

## *The Armenian Church's Observance of Theophany*

*"Four Ceremonies of the Armenian Apostolic Church."*

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In the Armenian Apostolic Church, the birth and the baptism of Jesus are celebrated together on January 6, because it is believed that Jesus came to the Jordan on his birthday. However in the early Church, Christmas was an eight day feast which began January 6 and lasted until January 14. In addition to celebrating Christ's birth, the feast was also devoted to the other central events of the first Christmas, including the Flight to Egypt and the Massacre of the Babes of Bethlehem (also known as Holy Innocents).

As mentioned, the Armenian Church celebrates the baptism of Jesus during Christmas with a special service known as the "Blessing of the Water." As believers, we understand and accept the tenet of our faith that baptism is in fact a second birth that is central to our salvation. As Christ instructed, "Unless one is born of water and spirit, one cannot enter into the Kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Jesus himself then set the example for us when he consented to being baptized by John the Baptist in the river Jordan.

The union of both the birth and baptism of Christ into the Christmas feast day speaks to the wisdom of early Church fathers who perhaps wanted to remind us of the importance and the imperative of our own baptism or second birth. Where Christmas was a physical birth, baptism is a spiritual birth. Therefore, on January 6 of each year, we travel with Jesus from his physical birth, in Bethlehem to his spiritual birth in the Jordan river and find in the picture of the baptism of our Lord, the memory of our baptism. And here we are provided with the opportunity to rekindle in our hearts the new life we received at the baptismal font and to live life as spiritual beings.

This ceremony of the Blessing of the Water is replete with symbolism. Performed after the Divine Liturgy, the celebrant and his congregation gather around the blessing fountain which is usually a large basin filled with water. Taking a large cross, the priest immerses it into the basin symbolizing the entry of Jesus into the water of the Jordan river. From the altar, a dove shaped silver container of Holy Muron (or Holy Oil), is brought forth and placed near the basin. Once the elements are ready, various scripture passages from the Bible are read reminding the believers of the fact that the water is the "womb" of our physical and spiritual birth. As blessed water gave life to the Israelites during the exodus in the desert, Jesus became the source of life giving water for all who drink from the fountain (John 6:35, Rev. 22:17).

With hymn and prayers, including a prayer written by St. Basil, the service continues until at one point the celebrant takes the cross out of the water and gives it to the Godfather of the cross. Typically a young member of the congregation, the Godfather represents the congregation, on whose behalf he carries the Cross representing Jesus. The Holy Oil, Muron, which symbolizes [and actually communicates to us] the Holy Spirit is then poured into the water reminding us of the descent of the Holy Spirit in the shape of a dove on the newly baptized Jesus.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, the believers are invited to take some of the anointed water, who may consume a portion of this water to symbolize their own immersion into the waters of our Lord's baptism. Through this immersion and with prayer, they will be renewed and reinvigorated with the life of Christ. After all, the dominical feasts of the Church are not just

memory generating dates, but glorious opportunities for the faithful to enter into the Feast and experience its mystery and grace.