation and purification. Repentance, means a deep, radical reevaluation of our whole life, of all our ideas, judgments, worries, mutual relations, etc. It applies not only to some “bad actions,” but also to the whole of life. At every moment of life, but especially during Great Lent, the Church invites the penitent to concentrated attention on the ultimate values and goals, to measure life by the criteria of Christian teaching, to contemplate human existence in its relation to God. This is repentance and it consists therefore, before everything else, in the acquisition of the *Spirit of repentance*, i.e., of a special state of mind, a special disposition of our conscience and spiritual vision. [26]

The Lenten worship is thus a school of repentance. It teaches us what repentance is and how to acquire the spirit of regeneration, without which “absolution” remains meaningless. It is, in short, both teaching about repentance and the way of repentance. And, since there can be no real Christian life without repentance, without this constant “reevaluation” of life, the Lenten worship is an essential part of the liturgical tradition of the Church. The neglect of it, its reduction to a few purely formal obligations and customs, and the deformation of its basic rules constitute one of the major deficiencies of Church life today. [27]

-Posture of the Church:

During Lent the Church maintains a penitential posture that is physically displayed by the closing of the altar curtain on the eve of Poon Paregentan [28] as a symbolic representation of the expulsion of Adam and Eve, the first human beings, from the Garden of Eden. The faithful are thus ushered into the Lenten period as penitents seeking to return to their Creator through prayer, forgiveness and instruction. [29] Also, during Lent it has become the practice of the Church to not offer Holy Communion during the Divine Liturgy.

-Fasting during Lent

A special word must be said about fasting during Lent. Generally speaking, fasting is an essential element of the Christian Life. Christ fasted and taught men to fast. Fasting is done in secret, without ostentation or accusation of others [Matthew 6:16, Romans 14]. It has as its goal the purification of our lives, the liberation of our souls and bodies from sin, the strengthening of our human powers of love for God and man, the enlightening of our entire being for communion with the Blessed Trinity.

The Church rules for Lenten fasting are derived from those practices followed in monastic life. In earlier centuries during the Lenten period, with the exception of Saturdays and Sundays, a total abstinence of food was observed. Today, however, it has become the practice of the Church to abstain from meat and meat byproducts only eating

those foods which are not derived from animals. These rules exist not as a Pharisaic burden on the faithful [Luke 11:46], but as an ideal to be striven for; not as an end in themselves, but as a means to spiritual perfection crowned in love to prepare us to commune with God.

Second Sunday of Great Lent [30]: Sunday of the Expulsion

The message of the *Sunday of Expulsion*, continuing on the theme of *Paregentan Sunday*, commemorates Adam and Eve's fall and banishment from Paradise as a result of their sin of disobedience toward God and His law [read Genesis 2:1-24 and 3:8-19]. After the expulsion man became subject to death, pain and every human imperfection.

Adam and Eve disobeyed the command of God, "Of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it you shall die." (Genesis 2:17). Eve was tempted by a serpent to eat the fruit of the tree ["you will not die, you will be just like God"]. After she did, she convinced Adam to eat of it as well. Adam and Eve then made aprons of fig leaves to cover their lower parts. After this act of disobedience God expelled them from the Garden of Eden. The act of disobedience damaged the unity of humankind with God and led, according to the biblical story, to man's mortality, fall and expulsion from paradise. Prior to the fall, man experienced a state of innocence in paradise, with freedom of unity and communication with God, and possession of immortality and harmony in the cosmos.

During this Lenten period, Christians fast in preparation for the Feast of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday, striving to return to dependence on God and experience a healing of the relationship between God and humanity. The ultimate goal therefore, is an even closer union with God and closer likeness to God than existed in the Garden of Eden.

Third Sunday of Great Lent: Sunday of the Prodigal Son

The *Parable of the Prodigal Son* teaches the lesson of God's Fatherly love and forgiveness for those who repent. The parable describes the passion of a caring father for his runaway son. Day after day, the father had been scanning the horizons for any sign of his lost son. Although in the first century a father would typically wait until a son showed some sign of respect before addressing him, here the father threw all social conventions aside. He could not wait to see his son. He started walking toward him. With open arms, he embraced his son, pulling him tightly to himself. God is like this loving father. He wants to welcome sinners back home with open arms. [31]

Through the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus presents a vivid illustration of God's mercy for repentant sinners. [cf. Luke 15:11-32]

Fourth Sunday of Great Lent: Sunday of the Steward

The Sunday of the Steward instructs us to use one's possessions prudently and wisely. Here, Jesus uses the example of a shrewd manager to reveal the foolishness of hoarding earthly riches. The lesson of the parable revolves around the shrewd manager

realizing his own predicament, that he would be judged for the dishonest way he had handled his master's possessions. He tried to obtain friends who would provide for his welfare later, by decreasing what was owed to his master. His shrewd action would guarantee his future welfare.

