

REV. FR. HOVEL OHANYAN

*Water as a Symbol of  
Spiritual Rebirth  
in The Armenian Apostolic  
Orthodox  
Holy Church*



Burbank  
2015

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**WATER AS A SYMBOL OF  
SPIRITUAL REBIRTH  
IN THE ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC  
ORTHODOX HOLY CHURCH**

Dissertation  
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**This Book is dedicated to the faithful children  
of St. Vartan Armenian Apostolic Church in Oakland, CA  
whose generosity helped me receive a Master's Degree  
in Theology at the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute  
of the Graduate Theological Union at the University  
of California in Berkeley.**

*“Whoever sows generously will also reap generously.  
Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give,  
not reluctantly or under compulsion,  
for God loves a cheerful giver.”*

(2 Cor. 9:6-7)

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## **Greg & Seta Tcherkoyan**

in honor of Rev. Fr. Hovel Ohanyan and the foresight  
of the Stewardship Committee of The Western Diocese  
under the leadership of Archbishop Hovnan Derderian  
and Dr. Vahram Birichik in the pursuit of higher education  
for our clergy.

*“A generous person will be enriched,  
and the one who gives a drink of water will receive water.”*  
(Proverbs 11:25)

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## A WORD OF APPRECIATION

We would like to commend the careful research of Rev. Fr. Hovel Ohanyan whose work is entitled “*Water as a symbol of spiritual rebirth in the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Holy Church*”.

We are delighted that Rev. Fr. Hovel Ohanyan, who is one of our beloved priests, chose for his thesis the above mentioned topic, as the topic truly requires a proper representation, especially in the recently published academic literature.

The work is an attempt to introduce to a larger audience the importance of water that had been shared by the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Armenian Nation as a whole for millennia.

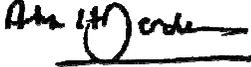
Truly, water has had the most significant importance in our culture and heritage. Armenian Apostolic Church, being the first nation to adopt Christianity as its state religion in 301 AD, managed to carry on the Apostolic Tradition not only in its teachings but also in its sacramental life, which to some extent is reflected in the Church’s various usage of the water.

Water itself is seen by our Church fathers as one of the most important gifts of the Almighty that has a dual significance, physical and spiritual. Indeed it is not by coincidence that the word water has a dual form in Biblical Hebrew: מַיִם (mayim). Water not only helps us to sustain our physical existence, it also helps us to become a member of the Living Body of Christ our Lord (1 Cor. 12:27), die for Christ and be reborn in the newness of life (Rom. 6:4). Thus, **“Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God”** (Jn. 3:5).

Indeed, “*When we are baptized, we are illuminated, and when we are illuminated, we are adopted, and when we are adopted, we are perfected, and when we are perfected we are made immortal*”. St. Clement of Alexandria.

We truly hope that the careful research of a dear priest Rev. Fr. Hovel Ohanyan will assist our fellow believers to get into the depth of the discussed matter and most importantly will help them to feel in their hearts the “Rivers of Living Water” (John. 7:38), which they on their turn will share with others.

Prayerfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Hovnan Derderian", written over a horizontal line.

Archbishop Hovnan Derderian  
Primate

*February 13, 2015*

## PREFACE

When Jesus Christ was baptized in the waters of the Jordan River, the heavens above opened and the voice of the Heavenly Father was heard proclaiming, “Thou art my son”. Moreover, as Jesus Christ rose up out of the waters, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him, completing the Revelation of the living and life-giving Holy Trinity at the Baptism.

In the Armenian Apostolic Church, individual baptism is modeled upon the events and theology of the Baptism of Jesus Christ. Through the re-presentation of the Baptism of Jesus Christ in the waters of the Jordan River, each Armenian is born again as a child and an heir, allowing the Holy Spirit now imbued within the person to proclaim Abba (father). Through the waters of baptism, an Armenian is spiritually adopted as a new child of the Holy Trinity.

It is a privilege and a pleasure for me to write this preface in praise of Reverend Father Hovel Ohanyan’s study on the theology of water in the baptismal rite of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Father Hovel has devoted the past several years pursuing and completing his Master’s Degree at the Graduate Theological Union at the University of California in Berkeley. He honored and humbled me by inviting me to be his Reader and Mentor in the course of preparing his dissertation. He is a diligent scholar and has compiled an extraordinary study.

Father Hovel has explored a subject which has heretofore not been researched in such fine detail, and he has analyzed the many qualities of water to show their theological importance and liturgical applications. He has introduced the pre-Christian symbolism of water as portrayed in Armenian mythology, and has shown ritual interpretations which appear to be unique to the pagan Armenian experience.

Father Hovel has then examined the Christian theology regarding water within the specific context of the liturgies of baptism amongst the Armenians. In the west, there appears to be an emphasis upon the connection of death and resurrection symbolized in the immersion of a person in and out of the baptismal font. In beautiful contrast, Father Hovel provides an excellent portrait of the

theology of obtaining a new life and of being adopted as a spiritual child through the rite of Armenian baptism.

Father Hovel has also presented details regarding the theology of water within the liturgical celebrations of the Blessing of the Water on Theophany (January 6) and in the Washing of the Feet on Great and Holy Thursday. He has provided information regarding other services throughout the liturgical year in which water is the focus of the invocation of Epiclesis.

In his conclusion, Father Hovel shares his personal experience with baptism and in his Calling into the Holy Priesthood of the Armenian Apostolic Church. His descriptions of life as a Christian in then-Soviet Armenia are stark yet spiritually compelling.

I commend Father Hovel for his personal discipline and perseverance in gathering so much pertinent information, and I admire his diligence in preparing such a scholarly presentation of these materials. Like most theological and liturgical studies, Father Hovel's fine paper must be read again and again in order to recognize the many facets and various complexities in the connection between water and baptism.

It is my prayerful hope that each person who reads this book will be inspired and enlightened, and will find the opportunity to renew the vows of baptism and to be refreshed through the water of Life.

Blessings upon Father Hovel and the Ohanyan Family.

Rev. Dr. George A. Lylegian  
Nassau, Bahamas

*2014*

## Forward

During religious ceremonies, certain vessels, containers and vestments are used; also, visible signs and symbols are used to make the rites and sacraments more understandable and meaningful. For instance, some of the recognizable symbolic objects utilized are bread, wine, water, candle, Myron (Holy oil), butter, grapes, etc.

Out of all of these items, my attention is drawn to the water, and I thought of preparing an article or a study about the usage of water in the religious rites. Several years after graduating from the Kevorkian Theological Seminary of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin in Armenia, in the midst of my new full-time parish duties at St. Vartan Armenian Apostolic Church in Oakland, when the opportunity was given to me to further my religious education, I was convinced that this was the proper time to devote myself to the pursuit of this project. During the research, I noticed that the subject I had chosen had numerous subdivisions; hence, the subject matter expanded and developed into the present study. Naturally, it was not easy to prepare and research a subject in view of the fact that there were very few resources available, whether in Armenian or English, and it became clear that this subject has never been fully examined in the Armenian Apostolic Church. During my research, I considered various publications and studies that were available, and which, to a lesser or greater degree, made some reference to the subject I was examining.

I hope that a closer examination of the element of water in religious rites might foster further interest in other, similar subjects such as light and oils in religious rites, etc., and will present an opportunity for future research. It would also be interesting to study the objects, prayers, and rites used during the pagan ceremonies and to compare them with Christian services.

I would like to thank my Spiritual Father and the Primate of the Armenian Church of the Western Diocese of North America, Archbishop Hovnan Derderian, who by his fatherly love, wisdom, and guidance has always encouraged me to continue my education and to enrich my knowledge about our Christian Church and Faith.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to my professors and instructors at the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute at GTU, where, in a rich spiritual atmosphere, I had the privilege to study for four years. I must thank the Dean of the PAOI, His Eminence Metropolitan Nikitas Lulias and my primary advisor, Dr. John Klentos, whose constant support and help have meant so much to me and have contributed so greatly to the improvement of my education.

I would like to thank, also, my beloved brother in Christ, Rev. Dr. George Leylegian, who graciously helped me throughout the years of my education at PAOI, helped me with my thesis as a third reader: editing, guiding and providing the most necessary sources for my research, as well as for accepting my request to write the preface for my book.

I must thank also Miss Angel Shekerdjian for her help for translating numerous Armenian texts into English for my research and our Diocesan librarian, Mr. Hayk Madoyan, for providing all the resources I needed for my research.

My words are not enough to express my deep wholehearted gratitude for the unmatched help and support which I have received all these years from my parishioners at St. Vartan Armenian Church in Oakland. Without their spiritual, moral, and financial support, I could never have attained such an education at GTU/PAOI in Berkeley.

From the bottom of my heart I would like to thank Mr. and Mrs. Greg and Seta Tcherkoyan, for their generous contribution for the publication of my book.

Most importantly, I want to thank my wife Yeretsgin Anahit and my three children, Vazgen, Nareh and Nazeni for supporting me patiently, not only sharing me with the congregation at Church, but also giving me the time to complete my studies to the glory of God and for the embellishment of the Armenian Church.

Fr. Hovel Ohanyan

# Introduction

The aim of my thesis is to describe the theological symbolism of water in the Liturgy of the Armenian Apostolic Church. From the beginning of humanity, water has its unique place in all religions. It was, and is, a very important element of life. In pagan times, water was glorified as one of the gods. Water had its special place in Judaism, and it influenced legislation, spirituality and sacramental life (Leviticus 11:1-15:33; Numbers 8:7-21; 19:17).<sup>1</sup> This study will focus upon the theological, symbolical, and liturgical aspects of water through the Baptismal service and the Blessing of the Waters as well as other liturgical references in the Armenian Apostolic Church, by providing historical and festal traditional examples. Although other Christian Churches use water in their spiritual and liturgical life, the focus of my work will be upon water as a source of life *physical* and *spiritual* in the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Since the beginning of creation, water remains the most important part of life and the "flowing friend" of humanity. Water in the Armenian Apostolic Church is life giving. My thesis is to demonstrate that through history, theology and liturgy, water gives life to Armenian Christians, and how we Armenians, through water, become adopted children of the Heavenly Father.

My premise is that the Armenian Apostolic Church shares many aspects of the universal theology of water, but has established her separate and distinct exegesis regarding water. By using all the ritual books of the Armenian Church, by examining the writings of the Church-Fathers, by analyzing the Church services (prayers, hymns about the water, etc.), and by referencing Armenian Church historians, I will show how the Armenians understand and approach water as a source of life; how and when we use water; and what is the purpose and the meaning of that usage. Examples from the Old and New Testaments will be given to show the roots of the usage of the water in the Armenian Church. Bible dictionaries and the Great

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<sup>1</sup> All Holy Scripture citations in English are taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha* (1977) and in Armenian from *Astvatzashunch* (2004).

Classical Concordance of the Armenian Bible will be used in this work. Some of the feasts and national traditions regarding water will be explained as well.

The significance of my thesis is that it will be the first time in English language that a detailed examination will be undertaken to uncover the historical, theological, symbolical and liturgical aspects of the water in the Armenian Apostolic Church. Through all of this research, I intend to provide more than one interpretation of the symbolism of the water in Armenian Christianity.

The first chapter of this work will introduce the pre-Christian and early-Christian significance of water in Armenian national traditions and beliefs.

The second chapter will explain the Baptism Service of the Armenian Church. In the Armenian Apostolic Church, every individual baptism is a sacramental representation of the great Baptism of Jesus Christ in the Jordan River. The role of water, both in the Jordan River and in the parish font, will be analyzed in the context of the Baptism of Jesus Christ.

The third chapter will discuss about the “Blessing of the Water” service held in conjunction with Theophany and the “Washing of the Feet” service held on Great Thursday in the Armenian Apostolic Church. By analyzing the prayers and hymns of these services, the chapter will show that even in His own Baptism our Lord Jesus Christ invites us to have life and to become an adopted children of God. The Blessing of the Water on the Feast of Theophany commemorates the Baptism of Jesus Christ in the Jordan River (Luke 3:23). Similarly, by washing the feet of His disciples, our Lord gives us the example of humility and love, to serve each other and to become a servant for each other. On the fifth day of the creation by God’s command the waters gave life (Genesis 1: 20-23), and on the fifth day of the week through the water God invited us to have part in His Kingdom and to become an adopted child of God (John 13:1-17).

Finally, I will examine some other liturgical services that show the usage of water in the Armenian Apostolic Church, such the “Blessing of a Well,” “*Khach’alva*” or “*Khach’ahangist*” (which is the washing of the Cross and the blessing of water for medicinal purposes), the “Home Blessing”, etc. By analyzing the hymns and

the prayers, I will present the Old and the New Testament references regarding water found in these particular services.

The Conclusion will be the overview of my thesis, once again emphasizing the life-giving aspects of the water in the Armenian Apostolic Church.

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **The Pre-Christian and Early Christian Significance of Water in Armenian National Traditions and Beliefs**

The Armenian language is one of the most ancient branches of the Indo-European tree of languages. The word for “water” is (*ջուր*) “*jur*” (eastern Armenian pronunciation) or “*chur*” (western Armenian pronunciation). The word “*jur / chur*”<sup>2</sup> bears an affinity to the Greek word “*hydor*”, from which “*hydra*” is derived.<sup>3</sup>

Water, in addition to its chemical composition and the indispensable importance to human life and the natural world it represents, has enjoyed an exceptional respect and veneration; and a special worship toward water has developed through the ages. Since the beginning of most ancient human history, water has had its distinct place in all religions; and nowadays, it is used during religious rites as a necessary element. Water, with its invigorating and healing qualities, and particularly “The Water of Life”, has provided a vast subject to numerous legends and interesting stories. Thales, a Greek philosopher in the Old Age, taught that the world and life consisted of water:

Thales, the founder of this type of philosophy, says the principle is water (for that reason he declared that the earth rests on water)... He derived his assumption, then, from this, and from the fact that the seeds of all things have a moist nature, and that water is the origin of the nature of moist things.<sup>4</sup>

Water has influenced man’s attitude toward his environment, his thinking, his religious beliefs and his customs. It follows that water has been considered a necessary element in religious ceremo-

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the paper, Armenian words are transcribed using Latin script. The first citation is the literal transliteration from the Armenian script, which is separated by a forward slash (/) from the common western Armenian pronunciation of the word.

<sup>3</sup> Sarkis Saryan. *Language Connections (Kinship of Armenian with Sister Indo-European Languages)*. Yarmouth, Mass.: Sarmen Book Co., 1982; p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Reale. *A History of Ancient Philosophy I: From the Origins to Socrates*. Translated by John R. Catan. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987; p. 36.

nies. Men have approached miraculous water sources with apprehension, and have reserved a special place for the water, and even worship it or dedicate gods to it.

### **The Usage of Water in Religious Rites**

Since the oldest days of human history, worshipping water and its usage during religious ceremonies has assumed an important role. All religions and nations have, in varying degrees, reserved an exceptional place for water, and have dealt with it respectfully and with appreciation during various religious ceremonies.<sup>5</sup>

Not only has water been used during religious rites, it has also become an object of veneration and numerous gods have been dedicated to it. Water has been greatly beneficial to the fertility of the soil, to the productivity of the trees and bushes, and to growth in the fields; consequently, people have expressed their adoration of the gods dedicated to water with even greater homage and appreciation, and have organized special celebrations to glorify the pantheon of aquatic deities. In man's view, water has mostly symbolized the power of nature, and has been considered an important factor of earth's fertility. The abundance of produce and the budding of nature are its beneficial results. Lakes, rivers, springs, and the seas have also been venerated as agents rendering man's everyday life productive by abundantly feeding the harvest of his fields:

Water plays a crucial role in man's health and for ages, has created a certain mysterious conviction in him, which has gradually resulted in the worship of water and the invention of stories about miraculous water sources.<sup>6</sup>

How did man regard water, and what did it represent?

In the first place, water was a crucial element in man's everyday life; it quenched his thirst and was the most used element at home. For man, water also meant rain pouring down from heaven,

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<sup>5</sup> Yeghishe Tourian. *The History of Religions (in Armenian)*. Jerusalem: Printing Press of the Armenian Patriarchate of Saints' James, 1935; p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> A. G. Arakelyan. *The History of Greek Literature (in Armenian)*. Yerevan: 1968; p. 58

bringing fertility and vitality to the harvest, and increasing the earth's water supply. When the rains were delayed, people begged for heaven's mercy with prayers and worship so they would not have a drought<sup>7</sup>: "*People have used water in their religious rituals throughout time. Indigenous people prayed to the rain god to send water to sustain their crops and lives.*"<sup>8</sup>

Since the beginning of time, drought has caused nightmares for all; in view of the fact that man's greatest hope – the abundance of the annual harvest – is completely destroyed by the drought, people have resorted to special ceremonies, offerings and prayers to save themselves from the drought.

During the pagan time, the gods of water, thunder and fertility enjoyed the most popularity and offered cause for celebrations. Such occasions among Armenians were the celebrations for the pagan gods *Vahagn, Anahit, and Astrid*.

After the autumn harvest, it was time for "the land to rest"; the people who cultivated the land considered that time as a dead season; during this period, they were extremely worried about the following season, and were not sure whether the land would be fertile and the yield abundantly; would the vineyards and fields justify all the hard labor, would the wheat be abundant, would the crops be fertile? In other words, would nature offer its blessings in the following season by giving the cultivators an abundant harvest?

Thus, for all nations almost everywhere, the unsure state of the waiting period during the so-called dead season, the immense worry for the fertility of the crops and the abundance of the yield became a true nightmare; hence, for some spiritual belief, hope and trust, the cultivators turned to their gods dedicated to waters, and by means of worship and rituals presented their pleas and prayers and offered sacrifices.

One of the principal conditions of land fertility and productivity was the rain, especially in countries that were located in desert areas and because of climate and geographical location, were often

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<sup>7</sup> We have the same ritual in the Church life and we will talk about it in the last chapter.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Galbreath. *Leading through the Water*. Herndon, Virginia: Alban Press, 2011; p. 78

under the threat of the drought. The cultivators were considerably worried about rain and water:

And during the drought, each nation had its own rituals and prayers to beseech for the rain. Especially among the people of the East, the rituals for the rain took a public character; people begged for nature's mercy by means of grandiose national and religious ceremonies.<sup>9</sup>

Water was, at the same time, the river, the water source and the sea. Rivers occasionally overflowed threatening to cause damage; they flooded and destroyed people's dwellings. Beside material losses, floods also caused human victims; thus, to appease the wrath of the waters, men without shelter would worship and offer sacrifices and deified the waters, imagining that there were spirits living in them.

They perceived the sea, whose appearance changed with the seasons, in the same manner. Naturally, the sea was pleasant during the summer, when, according to them "*the sea dragons were asleep.*" But during the winter storms, the sea changed into a terrifying appearance. The storm and strong winds on the one hand, and the sea waves and their splash on the other, spread awe and terror; in view of all that, man worshipped the sea, deified its waters and believed that various spirits inhabited in its depths from where they could control the storms and make the sea safe for navigation.<sup>10</sup>

During the warm summer season it was so pleasant for the tired and exhausted men to savor the cold and clear water of the sources that they would bless the folks who found the source. Often, there were some marvelous stories told about the waters of those sources and some extraordinary customs and worship were performed all around them.

