

OUR CHURCH CALENDAR FIVE SEASONS OF OUR CHURCH YEAR

Why a church calendar? As we live our lives, it helps to periodically pause and reflect on what's important. For this reason, we have family celebrations like birthdays or anniversaries. In a similar way as a church family, we pause from time to time to reflect on who we are and where we are going.

The Church Calendar endows time with rhythm and significance as a Christian makes the spiritual journey through life. The Calendar annually commemorates the key events in the Life of Christ and the history of the Church. At appropriate times during the year, it also draws our attention to examples of our faith and beliefs through the Lives of the Saints and New and Old Testament lessons.

Feasts, Fasts and Saints' Days. The Armenian Church celebrates over 100 saints' days each year. Saints' days are observed on weekdays: Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. The Armenian Church also observes 160 fast days each year. All Wednesdays and Fridays are fasting days, except for those during the fifty days following Easter, which are days of celebration of Christ's resurrection.

The most important days of the year are the five great feasts (also called tabernacle feasts since they were celebrated under a great tent, that is, a tabernacle), which divide the year into five seasons.

The Seasons of the Armenian Church Year

Theophany (*Մարտի 6-ի Սուրբ Ծնունդ* Soorp Dznoont)

In the Armenian Church, the birth and baptism of Our Lord are celebrated on the same day – January 6. According to St. Clement of Alexandria (late 2nd century) Christ's birth (Epiphany) was celebrated in Egypt on January 6. January 6th is also the day when the city of Bethlehem observed Theophany, which is a Greek word meaning Revelation of God. In the Roman Empire, December 25th was a day associated with a pagan feast, and thus in the 3rd century, the Church in the West moved Christmas to December 25th. This did not affect the Armenian Church, which continued the traditional January 6th celebration.

WHAT YOU WILL SEE:

The night before, on January 5th, a ճրագալոյց *Jurakalooytz* (*lamp-lighting*), or Candlemas, service is conducted. On the 6th, the church blesses water to commemorate Jesus' baptism. The service of Ջրօրհնէք *Chrorhnek* is conducted after the Divine Liturgy, recalling the baptism of Christ and the sanctification and purification of water, source of life. After the service, the blessed water is distributed to the faithful. In the early years, *Chrorhnek* was held at the banks of rivers and streams, but for practical reasons, it was moved to the church sanctuary.

Easter (*Մարտի 21-ի Սուրբ Զատիկ* Soorp Zadig)

This central feast of the Armenian Church commemorates the Resurrection (Յարութիւն *Harootyoon*) of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who died on the cross and rose on the third day. It

is celebrated between March 22 and April 25. In the early church there was much discussion and debate as to the proper day for the celebration of Easter: should it be on the day of the Judaic Feast of Passover or on the closest Sunday thereto? In 325 A.D. the Ecumenical Council of Nicea decided that the Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ should be celebrated on the first Sunday following the full moon after the vernal equinox. Why Sunday? Because Christ rose from the dead on the 3rd day after Passover, which is Sunday, which was until then called the first day of the week, and since then is referred to by Armenians as the Day of the Lord (*giragi* կիրակի, from the Greek word *kyrios* 'Lord', as in *kyrie eleison*, 'Lord, have mercy').

Easter is the culmination of the 40 day period of Lent (Պահք *Bahk*) and then Holy Week (Աւագ Շաբաթ *Avak Shapat*), the most solemn week of the year in the Armenian Church. This was traditionally a time of pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Jerusalem. Since the 4th century, the Armenians have had special rights to observe various Holy Week ceremonies at Christ's tomb in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

WHAT YOU WILL SEE:

The Holy Week and Easter services are among the most beautiful and significant in our Church. On Palm Sunday (Ծաղկազարդ *Dzaghzart*), palms are distributed to the faithful. Holy Week services include the Washing of the Feet (Ոսնլույլ *Vodnlva*), Vigil (Խաւարում *Khavaroom* (darkness)), Christ's Crucifixion (Խաչելութիւն *Khachelootyoon*) and His Burial. On Easter Sunday, Easter lilies adorn the altar.

The most popular custom associated with Easter in the Armenian Church is the coloring of eggs. Families would color eggs and gift them to relatives and friends they visited. The cracking of dyed Easter eggs (traditionally in red) is also part of the custom.

Transfiguration (Այլակերպութիւն *Aylagerbootyoon* or Պայծառակերպութիւն *Baydzaragerbootyoon*, Վարդապետ *Vartavar*)

In the Armenian calendar, the feast takes place on the 14th Sunday after Easter – 98 days later – so it is movable within an interval of 35 days, from June 28 to August 1.

Transfiguration commemorates the day Jesus took his three closest disciples – Peter, James, John – to Mt. Tabor to pray. It was there that our Lord was "transfigured," appearing radiant, his clothes became "dazzling white." The prophet Elijah (representing the Prophets) and the patriarch Moses (representing the Law) appeared at his side and a voice from heaven exclaimed, "This is my beloved Son." (See Mark 9:2-10; Matthew 17:1-9; Luke 9:28-36).

WHAT YOU WILL SEE

Some customs of an ancient Armenian pagan festival for the goddess Asdghig are still associated with this feast. Before Christianity, Armenians would celebrate *Vartavar*, which means "adorned with roses." Some remaining elements of this feast still occur in our Church today, such as decorating the church with roses and sprinkling water on one another.

