

SACRAMENTS OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

Christian Identity

Two key elements are considered when defining the identity of an individual. They include our given names at birth and our faith background. These characteristics are essential in molding and distinguishing the individual in society at large. Herewith, we would like to focus on and further expand our explanation of the Christian identity.

Over the past two thousand years, the Church fathers have provided countless interpretations of the Christian identity. One simple explanation would be sufficient in describing the Christian identity. The true Christians are those who follow Christ and His life and attain in their spirituality the sacraments of the Church.

In the following paragraphs, we will be sharing with you short explanations of the seven sacraments and their respective roles in the cultivation of our Christian identity. Too often we forget that we have been created in the image of God. Hence, we weaken in our faith life, enter into a state of apathy, disregard the power of prayer, and consequently, enter into lives of sin.

The purpose of the sacraments is to guide one toward regaining the divine image in our spirituality. Therefore, the sacraments aim to strengthen our bond with the Almighty God and eventually to make God inseparable from our spiritual texture. Each Christian is privileged to act as a bridge between the community in which we live and Christ, our Lord. By realizing the graces bestowed upon us, we humble ourselves and become partners in God's holy work.

The basis of the seven sacraments is the Gospel of Christ, our Lord. Every one of the sacraments have been reflected in the life of Christ during His early ministry. In the following passages, we will define the seven sacraments which were published by the Eastern Diocese decades ago with the purpose of educating the faithful.

SACRAMENTS are the signs of God's love, symbols which show His plan for humanity. Saint Paul used the word mystery to refer to God's plan of always wanting to save, renew, and unite things in Christ. (The Armenian word for sacrament, khorhoort, means mystery.) Jesus Christ is mysteriously present in the seven sacraments and is Himself the officiant through the person of the priest.

Sacraments are outward or visible signs of ceremonies that give us God's grace. What is grace? Grace is the gift of God's friendship for us, the story of His constant love for us, and God's invitation to us to live in union with Him.

The seven sacraments are (in order of customary appearance in our lives), baptism, chrismation, penance, communion, marriage, ordination, prayers for the sick.

BAPTISM (MGRDOOTIUN) ՄԿՐՏՈՒԹԻՒՆ

"Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God" (John 3:5)

Baptism is the Sacrament through which the believer is absolved of sins, is regenerated by the Holy Spirit, becomes a Christian and attains adoption by God.

The Armenian Church accepts as authentic the baptism of those Churches, who confess the Holy Trinity and baptize people in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. If a believer, who has been christened in an Orthodox, Catholic or other Church, wishes to become a member of the Armenian Church, he does not need to be baptized for a second time.

One needs a godfather for baptism; the latter should guarantee the faith of the person being christened before the Church and take him/her under his charge and educate the person according to the right faith.

Baptism should take place in the Church. But in those places, where there are no Churches or in the case where the person to be baptized is seriously sick, it is allowed to perform the baptism at home or in some other proper place.

Baptism is the first sacrament; a person who is not baptized cannot receive other sacraments. Immediately after the baptism, the sacraments of confirmation and Holy Communion are administered.

It was Christ's will and commandment that we be born of the water and the spirit so that we might enter into the presence of God and His Kingdom. Jesus Himself was baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptist, and after His resurrection, He commissioned the apostles to go forth and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the early days of Christianity, baptism was performed in rivers and pools (King Drtad was baptized in the Euphrates by St. Gregory the Illuminator).

Reverence for the rite itself and for water, which in time came to receive a special consecration, gave rise to the use of a special font for the sacrament. This font became one of the most important parts of a Christian church everywhere. The ancient practice was to have it hewn out of a solid piece of rock.

In the early church, the sacraments of initiation (baptism, chrismation, and communion) were generally performed together administered by a bishop (who alone was allowed to bless the oil) and given to masses of converts after a period of study and prayer. Easter Sunday was a favored day for such mass baptisms. The Armenian Church has retained the earlier tradition of giving all three sacraments together at baptism.

The parents and the godparents, particularly the godfather (gnkahayr) present the child for baptism. (The gnkahayr would also sponsor an adult seeking baptism.) Some of the important symbols associated with baptism: the "narod", or red and white braid symbolizing the blood and water that poured from Christ's side, placed along with a cross, around the neck of the child; the renunciation of Satan; the immersion into the water three times, and most importantly, water, the source of life. When the child is immersed he shares in Christ's baptism; when he is taken out, he shares in Christ's resurrection.

CHRISMATION (TROSHM-GNOONK) ԴՐՈՇՄ ԵՒ ԿՆՈՒՄԸ

Confirmation is a sacrament in which a baptized person receives the gifts of the Holy Spirit, when he is anointed with chrism (olive oil and other special oils of different fragrant substances and flowers).

Confirmation takes place immediately after the baptism.