Hence, water, in its different forms and under its different names, such as rain, river, source, lake, sea and ocean, had a very

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<sup>9</sup> Artak Manukian. *Water in the Religious Ceremonies (in Armenian)*. Tehran: Alik Publisher, 1973; p. 82

<sup>10</sup> Aram Ghanalanyan. *History of Traditions (in Armenian)*. Yerevan: 1969; p. 31

significant influence in the religious viewpoint of people and gave them the opportunity to deification and worship.<sup>11</sup>

And thus, through the ages, religious and national beliefs and customs, veneration of gods, and superstition grew with the people and, passing from generation to generation within the same environment, they became an inseparable part of religious understanding, faith, and belief, as well as the practical expression of popular customs. Great civilizations have developed and thrived around waters or near seashores. Wherever water existed, life and vegetation also grew. Any kind of contact with water brought about a great revival; the soil, the seed, the harvest, all vegetation owed their fertility to water.<sup>12</sup>

In religious rites water has a revitalizing and hope-inspiring quality. People have believed that water has a hidden power which heals different kinds of pains and diseases; water even gave them the hope that it could revive the dead and thus water symbolized life and livelihood, water was a life-giving and life-saving source.<sup>13</sup>

During the pagan times, the relationship between the woman, water and fish, or the woman, water and the moon symbolized fertility. It is surprising, but rather logical, that the gods dedicated to waters are mostly goddesses. Thus, in Assyria, they were called *Melidda* and *Ishtar*; in Babylon, *Ishtar*; in Phoenicia, *Ashtoret*, *Ashtara*, and *Derkerro*; in Syria, *Derkoro*, *Atarcatis*, and *Astrate*; the Greeks had *Aphrodite*; the Persians, *Anahida*; the Armenians had *Anahit* and *Astrid*. All of these were considered the people's favorite and most respected goddesses. Their statues and temples were located close to waters and especially their worship was performed in the vicinity of waters: rivers, lakes, and water sources.<sup>14</sup>

It is not the purpose here to include religions and goddesses dedicated to waters, rivers and seas, because there are far too many

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<sup>11</sup> Ghevond Alishan. *The Old Beliefs of the Armenian Nation (in Armenian)*. Venice: San Lazzaro Press, 1895; p. 58

<sup>12</sup> Arakelyan, p. 23

<sup>13</sup> Water has also had a mysterious role in wizardry and sorcery; even today, some people perform impressive predictions over and through the water giving it a significant importance.

<sup>14</sup> Manuk Abeghyan. *The Dragons*. Yerevan: 1941; pp. 71-73

and too diverse, since all nations of the past have worshipped the water and have held special festive ceremonies for it.

### **Water in the Armenian Beliefs and in some National Customs**

It must be stated that our general knowledge regarding pre-Christian Armenian traditions is quite limited. The Armenian alphabet was not formalized until the commencement of the fifth century of the common era and, owing to countless conquests of the region, the earliest existing original manuscripts date only from the ninth century. It is said by the Armenian historians that when King Tiridates issued the royal decree that henceforth Christianity would be the state religion of Armenia in 301 A.D., the pagan temples and associated literature were set upon with a zealous frenzy.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, what little information we now have has been transmitted through oral history and, like most histories written by the victor, may not accurately describe polytheism and pagan worship as practiced in the centuries before Christ.

There are many signs of water worship found within Armenian beliefs and religious customs and traditions, and people have attributed to water the quality of healing many diseases. Sensational stories and miraculous traditions about waters (mostly about waters in springs and fountains) have created a mysterious devotion toward certain water sources.<sup>16</sup>

Before the Christian era, in addition to miraculous stories and traditions associated with various sources of water, the rivers and the lakes themselves were turned into objects of worship.

During the Urartian period (1000-600 B.C.), while the Armenian people were growing and getting organized, religion was also

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<sup>15</sup> We will discuss about this in the Second Chapter.

<sup>16</sup> Modern science may identify certain mineral content (for example, a high presence of sulfur or compound salts) in a particular water source which would provide evidence linking the benefit of drinking or bathing in those waters as a means of medical cure. Cynically, today we recognize that for centuries most of the world languished in poor hygiene and poor nutrition, and therefore the simple act of drinking fortified water or bathing in general could profit the average person immensely in terms of health and well-being.

gradually starting to develop; at the first opportunity, natural occurrences, such as thunder, lightning, storms, rain and heavenly planets were made into objects of worship. When people were unable to explain the wonderful natural occurrences and the awesome events that they faced, they saw in them a supernatural power and started to worship them.<sup>17</sup>

Like other nations, the early inhabitants of Armenia also followed the totemic way of religion; the worshipped totem could be an animal, a plant or an article; they believed that the totem could transform itself and become a human being, an animal or a plant. The reverence rendered specially to sacred animals remained in the Armenian people's consciousness through centuries, and during the pagan time, each sacred place, temple, altar had its own sacred animal, which became an object of reverence and, sometimes, even an object of veneration:

Henceforth, the worship of nature was fully embedded in the people's religious approach and understanding; consequently, the sun, the moon, the water and the fire became objects of worship and people offered sacrifices to them in order to obtain their mercy.<sup>18</sup>

During the Urartian period, when polytheism was practiced and specific gods were dedicated to many manifestations and ideas, water also became one such object of worship. The Armenian goddess *Astrid* was the goddess of love, fertility and water, and the celebrations devoted to her turned into a popular festival. The polytheistic celebration known as "*Vardavar*"<sup>19</sup> is the most obvious representation of the popular nature of this feast. According to national customs, on the day of the celebration people sprinkled water on each other, let loose doves to fly freely and spread rose

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<sup>17</sup> Ervand Ter-Minasyan. *The History of Religions (in Armenian)*. Etchmiadzin: Printing Press of the Mother See, 1909; p. 18

<sup>18</sup> Ghanalanyan, p. 38

<sup>19</sup> "The term *Vardavar* is composed of the words "vard" (rose) and "var" (bright), therefore, *Vardavar* means brightness of a rose or a bright, shining rose." Hrachya Adjaryan. *Dictionary of Armenian Root Words*. Second . Vol. 4. 4 vols. Yerevan: Armenian University Press, 1971; p. 318

petals. These customs remained among the Armenians for a long time and are locally preserved amongst the Christian Armenians.<sup>20</sup>

However, according to Very Rev. Fr. Vahan Ter-Minasyan, Armenians celebrated the feast of *Vardavar* from the very earliest time. According to his testimony, *Vardavar* is the oldest feast established by our forefather Noah after the Flood, when the Ark settled on top of the mountain Ararat. By sprinkling water on each other and by releasing doves to fly, Armenians kept the memory of Noah and the Flood alive in their national tradition:

It is said that Noah himself established the feast of *Vardavar* after leaving the Ark on Mount Ararat. In the memory of the Flood, he commanded his descendants to sprinkle water on each other and let doves fly, which symbolized the dove that brought an olive leaf in her beak, thus announcing that the waters were abated from off the earth (Genesis 8:8-12).<sup>21</sup>

It is of significance that Armenians have never had gods of evil, darkness and destruction, even during their pagan time; and in general they have considered evil as the absence of goodness, of darkness, and of light. Their legendary heroes have battled against evil, darkness, and destruction; they were viewed as disseminators of light and goodness. In Armenian polytheism the gods have mostly acquired a literary character and have been represented as granters of goodness, light, peace, vigor and fertility: “*Evil and darkness are not separately represented in the people’s religious worship as they are among Persians, Greeks and Indians.*”<sup>22</sup>

Armenians also believed that water sources were inhabited by spirits and that they possessed magical powers. In particular, *Gat’naghpyur* (the Milk Source) and *Lusaghpyur* (the Light Source) are recognized and venerated by Armenians. The large rivers such as the Euphrates, the Aratsani, the Tigris, the Araxes, and others have become objects of worship and veneration.<sup>23</sup> In Armenian legends

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<sup>20</sup> We will discuss about the celebration of *Vardavar* during the feast of Transfiguration of our Lord in the Second Chapter.

<sup>21</sup> Vahan Ter-Minasyan. *Unwritten scripts and old customs (in Armenian)*. Vol. 2. Constantinople, 1904, p. 145

<sup>22</sup> Alishan, p. 41

<sup>23</sup> Manukian, p. 38

fire and water are considered to be sister and brother. Fire is the sister while water, the brother. Armenians would throw the ashes of sacrificial fire into Rivers Euphrates and Tigris.

According to Aram Ghanalanyan, the Armenians believed that the storms and tempests that occurred on the sea and lakes were the work of the dragon-like fish living in them, which also caused a drought by cutting off the source of rain, the heavenly waters. And to reopen the waters, it was essential that the hero of the storm and clouds, the friend of the people, annihilates the dragon.<sup>24</sup>

The Armenian stone dragons, about which M. Abeghyan has written in great detail in his book *“The Dragons,”* are regarded as the most obvious proof of water worship. He has shown that the fish-like statues called “dragons” (in Armenian, “*vishap*” վիշապ) are connected to the irrigation system and are related to water and its deification: *“The stone dragons, built in the form of huge fish near canals, water sources and rivers during Armenia’s Bronze Age, were the guardians of water.”*<sup>25</sup>

For the people of Armenia water had an exceptional meaning, beyond its use in daily life and its quality to augment the crops, the products and the fertility of the land. For the Armenians water had become an object of hope, joy and dreams and especially for religious worship. Consequently, every lake and water source was linked to some wonderfully consecrated religious tradition, indicative, yet once again, of the practice of water worship.

The geographical location of Armenia, its climate and natural resources gave an opportunity to the people to create a special adoration toward water, a substance of such importance in their daily life, especially on the dry land, that gave hope to the land cultivator, cure to the sick, and became the important element in religious rites and worship.

Ghanalanyan also confirms that Armenians had spirits dedicated to different elements of the land. The spirits taking care of the waters were called *Horot or Horut* while those protecting the waters were called *Morot or Morut*, hence today’s expression *Horot-Morot*,

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<sup>24</sup> Ghanalanyan, pp. 48-49

<sup>25</sup> Abeghyan, p. 43

which is the name of a flower and has stayed among Armenians and Persians.<sup>26</sup>

Among the Armenian gods, *Vahagn* is considered the god of clouds and thunder, similar to *Tishtiban*, the Persian god of thunder, who, fighting against the giant *Apasha*, brought down the rains; or the Indian god of clouds, tearing through the clouds in the sky, and *Vahagn*, fighting against the clouds, also brought down the rains.<sup>27</sup>

The fact that the historic boundaries of Armenia did not have any seashore induced the people to turn lakes, rivers and water sources into worship objects. As mentioned earlier, the most noteworthy aspect in Armenian beliefs is the unprecedented homage and awe displayed toward the miraculous water sources and rivers. Each province, and even each city and village, had its own miraculous river or water source which was considered sacred and having a healing power. People undertook pilgrimages to those waters with great devotion, hoping to obtain cure for their aches and diseases: “*And surprisingly, during the Christian era, as in the heathen period, all the great convents and holy sites were constructed close to waters and people wove extraordinary stories and traditions around them.*”<sup>28</sup>

Water usage in prophesy was a common phenomenon in ancient and more recent times, especially among people who claimed an important culture. For example, in order to establish the identity of a burglar or a robber, the old Armenians would dig a hole in the house which was burglarized and fill the hole with water. Then a pagan priest would pray to reflect the burglar’s spirit in the water; the burglar’s image would appear and his identity would be recognized. Many other nations have also used water in prophesy in various forms and rites.

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<sup>26</sup> Ghanalanyan, p. 56

<sup>27</sup> S. Harutiunian. *Armenian mythology (in Armenian)*. Beirut, 2001, pp. 78-79

<sup>28</sup> Sos-Vani. “Sacred Rivers, miraculous water sources” (in Armenian). *Hask*. Antelias, Lebanon, 1961; p. 160

## Some of the Armenian provinces and local beliefs about water

When Lalayan describes the Armenian provinces, he includes in each cultural study the local beliefs and customs specific to each province. Water had its distinctive place within the provincial traditions and customs, and was often used by the people on various occasions.

In the province of Chavaghk, when someone passed away, the deceased was washed with cold water, in a tub or on a wooden platform; if the deceased was a male, the *jhamgotch* (the male sexton of the church) washed him, and if a female, the *keyvani* (often a pious widow attached to the church). The relatives of the deceased, in a special sign of respect, poured some water over him so that he could be blessed for his goodness. After washing the deceased, the remaining water was discarded by turning over the tub and breaking the water pot (called “*moosharan*”) into pieces so that no other member of the family would die.<sup>29</sup>

In the old days, water had also its power on the deceased as it “quenched their thirst.” Death was not considered a final break between the deceased and the living. The deceased were transported into a different world and they often paid visits to their relatives. Hence, the relatives, mindful of their nourishment, believed that they suffered from thirst. In this regard, the parable of Jesus Christ about the rich man and poor Lazarus is familiar. The rich man begs Abraham to send down Lazarus so he could dip his finger in water and cool his tongue (Luke 16:20-31). Among the peoples of the East, this reasoning was widely spread. They believed that the deceased became thirsty and it was necessary to give them some water. The fire in hell and the thirst of the deceased have always kept people’s minds occupied.<sup>30</sup>

People did not drink water in dark places for fear of allowing the devils in. They also avoided throwing out water during the night fearing that devils would be strolling during that time and it was

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<sup>29</sup> E. Lalayan. *Azgagrakan Handes (Ethnographic Magazine)*, in *Armenian Shushi*: 1897, p. 309

<sup>30</sup> G. M. Galstyan. *A Brief Dictionary of Mythology (in Armenian)*. Yerevan: 1966; p. 63

possible to splash them. In some provinces they would not look at the water in wells and rivers during the night thinking that “something evil would happen”; they would not throw out water in dark places because it would “soak the devils that would harm the family.”

“They also believed that the devils inhabited in vast hollow places in the earth, in dense forests and caves close to the pond of the eternal life in the orchards of the golden apples.”<sup>31</sup>

The Armenian people of Akhalkalak (one of the parts of Chavaghk) believed that when God separated heaven and earth during the creation of the world, some of the water remained in heaven, while the rest formed the four rivers: *Moorat Chai* (Euphrates), *Koor, Araz* (*Arax*) and the Black Sea. They also believed that the sky has seven layers; the first layer is the cloud, the rest are layers of water, ending on top of the ocean.<sup>32</sup>

In the same location, they also believed that Prophet Elijah had four assistants surrounding him, who, at his command, would blow the clouds, push them down so they could drink water from the sea, then rise again to bring down the rains. As for the echo, people thought that there were mountains full of water, which produced those sounds. It was also customary not to throw water on fire so that the family’s blessing or good fortune would not be extinguished.<sup>33</sup>

In order to conceive male children, Armenians in Vaspurakan, while giving a bath to the new-born baby boy, would leave some water in the pail; and if the baby was a girl, they would empty the whole pail of water over the child, hoping that by doing so the female sex would come to an end, just as the water in the pail. They did this so they would not conceive baby girls.<sup>34</sup>

When the child was to be washed off the holy oil three days after his/her baptism, they would first wash each part of the body that had been anointed, and then wash the child in a tub. They would then pour the water, containing some traces of the holy oil, into a

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<sup>31</sup> Lalayan, 1897; p. 326

<sup>32</sup> Ibid; p. 347

<sup>33</sup> Ibid; p. 350

<sup>34</sup> E. Lalayan. *Azgagrakan Handes (Ethnographic Magazine)*, in *Armenian*. Tiflis: Hermes Press, 1910; p. 172

clean hole; and when a utensil was polluted by the touch of a mouse, dog, cat, or in short, by an unholy animal, they would bring out from the hole a handful of soil moistened with the holy oil and would wash the unclean utensils. Others would pour “holy-oiled” water into the water source or in some clean and inaccessible location.<sup>35</sup>

In certain Armenian provinces, after the religious ceremony of the Blessing of Water, it was customary to take some water home in a cup and pour it into the yeast and the flour and mix the rest with ashes and knead it into balls and use it, as needed, to wash the articles or plates that had been touched by mice or dogs.

According to a widespread tradition, on the Eve of New Year and/or Christmas, rivers and streams would stop their flow for a moment and if at that very moment one placed an object, such as pitchers or other water dispensers, those items would immediately turn to gold.<sup>36</sup>

In other parts of Armenia, it was also customary for the elderly head of the family to pass his authority by washing his hands over the hands of the person next in line, so that the blessings (Baraka) of his hands get transferred to the young one.<sup>37</sup>

In Gantsak, people worshipped certain water sources and considered them sacred. Each water source had a healing quality for a specific disease; for instance, “*the source of Koss*” healed the lepers, “*the source of Bakker (kisses)*” brought back youth, “*the source of Martyrs*” took away sadness and cured heartaches, the “*source of Vosgan the Martyr*” cured dumbness, deafness and blindness. However, the sources of eternal life were found at inaccessible places and they became the subject of numerous stories.<sup>38</sup>

In Mush the “*Gorkiag*” source healed headaches and earaches. Near the Akarag village of Chemeshgadsak the old church had two water sources, one of them cured ear pains and the second cured those suffering with fever. In the village Keghi there was the *Gat'naghpyur* (the source of Milk), in which mothers who could not produce milk would swim to induce lactation. In Khnus swimming

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid; p. 175

<sup>36</sup> Manukyan, p. 33

<sup>37</sup> M. Lisitsyan. *Armenians in Zangezur (in Armenian)*. Yerevan: 1969; p. 34

<sup>38</sup> Lalayan, 1910; p. 232

in the source of “*Khuyli Baba*” cured the lunatics. And people with eye pain would get relief from the “*St. Sahak*” source in Baghesh. Thus, because of their healing qualities, many waters and sources have been transformed into pilgrimage sites and earned respect and veneration:

It was also customary for a newly-wed bride to throw wheat, as a sacrifice, into the source at her first visit there. On Sundays, they lit candles near the sources considered sacred, while the visitor beseeching health would light candles, offer a chicken and would pray and worship the miraculous source.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid; p. 235

## **CHAPTER 2**

# **The Sacramental Mystery of Holy Baptism in the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Significance of Water in the Baptism**

**B**aptism, Chrismation, and Holy Communion are the most important sacramental mysteries of the Universal Church. The “Order of Baptism” of the Armenian Apostolic Church combines all three of these sacramental mysteries which comprise the sacred rite of Christian Initiation. Baptism is the initiatory sacramental mystery by which an individual is made a member of the Body of Christ, thus becoming an adopted child of God and an heir of the heavenly kingdom. Chrismation is the sacramental mystery by which the baptized receives the Holy Spirit, and is accomplished by being anointed with Holy Chrism (in Armenian, “*miwr'on / myuron*” (*մյւրոն*), from the Greek “*myron*”).<sup>40</sup> Holy Communion is the sacramental mystery by which the baptized/chrismated individual offers up thanksgiving to God and through which the individual shares in the feast of the precious Body and the Blood of Jesus Christ: “*Believers become Christians through the baptismal bath, through anointing at confirmation, and through participation in the Eucharistic feast. There are thus three steps: washing, anointing, and meal.*”<sup>41</sup>

A catechumen<sup>42</sup> who is brought to baptism receives all three great sacramental mysteries necessary for salvation, one after the other, and becomes a Christian through one continuous sacred act.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> “The Holy Chrism is the symbolic presence and abiding grace of the Holy Spirit upon the recipient. The Holy Chrism is usually kept in a dove-shaped vessel in every Armenian Church. It is not blessed olive oil but a mixture of over 45 different sweet-smelling spices, plants, leaves and flowers, including olive oil...” (Der-Mkrtchian 2008, 25-26)

<sup>41</sup> Richter Klemens. *The Meaning of the Sacramental symbols: Answers to Today's Questions*. Translated by Linda M. Maloney. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1988; p. 78.