Assumption (*Asvadzadzeen* Աստուածածին)

This feast day is celebrated on the Sunday nearest August 15. It commemorates the "assuming" -taking up into heaven- of the Mother of God at her death. According to

tradition, when she died in Jerusalem, the apostles buried her in the Garden of Gethsemane, but St. Bartholomew was away. When he returned, he wanted to visit her tomb, but when he arrived it was empty; her body was gone. The apostles were convinced the Lord took her body to heaven. A church, built over the site of St. Mary's tomb in Jerusalem, may be visited to this day. This holy place is under the protection of the Armenian and Greek Churches.

WHAT YOU WILL SEE:

On this day, the church performs the Blessing of the Grapes (Խաղողօրհնէք *Khaghoghornek*) after Divine Liturgy and distributes them to the faithful. In the Old Testament tradition of offering the first fruits of the harvest, the people bring grapes as an offering to God, thanking Him for His blessings and asking for an abundant harvest. Grapes have multiple, symbolic significance in Christianity. Jesus often referred to wine in his teachings and likened the Church to "the vine and the branch," references which are still repeated in the Divine Liturgy. Most importantly, wine and bread are the components of Holy Communion, offered during each Badarak.

Exaltation of the Holy Cross (Խաչվերաց *Khachverats*)

This feast occurs on the Sunday closest to September 14. When Jerusalem was captured by the Persians in 610, the true cross was taken away as booty. In 629, Emperor Heraclius defeated the Persians and the cross was returned. Its ceremonious journey from Persia back to Jerusalem passed through the land of Armenia and was a source of inspiration to the faithful; it was elevated constantly along the way for the faithful to venerate.

The Exaltation is connected with several historical events, each of which involves the "raising up" or glorification of the cross. An early tradition identifies St. James, the brother of the Lord – one of Jesus' 12 Apostles and the first bishop of Jerusalem – as the first to exalt a cross. Taking in hand a likeness (or perhaps an actual piece) of the original cross of the Crucifixion, St. James elevated it before the people, and venerated it as a symbol of "the power of God," praying: "We bow before your cross, O Christ." Those very words in Armenian – Խաչի քն, Քրիստոսս, երկիրպազանենք *Khachee ko, Kreesdos, yergeerbakanemk* – are still repeated in our church services.

WHAT YOU WILL SEE:

On this feast day, the liturgy is marked with the Blessing of the Fields service (*antasdan* անդասան) during which the processional cross is adorned with basil (a symbol of royalty) and the four corners of the church are blessed as a symbol for all the world. Following the liturgy, the faithful venerate and kiss the cross and take home a sprig of the basil.

Viewing the Year as a Coherent Whole. There are many ways to view the year as a coherent cycle. Here's one way to view the seasons of the church year:

Christmastide – comes in mid-winter, after the shortest day of the year (Dec. 23) when we most want the light. In the darkness we are reassured by the light of Christ entering the world. Then we remember the spread of the light by Armenia's patron saint, St.

Gregory (during National Fast of Armenia's conversion) and through the courage of "Christian soldiers" Sts. Sarkis, Vartan and Ghevont.

Eastertide –comes with the spring, a time of growth and renewal, rebirth, coinciding with Lent and Easter. It is the period of "spring cleaning" when we clean and prepare the soil of our soul for resurrection, reassured by the triumph of Easter, Ascension, and the comfort of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, when the Church was founded and when we remember St. Gregory and those who planted and cultivated the Armenian Church.

Transfigurationtide – comes in early summer when the sun is in full blaze, near the summer solstice longest day of the year. Christ's Transfiguration reminds us of his divinity, lest we in our enthusiasm believe we can go it alone.

Assumptiontide – comes as the fall harvest is ripe and ready to be reaped. At Assumption we remember the example of Mary, the humble servant, Mother of God, who as the best fruit was reaped and transported to heaven. At this time, we also celebrate the Blessing of the Grapes, from which we make wine, a symbol of joy and an essential part of the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Exaltationtide – comes as the days grow shorter, but our work is not done. Having grown to fruition during the four preceding seasons, it is our turn to work, to take up our cross and to assist our creator with our works. As we celebrate the Exaltation of the Cross and the Holy Translators, we remember how the tool of death and darkness turned into a symbol of life. We also remember the Bible, in Armenian the *Asdvadzashoonch*, the "Breath of God" translated in the 5th century by the Holy Translators is a tool to battle darkness and ignorance. The Cross and the Bible are two of the most powerful symbolic tools of our faith.

Thus the year winds down and the days grow shorter with Advent and Christmastide, when we are propelled by the efforts of the year that passed and drawn forward by the faith that the light will come again, as it always does, at every Christmas, giving us another chance to do better with the insight and experience gained in the passing year.

Daily Readings: The Armenian Church has selected for each day appropriate Bible reading based on the traditions and customs of the early church in Jerusalem. One good way to start or end each day and get into the rhythm of Armenian Christianity is to say the Lord's Prayer and read the passages specified for that day in the Armenian Lectionary.

You can find the daily readings and more information on Armenian feast days, saints days and holidays and hymns on our website at: www.armenianchurch.net. For more information about the calendar and hymns for specific days, you can check www.sharakan.am.