With this parable, Jesus is pointing out that everyone should follow this manager's example. Instead of frantically holding on to one's possessions that will soon disappear, people should give possessions away, especially to those in need [Luke 12:33]. Money will not last but people, God's Word, and His Kingdom will. [cf. Luke 16:1-15]

Fifth Sunday of Great Lent: Sunday of the Judge

The Sunday of the Judge, reminds us of the importance of prayer and of the virtues of humility, fear of God, justice and protection of the weak. The Parable of the Widow and the Judge, and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector illustrate the results of the proper practice and importance of persistent prayer with a humble heart. IN the former parable, Christians, like the widow, should not give up praying to God even when facing indifference and powerful opposition. If a helpless widow wins her case by persistent pleading before a callous judge, how much will God's elect find quick justice before a loving and righteous Father?

After encouraging the disciples to be persistent in prayer, in the latter parable, Jesus teaches them how to pray. This parable sharply contrasts the prayer of a Pharisee with that of a tax collector. Jesus commended the tax collector for his humble, contrite and "justified" prayer tot God and contrasted that with the hypocrisy of the Pharisee's sense of self-righteousness. [cf. Luke 17:20-18:14].

Sixth Sunday of Great Lent: Sunday of Advent

The *Sunday of Advent*, the Last Sunday of Lent, reminds us of the end of the present order of the world, the second coming of the Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the Last Judgment and the creation of a new earth and a new heaven.

The Gospel for Matins according to St. Mark articulates Jesus' prophecy about the future end times. Jesus gave His followers a prophetic picture of the end times, including events leading up to it. He also talked about future events connected with His return to earth to judge all people. Jesus predicted both near and distant events without putting them in chronological order. Jesus warns His followers about the future to provide them with a guide to live by glorifying God in the present age to prepare for the future fulfillment of the Kingdom. Many predictions Jesus made in this passage have not yet been fulfilled, but they were made to help the faithful remain spiritually alert and prepared at all times as the Church eagerly waits for His Second Coming. [Mark 13:1-37]

Notes:

[24] Even though it is not indicated in the liturgical calendar, it is a custom of the church to designate the entire seven days prior to Poon Paregentan as Paregentan week.

[25] “Poon Paregentan” translates as “The Premiere Carnival” or “Good Life.” However, the word “Poon” should be understood as pointing out “The” or the “Premiere” [in its adjective meaning]. Hence, distinguishing this particular “Paregentan” as the one that leads to the Feast of the Holy Resurrection. “Paregentan,” on the other hand, should be understood as the “Eve” of a lengthy fast, notwithstanding its literal meaning.

[26] Repentance literally means a change of mind [Grk. Metanoia; Arm. Abashkharootyoon; Latin, Poenitentio]. This is the Biblical term for that repentance or complete change of heart which turns one away from sin to serve the living God. Old Testament prophets called for a conversion that would turn people away from idolatry and from a mere superficial practice of religion to live in fidelity to God’s law and their social responsibilities [Isaiah 1:10-20; Ezekial 18:1-32]. John the Baptist and then Jesus preached a radical change of heart as demanded by the coming of God’s kingdom [Matthew 3:1-12; Mark 1:15]. John’s Baptism was for repentance [Mark 1:4; Acts 13:24; 19:4]. In the name of Jesus the Apostles invited people to be converted and baptized and so begin a new life in the Spirit [Acts 2:38]. The gift of authentic metanoia [see Psalm 51:14] is so special that whoever jeopardizes it by subsequent sin may lose it forever [see Hebrews 6:4-6].

[27] The Russian Orthodox Journal, March, 1959, pp. 6-8.

[28] Called *Pagial khoran*, which means closed altar.

[29] During the Lenten period, the faithful become like the penitents who in earlier centuries were instructed to leave the church at the beginning of the Eucharistic part of the Liturgy during the bidding, “Mi vok” [Let none of the catechumens, none of little faith and none of the penitents, nor of the unclean, draw near to this divine mystery] and got to the porch of the penitents or *kavit* because they were not prepared to receive Holy Communion.

[30] The second week of Great lent differs slightly from the other weeks by the length of the lections [readings]. Aside from being Lent, this week also includes the pre-spring week of fasting and is thereby deemed a double fast [*Dzisagon Pararan*, Ormanian].

[31] *Life Application Bible Commentary. Luke.* Tyndale House Publishers, Illinois. 1997