<sup>42</sup> The person who is not baptized and is under the instruction of the Church is known as a Catechumen. The Armenian word for it is “*erexay / yerekhah*.” (Sarafian 1959, 17)

<sup>43</sup> Dirayr Dervishian. *Variables of the Divine Liturgy, Proper to Sundays and special Feast Days and Church Knowledge*. Burbank, CA: Western Diocese Press, 2013; p. 42

Every sacramental mystery<sup>44</sup> has two signs: one visible, and the other invisible. The visible signs in Baptism are the water, the person being baptized, the priest, the godfather, the Holy Chrism in the dove shaped container, etc. The invisible sign in Baptism is the cleansing of all our sins, and the reception of new birth into righteousness, by which we are made the children of God: “*Both sacraments and sacramental contain a visible and an invisible component... What is visible, apparent, and accessible is a sign of what is invisible, hidden, and mysterious.*”<sup>45</sup>

The sacramental mysteries of the Church are precisely this: “*they are the sacramental symbols of a divine plan for humanity that one must obey to attain salvation in God's heavenly kingdom. They are His way of living a life inspired and sanctified by God's presence through Jesus Christ*”.<sup>46</sup>

Baptism is the first of all the sacramental mysteries, and it is administered only once. The Church's Creed, based on the teaching of St. Paul (Ephesians 4:4-6), declares that there is only one baptism:

We believe also in only one catholic and apostolic holy Church;

In one baptism with repentance for the remission and forgiveness of sins;

In the resurrection of the dead, in the everlasting judgment of souls and bodies, in the kingdom of heaven and in the life eternal.<sup>47</sup>

We cannot receive any other sacramental mystery until we are baptized. That is why Baptism is called “the door of the Church.”

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<sup>44</sup> There are seven, great sacramental mysteries (in Armenian, “*xorhowrd / khorhour*” խորհուրդ) in the Armenian Church: Baptism, Chrismation, Penitence, Holy Communion, Ordination, Holy Matrimony, and Unction of the Sick. (Maksoudian 2004, 70)

<sup>45</sup> Klemens, p. 16

<sup>46</sup> Garabed Kochakian. *The Sacraments, the Symbols of our Faith*. New York: St. Vartan Press, 1983; p. 3

<sup>47</sup> Daniel Findikyan. *The Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church: With modern Armenian and English translations, transliterations, musical notations, introduction and notes*. New York: St. Vartan Press, 2000, p. 19

The disobedience of Adam is often called Original Sin<sup>48</sup>, which is our inheritance from the beginning. It is the tendency which constantly challenges all human beings to choose between doing good and doing evil and from which we must be purified in order to be truly children of God: “...for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth...” (Genesis 8:21). One of the aims of the Baptism is the forgiveness of all sins, including the original sin into which we are born to this world. Baptism makes us children of God, washes away our sins, gives new life to our souls and makes us co-heirs of Christ.<sup>49</sup>

Man is created for union with God but as a consequence of the primordial sin of Adam the channels of grace that Adam denied are closed... The sacrament of baptism reopens these channels of grace and what had been lost in Adam is regained in Christ.<sup>50</sup>

In the Acts of the Apostles, Ananias, sent by God, after healing the blind Saul, tells him to not wait, but “*Arise and be baptized and wash away your sins*” (Acts 22:16). This is one of the greatest testimonies that the result of the baptism is to be cleansed from all sins. It is noteworthy to mention here that Saul was called by God to be an Apostle and to take His word to the gentiles. Even though Saul encountered the Lord on his way to Damascus, his sins were not forgiven at his meeting with the Lord. Baptism was still required to wash away his sins. So, Baptism is the washing away of sins.<sup>51</sup>

Before being baptized, we are like any of the other creatures of God. He is our physical Maker, but not yet our spiritual Father. Baptism makes us Christians and adopted children of God. It is enough to be baptized in order to be a Christian; however, it is not

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<sup>48</sup> Frequently in colloquial Armenian, we refer to Original Sin as “Adamic sin.” (Kassarchian, *Catechism*, p. 18)

<sup>49</sup> Shnorhik Kaloustian. *Saints and Sacraments of the Armenian Church*. New York: Diocese of the Armenian Church of America, 1969; p. 37

<sup>50</sup> Graeme Castleman. “Returning to the Primordial: the Water Symbolism in Baptism.” In Elena Llyod-Sidle and Virginia Gray Henry-Blakemore, *Water and Its Spiritual Significance*. Louisville, Kentucky: Fons-Vitae Press, 2009; p. 112

<sup>51</sup> His Holiness Pope Shenouda. *Comparative Theology, Volume One*. East Brunswick, New Jersey: Saint Mary Coptic Church, 1987; p. 19

enough to be a Christian in order to go to heaven and be saved.<sup>52</sup> Although every baptized person is a Christian, it must be remembered that if a Christian makes of himself a slave to sins after baptism, he is then a Christian and a child of God in name only, and effectively a pagan in deeds. To such Christ will say on His Day of Judgment: *“I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers”* (Matthew 7:23). Baptism is the Liturgy of Christian Initiation, through which the catechumen is enlightened; his will is reformed as a result of hearing the Word of God. Baptism is called an act of illumination, because through its holy and saving light the catechumen comes forth out of the darkness of sin and death, and goes forth into the light of eternal life. As St. Clement of Alexandria so beautifully describes it, putting the emphasis on adoption and perfection through the water baptism: *“When we are baptized, we are illuminated; and when we are illuminated, we are adopted; and when we are adopted, we are perfected; and when we are perfected, we are made immortal.”*<sup>53</sup>

By baptism, we are made Christians and are incorporated into the Church’s life. And even more than this, baptism builds the Church - not the Church of stone, but the Church of living stones: the Christian Community, where all the members through baptism and through the grace of the Holy Spirit are becoming the true sons and daughters of the Almighty God: *“In the Sacrament of Baptism, the Christian community, acting as the Body of Christ, builds on water in both its death-dealing and life-giving functions.”*<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Tiran Nersoyan. *The Order of Baptism, According to the Rite of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church*. Evanston, Illinois: Saint Nersess Publications, 1964; p. 87

<sup>53</sup> Everett Ferguson. *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009; p. 311

<sup>54</sup> Thomas H. West. *Jesus and the Quest for Meaning: Entering Theology*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001; p. 128

## The Order of Baptism in the Armenian Apostolic Church<sup>55</sup>

According to the famous Armenian linguist, Hrachya Adjaryan, in the Armenian language, the word (*մկրտանություն*) “*mkrtowt’iwn / mgrdootyoon*” is derived from the root “*k-r-t / g-r-d*”, which refers to the act of cutting or separating away; the common word for “scissors” in Armenian is likewise “*mkrat / mgrad*” (*մկրատ*), from the same root. Unlike the Greek word “baptizein”, which implies immersion, the Armenian word for the ritual implies a cutting away.<sup>56</sup> In so many ways, the Armenian rite is the New Testament, bloodless perfection of the Old Testament ritual of circumcision of the foreskin, which connotes the recognition that someone is now a legal son and heir to the father (Genesis 17:23-27, 21:4).

We will see this theme come to fruition in the Galatians lection which is read at the baptism service in the Armenian Church.

In the Armenian Apostolic Church, baptism<sup>57</sup> is usually administered during infancy. While little children cannot understand the meaning of the rite, by the faith of their sponsor or godfather<sup>58</sup>, they are received into Christ’s Church, they become the recipients of grace, and they are trained in the household of faith, and are

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<sup>55</sup> To describe the Baptismal Service and the other Liturgical Services of the Armenian Church, we refer to the Ritual Books of the Armenian Church published in Jerusalem (Dzisanan, 1896) and for the better English translation we used the publication of the Eastern Prelacy (The Rituals 1992).

<sup>56</sup> Hrachya Adjaryan. *Dictionary of Armenian Root Words*. Second . Vol. 3. 4 vols. Yerevan: Armenian University Press, 1971, p. 331

<sup>57</sup> Armenians employ several words when referring to this combined service. Baptism is “*Mkrtut’iwn*”, as we have explained above. The word “*knunk’ / gnounk’*” is also in common use, meaning “sealings”, and refers to the second part of the service which includes anointing. Sometimes people use also the word *Miwronel*, which corresponds to chrismation. (“Christian Armenia” Encyclopedia 2002, 748)

<sup>58</sup> “A godfather (in Armenian *Knk’ahayr / gnkahayr*) makes promises, at the time of Baptism, on behalf of the child being baptized. He is responsible for the Christian education of his godchild. Godfathers must be practicing members of the Armenian Church and they must see to it, when necessary, that their godchild receives a proper Armenian Christian education. A spiritual relationship is established between the godfather and godchild. As a consequence it has been the Church’s custom to forbid marriages between them. Nor can a husband be his wife’s godfather.” (Altounian, *The Sacraments of the Armenian Church* 1982, 23)

members of Christ's Body, the Church. However, age has nothing to do with baptism. God receives a person as His child at any time. But since life is full of dangers, the wise custom of the Armenian Church is to baptize children as soon as possible after their birth. The Canons of the Armenian Apostolic Church strongly advise baptism on the eighth day after birth and it should not be delayed for more than forty days.<sup>59</sup>

The first part of the Rite of Baptism of the Armenian Apostolic Church is the **Call to Penance**; the second part is **the Entrance into the Church**; and the third part is **the Baptism** proper. The first two parts are really a preparation for the third part, namely Baptism itself.

In the first part of the rite, the people who have taken the catechumen to the doors of the church tell God with, or on behalf of, the catechumen, that they are sorry for their sinfulness.<sup>60</sup> They beseech God to forgive them. Right at the beginning of the service, after the recitation of the first Lord's Prayer, the priest invokes the Holy Spirit saying: "*Blessed be the Holy Spirit, the True God. Amen*" and then alternates Psalm 51 with the deacon. Then the priest twists the (*նարոտ*) "*narot / narod*" (knotted ribbon or braid) with red and white ribbons, signifying the life-giving Blood and Water which came out of the side of Christ pierced with spear (John 19:34).<sup>61</sup> Then the catechumen is specially prayed for, that he may have a

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<sup>59</sup> Nerses Melik-Tangian. *The Religious Rights of the Armenian Church (in Armenian)*. Etchmiadzin: Printing Press of the Mother See, 2011; p. 109

<sup>60</sup> Fredrick Conybeare brings up an interesting practice that has fallen into disuse in the Armenian Church. According to him, when the catechumen is eight days old, the grandmother shall bring the infant to church for baptism: "*The physical mother is excluded, because her presence might prejudice the spiritual birth by water and spirit. But when the child is forty days old, they shall come into the church, to with the mother and the nurse and the child. And the priest orders the mother of the child to bend the knee forty times at the door of the church.*" (Conybeare, *Rituale Armenorum* 1905, 86-87)

<sup>61</sup> According to the teachings of the Armenian Church Fathers the life-giving Blood and Water which came out of the side of Jesus Christ on the Cross are the symbols of two Sacraments; Baptism and Communion, which are the foundation of the Holy Church and the way of the salvation of the humankind. Even at that time Jesus is showing that in order to be saved one should be baptized with the water and by receiving His precious Body and Blood should become a member of His Body, the Church. (Baghumyan 2013, 32)

healthy life in the service of God. Then the godfather, bowing down three times repeats the tenth verse of Psalm 22: *“Upon thee was I cast from my birth; and since my mother bore me thou has been my God.”* With this verse he confesses on behalf of the catechumen that he belongs to God even before coming into this world. Then the godfather takes the infant in his arms and with everyone in attendance turns his face to the west and with the priest three times renounces Satan<sup>62</sup> and then the godfather faces the east and recites the Baptismal Creed.<sup>63</sup> The reading from the Gospel of St. Matthew (28:16-20) brings the first part of the rite to a close.

During the second part of the rite the catechumen enters the church building or the chancel (if he is already inside the church building) when the priest and deacon alternate Psalm 118 with the antiphon: *“Open to me the gates of righteousness; that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.”* On arriving in the chancel they sing the hymn of the saints. This entrance shows that the catechumen confesses faith in the Holy Trinity, and now seeks to be admitted as one of the faithful. The second part concludes with the bidding for the Church and with the prayer in the midst of the temple.

The third part of the rite, which is the Baptism proper, starts with the hymn of the Holy Spirit. After the bidding and the prayer

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<sup>62</sup> Conybeare talks about spitting upon Satan during the renunciation, that we again stopped practicing in the Armenian Apostolic Church. This fact is also interesting for this thesis, because saliva is made up mostly of water and other chemicals, and by spitting upon Satan, it shows that the renunciation also takes place through and by the water. *“Next the priest orders the catechumen to turn to the west and to stretch his hand straight out in the same direction, as if thrusting backwards the gloomy darkness. And he bids him spit three times on Satan, that is to deny him; and he adjures him thrice, saying: Dost thou renounce satan and all his deceitfulness and his wiles and his paths and his angels? The priest questions him thrice, and each time the catechumen shall say: I renounce, and withal spits upon satan.”* (Conybeare, *Rituale Armenorum* 1905, 92)

<sup>63</sup> There is early evidence that the creedal formula was expressed in the form of an interrogation, with the priest asking the catechumen to explain his belief, item by item: *“Then he turns the catechumen to the east, and bids him raise his eyes to heaven and stretch out his hands, confessing the one Godhead of the Holy Trinity, saying thrice as follows:” Dost thou believe in the all Holy Trinity? In the Father, in the Son and in the Holy Spirit?” And at each several question the catechumen shall say: I believe, I believe, I believe”* (Ibid., pp.92-93)

over the Holy Chrism, the priest pours the water into the Holy Font crosswise reciting the Psalm 29:2-4: *“The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, upon many waters,”* followed by Scripture readings (Ezekiel 36:25-28, Galatians 3:24-29, Psalm 23, John 3:1-6) and litanies over the baptismal water. Then the godfather takes the infant catechumen to be undressed and brings him back naked to the side of the priest. The priest takes the Holy Myron (oil) in his hand and by praying over the waters<sup>64</sup> he thrice blesses it by making the sign of the cross over the water and then he pours a few drops of the Holy Myron into the Font while singing the hymn of the Holy Spirit. After the prayer of Baptism the priest asks the godfather: *“What does this child request?”* The godfather answers: *“Faith, hope, love and baptism, to be baptized and justified, to be cleansed of sins, to be freed from demons and to serve God.”* He repeats this three times and the priest blesses him saying: *“May it be done unto you according to your faith.”* Then the priest immerses the infant catechumen into the water and gives him a new name<sup>65</sup> and says the phrase of the baptism. The priest says this once, but during its recitation immerses the child into the water three times. Then the priest takes the child out of the water, saying: *“You that have been baptized in Christ have put on Christ. Alleluia. You that have been enlightened in the Father, the Holy Spirit shall rejoice in you. Alleluia.”* In case of adults and persons with physical illness, baptism is performed by sprinkling the blessed water three times over the head of the person and repeating the same rite as in Immersion.<sup>66</sup> After reciting Psalm 34:19-22 and after the Gospel reading (Matthew 3:13-16), the Baptismal Rite concludes with the formal delivery of the Lord’s Prayer followed by the Sacraments of Chrismation and Communion.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> We will analyze the Scripture readings, litanies, prayers and the hymns over the Baptismal Waters at the end of this chapter.

<sup>65</sup> “From the earliest times of Christianity in Armenia a new name was given to the catechumen at Baptism, even if the receiver of this sacrament already had a name... It is always recommended that the name of a saint should be given because the name given at the Baptism is the child’s “Christian” name.” (Kaloustian. *Saints and Sacraments*, p. 39)

<sup>66</sup> Petrosyan. *The Armenian Apostolic Church*. pp. 45-46

<sup>67</sup> According to Conybeare the newly baptized person stayed in the church for eight days and participated in all the church services wearing a white garment and covering his head with a white hood. After eight days the priest took off the

## **Water and the Water Baptism Typology in the Holy Bible (Old and New Testaments)**

Having briefly introduced the Baptismal service of the Armenian Apostolic Church, let us now analyze the connection between the water and the baptism as well as the typology of the water baptism in the Holy Bible (Old and New Testaments). This will help us to understand how the Armenians celebrated the Baptism in the early days and how they understood the significance and the meaning of the water during the Baptism Service.

From the beginning of humanity, water has had its unique place in all religions. It was, and is, a very important element of life. As we discussed in the Chapter One, in pagan times, water was glorified as one of the gods. Water had its special place as well in Judaism and it also played a large role in legislation, spirituality, and sacramental life (Leviticus 11:1-15:33; Numbers 8:7-21; 19:17, etc.) From the beginning of creation until now, water has been a necessary part of life of humanity, because it has been a life-giving and cleansing element. Water was and is the primary source of life (physical and spiritual). However, in huge amounts it can also become very dangerous:

One is to promote life: without it, life is impossible. All life thirsts for water in one form or another. Water produces not only life, but also beauty... Water is life-giving and life-enhancing. But water is also death-dealing. In huge amounts, it destroys all in its path.<sup>68</sup>

In the Old Testament we see water in two dominical forms: in the form of punishment and also in the form of salvation. I would like to mention also that water baptism in the New Testament was not a new idea to those living at that time. It was not a foreign thought. They were already familiar with the concept of water baptism, which was seen in the Old Testament in typology. First, baptism was the flood which washed the sin from the earth. Second,

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crown or the head covering with a special prayer and by receiving the Body and the Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ *“they give glory to God and are dismissed.”* (Conybeare, *Rituale Armenorum* 1905, 100-101)

<sup>68</sup> West, pp. 127 – 128

baptism was the passage through the Red sea and clouds. Third, baptism was in adherence to the law; everyone who was unclean before entering into the camp should wash their clothes and bathe their bodies. Fourth, baptism was John's baptism which was a call for repentance. Fifth, baptism was our Lord's, who through His own baptism instituted the first Sacrament of the Christian Church, Holy Baptism. In fact, there are many Old Testament typologies of baptism in the writings of the Church Fathers. In the words of St. Cyprian of Carthage: "*Every time that water is named by itself in the Holy Scriptures, there is a prophetic allusion to baptism.*"<sup>69</sup>

In the Book of Genesis we read that because "*the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth and it grieved him to his heart*" (Genesis 6:5-6), His judgment took the form of a destructive flood.<sup>70</sup> By the order of God, "*...all the fountains of the great deep burst forth and the windows of the heavens were open. And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights which took place forty days*" (Genesis 7:11-12).

The flood was not like ordinary floods taking place in our days, but rather it was a cosmic catastrophe; God destroyed the earth with the water. The waters covered the surface of the earth and the highest mountains and "*everything on the dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died*" (Genesis 7:22). As we can see, it was the first time that God used water for the judgment of mankind. God used the water to wash away the sin from the earth and His creation.

However, it would be noteworthy to mention that the waters of the flood, at the same time, became the way of salvation for the second generation of the humanity: "*...and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth*" (Genesis 7:17). Noah was saved through the flood with all his family. This story of flood and Noah is one of the first prototypes of Baptism in the Old Testament which was used by St. Peter in his First Epistle to explain the Flood as baptism and those who were saved in the ark prefigured

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<sup>69</sup> G. W. Clarke. *Ancient Christian Writers: The Letters of St. Cyprian. Volume One.* New York: Newman Press, 1984; p. 361

<sup>70</sup> Alva William Steffler. *Symbols of the Christian Faith.* Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002; p. 127

the Church of baptized Christians saved by the resurrection of Jesus Christ:

Which sometime were disobedient, when once the long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:20-21).

