

## *Heesnagats: Advent in the Armenian Tradition*

"Sanctify a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the Lord your God, and cry earnestly to the Lord...

-St. Joel 1:14 LXX

Reverend Fathers & Deacons, Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Today is the first day of Heesnag in the Armenian Orthodox Church. Today we begin a spiritual journey of fifty days that will ultimately culminate in the great Festival of Theophany (Arm. "Asdvadzahaydnootyoon") on January 6th. I want to wish each of you a blessed Heesnagats or as it is called in the West "Advent." May Christ our God use this Holy Season to renew in our hearts a burning desire to serve Him in this world. If interested, I have copied an excellent, informative article about our Armenian Church's traditional understanding of the Holy Season of Advent from the Domar of the Armenian Orthodox Theological Research Institute (AOTRI). May it inspire you and your families in following the historic faith and practice of the Armenian Orthodox Apostolic Church.

Domar Entry: "Paregentan of the Fast of Advent"

As Armenian Orthodox Christians, we begin the celebration of the Theophany [Manifestation; Arm. Asdvadzahaydnootyoon] with a time of preparation called Advent [Arm. Hisnag], fifty days before January 6. Advent is a time to begin to purify both soul and body to enter properly into and partake of the great spiritual reality of Christ's Coming.

Although Advent was like Lent at one time, ostensibly, a period of fasting; in modern times, it has taken the form of three week-long fasts during the fifty days in addition to the regular fast days of Wednesday and Fridays. The three week-long fasts during Advent are:

1. The Fast of Advent (Hisnagats Bahk)
2. The Fast of St. James (Soorp Hagopah Bahk)
3. The Fast of the Nativity (Dz'nuntyan Bahk)

Counting backwards from January 6th, the beginning of Advent falls on November 18th or the closest Sunday thereof [120]. This season does not constitute the intense fasting season that is characteristic of Great Lent; rather, Christmas Lent is a period of anticipation and contrition wherein we exercise humility and innocence to prepare ourselves for the great and joyous Feast of the Theophany (Nativity and Baptism of Our Lord). Advent is a preparatory penitential season which is reflected in the life of the Church not necessarily with any specific liturgical worship services or a special rite, but by a number of small preparatory liturgical hymns and prayers that gradually proclaim Christ's coming into the world as a man. For example, during the first week of Advent, on the Feast of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple, we sing about the birth of the Christ Child during the Cantemus Hymn, "Yerketsek vortik":

"For she [Mary], who without seed bore the uncontainable One [Jesus] in her womb, comes forth from the root of Jesse."

Thus the Church announces the Birth of Christ, the Incarnation of God, His entrance into the world for its salvation. Then, in the two weeks preceding Christmas, the Church commemorates the King and Prophet David as a sign of the Messianic prophecies that the Christ-child would be born of the House of David and its Kingship, and the Preeminent Apostles Peter, Paul, James and John, Stephen -the first martyr, James -the first bishop of Jerusalem and brother of our Lord, as symbols of the Lord's earthly ministry for the manifestation of the Kingdom of God as the fulfillment of all righteousness. Finally, one week prior to the Theophany, the Church begins the Forefeast of the Nativity with a week long strict fast called "The Fast of the Nativity" which marks the final preparation in anticipation of the birth of the Son of God [121].

The joyful note of the season, in anticipation of the Nativity of Christ, affords an opportunity for the faithful to exercise their Christian commitment in a mood of happy spiritual toil to "make ready the way of the Lord" (St. Mt. 3:3). As we "make ready the way of the Lord," let us heed the words of Christ from the Gospel reading of the day according to St. Luke who reminds us that in order to prepare for and receive the Coming of the Lord, we must become like a child - in innocence, sincerity, simplicity and humility:

"Let these words sink down into your ears, for the Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men.' But they did not understand this saying, and it was hidden from them so that they did not perceive it; and they were afraid to ask Him about this saying. Then a dispute arose among them as to which of them would be greatest. And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a little child and set him by Him, and said to them, 'Whoever receives this little child in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me. For he who is least among you all will be great.' Then John answered and said, 'Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow with us.' But Jesus said to him, 'Do not forbid him, for he who is not against us is for us.'" (S. Ghookas 9:44-50).

Notes:

120. In reality, the Eastern Churches do not keep a liturgical season in preparation for Christmas, but they observe a fast. In the Byzantine Rite this fast has been customary since the eighth century. It begins on November 15th and lasts until Christmas. Its name is "Quadragesima of St. Philip" because it starts on the day after the Feast of the Apostle Philip. The Syrians of the Antiochene Rite also have a fast of forty days before Christmas, but the Catholic Syrians keep it, by Papal indult, only for the last nine days before the Nativity. The Armenians celebrate a fast of three weeks (instead of the original seven weeks -as stated above). The Copts observe a fast which is very strict, from November 24th (in upper Egypt) and from December 9th (in lower Egypt) until the Feast of the Nativity (which they celebrate on the Western Epiphany). The Syro-Chaldeans begin their "Fast of the Nativity" or "Fast of the Annunciation" at the middle of November or, in some dioceses, on the Sunday nearest to December 1st.

121. A. Schmemmann in the book, *The Services of Christmas: The Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ*, David Anderson and John Erickson, Dep. of Religious Education, Orthodox Church in America, NY, 1981; Also article by G. Samoorian, *Advent in the Armenian Church*. 2002.

Monday's Gospel is a bit more penitential:

"And it happened, as He spoke these things, that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!' But He said, 'More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!' And while the crowds were thickly gathered together, He began to say, 'This is an evil generation. It seeks a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah the prophet. For as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so also the Son of Man will be to this generation. The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.'" (S. Ghookas 11:27-32)

Have a Blessed Heesnagats!  
Trusting in Christ's Inextinguishable Light  
Sdn. Ghazaros Der-Ghazarian