The grace of the Holy Spirit is granted by chrism for confirmation in Christian life; it strengthens our spirits, sanctifies our spiritual possibilities and equips us with courage to struggle against all trials.

Like water, oil is an essential religious symbol, one of healing, light, reconciliation, and peace. The dove brought Noah an olive branch announcing God's forgiveness and reconciliation with humanity after the Great Flood. The peace and healing by oil is represented during the actual pouring of Muron into the water from a dove-shaped vessel. The priest sings the hymn "Arakeloh Aghavnoh" (the dove that was sent). This recalls the descent of the Holy Spirit on Christ. The priest then pours the Holy Muron into his palm and uses it to bless 9 parts of the body; forehead, eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, hands, heart, back and feet, beseeching the Holy Spirit to seal the newly-baptized with faith and to protect the child's sight, thoughts, words, deeds, and service from the influences of evil in the world.

PENANCE (ABASHKHAROOTIUN) ԱՊԱՇԽԱՐՅՈՒԹԻՒՆ

Penitence is a sacrament in which a person, who confesses his sins, receives forgiveness from the priest being invisibly released from his sins by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

The penitent realizes his sins and repents for them, confessing them before God and the Church. The penitent is asked to have the intention to rectify his life, have faith in Christ and hope for His mercy.

During the confession the penitent reads a special supplication, in which all the possible sins are enumerated.

Those who want to receive this sacrament prepare themselves by fasting, abstinence and prayer.

The history of this sacrament is long and complex. It begins, of course, with Jesus Christ. Christ gave power to the holy apostles to bind and loose sins. Sin is traditionally defined as "disobedience" or alienation from God which causes us to hate ourselves and be distant from others.

If we confess our sins, God is always ready to forgive us, just as the father did the prodigal son. Christian confession and even confession in the Old Testament was always public confession. There was no notion that confession be other than a public one. Over the years, it evolved into a "private" confession where Christians would reveal their sins to a priest. It is the practice of the Armenian Church to endorse both private and public forms of confession. The more practiced is the public one where those ready to take communion first step forward and confess their sins as a group ("megha Asdoodzoh"... I have sinned against God...).

The present form of confession is a shortened version of St. Ephraim the Syrian's 10 confessional statements. It was originally introduced into the Armenian Church by St. Gregory the Illuminator and translated from the Syriac by Sts. Mesrob and Sahag.

It is through this sacrament of healing that humankind is restored and reconciled with God. But of course, forgiveness can only become complete and genuine when we ourselves are forgiving.

COMMUNION (HAGHORTOUIUN) ՀԱՂՈՐԴՈՒԹԻՒՆ

The most important religious obligation of every Christian is the receiving of Holy Communion.

Holy Communion is a sacrament by which the believer receives Christ's Body and Blood in the form of bread and wine for remission of sins and the reception of eternal life. It is offered to the faithful during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy.

Sunday is the Lord's Day (Giragi is from the Greek for Lord"). It is a little Easter commemorating Jesus' triumph over sin and death. At the time of Sts. Thaddeus and Bartholomew, who brought the message of Christ to Armenia, the eucharistic meal was very simple. With the sharing of bread and wine, Christ was present. At about the end of the 10th century, the Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church was formalized.

The language of worship is krapar (classical Armenian) with additional Greek and Hebrew words that have been retained from the early liturgies used by Armenians. Before St. Mesrob created the Armenian alphabet, services were conducted in Greek and Syriac.

Holy Communion is the purpose and reason Christians gather together to celebrate the mystery of Christ's presence in the world. The service of the Divine Liturgy (Soorp Badarak), of which Holy Communion is part, is the central action of the Christian community and binds us all together as followers of Christ's way. The Divine Liturgy is also our act of thanksgiving to God for the gifts of both earthly and eternal life which are ours in Christ.

HOLY MATRIMONY (SOORP BUSAG) ՍՈՐՔ ԲՍԱԳ ՍՈՒՐՔ ՊՍԱԿ

The Sacrament of Holy Matrimony or marriage is the consecration of the union between a man and a woman for life in lawful marriage.

By mutual accord of the man and the woman, they are united together with a spiritual bond to each other and to the Church.

Marriage mandates not only God's orders, but it also demands life commitment of the married man and woman toward each other. The divine initiative and the moral foundations set by Christ make marriage a Holy Sacrament. Jesus followed His Father's initial creation and granted it His sanction and endorsement, emphasizing the inseparable unity between the husband and wife.

From as early as the 4th century, a rite of crowning for newly-married couples is mentioned by the early Christian writers. This would take place during the Eucharistic Liturgy. According to the teachings of St. John Chrysostom, the crowns symbolized victory over passions for the couple and stood as a sign of the eternity of the sacrament. By the 11th century, the rite was separated from the Badarak.