However, it is very important to mention that although the waters of the flood cleansed the world from the sin, they destroyed the life and everything living in the world as well, “*whereas Christian baptism cleanses sins, imparts new life, and raises the world to heaven.*”<sup>71</sup>

Another time, God used water to punish the Pharaoh of Egypt and the Egyptians by turning the waters of the River Nile into blood. By the order of God, Moses struck the waters of the river with his rod and it turned to blood and the Egyptians could not drink water from the river (Exodus 7:20-24). Again we see God using water as a way of punishment. Being one of the most important elements of life, God chose the waters of the River Nile as the first plague for Egypt. However, the same waters saved Moses in his childhood, when he was hidden in a basket in the Nile (Exodus 2:3). On discovering and taking him home, Pharaoh’s daughter named the child Moses, which means saved from the water<sup>72</sup> “*because I drew him out of the water*”(Exodus 2:10), who then became the leader of his nation and, by the divine power of God, saved his people from the slavery of Egypt. The River Nile was worshiped by Egyptians as one of their gods<sup>73</sup>, and by turning the waters into blood, God showed His dominion power over His creatures and His creation to show them their false belief.

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<sup>71</sup> Shnorhk Kaloustian. *The Tabernacle Feasts (in Armenian)*. Jerusalem: Printing Press of the Armenian Patriarchate of Saints’ James, 1976; p. 104

<sup>72</sup> West, p. 417

<sup>73</sup> William Smith. *Smith’s Bible Dictionary*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986; p. 449

We read in the Book of Exodus that after the last plague, Pharaoh agreed to give freedom to God's chosen people; and Moses, by the order of God, led his people from Egypt to the Promised Land. However, the Pharaoh decided to bring their "working class" back to slavery. God sent a cloud to stand between His people and the army of Pharaoh as Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. God parted the Red Sea, allowing Israel to cross on dry land. Here again, we see, the waters of the Red Sea became the way of salvation for God's chosen people and in the meantime, the same waters were used as a form of punishment and destruction for the disobedient Egyptians:

The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen and all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not so much as one of them remained. But the people of Israel walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left (Exodus 14:28-29).

God used water to destroy Pharaoh's armies and to save His people. This is symbolic of water baptism destroying the sinful nature of mankind and saving them.<sup>74</sup> St. Paul uses this story as a typology of Baptism in his First Letter to Corinthians: "*Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea*" (1 Corinthians 10:1-2).

The waters of the River Jordan played a significant role in the life of Israelites. The plain near this river was chosen by Lot as an ideal place to live because of the abundance of water (Genesis 13:10-11). This river played an important role in the lives of the prophets Elijah (2 Kings 2:1-14) and Elisha (2 Kings 6:2), as well as cleansing Naaman from leprosy (2 Kings 5:12). However, after the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ by John the Baptist, this river has become a symbol of cleansing and purity.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Randy A. Brown. "Water Baptism – Old Testament Typology." *www.studiesinscripture.com*, posted December 3, 2009

<sup>75</sup> Merrill C. Tenney. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975; p. 906

It is interesting to mention that God performed the same miracle for His people after escaping from Egypt and passing through the Red Sea, they crossed the River Jordan to reach the Promised Land. With this in mind, God ordered priests to take up and carry the Ark of Covenant and to stand in the river:

It was the harvest season, and the Jordan was overflowing its banks. But as soon as the feet of the priests who were carrying the Ark touched the water at the river's edge, the water above that point began backing up a great distance... And the water below that point...was dry. Then all the people crossed over near the town of Jericho. Meanwhile, the priests who were carrying the Ark of the LORD's Covenant stood on dry ground in the middle of the riverbed as the people passed by. They waited there until the whole nation of Israel had crossed the Jordan on dry ground (Joshua 3:14-17).

As we can see from these Old Testament stories, the exodus and salvation from slavery and entering the Promised Land for Israelites took place by and through the water: passing the Red Sea and the River Jordan. Exactly the same experience happens with us during the baptism, because Christian baptism is the real exodus, the essential aspect of the process by which the catechumen experiences the New Covenant that exceeds the old. Salvation from the slavery of sin and adoption as an heir of the Heavenly Kingdom (the Promised Land for the New Israelites).

Almost all the early Church Fathers used these stories of the flood and Noah, and the exodus of Israelites from the slavery, and their entry into the Promised Land in their writings as a typology of Christian Baptism. According to Tertullian<sup>76</sup>, God uses water every day to save nations and human beings and to destroy death by the washing away of sins:

As the guilt is removed the penalty is taken away, for by baptism death is washed away. For the flood was kind of baptism

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<sup>76</sup> "An African author (160-225). He grew up in Carthage as a pagan and was converted to Christianity before 197. He is the author of numerous works apologetic, theological, and controversial works in Latin. Eventually he joined the Montanist sect." (Petrosyan, *Patrology*, p. 195)

by which the ancient iniquity was cleansed away; in the same way our flesh comes up from washing that removes our old sins.<sup>77</sup>

Didymus the Blind<sup>78</sup> develops the typology of the flood and gives more explanation to it by comparing the Ark with the Church, the dove with the Holy Spirit, and the olive branch with the symbol of peace. Talking about the exodus, Didymus compares the Egyptian Pharaoh with Satan and Moses as a type of Jesus Christ. The old and sinful nature of the human being, symbolized by the soldiers of the Egyptian army, dying in the water, “*while the Hebrews casting off their bondage are the new man who emerges from the waters into freedom and its freedom is a new beginning*”.<sup>79</sup> The rod of Moses is interpreted as a symbol of the cross. St. Cyril of Jerusalem compares the blood of the slain lambs with the Blood of the Lamb of God, being Jesus Christ.<sup>80</sup> St. Basil the Great<sup>81</sup> puts the emphasis on the salvation through the water baptism:

Israel was baptized into Moses in the cloud and sea, delivering to you the types and characterizing the truth to be received at the end of the ages... Israel, if it had not crossed the sea, would not have escaped from Pharaoh. And you, if you do not cross through the water, will not escape the painful tyranny of the devil.<sup>82</sup>

There are many other great stories related to water and water baptism typology in the Old Testament. Just before God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, He commanded Israel to

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<sup>77</sup> Ernest Evans. *Tertullian's Homily on Baptism*. London: University Printing House, 1964; p. 19.

<sup>78</sup> “An Alexandrian Theologian (313-398). He was blind from infancy. Though a staunch Nicene in Trinitarian theology, he was regarded by Jerome as too deeply influenced by Origen...” (Cross, *Oxford Dictionary*, p. 480).

<sup>79</sup> Castleman, p. 121

<sup>80</sup> Ferguson, pp. 468 and 482

<sup>81</sup> “One of the three Cappadocian Church Fathers. He was the brother of St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Macrina...” To read more about St. Basil, see: (Cross, *Oxford Dictionary*, p. 166)

<sup>82</sup> Francis Patrick Kenrick. *A Treatise on Baptism; with an Exhortation to receive it, translated from the works of St. Basil the Great*. Philadelphia: King and Baird, 1843; p. 229

wash their clothes in water (Exodus 19:10-11). The laver of brass was given for the priests to wash before entering the Tabernacle and offering their sacrifice (Exodus 30:17-21). This is also symbolic of washing away uncleanness before entering the holy place. Without washing, the priests were unclean, as well without water baptism our sins are not washed. Consecration of the priests required a blood sacrifice, washing in water, and anointing with oil (Exodus 29:4).<sup>83</sup> The blood sacrifices had to be washed in running waters before being burned in fire (Leviticus 1:9). Those who were ceremonially unclean had to be purified by blood, water, and fire (Numbers 19:7-8). We read also how God helped His people by giving them water to drink from the rock (Numbers 20:1-13), sent them rain (Ezekiel 34:26) or punished them for their sins by sending them no rain (1 King 17:1).<sup>84</sup>

In the Old Testament, in addition to a way of physical salvation and punishment, water was one of the healing elements (physical and spiritual). Through the visible signs and miracles made by water, people turned to God. Not only were their bodies protected and healed, but also their souls were saved from faithlessness and distraction: “... *and his flesh was restored like the flesh of the little child, and he was clean. Then he returned to the man of God...and he said, ‘Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel...’*” (2 Kings 5:14-15).

The great commander of the Syrian army, Naaman who was sick with leprosy, went to the Prophet Elisha to be healed by him. By the order of the prophet, Naaman washed himself in the River Jordan seven times and found himself healed from his sickness. In one of his writings<sup>85</sup> St. Irenaeus<sup>86</sup> uses this story of Naaman as a prototype of Christian baptism, emphasizing that water baptism

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<sup>83</sup> Jonathan D. Lawrence. *Washing in Water: Trajectories of Ritual Bathing in the Hebrews Bible and Second Temple Literature*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006; pp. 30-31

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47 - 48

<sup>85</sup> “The Demonstration, which seems to represent Irenaeus’ teaching to catechumens, follows the order of the baptismal formula, adducing Scripture proof for belief in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 349)

<sup>86</sup> “Bishop of Lyons. Relatively little is known of his life, but since he heard St. Polycarp as a boy, it is generally supposed that he was a native of Smyrna...” (Petrosyan, *Patrology*, p. 96)

connects us with the Holy Trinity by granting us rebirth unto God the Father, through His Son, by the Holy Spirit:

It was not in vain that Naaman the leper of old, when he was baptized, was cleansed, but it was a sign to us. We who are lepers in our sins are cleansed from our old transgressions through the holy water and the invocation of the Lord.<sup>87</sup>

In the New Testament, water becomes the way of spiritual salvation and, at the same time, one of the “tools” of the healing process. In the Gospel according to St. John, we find two episodes of the healing process, similar to the story of the Syrian commander Naaman. The first episode took place at the pool of Bethesda, into which the afflicted would immerse themselves for their physical healing:

In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, and waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had. And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years (John 5:3-5).

So, the people suffering from various illnesses, but strengthened with faith and hope, were waiting around the pool to be healed through the water. God requires faith and cooperation from the one who needs to be healed. The second incident took place immediately after the healing of the blind man. Jesus sent him to the Pool of Siloam to wash in the healing water: “...*Go, wash in the pool of Siloam (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing*” (John 9:7). There was something healing about the fresh water in the Pool of Siloam. “*Clean fresh water has healing and restorative*

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<sup>87</sup> Alexander Roberts Rambaut and W. H. Rambaut. *The Writings of Irenaeus*. Vol. IX in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1868; p. 174

*properties, just as dirty, stale water has bacteria and causes disease. Fresh water was (and still is) a source of healing power.*”<sup>88</sup>

Between these Old and New Testament stories we can count hundreds of years; however it is apparent that the water had not lost its healing power throughout all those years and that the water never stopped being one of the instruments by which God heals and saves His creation. As Tertullian emphasizes the importance of the water so beautifully: “*Water alone - always a perfect, gladsome, simple material substance, pure in itself – supplied a worthy vehicle to God*”<sup>89</sup>

If in the Old Testament, through the dominical order of God, the waters rinsed all the earth during the flood which destroyed all of creation, then in the New Testament, again through the same dominical order of God, the waters calmed down and saved terrified disciples, also cleansing their faithlessness (Matthew 8:23-27). In the Gospel according to St. Matthew, Jesus walks upon the waters and identifies Himself as the Creator of all, and He restores the creation from chaos.<sup>90</sup> When Peter walks on the water, it shows the way to the new life made possible by Jesus Christ. This moment in Peter’s life is one of the greatest prototypes of the Christian initiation in the New Testament in which each new Christian enters liturgical time to make the same descent and ascent in the water, to die the same death and be born again.

The Rock sinks like a stone until he calls on God: ‘Lord, save me!’ Then, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Creator of all, lifts the first Christian from the water, brings a new human form from the water. In the down and up movement of Peter’s sinking and being lifted, we have exactly immersion into the water and emersion from it, which is the prototype of the Water Baptism in the Christian Church (Matthew 14:22-33).<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Michael Christensen. “How did Jesus heal the sick?” *www.michael-christensen.blogspot.com*, posted March 11, 2007

<sup>89</sup> Castleman, p. 116

<sup>90</sup> Malachia Ormanian. *Hamapatum (The Harmony of the Four Gospels)*, in *Armenian*. Etchmiadzin: Printing Press of the Mother See, 1997; p. 272

<sup>91</sup> Bula Maddison. *Reading the Watery Creation: an Intertextual Story*. Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 1997; p. 38

John the Baptist came preaching the baptism of repentance to prepare the way for the Messiah. The rites of immersion he performed washed away the sins of those who repented. Whoever believed John's teaching showed their change of heart and faith through water baptism:

John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins (Mark 1:4-5)

The Judean ministry of John the Baptist marked the beginning of what became Christian Baptism, however, John made it clear that he was only the forerunner and not the Messiah. John later baptized Jesus to "*fulfill righteousness*" (Matthew 3:15).

"*The Teaching of Saint Gregory*"<sup>92</sup> also describes the baptism through the light of creation. As God opened the womb of the waters and brought everything to life through it, He also opens the womb of the waters at the baptism service and gives life to that new born Christian. For St. Gregory, John the Baptist serves as a connecting link between the Old and New Testaments. Although his baptism was "*not the baptism of the divine mark of illumination of eternal life,*" he gave the baptism of repentance and, like Moses who ordered Israelites to wash and purify themselves when God wished to appear to them, John the Baptist prepared people "*that they might become worthy of the revelation of the divine glory.*"<sup>93</sup>

In His baptism, Jesus not only set a precedent for His followers but also publicly declared the mission for which He came. He was the promised Messiah who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matthew 3:11), and at His baptism the fullness of the Holy Spirit came upon Him (Acts 10:38). So, through water baptism we leave our old nature, our past life and we become new creatures touring from sin to righteousness, from death to life. In baptism human life responds to something that transcends the condition of the Old Testament saints – the substantial union with Christ's

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<sup>92</sup> Robert W. Thomson. *The Teaching of Saint Gregory: An Early Armenian Catechism*. New York: St. Nersess Armenian Seminary, 2001; pp. 121-122

<sup>93</sup> Ibid; p. 120

glorified humanity: “*What was not possible before is made possible by the glorious incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ*”<sup>94</sup>

Jesus did not perform baptism Himself, that we know of, however, through His own baptism Jesus made the baptismal water the way of spiritual salvation for the human being. Once again God emphasized the importance of water not only for our physical life, but also for our spiritual salvation. “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*” (John 3:5). This was Jesus’ answer and explanation to the Jewish ruler Nicodemus, who came to Him by night. In the Old Testament, people used water for the purpose of cleansing in their spiritual, sacramental and ordinary live. Then in the New Testament, through baptism, Christian people washed their souls from their sins. By the dominical order of God, water became the starting point of the journey to His Kingdom, making the believers, children of God, members of the Holy Church of Jesus Christ.<sup>95</sup> In the Gospel according to St. Mark, Jesus once again mentions and emphasizes the importance of the baptism for the salvation of humanity: “*He who believes and is baptized will be saved, but he who does not believe will be condemned*” (Mark 16:16). As we can see through this verse, we should not only believe in His Name to be saved, but we also need to be baptized to become children of God. Even our Lord’s final commandment to His disciples in this world was to “*go, preach and baptize all the nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matt. 28:18).

After the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Apostles preached repentance (Acts 2:38), baptizing new believers in water just as John the Baptist did; but their message went deeper than John’s. Now, they preached Christ’s death and resurrection empowered by the Holy Spirit, which has given at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-13). The Acts of the Apostles recounts many examples of believers being baptized with water and being filled with the Holy Spirit<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> John W. Hardenbrook. *Infant Baptism*. Chesterton, Indiana: Conciliar Press, 1994; p. 22

<sup>95</sup> Khoren Nar-Bey. *A Catechism of Christian Instruction, according to the Doctrine of the Armenian Church*. Calcutta: Printing Press of the Armenian Church of Holy Nazareth, 1898; p. 183

<sup>96</sup> See: Acts 2:38-41; 8:12-18; 8:26-38; 9:17-19; 10:45-48; 11:15-18, etc.

*“Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?” (Acts 10:47).*

The first mention of water in the Holy Bible is found in Genesis 1:2 *“And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters”* and the last mention is found in Revelation 22:17 *“And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.”* So, the Bible begins with God and water and ends with God and water, and between the beginning and the end the Bible is full of testimony that links God and water in His creating, blessing, and saving work. We can see from all these Biblical stories that water is a mystically powerful element which, by the power of God, can cleanse sins, inner and outer defilements, and regenerate the human person, physically and spiritually:

These rely upon a “rational” theological perception of mysteries hidden in water according to which the omnipresent God initiates any sacramental activity therein. From this perspective water appears to be a unique earthly element capable of immediate contact with God.<sup>97</sup>

Armenians have always believed that in the order of creation of all elements, the “holiness” of the Creator is reflected. But because of the abuse of these elements, they have become polluted and are in constant need of purification and sanctification. As water’s significance was apparent in the Old and New Testaments, it is imperative that water “flowed” into the Christian Church and became one of the unceasingly spiritual elements in the church’s sacramental life.<sup>98</sup> As we discussed above, washing appears throughout the Bible as a ritual of purification. Aaron and his sons, like others who were about to take part in religious services, washed before donning priestly robes and being anointed with oil (Exodus 30:19-21). A person who was ritually unclean had to wash according to the

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<sup>97</sup> Alexander Pokhilko. “The Meaning of Water in Christianity.” *www.orthodoxytoday.org*. Posted March 24, 2004

<sup>98</sup> Arshak Ter-Mikayelyan. *The Catechism of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church (in Armenian)*. Etchmiadzin: Printing Press of the Mother See, 2007; p. 397

Law of Moses.<sup>99</sup> In the Christian era, water baptism became a symbolic washing, signifying a cleansing of sin, repentance, and participation in Christian life and being a member of Christ's body: the Church.

### **Historical overview of the Baptism Service of the Armenian Church and the significance of the Water for the Armenians**

The information related to the earliest period of the history of the Armenian Apostolic Church is scarce. The main reason for this is the fact that the Armenian alphabet was formalized only at the beginning of the fifth century. The history of the first centuries of the existence of the Armenian Church, as reflected in Holy Tradition, was delivered orally from generation to generation and only in the fifth century was recorded in written form in historiography and hagiographical literature.<sup>100</sup>

According to the Tradition of the Armenian Church, the first seeds of Christianity were sown in the Armenian land at the time of the Apostles.<sup>101</sup> A series of historical testimonies in Armenian, Syrian, Greek and Latin languages, confirm the fact that the Apostles

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<sup>99</sup> Barbara J. Morgan. *Illustrated Dictionary of Bible Life and Times*. New York: The Reader's Digest Association, 1997; p. 365

<sup>100</sup> It is the Armenian Church which gave the Armenian people the alphabet, which enabled the nation to cultivate the language and create an original literature: "*St. Sahak, the great Catholicos, St. Mesrop, the eminent doctor, and Vramshabuh, the king of Armenia, are a distinguished triad whose harmony and foresight gave the Armenians that imperishable instrument, culture, for which literature stands... After the invention of the alphabet the chief works of the Syrian and Greek Fathers were translated into Armenian. The Bible is the masterpiece of these translations. Eminent scholars consider the Armenian translation of the Bible "The Queen of Translations." In a short time a rich literature flourished.*" (Gulesserian, *The Armenian Church*, pp. 20-21)

<sup>101</sup> "The apostolic origin, which is essential to every Christian Church, in order to place her in union with her Divine Founder... The Armenian Church can rightly lay claim to such a direct apostolic origin. The chronology, which is generally adopted, ascribes to the mission of St. Thaddeus a period of eight years (35-43 A.D.) and to that of St. Bartholomew a period of sixteen years (44-60 A.D.). The apostolic origin of the Armenian Church is hence established as an incontrovertible fact in ecclesiastical history." (Ormanian, *The Church of Armenia*, p. 5)

Thaddeus and Bartholomew preached Christianity in Armenia<sup>102</sup>, thus becoming the founders of the Armenian Church. They were subsequently martyred by the order of the Armenian King Sanatruk.

