

## DESCRIPTION OF A HISTORIC “CHOUR-ORHNEK”

(The Blessing of the Waters)

by Bishop Shnork Kaloustian

The celebrations of Christmas in the Armenian church culminate in what is called in Armenian “Chour-orhnek” which means “the blessing of waters”. It is a symbolic commemoration of Christ’s Baptism. This ceremony was celebrated in ancient times by the riverside or by the seashore. But, because of the difficulties caused by Moslem neighbors and for other reasons, it was later confined to the interior of the churches. This religious ceremony was accompanied by popular joyful festivities.

The following is a description of “Chour-orhnek” in the thirteenth century Sis, the Capital of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia, during the reign of the Armenian king Levon the Great (1190-1220), the most glorious figure of this kingdom. We are indebted for this description to a European monk by the name of Canon Willebrand. In 1211 a group of European princes, going on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, passed through Cilicia. They stayed there for four months, enjoying the hospitality of the King. Canon Willebrand was one of them. On the Armenian Christmas the King invited his noble guests to the celebration service of “Chour-orhnek”. This is how the Canon describes it.

“During the feast of Theophany we came to Sis, where we were invited by King Levon to attend their celebrations. Sis is one of the principal cities and has a great number of rich inhabitants. The feast of Theophany was celebrated thus: At first, for twelve days they did penance, fasted and abstained from fish, wine and oil. On the day of “Jrakalouyts” (i.e., Christmas Eve) they fasted the whole day. In the evening Mass was celebrated, and this was followed by a divine service and vigil the whole night.

“The next morning they all came to the riverside near the city. King Levon rode on a magnificent horse. His suite rode ahead of him, splendidly dressed and carrying flags, and a thousand men surrounded the King. Roupen, the Heir to the throne, rode behind the King with all the nobles of the land. Then came a host of soldiers, all in splendid garments suitable to the occasion. The soldiers shouted in unison, ‘Holy King’! Then the trumpet sounded and the musical instruments struck their notes. Upon this, the King alighted from his horse and entered the tent which had been pitched for him on the bank of the river. Then came the Greek Metropolitan with his suite, and the Armenian clergy, headed by their Catholicos, in great pomp.

“They began to bless the water of the river. The Gospels were read in Armenian and Greek, the cross was lowered into the water, and at the same time, on the right, a pigeon was flown. One person entered the water and when he got to the middle of the river, he called out in a loud voice, ‘Long live our King’! Then he called out again saying, ‘Let all Christendom never cease to be strong and loft’, and all in unison replied, ‘Amen’. Then the King and others sprinkled this blessed water on their persons, and the Assyrians, who were present, bathed in the water. After the blessing of the waters, the clergy went back, but the king and those with him went to the races, for a course was laid out near the city of Sis. The refined amusement afforded by these entertainments, I must confess, I am not able to describe. The sons of the nobility took part in fencing and arrow throwing tournaments. When the days of Theophany were over, the Great King saw us off with royal honors. We visited other cities over which King Levon ruled”.