In the Armenian rite, each act has a special meaning for the new life of the couple. Rings are exchanged and the right hands of the bride and groom are joined to symbolize the oneness of the couple. The crowns – narods are traditionally used in the rite – are signs of honor and glory and the new kingdom the couple will now rule (their new lives, their home). Drinking from a common cup of wine recalls the marriage at Cana and stresses the total sharing that will characterize married life.

HOLY ORDERS (YEGEGHETSAGAN ASDIJAN) ԵԿԵՂԵՑԱԿԱՆ ԱՍՏԻՃԱՆ

The Church is an organized society. It is composed of all the baptized persons who are united in the same Faith, the same Holy Communion, the same Sacraments, and under the same Ecclesiastical authority. Those who exercise this ecclesiastical authority form the clergy of officers of the Church who serve God, teach and sanctify the faithful, and govern the Church. This authority to serve, to teach, to sanctify and to govern is not given by election or appointment, but by a sacred sacrament called Ordination.

Ordination of the Holy Orders is one of the important sacraments of the Church. Through ordination, men receive the power and grace to perform the sacred duties of a clergyman of the Church. Ordination is a sacrament by which the Holy Spirit offers the elected person the right to perform the sacraments and to feed Christ's flock.

It is true that by Baptism all Christians are endowed with the "priesthood" of laymen, who have thus the obligation to offer up to God the spiritual sacrifices of thanksgiving, prayers and acts of faith, hope, and

charity. But only those men who receive the sacrament of the Holy Orders are clergyman of God in the full sense of the word.

People may devote themselves to the service of the Church not only by entering Holy Order, but also in the lay states. The latter service is sometimes as valuable and meritorious before God as the service rendered by the Holy Orders.

In the Church, there is a three-fold ministry or rank of clergymen. The three orders of clergy are deacon, priest, and bishop.

DEACON: The elevation of deacons is noted in Acts 6. The apostles prayed over them and laid their hands on them as a symbol of authority. The deacons were instructed to assist the apostles in serving the people. Even today, deacons assist at liturgical services and help with the administrative, charitable, and mission programs of the church.

PRIEST: This order evolved fully by the second century when the huge number of Christian converts made it necessary to increase the ordained ranks. As today, the priest's task was to preach, sanctify and celebrate the Lord's Supper, and be the leader of his flock in the bishop's name.

BISHOP: This office can be traced directly back to Christ who instituted the office through the Holy apostles. Originally, bishops served as parish heads, but as parishes grew, the office of priest was expanded and bishops began to serve at the head of groups of parishes.

There are minor orders as well, namely clerk (tbir) which consists of 4 orders: doorkeeper, reader, exorcist, and acolyte and the sub-diaconate (gisasargavak).

rites of the sick (HIVANTATS ARAROGHOOTIUN) ՀԻՎԱՆՂԱՑ ԱՐԱՐՈՂՈՒԹԻՒՆ

The Orthodox and Catholic Churches acknowledge the Unction of the Sick as the seventh sacrament. In the Orthodox Church this sacrament is officiated upon people who are very ill and rely on God's mercy and belief that the Holy Oil will quicken the recovery or in the case of inevitable death, the oil will alleviate any death-related sufferings.

Today, the Unction of the Sick is not regularly practiced, but is still recognized as a Sacrament of the Church. In the administration of the Sacrament, the clergyman prays and reads the Gospel of healing, blesses the individual, and then offers communion. Thus, both the body and the soul of the individual find peace and healing.

In the Armenian Church, only clergy may be anointed after death. This is done to honor them in regard to their priestly office.

The sacrament of the sick has existed since the beginning of the Church. We have reference to it in the Gospel of Mark and the letter of James. After the eighth century, the sacrament became more and more associated with the clergy only and led to a change of name, extreme unction, or the final anointing.

In the Mashdotz (the book of rituals of the Armenian Church) there is a special prayer for the sick.

One of the aspects which develops our Christian identity is a prayerful life. As we pray, we grow in our relationship with the Savior. Christ, our Lord, lived a prayerful life. Moreover, prayer became the foundation of His earthly ministry. Without prayer, our spiritual lives are emptied of God and we can no longer become the golden bridge between humanity and God. When we pray, we make the commitment to follow Christ, we become a friend of God and finally, we put off the old self and become a new person in Christ.

People who pray reveal the spiritual gifts which God has bestowed upon us. We often speak about benevolence, forgiveness, justice, nobility and many other virtues. To be graced with virtues requires from us to be engaged in prayer with God. Without adhering to God's commandments we do not have the moral right to call ourselves Christians. The depth of one's spirituality is clearly visible to the person who prays and lives in the presence of God. Essentially, prayer is the force which transfigures the individual. Through prayer Christ opened before us the doorway to the righteous life.