In the first century, both external and internal conditions were favorable for the spread of Christianity in Armenia, such as the existence of the Christian communities in the countries close to Armenia<sup>103</sup>, as well as the existence of the Jewish Diaspora in Armenia. These provided favorable conditions for spreading Christianity in Armenia. It is known that the first preachers of Christianity usually began their activity in those places where there were Jewish communities:

So it is very likely that the apostles in Armenia preached first to the Jews of Armenia in their synagogues. The apostles had more in common with the members of the Jewish communities, who spoke the same “religious language,” meaning that they would have understood the concept of a messiah.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> “After the Ascension of Christ, St. Thaddeus arrived in Edessa, cured the king of Osrohene Abgar from leprosy, ordained Addai bishop for the Church and left for Greater Armenia to preach the Word of God. There, numerous converts, including Sandukht, the daughter of King Sanatruk, were among his followers. On the charge of preaching Christianity, the apostle, together with the princess and the other converts, was martyred by the order of the king in Shavarshan, in the province of Artaz. Some years later, in the 29th year of Sanatruk’s reign, after accomplishing his preaching in Persia, the Apostle St. Bartholomew arrived in Armenia. Here he converted the king’s sister, Ogouhi (Vokouhi) and many nobles. Afterward, by Sanatruk’s order, he also was martyred in the city of Albanos, which was situated between the Lakes Van and Urmia.” (Petrosyan, *The Armenian Apostolic Holy Church*, pp. 4 -5)

<sup>103</sup> “The First Epistle of Peter mentions Pontus, Cappadocia, where the Apostles must have preached, for Peter addresses his letter to Christians in these countries among others. Pontus and Cappadocia are north and west of Armenia, respectively. Simon the Zealot is considered the Apostle of Persia, the neighbor of Armenia on the east. All these stories show at least that Armenians were not entirely out of contact with the followers of the new faith”. (Nersoyan, *Armenian Church Historical Studies*, pp. 56-57)

<sup>104</sup> Michael B. Papazian. *Light from Light: An Introduction to the History and Theology of the Armenian Church*. New York: Sis Publication, 2006; p. 37

Indeed, St. Movses Khorenats'i<sup>105</sup> tells us that the Apostle Thaddeus, upon arriving in Edessa, resided at the house of a Jewish nobleman Tobias: "When he arrived he entered the house of Tobias, the Jewish prince..."<sup>106</sup> There were Jewish communities existing in the principal cities of Armenia, in Tigranakert, Artashat, Vagharshapat and Zarehavan.<sup>107</sup>

The well-known ecclesiastical writer of the second century Tertullian in his book "Against the Jews," (written in ca. 197), quoting the text from the Book of Acts (2:9) and speaking of the nations and people who were present at the Pentecost in Jerusalem and, after hearing St. Peter's homily were baptized and adopted Christianity, among the Parthians, Lydians, Phrygians, Cappadocians, also mentions the Armenians:

Upon whom else have the nations of the universe believed but upon the Christ who is already come? For whom have the nations believed — Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and they who inhabit Mesopotamia, Armenia, Phrygia, Cappadocia, and they who dwell in the Pontus and Asia and Pamphylia, sojourners in Egypt and inhabitants of the reign of Africa which is beyond Cyrene, Romans and wayfarers, yes, and in Jerusalem, Jews and all other nations." ("Answer to the Jews," Chap. VIII)<sup>108</sup>

This testimony is also confirmed by the blessed St. Augustine (430), in his work, "Against Manichaeans."<sup>109</sup>

At the end of the second and at the beginning of the third centuries Kings Vagharsh II (186-196) and Khosrov I (196-216) and their successors persecuted the Christians in Armenia. These persecutions were described by Firmilian, the Bishop of Cappadocian

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<sup>105</sup> St. Moses of Khoren (Movses Khorenats'i) was the student of St. Sahak and St. Mesrop. After studying Greek and philosophy in Alexandria, Greece and Rome he returned Armenia in 440. His principal work "History of the Armenians" was written in the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. (Kaloustian, *Saints of the Armenian Nation*, p. 103)

<sup>106</sup> Moses Khorenats'i. *History of the Armenians*. Translated by Robert W. Thomson. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978; p. 170

<sup>107</sup> Ibid; pp. 28-29

<sup>108</sup> Vahan M. Kurkjian. *A History of Armenia*. New York: Armenian General Benevolent Union Publications, 1958; p. 330

<sup>109</sup> Ormanian. *The Church of Armenia*, p. 9

Caesarea (230-268) in his book “*History of the Persecutions of the Church.*” These would certainly not have occurred if there had not been a large number of Christians in Armenia.<sup>110</sup>

Eusebius of Caesarea<sup>111</sup> mentions the letter of Dionysius, the bishop of Alexandria, “*On Penitence to the Brothers Living in Armenia, whose bishop was Meruzhan.*”<sup>112</sup> The letter is dated about 251-255.<sup>113</sup>

The most important event in the history of the Armenian nation took place in 301 A.D. St. Gregory the Illuminator, who later became the first Catholicos (301-326) of the Armenian Church and the King of Armenia Tiridates III, played decisive roles in the adoption of Christianity.<sup>114</sup> By its conversion, Armenia entered into a new phase of civilization and became the first country to formally and legally adopt Christianity as its national religion:<sup>115</sup> “*To this day the Armenian Church has been known by her name and has been a symbol and bond of Armenian nationalism.*”<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Khorenats'i, p. 222

<sup>111</sup> “The Father of Church History... Of Eusebius many writings the most celebrated is his “Ecclesiastical History”, the principal source for the history of Christianity from the Apostolic Age till his own day.” (Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary*, p. 574)

<sup>112</sup> “In this connection we should mention an early tradition ascribing to the See of Artaz a line of seven bishops... A computation of this period carries us to the end of the second century. Another tradition assigns to the See of Siunik a line of eight bishops... Moreover, Eusebius quotes a letter...to Mehroujan, bishop of Armenia, who was a successor of the above mentioned bishops of Artaz.” To read more about the successors of the Apostles in Armenia, see: (Ormanian, *Azgapatum*, pp. 17-30)

<sup>113</sup> Eusebius. *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*. Translated by G. A. Williamson. New York: Dorest Press, 1965

<sup>114</sup> To read about St. Gregory and King Tiridates, and about the conversion of the Armenian Nation, see: (Ormanian, *Azgapatum* 1959, 34-58)

<sup>115</sup> Ten years after the adoption of Christianity, Armenia had to defend its religion against the Roman Emperor Maximian, who declared war on the Armenians. Eusebius testifies that during that ten years Christianity had taken such deep roots in Armenia that the Armenians struggled against the powerful Roman Empire for the sake of their new faith: “*He tried to make the Armenians, those fervent Christians, sacrifice to idols and demons, thus making them foes instead of friends, and enemies instead of allies. He himself, together with his army, was defeated in the war with the Armenians.*” (Jones 1978, 79, 172)

<sup>116</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette. *A History of Christianity*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1953; p. 79

All these historical testimonies are coming to prove that the Light of Jesus Christ was spread across Armenia from the beginning of the apostolic age and that in the third century there were organized Christian communities throughout Armenia, acknowledged by the universal Church.<sup>117</sup> However, we do not know in what manner and under what forms Christian worship was practiced in Armenia, and how the first Armenian Christians celebrated the Holy Eucharist and performed the Baptism service from the time of the Apostles until St. Gregory the Illuminator.

The Armenians, as we know, then had no written language; consequently no contemporaneous documents of the first three centuries have been handed down to us, and we have very little information concerning the progress of Christianity in this land before its official conversion. However, the religious persecutions said to have been carried out by the kings of Persia and Armenia show the Christians to have been already in considerable numbers at the accession to the throne of Tiridates III.<sup>118</sup>

However, we know that from the time of St. Gregory the Illuminator until the invention of the Armenian alphabet in the beginning of the fifth century by St. Mesrop Mashtots' and St. Sahak Partev<sup>119</sup> the Greek and Syriac languages were used during the Church services<sup>120</sup>, and according to the testimony of the fifth century Armenian historian Phaustus Buzand, the church services were rendered unintelligible to the common people and, consequently, people often converted to Christianity not because of their piety, faith or hope, but because it merely became "*a human religion, a*

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<sup>117</sup> Damaskinos Papandreou. *The Establishment and the Organization of the Armenian Church before the 4th Ecumenical Council*. Translated by Eznik Petrossyan. Holy Etchmiadzin: The Publication of Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, 1997, p. 36

<sup>118</sup> Jacques de Morgan. *The History of the Armenian People: From the Remotest Times to the Present Day*. Translated by Ernest F. Barry. Boston: Hairenik Press, 1965; p. 123

<sup>119</sup> To read about the life of St. Mesrop Mashtots' and the invention of the Armenian alphabet, as well as about the missionary work of St. Mesrop and St. Sahak, see: (Koryun 1951).

<sup>120</sup> Nersoyan, *Armenian Church Historical Studies*, p. 304

*necessary human superstition... for those only understood it by little or much who were somewhat familiar with either Greek or Syrian letters.*"<sup>121</sup>

Although St. Movses Khorenats'i mentions the baptismal services performed by the Apostle St. Thaddeus, he does not provide additional information about where, how, and in what kind of conditions the first baptismal services were celebrated and performed in the Armenian Land: "*And they all believed. Abgar himself and the whole city were baptized... The Apostle Thaddeus baptized a certain tiara maker and silk worker called Adde, ordained him (as bishop) over Edessa and left him in his stead with the king.*"<sup>122</sup>

We assume that these baptismal services, mentioned by St. Khorenats'i, took place outdoors in one of the rivers in Edessa. First of all, it is not realistic to think that the Apostle Thaddeus baptized the entire city in one of the rooms in the king's palace using a small vessel or even a pool. Second, as an Apostle of Jesus Christ, it is likely that St. Thaddeus would follow the example of the Lord being baptized in the running waters of a river. Third, being a Jew in his origin, St. Thaddeus was the bearer of the Law of Moses, where he commanded the Israelites to wash their bodily uncleanness in the running waters. And having the example of Naaman from the Old Testament (who was sick with leprosy), St. Thaddeus would take King Abgar to the river to wash his bodily disease of leprosy, and to baptize him in the name of the Lord with the entire city.

The next historical record about the baptismal service in Armenia is preserved in the "*History of the Armenians*" written by the fifth century Armenian historian Agathangelos, who gives an account of the life of St. Gregory the Illuminator and the conversion of Armenia.<sup>123</sup>

According to Agathangelos' testimony, upon his return from Caesarea to Armenia St. Gregory stopped by the river Aratzani (a tributary of the Euphrates). There, he baptized nearly one hundred thousand people. Among them were priests of the old religion. One of those, Albianus, even became a bishop.

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<sup>121</sup> Leon Arpee. *A History of Armenian Christianity from the Beginning to Our Own Time*. New York: Princeton University Press, 1946; p. 19

<sup>122</sup> Khorenats'i, pp. 170-171

<sup>123</sup> Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary*, p. 27

In pagan Armenia, the most revered temples were erected mostly in the region of Taron, and this region had been most conservative and most idolatrous. St. Gregory the Illuminator, after returning from Caesarea, first decided to go Taron, to establish the new faith and start his missionary work from there. While in Taron, St. Gregory the Illuminator founded the first churches and one of them is well known St. Karapet Monastery<sup>124</sup>, which was built to safeguard the relics of St. John the Baptist in the fields of the *Meghraget* (Kara-Su River) and the river Aratzani:

Being built for the glory of God on top of the ruins of the pagan temples, this glorious monastery became the center of the Christian Armenia. It became the first and most important site for pilgrimages, as well as the Mother Church and the Patriarchal seat for the Catholicoi. In this monastery they safeguarded the relics of St. John the Baptist and St. Athenogenes of Sebastia, which were brought by St. Gregory from Caesarea. Seven times every year, Armenian pilgrims gathered at that monastery to celebrate the feasts of these Saints.<sup>125</sup>

It is noteworthy to mention that the first Christian relics brought to Armenia by St. Gregory were the relics of St. John the Baptist and St. Athenogenes.<sup>126</sup> St. John the Baptist was the principal figure in the Bible clearing the way from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, connecting the Old with the New. Being the last

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<sup>124</sup> “The St. Karapet Monastery of Mush, known also as “Glakavank”, or “Innaknian Vank” (the Monastery of nine water sources), is situated on the northwest side of Moush, near the hamlet of Ashtishat. The first chief abbot of St. Karapet was Zenob Glak, designated for that position by St. Gregory the Illuminator himself. Armenians regarded St. Karapet as possibly their most hallowed pilgrimage site, and a visit was considered comparable to making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. With the popularity, the merit, and significance it has enjoyed, St. Karapet Vank of Moush had been the most hallowed site for Armenians next to Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin. Unfortunately, after the Armenian Genocide in 1915 by Ottoman Turks, the great monastery of St. Karapet was destroyed and today it is hardly more than a mound of ruins.” (Bedrosian, *Feasts of the Armenian Church*, pp. 77-78)

<sup>125</sup> Papandreou, p. 54

<sup>126</sup> Agatangelos. *History of the Armenians*. Translated into modern Armenian by Aram Ter-Gevondian. Yerevan, 1983, p. 453

prophet of the Old Testament, he prepared people to welcome the Savior, and it was very important and necessary for the early Armenians to have a relic of St. John and to build their new faith on the way prepared by him. For Armenians, St. John became the connecting bridge who led the faithful to Jesus Christ, showing them the “*Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*” (*John 1:29*).<sup>127</sup>

The fact that the first relic brought to Armenia was the relic of St. John the Baptist, gave him a great popularity and from the beginning of the fourth century, and continuing throughout centuries, Armenians built numerous churches and chapels dedicated to John the Baptist. Even today, wherever there is a city in Diaspora with a large Armenian population there is often a church named after the Forerunner John.<sup>128</sup> By bringing St. John’s relics to Armenia, it appears that St. Gregory the Illuminator was also transferring the traditional teaching to baptize people in the rivers, and to wash their sins in the running waters.

The king of Armenia, Tiridates III, went to meet the returning head of the Armenian Church at Bagrevand, on the shores of the river Euphrates. Then they returned to Bagavan, the capital city of the province. Saint Gregory ordered one month of prayers and abstinence as a preparation for the baptism. After that special month of preparation St. Gregory baptized the Armenian King in the river:

And when all the people and the king went down to baptism in the water of the river Euphrates, a wonderful sign was revealed by God: the waters of the river stopped and then turned back again. And a bright light appeared in the likeness of a shining pillar, and it stood over the waters of the river; and above it was the likeness of the Lord’s cross. And the light shone out so brightly that it obscured and weakened the rays of the sun. And the

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<sup>127</sup> “Our hallowed patriarchs have delineated that the Feast of St. John, being the most important, should come immediately after the feast of the Theophany. So, it is that January 14 (right after the Naming of the Lord on January 13) should be the Feast of St. John, unless it occurred on a Wednesday or Friday, in which case it would occur on January 15.” (Kassarchian, *The Armenian Apostolic Church*, p. 36)

<sup>128</sup> There are five Armenian Apostolic Churches dedicated to St. John the Baptist within the Western Diocese and the Western Prelacy of the Armenian Church in USA.

oil of anointing which Gregory poured over the people floated around them in the river.<sup>129</sup>

After baptizing the King, St. Gregory baptized Queen Ashkhen and the princess Khosrovidukht, then the princes, then the noblemen and people. They were all baptized clad in white. St. Gregory celebrated the Divine Liturgy and they all received Holy Communion. On that very day more than one hundred and fifty thousand people from the royal army were baptized in the river Euphrates.<sup>130</sup> It is interesting to mention that St. Gregory after one month of preparation and instruction performed the three Sacraments together: Baptism, Chrismation and Communion. Remaining in Bagavan for seven more days, St. Gregory continued to baptize people. Based on the oral tradition, as well as to the testimony of Agathangelos, he baptized more than four million men, women and children<sup>131</sup>: “*It is historically attested that it was the Armenian King’s acceptance of the Christian faith that became an example and forerunner for Constantine the Great to change his negative attitude towards Christianity.*”<sup>132</sup>

Christianity in Syria had a great influence on the development of the Christian faith in Armenia. Coming from the south, especially from Syria, the early missionaries brought with them Syrian forms of Christian worship to Armenia, constantly strengthening the flickering light of the Gospel and the Good News of the new religion:

There has been great influence, of various sorts, from the Syrians throughout the history of the Armenian Church. Early ties with Syria were very close; as already noted, Syrian missionaries

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<sup>129</sup> John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk. *The Christianization of Armenia: Agathangelos, History of the Armenians*. In *Readings in World Christian History: Earliest Christianity to 1453 (Volume One, pp. 122 – 130)*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008; p. 128

<sup>130</sup> Hagop Nersoyan. *A History of the Armenian Church, with Thirty-Five Stories*. New York: The Delphic Press, 1963; p.39

<sup>131</sup> Coakley, p. 128

<sup>132</sup> Papandreou, p. 44

were very active in Armenia, especially from its two centers, Edessa and Antioch.<sup>133</sup>

One of the earliest writings of the Christian Church is the *Didache*, which indicates that the baptism should be performed in the “living water” in the name of the Holy Trinity.<sup>134</sup> However, it permits to baptize in the still (collected) water also, if there is no running water available:<sup>135</sup>

Running water was called “living” because it had motion. Such water was the appropriate place for an act that imparted life (spiritual)... Christians serve a living God... In the absence of a sufficient amount of water (whether from a flowing source or still) for covering the body, water could be poured over the head.<sup>136</sup>

The canons of Hippolytus<sup>137</sup> and “*The Apostolic Tradition*”<sup>138</sup>, also mention that the baptism should be performed in the living/running waters.<sup>139</sup> There was a three-year period of instruction and education of the catechumens and the actual baptism took place on

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<sup>133</sup> Edward G. Mathews. “Early Armenian and Syrian Contact: Reflections on Koriwn’s Life of Mas’toc.” Edited by Abraham Terian. *St. Nerses Theological Review*. Volume 7, No. 1086-2080. New York: St. Nersess Armenian Seminary Press, 2002; p. 6

<sup>134</sup> “A short Christian manual on morals and Church practice... It describes the life of a Christian Community in Syria. The author knew the tradition of Christ’s teaching which lies behind the Gospels.” (Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary*, pp. 478 - 479)

<sup>135</sup> Andrew Louth, ed. *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*. Translated by Maxwell Staniforth. London: Penguin Books, 1968; p. 194

<sup>136</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism*, pp. 204 - 205

<sup>137</sup> Paul F. Bradshaw. “The Canons of Hippolytus.” Edited by James Empeur. *Models of Liturgical Theology* (Grove Books Limited), no. 52 (1987).

<sup>138</sup> “The document formerly known as the “Egyptian Church Order,” now generally held to be the work of St. Hippolytus... It contains a detailed description of rites and practices which are alleged to be traditional... The document includes rites of Ordination and Baptism, and Eucharistic Prayer.” (Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary*, p. 91)

<sup>139</sup> “In Jeremiah 2:13, God refers to himself as the fountain of “living water,” a translation of the Hebrew term meaning “running water.” In the New Testament, the expression “living water” is connected with Jesus Christ, who is identified as the source of eternal life.” (Morgan, *Illustrated Dictionary*, p. 366)

the fifth day of the week<sup>140</sup>: “*At cockcrow the candidates took position at ‘water from a river, running and pure.’ Baptism was in the nude.*”<sup>141</sup>

As we can see from all these historical accounts, the baptismal service in Armenia was performed in the rivers, in the running waters from the time of the Holy Apostles to the time of St. Gregory the Illuminator, from the first to the fourth century. Having the Jewish baptismal practice, as well as the baptism of our Lord in the running waters of the River Jordan as an example, the first Christian Armenians strongly believed that the sins could be washed away only in the running waters. As the Israelites washed their bodily uncleanness in the running waters, Christians washed their spiritual uncleanness in the running waters.<sup>142</sup> As we saw in the First Chapter, from the ancient times to the beginning of the Christianity Armenians had a very special attitude towards rivers and running waters. Rivers were worshiped as a source of life, as a source of comfort and peace.<sup>143</sup>

Therefore, St. Gregory the Illuminator being one of the successors of the Holy Apostles and the Apostolic Fathers and knowing the Holy Bible and the Biblical stories about the water and the baptism, would surely continue the same old practice baptizing people and washing their sins away in the rivers: through the running and living waters.

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<sup>140</sup> Obviously reflecting Genesis 1:20, “*Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life*”, and correlating to the Washing of the Feet described in John 13, which occurs on the fifth day of the week (i.e. Great Thursday).

<sup>141</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism*, pp. 329-330 and 466

<sup>142</sup> Madeleine S. Miller and J. Lane Miller. *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*. New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1959; pp. 803-804

<sup>143</sup> Tenney, p. 120

## **The Feast of Transfiguration and the celebration of *Vardavar***

Here we would like to talk about the Feast of Transfiguration of our Lord, about the celebration of *Vardavar*, and connect them with the first baptism performed by St. Gregory in Taron, after returning from Caesarea. As we have indicated in the First Chapter the most joyous celebration among Armenians was (still is) *Vardavar*, when people sprinkled water on each other remembering the story of Noah and Flood. Unfortunately, throughout the centuries this beautiful custom had been reintroduced as a pagan feast dedicated to some idols. The communist scholars (this is what we learned in the schools and universities for almost eight decades during the communist regime) emphasized this idea more. However, those scholars never explained or questioned why the Armenians kept celebrating *Vardavar* by sprinkling water on each other and gifting roses to each other on the Feast day of Transfiguration of Jesus Christ?

It is historically proved that the Christian Church turned some of the pagan feasts into Christian celebrations and that St. Gregory joined the celebration of “pagan” *Vardavar* with the Transfiguration of our Lord not only to stop the pagan custom, but also to call to remembrance that the Armenians celebrated *Vardavar* long ago, starting from our forefather Noah after Flood when the Ark came to rest on top of the Mt. Ararat:

This ancient feast that keeps the memory of the Flood has got a new Christian reinterpretation and is related to the Transfiguration of Christ in the following way. According to the Armenian Church Fathers and especially to St. Grigor Tatevatsi (1345-1409), the feast of Transfiguration is called *Vardavar*, because the brightness of a rose is hidden in its bud, and likewise Jesus kept hidden the light of His Divine glory in His body prior to His Transfiguration on Mount Tabor. Afterwards, He revealed and showed it in all its brightness on Mount Tabor.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Vardan Devrikyan. *Transfiguration and the Feast of Vardavar*. Yerevan: "MAGALAT" publishing house, 2006; p. 3-4

The Armenian Church has always celebrated the Feast of Transfiguration in the summer time. Along with the other traditional churches, the Armenian Church used to celebrate this feast on August 6, however, after the fifth century Armenians started to celebrate the Transfiguration of our Lord on the 98<sup>th</sup> day (that is, the 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday) following Easter, between June 28 and August 1.<sup>145</sup> Therefore, it was easy for St. Gregory to transfigure the old and pagan feast into a new and Christian celebration:

In contrast to the Greek and Latin churches, the Armenian Church has connected the Transfiguration to the beginning of the year of the ancient Armenian calendar, *Navasard*, which came according to the present calendar on August 11... St. Gregory the Enlightener recognized that it would be difficult for the people to discard their customs of centuries standing, so he joined the observance of the Transfiguration with the feast of *Navasard*.<sup>146</sup>

Armenians always celebrated *Vardavar* in the summer time on month of *Navasard*, which was the first month of the Armenian New Year falling from August 11 to September 9. Because of the geography and the climate in Armenia, this is the only perfect time for Armenians to swim in the rivers and lakes or to sprinkle water on each other. The name *Navasard* has an interesting meaning and explanation which will spread more light on this celebration and will show and prove the idea that Armenians celebrated *Vardavar* before the pagan times.

For some linguists this word has a Persian root: the word *nava* means *new* and the word *sard* means *year*<sup>147</sup>, which makes sense, because the old Armenian calendar started the New Year with the month of *Navasard*. Therefore, this month marked the beginning of the New Year and by sprinkling water on each other on the first day of the year, pagan Armenians cleansed themselves from their old lifestyle and prepared themselves to enter and to celebrate the New Year:

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid; p. 3

<sup>146</sup> Garo Bedrosian. *Feasts of the Armenian Church and National Traditions*. Translated by Arra S. Avakian. Glendale, CA: Yerevan Printing & Publishing, 1998, p. 211

<sup>147</sup> Adjaryan Hrachya, vol. 3, p. 435

And there was water. This being a sign of renewal and cleanliness, to sprinkle a friend with water was a way of wishing him a happy new year... Water has also been considered from very ancient times the birth-giving, creative element.<sup>148</sup>

However, the word *Navasard* has a deep explanation in Armenian which is very much related to this thesis. The word *nav* means *ship* and the word *sar* means *mountain* in Armenian.<sup>149</sup> We read in the Bible that the Noah's Ark rested on top of the Mountain Ararat and that "*In the six hundred and the first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried from off the earth; and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and behold, the face of the ground was dry*" (*Genesis 8:4; 13*). This is the first day of the new era of the humanity; this is the first day of the second generation of the humanity. And Armenians called the first month of the New Year *Navasard* to emphasize the Biblical truth that Noah's Ark came to rest on Mountain Ararat. Therefore, every year Armenians celebrated the New Year by sprinkling water on each other and let the doves fly to keep the story of Flood and Noah alive in their national custom and to remember the story of the second generation of humanity.

We assume that St. Gregory performed his first baptism service on the day of the Feast of Transfiguration of our Lord. First, because it was summer time and the weather was just perfect for catechumens to go into the river (running waters) to be baptized by St. Gregory. Secondly, as we know *Vardavar* had been celebrated in the summer time, and that was the reason that St. Gregory transfigured the pagan *Vardavar* into a Christian celebration by giving a new meaning to that national custom. If the Armenians sprinkled water on each other as a fun event or as a part of pagan celebration, after adopting the Christian faith, Armenians sprinkled water on each other to remember the first baptism ever performed in the Armenian Land by the Holy Apostles and by St. Gregory the Illuminator. Therefore, the first day of the salvation of the second generation of humanity became the first day of the salvation and transfiguration of the entire nation.

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<sup>148</sup> Drtad Krikorian. "Navassard and Vardavar: The New Year's Day in Pagan Armenia." *The Armenian Guardian*, 1953; p. 4

<sup>149</sup> Adjaryan Hrachya, vol. 3, p. 435

In the story of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9, Mark 9:2-9, Luke 9:28-36, 2 Peter 1:17-18) we read that Jesus took with Him three of His Apostles (Peter, James, and John) on top of the Mount Tabor and was transfigured in front of their eyes, showing them the beauty of His Kingdom and the Light that came out of His Body. The water baptism is that personal transfiguration, when after washing away our sins, we are becoming transfigured, and retrieving our lost image and becoming the dwelling place and a temple for the Holy Spirit. We are putting on Jesus (Romans 13:14) and getting illuminated through His Light. We are becoming a new and transfigured person in this world for His glory. Therefore, when we sprinkle water on each other on the day of *Vardavar*, we remind ourselves of our own baptism and “renew” it with the Light of Mount Tabor.

It is interesting to mention that the stories of the prophets appeared to Jesus at that time; Moses and Elijah are greatly connected with the water. Moses saved his nation passing them through the Red Sea, which became the symbol of the Christian Baptism. The life and the mission of Prophet Elijah are full with the presence of water. Many miracles were performed with the water, he was the one who was praying God to send rain or stop it (I Kings 17 and James 5:17).

The Feast of Transfiguration and *Vardavar* was and is one of the favorite celebrations in Armenia. This feast was significant and famous because of the pilgrimages. There was a saying that the Armenian pilgrims were using at this time: (*Լնլյոհ նսն կւ զնուս*) “*I am going to the Feet of Light.*” This is the Light of Mount Tabor, this is the Light of Jesus Christ, and this is the Light that enlightens every man who comes to this world (John 1:9):

Vardavar was also a feast for pilgrimages. The main shrine was the Monastery of St. Karapet of Moush, which bore the name of John the Baptist and was in the province of Taron. In all the regions, people organized pilgrimages to those churches and monasteries that were named after John the Baptist.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Vardan Devrikyan. *Transfiguration and the Feast of Vardavar (in Armenian)*. Yerevan: "MAGALAT" publishing house, 2006; p. 67

As we mentioned above, right after returning from Caesarea St. Gregory visited the Taron region where he performed his first baptism, destroyed all the pagan temples, and built the Monastery of St. Karapet to safeguard the relics of St. John the Baptist. Therefore, by visiting these holy places faithful Armenians first remember the baptism of our Lord by St. John, and secondly, by sprinkling water on each other emphasized that through His baptism Jesus Christ opened the gates of Heaven for us, and through our own water baptism we became the adopted children and the heirs of that Heavenly Kingdom.

The celebrations not only took place outside of the churches in the fields and picnic grounds, but also inside of the churches through the celebration of Divine Liturgy, prayers, hymns, and fasting. If the pagan Armenians presented roses to their temples, Christian Armenians decorated their homes and their churches with roses, which became the symbol of the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ. During the service, deacons filled the basin with rose water and placed it on the Main Altar and when people approached to receive Holy Communion or kiss the Holy Bible, they sprinkled them with that rose water.<sup>151</sup> People brought ears of wheat to the church asking the priest to bless them after the Liturgy and to sprinkle them with the blessed water that they might have an abundance of harvest and their fields would be protected from various infections<sup>152</sup>:

Some customs also remained, such as decorating the church with roses or other flowers, spraying one another with water, and the releasing of doves which are truly the last customs of ancient pagan Armenia still practiced. By practicing these customs, however, pious Christians have modified their meaning and have given them a new meaning in light of the Holy Scriptures, thereupon recalling the Great Flood, the dove of Noah and other such symbolic references.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> E. Lalayan. *Azgagrakan Handes (Ethnographic Magazine)*, in *Armenian. Book XII*, Tiflis: Hermes Press, 1905; p. 151

<sup>152</sup> "The Traditions of Vardavar" *Tsaghik*, Istanbul. 1895; p. 412

<sup>153</sup> Koushagian, Torkom. *Saints and Feasts of the Armenian Church*. Translated by Very Rev. Fr. Haigazoun Melkonian. New York: St. Vartan Press, 1988, p. 35

As we can see, water was and is one of the essential and necessary parts of these celebrations, not only in national customs, but also in the liturgical celebrations. Unfortunately, the religious connotation and the meaning of the usage of the water during these celebrations were lost in the course of history, but we hope that through the grace of God, our people will realize that sprinkling water on each other on the day of Transfiguration is not only fun to keep us cool in the summer time, but also has a deep religious meaning to remind us that we were transfigured and became the adopted children of God through the water baptism.

### **The Baptismal Font of the Armenian Apostolic Church**

Almost all the Armenian historians from the fifth and sixth centuries kept the account of the conversion of the Armenian Nation and the missionary work of St. Gregory the Illuminator and King Tiridates III; destroying the old pagan temples and replacing them with the first Christian churches, which were often built upon the foundations of pagan temples or the pagan temples were converted into Christian Sanctuaries, thus connecting the old places of worship to the new religion.<sup>154</sup> Likewise, the Mother Cathedral of Holy Etchmiadzin was established in the location of the temple dedicated to the pagan goddess Artemis which, according to the vision of St. Gregory the Illuminator, was struck and destroyed by the golden hammer of the Descending Only Begotten Son of God.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> “Agathangelos has very little about St. Gregory’s last years, a subject which looms large in our panegyric. After telling about the Saint’s missionary activity in Armenia, he concludes: ‘The king greatly implored Gregory to remain with him continually and to travel around with him, but he did not agree; he rather preferred to live in desert places, suppressing himself by fasts... until the day of his death when summoned by Christ to rest.’” (Terian, *Patriotism and Piety*, p. 51)

<sup>155</sup> “During the archaeological excavations of 1958, the Main Sacristy built in the fifth century by Vahan Mamikonian, with its columned bases, bema and the foundation stone of the Altar, was exposed after being discovered untouched at a depth of one and one half meters under the present Main Altar of the Mother Cathedral. During the excavations, a furnace-like fireplace, made of fired clay, still containing remnant ashes, was also discovered inside the perimeter of the fifth-century sacristy. It is significant that the oldest main altar’s foundation stone was found placed directly upon the fireplace, which symbolizes the victory of Christianity over paganism. Just as the old sacristy consists of two layers, so is the

However, it is noteworthy to mention that there is no single account preserved about the building of baptisteries or even baptismal fonts during the earlier Christian missionary work in Armenia. Perhaps because of the prevalent custom of baptizing outdoors in rivers and in lakes, churches were constructed without interior baptismal fonts or baptisteries.

The letter of Macarius, Bishop of Jerusalem<sup>156</sup> addressed to the Armenian Catholicos St. Vertanes<sup>157</sup> is also one of the earliest full-length documents about the history of the Armenian Church in her formative years. In the letter we read that there was a delegation sent from the Chief Bishop of Armenia to Jerusalem with a written petition to Macarius, Archbishop of Jerusalem:

Bearing in mind the saying that thou shalt not hesitate to go a long way, if there be the promise of learning something serviceable; yea, and having manifested in your souls that longing for spiritual toil for the sake of the divine gain of spiritual treasures, ye have sent a letter from a far off land, from your regions of the east, unto the holy city Jerusalem; and this letter by the hand of reverent priests hath been laid before the multitude of bishops, who were gathered together from their several cities. Before whom appearing with humble entreaty, they have asked for an answer to this letter.<sup>158</sup>

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old religion left under the foundation-stone, a stone obelisk from the Urartian period, made of burnished basalt was discovered under the fireplace of the pagan temple, in the lower bema, in a horizontal position. It is the largest of similar monuments from the Urartian period." *Mother See Of Holy Etchmiadzin, "Mother Cathedral, History"*. [www.armenianchurch.org](http://www.armenianchurch.org). posted in 2013.

<sup>156</sup> "Macarius I became Patriarch of Jerusalem in 311 or 312. He attended the Council of Nice in 325. Sozomen places his death between 331 and 335. The Epistle to the Armenians must therefore have been written between 325 and 335, and is the earliest document we possess bearing on the history of the Armenian Church." (Conybeare, *The Key of Truth*, p. 178)

<sup>157</sup> St. Vertanes (in office 327-342) was the elder son and the second successor of St. Gregory the Illuminator. He was the founder of the Armenian Church Hierarchy. (Kaloustian, *Saints of the Armenian Nation*, p. 42)

<sup>158</sup> Frederick Cornwallis Conybeare. *The Armenian Church: Heritage and Identity*. Edited by Nerses Vrej Nersessian. New York: St. Vartan Press, 2001; p. 472

We learn from the letter that there was a report presented by the Armenian delegation in front of the synod of bishops in Jerusalem about baptismal and hierarchical rules and customs in Armenia. After having a discussion, the decision was made by the synod to answer the letter and to give the administrating rules of two fundamental sacramental mysteries of the Church: Baptism and Eucharist, as well as the explanation of the hierarchical irregularities:

Whereat we are surprised and wonder greatly, and from fear of God we have not shrunk from writing promptly, I Macarius, Archbishop of Jerusalem, and all the number of bishops who are under me; sending to the regions of the East unto your Christ-loving and reverent chief Bishop Vrtanes, and to the whole body of the bishops and priests of Armenia; to the end that with much care and reverence they may fulfill the regular order (of administration) of the great sacrament of God, as it fulfilled in the Catholic Church; whereby is bestowed out of the grace of the Spirit remission of sins and salvation of souls, being baptized in the holy font.<sup>159</sup>

According to Conybeare and others, the Chief Bishop of Armenia was anxious to put everything in order in the Christianity of Armenia, according to the Canons and the teachings of the Nicene Fathers and to make everything in common with them, because the advice of the Archbishop of Jerusalem was more likely and acceptable than the practices of the Syrian or Greek missionaries in Armenia<sup>160</sup>: “*His elder brother, Vertannes, succeeded him in 339, and, finding no fixed rule regarding the manner of celebrating Divine worship, adopted the ritual and ceremonies used by the Church of Jerusalem.*”<sup>161</sup>

While it is true that no historical account preserved about the order and the form of the baptismal service in Armenia before the time of St. Gregory the Illuminator, the letter of Macarius sheds light on this topic and once again proves the testimonies of the

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<sup>159</sup> Conybeare, *The Armenian Church*, p. 472

<sup>160</sup> Conybeare, *The Key of Truth*, p. 179

<sup>161</sup> E. F. K. Fortescue. *The Armenian Church founded by St. Gregory the Illuminator; being a sketch of the History, Liturgy, Doctrine and Ceremonies of this Ancient National Church*. New York: AMS Press, 1970; p. 19

Armenian historians that in the early ages of Christianity in Armenia the baptismal service was administered in the rivers and pools without special baptismal fonts. It was a widespread custom in Armenia and in Syria to use portable vessels for the baptism service as well.<sup>162</sup> So, the early Armenian churches were probably built without baptismal fonts or baptisteries. In his letter to the Armenians, Macarius encourages that baptisms should be performed inside the churches, in the fonts or in the baptisteries:

To wit, in sundry places they have no regular fonts, but baptize in any vessel which comes handy... If they have no hallowed font, in what handy vessel should they baptize? If there is no nearby church built to the glory of God for people to come into, (then), perhaps, there was nothing to blame. But if we have churches, we must also built baptisteries and a font in which to baptize those who come with true faith to piety...<sup>163</sup>

However, exceptions could have been made when a person was sick and there was no church and font nearby. In that case the baptism should have been performed in a regular font; because “*the Holy Spirit bestows grace upon the petitioner, and is not prevented by the vessel...*” This gives us an idea that the indoor baptisms also were not uncommon in Armenia starting even from the apostolic age.

So the question is why did the Armenians not have baptismal fonts or baptisteries? It was not only the influence and the practices which were brought to Armenia by the Syrian missionaries, but it showed the understanding of the mystery of the water and its significance in the baptismal service in the Armenian sacramental life.

According to Dr. Abraham Terian<sup>164</sup>, the absence of the baptismal fonts in Armenia in the beginning of the Christian era was primarily due to the fact that the Armenians did not emphasize the Pauline theology of baptism as death, burial, and resurrection with Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 6: 3-5). Indeed, this lection is noticeably absent from the accepted ritual of baptism in our Church,

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<sup>162</sup> Mathews, p. 8

<sup>163</sup> Conybeare, *The Key of Truth*, pp. 181-182

<sup>164</sup> Abraham Terian. *Macarius of Jerusalem, Letter to the Armenians, A.D. 335*. Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2008; p. 116

and instead, we read from Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (3:24-29) about being adopted as sons. Therefore, unlike other denominations, which emphasize the Pauline Romans triad of death-burial-resurrection in their baptism, in the Armenian rite, the triple immersion of the catechumen during the baptism service signifies a confession of faith in the all-holy Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The letter of Macarius tells us also that the Armenians were administering the baptismal service at anytime, anywhere, in anything that served as a basin, as a font. So, the letter brings up the theology and the meaning of the three Great Feasts and the importance of the performance of the baptism on those Feasts, and encourages Armenians to hold their baptismal services on Epiphany/Nativity, on Holy Easter, and on Pentecost:<sup>165</sup>

And this (form of the mystery) they hasten to carry out with great eagerness in the holy places of Christ; which all Christians, those who fear Christ, must also carry out in the baptismal service on these (days): on the holy Epiphany of the Nativity of the Lord, and [on] the saving Easter of the life-giving passion of Christ, and on Pentecost full of grace – when the Divine descent of the quickening Spirit overflowed among us.<sup>166</sup>

This part of the letter provides clear evidence that the Armenians were not celebrating baptism exclusively on Easter Sunday (which remains a prevalent custom in many parts of Christendom), but in concord with natural child birth, recognizes the spiritual adoption of each new child as soon as possible with the heavenly Father.

The idea of the water being a womb of regeneration and the adoption is apparent in the teachings of St. Gregory the Illuminator, where the author connects the creation of the world with the re-

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<sup>165</sup> “For on that same salutary day, with the luminous Nativity of Christ, our expiatory birth of the holy font is realized... Next, on the quickening resurrection of Easter, by mortifying our sins in the waters of the font, we become imitators of the mortification by death of our Lord Jesus Christ... But on the grace-bestowing <and> sanctifying day of Pentecost was the luminous manifestation of the life-giving Spirit. After the same pattern we also, on the same day, bestow the same Spirit by laying hands on those who are baptized. We fulfill the pattern of this with unflinching care, that we may become perfect.” (Terian, *Macarius of Jerusalem*, pp. 123 - 123 and 125)

<sup>166</sup> Conybeare, *The Key of Truth*, p. 185

creation and renovation of “*the old deteriorated earthly matter*” through the womb of the baptismal water. As the entire creation emerged and was born from the womb of the water by the Divine Command of God, on the same way the masterpiece of the creation, the human being, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, who made verdant the womb of the waters, becomes the adopted child of the Heavenly Father through “...*the womb by visible water, preparing the newly born fledglings for the regeneration of the font (Titus 3:5), to clothe with robes of light all who would be born once more.*”<sup>167</sup>

For the sake of privacy and solemnity, indoor baptism came to be the norm by the end of the fourth and in the beginning fifth centuries in Armenia.<sup>168</sup> Reverence for the rite itself, and for the water, which came in time to receive a special consecration, gave rise to the use of a special font for the sacrament of Baptism. This font became one of the most important parts of the Christian Church everywhere.

Although the second Canon of St. Sahak Partev (387-439), (Catholicos of Armenians and the great-grandson of St. Gregory the Illuminator)<sup>169</sup> orders to build the baptisteries near the altar, and to erect the baptismal font there, in which “*the Holy Spirit regenerates us and seals us to become children of light*”<sup>170</sup>, movable fonts or the portable vessels are still commonly used to administer the baptismal service in Armenia.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Thomson, pp. 121 - 122

<sup>168</sup> Some early remains of built baptisteries and fonts are found at several parts in Armenia from the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries. (*Christian Armenia Encyclopedia*, p. 744)

<sup>169</sup> “This particular Sahak was named the Great, because of his activity in organizing his national Church, in completing the Armenian Version of the Scriptures.” (Conybeare, *The Armenian Church*, p.839)

<sup>170</sup> Melik-Tangian, p. 421

<sup>171</sup> In the case of emergency the portable vessel can be used in our days as well, for example, in the hospitals or in the bed of a dying person. During the time of the Communist Regime, when it was prohibited to go to church, faithful people were baptized secretly in their homes by using portable vessels. I was also baptized during the reign of the Soviet Union time in my grandparents’ apartment in February, 1979, around 9:30pm, in the clean pot, which through the Grace of God became my Baptismal Font, through which I was born again as an adopted child of God.

The fifth century Armenian historian Yeghishe<sup>172</sup>, who wrote the history of St. Vartan Mamigonian and the Armenian War against the Persians in 451, preserved an interesting account about the baptismal font and the baptismal service administered before the war at the shore of the river Tghmut:

Thus, spoke the holy Priest Ghevont that night and ended his benediction by saying, “Amen.” Then an altar was set up and the most holy Sacrament was offered. Baptismal fonts were prepared and all through the night those of the troops who had not been baptized were baptized. In the morning all of them received communion and became radiantly attired as on the festival day of the Great Holy Easter.<sup>173</sup>

As we can see from this historical testimony, the priests and the catechumens did not go back to church from the battlefield to administer the baptismal service, but they built temporary fonts, or maybe they used portable vessels to perform the baptism service. This comes, again, to prove that the Armenians (even though the church canons clearly prohibit the administration of baptism outside of the church<sup>174</sup>), were not bound exclusively to use a font only erected inside a church building or in the baptisteries. They saw and understood the font and the water as a source of life and as a womb of rebirth, purification and adoption. It is noteworthy to mention that after St. Gregory the Illuminator, this is the next historical account preserved about the group baptismal service again performed in the river or on the shore of the river.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century scholar Fortescue, describing the celebration of the Feast of Nativity and Epiphany of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Armenian Church, mentions that this particular feast was great among the Armenians for the baptism of infants, who were strong and healthy. People were waiting for almost a year to baptize their

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<sup>172</sup> “Yeghishe, the historian, was a clergyman, an ordained celibate priest (*vardapet*) of the Armenian Church. He was one of the youngest pupils of St. Sahag and St. Mesrop Mashtotz, the two most remarkable and learned figures of the Golden Era of Armenian Culture. He was born probably in the year 415.” Yeghishe. *The History of Vartanank*. Translated by Dickran H. Boyajian. New York: The Delphic Press, 1952, p. xxvi

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid*; p. 137

<sup>174</sup> Melik-Tangian, pp. 337 – 338; 394; and 420

children or to be baptized on that day, and usually there were so many baptisms that it was necessary to administer the sacrament outside the Church, “*in some stream or river.*”<sup>175</sup> I would like to add here that until now the same practice to administer the baptismal service in the rivers is preserved in Jerusalem, when the Armenian pilgrims are baptized in the Jordan River, at the same spot where according to tradition our Lord was baptized by John the Baptist.<sup>176</sup>

In summary, for the Armenians, then and now, water is a source of life. It is life-giving, and therefore, the baptismal font is that very place of the spiritual rebirth. So, the baptismal font and the water are perceived as a WOMB, and not as a TOMB, for Armenians.<sup>177</sup>

The Canon of the Consecration of a Font of the Armenian Church<sup>178</sup> also contains this beautiful theological mindset of viewing the font and the water as a womb of the church and not as a place of burial and resurrection. After placing the font in its proper place in the church (often on the right side of the main altar, or attached to the northern wall of the building<sup>179</sup>), the priests wash it with water and wine. Then the bishop stands with the priests around the font and they lay their right hands on the lips of the font, and they all recite Psalm 29. The prayer before the consecration of the font with the Holy Oil reveals the whole theology of the Armenian Church towards the water and the font. We can easily see that again the Pauline Romans doctrine about death-burial-resurrection is missing. The Armenian prayer emphasizes the theology of forgiveness and Pauline Galatian doctrine regarding the adoption as children of God: “*Vouchsafe to them that are baptized therein remission of sins, reception of the Holy Ghost, the grace of adoption by the heavenly Father, unto the inheriting of the kingdom of heaven.*”<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Fortescue, p. 189

<sup>176</sup> Boris Baratov. *Jerusalem; Pilgrimage to the Holy Land*. Jerusalem: Printing Press of the Armenian Patriarchate of Saints' James, 2000, p. 100

<sup>177</sup> Terian, *Macarius of Jerusalem*, p. 61 and 123

<sup>178</sup> Frederick Cornwallis Conybeare. *Rituale Armenorum; Being the Administration of the Sacraments and the Breviary Rites of the Armenian Church, together with the Greek Rites of Baptism and Epiphany*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905; p. 27

<sup>179</sup> The canons of the Armenian Church prescribe that fonts be carved out of a solid piece of rock. (Melik-Tangian, pp. 337 and 349)

<sup>180</sup> Conybeare, *Rituale Armenorum*, p. 28

Therefore, the font becomes that very place, where through the water within it, sins may be forgiven, the grace of the Holy Spirit may be received, and the candidate may be adopted as a true child of God. As such, he is now worthy of being an heir of the heavenly kingdom, and as a newborn member of Christ's Body, his name may be registered in the Book of Life. The Scriptural readings (2 Kings 5:1-14, Isaiah 35:1-2, Galatians 3:24-29, John 1:1-17), litanies and the last prayer after the consecration of the font with Holy Oil embellish the service with the same idea of forgiveness of sins and the adoption as a child of God:

There is a beautiful and wise practice formulated by our early church fathers, a practice that has become canonical. According to that practice, all Armenian infants of our Church must unconditionally be baptized in the waters of the same baptismal font, to symbolize spiritual brotherhood.<sup>181</sup>

### **The Consecration of the Baptismal Water in the Armenian Church**

The consecration of the baptismal water became an essential part of the baptismal service almost in all Christian Churches. The blessing in the past took place only three times yearly: on Christmas, on Easter, and on Pentecost. Today, the consecration of the baptismal water is performed at each baptismal celebration. This rite is not a "Water Blessing" service, but it points toward the use of this water, baptism itself. It symbolically shows what is happening with the one asking for baptism and it creates a union between the unbaptized catechumen with the one being already baptized and with everyone present at the service, and with the Church itself.<sup>182</sup>

We must understand, therefore, that it is precisely water which reveals to us the meaning of Baptism and that this revelation takes place in the consecration of water before Baptism. Not only does Baptism begin with the blessing of water, but it is this

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<sup>181</sup> Bedrosian, p. 65

<sup>182</sup> Klemens, p. 72

blessing alone that reveals all the dimensions of the baptismal mystery...<sup>183</sup>

The consecration of the baptismal waters in the Armenian Church starts with the citation of the Psalm 29:2-4: “*The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, upon many waters,*” while pouring water into the font crosswise. Before the actual consecration, the Armenian Church has the following Scriptural readings: a passage from the prophet Ezekiel 36:25-28, a reading from the Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians 3:24-29, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to St. John 3:1-6.

As we can see from these readings, the Armenian Church teaches her faithful that the only way to be united with Christ and to enter into the kingdom of God is to be born again and become a new person through the grace of the Holy Spirit. The readings also emphasize the importance of the adoption as a child of the Heavenly Father. Baptism brings the baptized person into relationship with the saving act of Jesus Christ and makes him a true heir of the Heavenly Kingdom.<sup>184</sup> All the readings emphasize the importance of the water baptism and the salvation of the humankind through the adoption as an heir of the Heavenly Kingdom. In the first reading from Ezekiel, we hear that God will sprinkle clean water on us and wash us from our sinful nature. The reception of the Holy Spirit takes place after becoming clean through the water and then God invites us to be part of His Kingdom and to live in the Promised Land. The second reading is from the Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians, and we hear that after baptism we put on Christ as a protecting weapon against the adversary. If we have faith in Christ and were baptized in the name of Holy Trinity, then we belong to God as an adopted child from the seed of Abraham. In the third reading, Jesus Christ again emphasizes the importance and the necessity of the water baptism. Only the birth of the water and the Spirit will make us children of God and will lead us to the Light of the World. Only through this

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<sup>183</sup> Alexander Schmemmann. *Of Water and the Spirit: A Liturgical Study of Baptism*. New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974; p. 38

<sup>184</sup> Mesrob Tashjian. “The Sacrament of Holy Baptism in the Armenian Church.” In Thomas F. Best, *Baptism Today: Understanding, Practice, Ecumenical Implications*, pp. 15 - 21. Collegetville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2008; p. 16

spiritual rebirth God will adopt and save us, by opening the gates of the Promised Land.

The readings are followed by the litanies proclaimed by the deacons over the baptismal waters:

That the Lord may guide the work of the hands of the priest that celebrate this baptism, let us pray.

For the hallowing of the water here before us, and that the Holy Spirit may come and work together with it, let us pray.

For the reception by it of the blessings of the Jordan, let us pray.

For it to become a means of healing souls and bodies, let us pray.

For the regeneration of those who are baptized therein, as children of light and truth, let us pray.<sup>185</sup>

Although the priest is the one who is administering the service, it is the Lord who is guiding and blessing the work and the service of that priest. It is the Lord who gave the authority and a command to His servants (Apostles, Church Fathers, bishops, and priests) to go and to baptize all the nations and to make everyone His adopted child, saved through the water baptism (Matthew 28: 16-20). In the beginning of the creation, the Holy Spirit was upon the waters, creating the world and giving life to all creatures. It was His dominion that put the waters in order in heaven and on earth (Genesis 1:1-25). The presence of the Holy Spirit sanctified the waters of the Jordan River for Naaman to be healed (2 Kings 5:7-14), and it was His power, which stirred up the waters in the pool of Bethesda to save His creatures from their bodily diseases (John 5:1-9). Now, with these litanies we beseech the same Holy Spirit to come down upon this baptismal water as He sanctified the waters of the River Jordan with His visit and to make this font as a River Jordan for the one who is about to be baptized. The Holy Spirit is implored to make the water of this baptism as a source of the healing power and as the way of rebirth and regeneration, that the person who is about to be baptized in this baptismal water may become the adopted child of the Heavenly Father and the heir of the Heavenly Kingdom.

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<sup>185</sup> *The Rituals of the Armenian Apostolic Church*. New York: The Armenian Apostolic Church Prelacy Press, 1992; p. 35

After the deacon's proclamation, the catechumen stands closer to the baptismal font and the priest says the prayer of consecration over the baptismal waters:

Thou, Lord, by thy mighty power, hast made sea and dry land, and all creatures that are in them. Thou hast divided and established the waters below the heavens for a dwelling-place of the hosts who incessantly do praise thee.<sup>186</sup>

The Preface of the prayer recalls the story of the creation, when God, by His almighty power created everything in heaven and on earth, and He divided and established the sea and the land, the upper and the lower waters:

Thou didst send thy holy apostles, laying on them the command to preach and baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all the nations. But also thou hast declared, and thy word lieth not, that except men be born of water and of Spirit, we cannot enter the kingdom.<sup>187</sup>

The Anamnestic part (meaning memorial or remembrance)<sup>188</sup> of the prayer remembers that the same God, who created the heaven and the earth, sent His Apostles to the world and commanded them to preach the Good News everywhere and to baptize in the name of the Holy Trinity. However, He strongly declared that in order to enter the Kingdom of God one should be born of water and the Spirit and to become a Christian. To be a Christian is to know God, and to know God is to be in communion with Him.<sup>189</sup> To communicate with God is to be a spiritual person, to be born of water and Spirit: "*That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit*" (John 3:6). Baptism makes us spiritual persons and puts us in communion with God. Man is the most

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid; p. 35

<sup>187</sup> Ibid; p. 35

<sup>188</sup> *An Introductory Dictionary of Theology and Religious Studies*, Edited by Orlando O. Espin and James B. Nickoloff, Collegeville, Minnesota, Liturgical Press, 2007, p. 50

<sup>189</sup> Irenaeus M. C. Steenberg. "Baptism in Orthodox Christianity." In Gordon L. Heath and James D. Dvorak, *Baptism: Historical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspectives*, pp. 1-25. Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2001; p. 3

beloved creature of God and for him God has created everything else. We read in the Book of Genesis that God created man in His own image and likeness; He has given man independence and free will to serve Him and by living a righteous life according to His commandments to inherit the Heavenly Kingdom. Unfortunately, using his free will for himself and being disobedient to God's commandment, man became a slave of sin and darkness.<sup>190</sup> However, God being merciful and benefactor, He took and still takes care of His creatures and wants to redeem them.

The crux of this prayer shows that man, realizing his fallen state and his separation from God, and wanting to restore and to be reconciled with Him, willingly comes to be baptized and to become a part of God's Body; the Church: *"In awe whereat this thy servant, desiring eternal life, is come of his own will unto baptism of this spiritual water."*

The union of man with God and his salvation, however, takes place by the grace of God, through the Incarnation of His Only-begotten Son Jesus Christ, who through His own baptism showed the way of the unity with God. If we are not baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity then we may have no part in His Kingdom.

The Epiclesis (petitionary, invocation of the Holy Spirit)<sup>191</sup> of this prayer invokes the same God, who created everything in the beginning and prepared all good things for the welfare of man, and by His Divine command He sent His apostles to preach and to baptize and to transform the world, to send His Holy Spirit upon these baptismal waters and to consecrate it by His Divine power:

We pray thee, Lord, send thy holy Spirit into this water, and cleanse it as thou didst cleanse the Jordan by thy descent into it, all-holy one, our Lord Jesus Christ, prefiguring this font of baptism and of the regeneration of all men.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> "Despite his being the creation of God, man is a weakling, consisting of two parts, body and soul. In his pursuance of salvation, he gets confused, hesitates in choosing between two wills, those of the soul and those of the flash. The cause of human suffering lies in this duality; therefore, flash should be destroyed by renouncing the world and all matter; for as flash and its desires become strong, the soul weakens." (Kaloustian, *The Tabernacle Feasts*, p. 58)

<sup>191</sup> *An Introductory Dictionary*, p. 403

<sup>192</sup> Conybeare, *Rituale Armenorum*, p. 95

It was the same God who descended into the Jordan River to be baptized by John and by His entering, He sanctified and cleansed the waters for the regeneration, that whosoever would be baptized in the same way will be the child of God. It is noteworthy to mention that the same idea of the font is apparent here, in this part of the prayer. The Jordan River became a baptismal font for the Lord, becoming the precedent for the font in the Church. For Armenians the baptismal font is connected with the Jordan River, and the baptism service being administered in the font erected in the sanctuary or in the baptistery goes back to Jordan and connects the Baptism of the Lord with the baptism of each catechumen. Whatever happened in the Jordan River is re-presented now in this font:

And graciously vouchsafe to him in this water, in which he is now baptized, means to the remission of sins, to reception of the Holy Spirit, to adoption as a son of the heavenly Father in heaven and to inheriting of thy kingdom of heaven.<sup>193</sup>

In the supplicatory part of the prayer we ask God to have mercy upon the one who is about to be born again, that through the font and the water his sins would be washed away, that he would receive the graces of the Holy Spirit, that he would become an adopted child of God, and would inherit the Kingdom of God. It is apparent that the Pauline Romans doctrine of death-burial-resurrection is again missing in this prayer, and that for the Armenian Church the baptism is the way of spiritual rebirth and the Baptismal font with the water is the womb of the Church through which the newly baptized person becomes the adopted child of the Heavenly Father.

To the end that cleansed from sin he may continue in this world agreeably to thy will and in the world to come may receive thy infinite benefits together with all thy saints, and thankfully glorify Father and Son and Holy Spirit, now and forever.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid; p. 95

<sup>194</sup> Ibid; p. 95

The prayer concludes in a doxology, which includes the blessing of God bestowed upon the catechumen, who by the guidance of the Holy Spirit is now called to live his whole life according to God's will. Furthermore, by following God's commandments, the newly baptized would join the hosts of angels and all saints in Heaven to glorify the Savior of the World.

The theology and the structure of this beautiful prayer of blessing and consecration of the baptismal waters are transmitted through the teachings of St. Gregory the Illuminator, which in turn reflect the development of theology and doctrine prevalent in the first three centuries of Christianity practiced from Ephesus through Cappadocia and Edessa into Armenia. Teaching about the baptism of our Lord, St. Gregory also emphasizes the theology of the adoption, that through the Holy Baptism and through the consecrated water, everyone becomes the adopted child of God. If God made the upper waters as a dwelling place for the angels, then He made the lower waters for human beings that through the water baptism they also would become angels and by the power of the Holy Spirit they might become the adopted children of God. By entering into the lower waters, Jesus opened the way to heaven, and by His own baptism He symbolically connected the upper and the lower waters, as if by a ladder (see John 1:52), which would take up the newly baptized Christian and will make him a joint heir of the Heavenly Kingdom:

Treading the waters with his own footsteps, He sanctified them and made them purifying. Just as formerly the spirit moved over the waters, in the same way He will dwell in the waters and will receive all who are born by it. The waters massed together above are the dwelling of the angels. But He made these waters just as those, because He Himself came down to the waters, that all might be renewed through the Spirit by the waters and become angels, and the same spirit might bring all to adoption by the waters forever. For He opened the gates of the waters below, so that the gates of the upper waters of heaven might be opened, and that He might elevate all men in glory to adoption.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Thomson, pp. 122-123

After this prayer, the blessing and the consecration takes place when the priest takes the Holy Oil, and by blessing the waters three times, says:

Amen. Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia. May this water be blessed and sanctified by the sign of the Holy Cross and by the Holy Gospel and by the Holy Myron and by the grace of this day, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and forever and ever, Amen.<sup>196</sup>

The harmony between the Persons of the Holy Trinity is apparent here: the Holy Cross represents God the Father, Who sacrificed His Only Son on the Cross for the salvation of humanity. The Holy Gospel is the symbol of God the Son, and the Holy Myron is the symbol of the Holy Spirit. We are blessing the baptismal water in the name of the Holy Trinity. As God created the entire world and everything in it, now by blessing the baptismal water in the font He is establishing the personal contact with the one who is going to be born through it. So, in our own baptism we are not alone with the priest and relatives, but the entire Divinity is acting to save us and by making us Christians, registering our names as adopted children of God. We are protected by the power of the Holy Cross, which became the sign of victory of our salvation. The Word of God is that very food which nourishes and enriches our spiritual life, and by receiving the anointment of the Holy Oil, the saving and protecting power of the Holy Spirit descends upon us.

The day of baptism is a very special day not only for the one who is being baptized, not only for those who are present at the baptism service, but also for the entire Church. As it was during the creation time, when each day received a special grace, because everything created on that day was good and perfect, in the same way the baptismal day receives that same grace of God, because baptism is an act of regeneration, of rebirth and of re-creation.

Next the priest pours few drops of the Holy Oil crosswise into the font while singing the hymn of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus Christ during the Baptism in the Jordan

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<sup>196</sup> *The Rituals of the Armenian Apostolic Church*; p. 37

River, and we believe that the same Holy Spirit is now called to descend upon the candidate in the baptismal font:

The Dove sent from on high, descending with high sound and like flashing light, fortified the disciples with incombustible fire while they were sitting at the holy upper chamber.

The dove is insubstantial and unsearchable; but he knows all the deep secrets of God and taking the same from the Father, tells us about the awesome second coming of Christ. He is consubstantial with the Father.

Blessing in the highest to the Holy Spirit that proceeded from the Father. The apostles drank from the immortal cup of graces and were invited from the earth into heaven.<sup>197</sup>

The hymn tells the story of the Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), when the Third Person of the Holy Trinity came upon the Apostles in the Upper Room, as the Lord promised them (Luke 24:49) and thought them about Lord's second coming and everything about God's plan for the salvation of humanity. By drinking from the immortal cup of the graces of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles spread the light of the Lord in the world and took the Good News of the Lord to all nations. So, baptism is that personal Pentecost that each newly born Christian experiences, during this time of the service. The same Holy Spirit which came down upon the Apostles in the Upper Room, comes down upon the newly baptized person and bestows upon him the graces of the Eternal Life.

The logical conclusion of the consecration of the baptismal water takes place when the priest, after praying for the catechumen and after questioning the godfather, immerses the catechumen into the consecrated baptismal water three times, and by giving him/her a new name, recites the phrase of the baptism:

(Name), the servant of God, coming from the state of catechumen to baptism, is now baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Redeemed by the blood of Christ from servitude to sin, he/she receives adoption as a child of

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid; p. 37

the heavenly Father, to be a joint heir with Christ and a temple of the Holy Spirit.<sup>198</sup>

In the Armenian rite, the phrase is recited in the third person passive “the candidate IS BAPTIZED”. In other traditions, there is a tendency for the minister to say “I baptize thee”, but in the Armenian Church, it is the unseen but clearly known Grace of the Holy Trinity which has called the candidate out of darkness into life, and out of fleshly birth into spiritual re-birth.

By the command of the Lord, the baptism is administered in the name of the Holy Trinity through the consecrated water in the holy font. Jesus Christ, the Savior, shed His precious Blood on the Cross to redeem us and to save us from the snares of the evil one and from the bondage of the sin and death. After the redemption, the adoption takes place. We are becoming the adopted children of the Heavenly Father and the joint heir of the Heavenly Kingdom. After washing our sins away through the baptismal water and by receiving the holy anointing, we are transformed into the true temple and the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16).

As a conclusion of this chapter, once again I would like to mention that from the beginning of the creation until now water became one of the most important and essential elements for the physical and spiritual life of a human being. Water is life-giving, and there is no life without water. Water is a source of cleansing and purification (physical and spiritual). As the water washes away the bodily uncleanness, through the grace of the Holy Spirit it washes away the spiritual uncleanness, as well. As we drink water to keep our bodies hydrated and healthy, Jesus Christ calls Himself a Living Water and invites every one of us to drink from that Water and to have life eternal (John 4:13-14).

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid; p. 39

## **CHAPTER 3**

**The significance and the usage of the  
Water in the “Water Blessing”  
and “Washing of the Feet”  
and in some other Liturgical Services  
of the Armenian Apostolic Church**

## Blessing of the Water

In the Armenian Church, and for the Armenian people, one of the most joyous and loved feasts is the Holy Nativity and Theophany of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In the Armenian Church, we observe a single, unified feast-day on January 6 which combines the mysteries of the Incarnation, the Baptism, and the Revelation of the Son of God. Theophany is celebrated each year with great solemnity and inspirational ceremonies. The name for the feast-day is “*Astvatsahaytnutyun*” (Աստվածահայտնություն) which is a compound noun; “*Astvats*” (Աստված) is God, and “*haytnutyun*” (հայտնություն) is “revelation”. This feast is one of the five Tabernacle Feasts<sup>199</sup> of the Armenian Apostolic Church. The Baptism of Christ is as important as His Nativity: “*As His Birth is the starting point of His human life, so also His Baptism is the starting point of His public life, and ministry.*”<sup>200</sup>

The celebration includes citations regarding the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38; John 1:1-17), the Birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 2:1-7), the glorification by the Angels (Luke 2:8-14), the visitation of the shepherds (Luke 2: 15-20), the adoration by the Magi (Matthew 2:1-12), the escape into Egypt and return (Matthew 2:13-23), the Circumcision and the Naming of our Lord (Luke 2:21), the Baptism of Jesus Christ in the Jordan River (Matthew 3:1-17; Mark 1:4-11; Luke 3:1-38), the Temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13) and the Witness of John the Baptist (John 1:18-28; 1:29-34; 1:35-36). On the Sunday following Theophany, in sequence of the

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<sup>199</sup> The Tabernacle Feasts of the Armenian Church are: the Nativity and Theophany of our Lord Jesus Christ; the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ; the Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ; the Assumption of the Holy Mother of God; and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. (Kermian, *Welcome to the Armenian Church*. P. 96)

<sup>200</sup> Shahe Altounian. *Feed My Sheep*. Cairo: Archdiocese of the Armenian Church, 2000; p. 31

revelations, we commemorate the commencement of the Signs by proclaiming the miracle at Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11).

During period between the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> of January, stational liturgies are commemorated in the Armenian sections in and around Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Jordan, and these stational commemorations have long been established in the universal calendar used by churches across the globe. Of these stational liturgies, the most prominent are the Birth and Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ. However, the Armenian Church celebrates all of the events associated with the Nativity and Theophany of our Lord as a unified Mystery<sup>201</sup>, the Incarnation and Revelation of the Son of God, the ultimate expression of God's love toward His creation: "*Generations of Christians have celebrated the feast of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ and have been inspired by the message of love and peace it brings to all mankind.*"<sup>202</sup>

It is important to mention here that during the first centuries of Christianity, the night before every feast, a vigil was kept. In the evening the faithful assembled in the church and prepared themselves by saying prayers, chanting Psalms and reading Holy Gospels. In addition, incorporated into the vigil on the eves of major feasts the church celebrated the *Jragaluys*<sup>203</sup>, when candles were lit throughout the whole church and the faithful carried them in procession around the church during the great processional of the Divine Liturgy.<sup>204</sup> Today these vigils are only kept on two dominical feasts:

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<sup>201</sup> According to Dr. George Lylegian, it is quite possible that the Mystery of the Resurrection was originally a unified celebration on Sunday, during which the Passion, the Crucifixion, the Burial, the Resurrection, and the post-Resurrection appearances were commemorated. Over the course of liturgical development, these critical sections were accorded separate commemorations, thus extending the Pascha backward and forward by several days from the apex on Sunday. It is therefore highly likely that Theophany originated in the same way, and that over the course of centuries, some of the sections were likewise accorded separate days. Lylegian, George. Personal interview. Oakland, December 21, 2013

<sup>202</sup> Arshen Aivazian. *Echoes of Faith*. New Rochelle, New York: St. Nerses Seminary Press, 2008; p. 23

<sup>203</sup> The term, '*Jragaluys*', means "the lighting of the lamp". In Latin, it is called "*Lucernarium*." (Ormanian, *Dictionary*, p. 21)

<sup>204</sup> Ghevont Samoorian. *Domar: A Compendium of the Directorium and Calendar of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church according to the Traditions of the Apostolic See of Jerusalem*. New York: St. Nerses Seminary Press, 2006, p. 645

Nativity/Theophany and Holy Easter<sup>205</sup>, when the Divine Liturgy is celebrated during the evening services and the churches are brightly lit with candles. Candles are distributed to the faithful who hold them in awe and carry them home to keep them lit during the celebration of these great Feasts: “*In fact the entire day which precedes these two dominical feasts is known as Jragaluyts’ as the day of preparation for the great feasts.*”<sup>206</sup>

The general history of the Christian Churches confirms that until the fourth century the Birth and the Baptism, as well as the presentation of Jesus Christ at the temple, were all celebrated on the same date, on January 6<sup>th</sup>. Scholars continue to research the development by which the celebration of the Nativity was eventually shifted to December 25, and the celebration of the Baptism was kept on January 6. As pilgrimages increased to the Holy Land, many other stational liturgies were appended to the Calendar, inviting pilgrims to travel to Nazareth, Bethlehem, the Mount of Olives, and out to the Jordan River. At the same time, scholars also discuss why the Armenian Church remains unique throughout Christendom in preserving the most ancient, unified observance of Theophany on January 6.

Like all major feasts, Theophany is preceded by a period of spiritual and physical preparation. Originally, there may have been one day of fasting. Later, the fasting period was extended to include a week. Most recently, in parallel with the development of the preparation prior to Easter (the Great Lenten Fast), Theophany is now preceded by a 50-day period of preparation. This is known as the “wintertime fifty-day” (in Armenian, “*dzmernihisnag*”), and while it is strictly observed in the monasteries, amongst the laity, only the first, middle and final weeks are observed as fasting-periods today. This week of fasting, as well as the whole period of fifty days, is considered a reminder of St. John the Baptist’s proclamations about

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<sup>205</sup> “On the immediately preceding evening of each of those two feasts the Church conducts special services, as a pre-feast. These two evening services have an Armenian name, “*Khtum*,” meaning “the end of abstinence.” For Theophany on January 6, its *khtum* will necessarily be on January 5. For Easter it will occur on the Saturday evening before Easter Sunday.” (Bedrosian, p. 58)

<sup>206</sup> Malachia Ormanian. *A Dictionary of the Armenian Church*. Translated by Bedros Norehad. New York: St. Vartan Press, 1984; p. 22

the coming of Christ, and therefore, constitutes an earnest invitation to repentance.

### **Some Historical accounts about the Water Blessing service of the Armenian Church<sup>207</sup>**

According to the tradition of the Armenian Church, the first Water Blessing service was conducted by St. Gregory the Illuminator. Before baptizing the Armenian King and the entire nation, St. Gregory blessed the waters of the River Aratsani. As the Armenian historian Agathangelos tells, a great miracle happened at the time of the mass baptism, when the waters of the river stopped and then turned back again, a light appeared and stood over the waters of the river, and the sign of the Holy Cross appeared and remained until the end of the service.<sup>208</sup>

The next historical testimony about the Water Blessing Service is preserved from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and indicates that the service was performed by the Armenian Catholicos Petros Getadardz (1019-1054). By the invitation of the Emperor Basil of Byzantium, Catholicos Petros went to participate at the Water Blessing service in the stream that flowed through Trabizon (Trebizond). Armenian historians testify that great miraculous events occurred when the Armenian Catholicos blessed the waters of the river with a cross by pouring some Holy Oil into the water. Almost all of them wrote that a great light appeared to them, which was shining from the hand of the Catholicos and from the Holy Oil. Some of them testify that by the blessing of the Armenian Catholicos the waters of the river stopped and started running back, which gives rise to the fact that the Catholicos Petros was called “*Getadardz*” (Petros, the one who turns the course of the river).<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> “The *Blessing of the Water* service which is used in the Armenian Church is ascribed to a service composed by St. Basil of Caesarea. It was translated and introduced into Armenia in the fifth century by Khosrov the translator, who was a student of St. Mesrop Mashtots’ and St. Sahak Partev”. Anna Arevshatyan. “The Canons of the Water Blessing and the Washing of the Feet services in the Ritual Books.” *Etchmiadzin Magazine*, 1986; p. 41

<sup>208</sup> This historical account was discussed in chapter 2.

<sup>209</sup> Ormanian, *Azgapatum*, pp. 622-623

The next historical account is from the thirteenth century, when a European monk by the name of Canonikus Willebrandt visited the Armenian King Levon the Great (1190-1220) in Sis, the capital of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. On the way to a pilgrimage to Jerusalem he had remained in Cilicia for four months enjoying the hospitality of the Armenian King. With great detail, Willebrandt testifies how the Armenians celebrated Theophany and the Water Blessing service. Prior to the service, he writes, they observed twelve days of penance and on the day preceding the feast they fasted, and in the evening they celebrated the Divine Liturgy and received Holy Communion. On the next morning, the King and nobles, together with all the people, went to the riverbank with a great procession, where the Armenian Catholicos, along with the Greek bishop, blessed the waters of the river by immersing a large cross into it. After the service the King and the others sprinkled themselves with that blessed water and then they started the celebration.<sup>210</sup>

A noteworthy account is preserved by the Fortescue, who in describing the Water Blessing service in the Armenian Church testifies that after celebrating the Divine Liturgy with a great procession, carrying the Holy Cross and Holy Oil, the people took the blessed water from the church to sprinkle in their houses and into the neighboring wells and streams. According to Fortescue, after concluding the service in the church: *“The procession then proceeds out of doors and the same ceremony is performed at the neighboring rivers and fountains.”*<sup>211</sup>

As we can see from all of these historical accounts, the Water Blessing Service of the Armenian Church was held outdoors, upon the riverbanks or near the seashore. In the course of time, because of practical difficulties, it became a necessary practice to celebrate Jesus’ Baptism within the church sanctuary: *“Later, because of subsequent Islamic prohibitions within the Ottoman Turkish Empire, this and other public out-door rituals were henceforth accomplished within the confines of the churches.”*<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> To read more about Canonikus Willebrandt’s historical testimony, see: (Kaloustian, *Saints and Sacraments*, pp. 67-68)

<sup>211</sup> Fortescue, p. 189

<sup>212</sup> Ghevont Samoorian; p. 649

Today the outdoor practice is preserved only in Jerusalem, where the Armenian Patriarch leads all of the clergy and faithful to the Jordan River to celebrate the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>213</sup> The Water Blessing is offered directly upon the waters of the Jordan River. As we mentioned in the Second Chapter, many pilgrims descend into the Jordan River and are baptized (or immerse themselves if they have already been baptized) during the Octave of the feast of Theophany of our Lord. In so doing, the pilgrims are connecting their own baptism with the Baptism of our Savior, who became a true example for all of us through His own Baptism.

### **The Order of the Water Blessing Service of the Armenian Apostolic Church<sup>214</sup>**

The rubrics indicate that the Water Blessing Service is to be performed after the offering of the Holy Eucharist on Theophany Day. In many parishes, in order to accommodate the traveling of parishioners, the service is immediately appended to the liturgy, but theologically, the service is associated with the Ninth Hour of the Day. The citation from Genesis 3:8 (in the Armenian Version) correlates the period between the Ninth Hour and the Tenth Hour (that is, the Evening) with the fall of the first human being. Consequently, the salvation of humanity is accomplished on the Cross at the same hour of the day, and in the Armenian tradition, the descent of Jesus into the Jordan River also takes place at the same hour.

The celebrant, holding a Cross and the Holy Gospel and the Holy Myron, accompanied by the altar servers and the godfather of the Cross<sup>215</sup>, proceeds to the cauldron of water which has been placed on the bema of the church, singing the hymn “Light of Light”:

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<sup>213</sup> In Jerusalem, the Armenians maintain the Old Calendar. Theophany is celebrated in Bethlehem by the Armenians on January 18/19, in Jerusalem on January 19, and on the banks of the Jordan River on January 21.

<sup>214</sup> To describe the Water Blessing Service we used the publications of the Western and Eastern Dioceses of the Armenian Church: (Blessing of the Waters Service 2001), (Blessing of Water 2007)

<sup>215</sup> “During the service a prominent member of the community, who has so desired, stands near the basin clothed as an acolyte to act as the so-called “Godfather of the Cross.” The chosen person, so honored, in return makes a substantial gift to the church, or to some worthy cause.” (Hacobian, *The Armenian Church*, p. 30)

Light of Light, You were sent from the Father, and became incarnate of the Holy Virgin to regenerate the corrupted Adam.

The voice of Your Father from heaven bore witness, saying, "This is my son," and the Holy Spirit, in the form of a Dove, revealed You.

You, O God, appeared on earth and walked among men and saved the universe from the curse of Adam.<sup>216</sup>

This is the same Light who led the Israelites out from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 13:21-22). This is the same Light who talked to Moses on the mountain and his face became shining because of the glory of that Light and he had to cover his face (Exodus 34:29). This is the same Light which shined on top of the mountain Tabor and, the holy Apostles saw the glory of God (Matthew 17:1-8). This is the Light which disperses the darkness from the lives of His people throughout the history of the humankind and who never forsakes us. This is the Light that St. Gregory the Illuminator talks about so boldly, building up his theology and teaching according to the will of that Light:

By this light was the world made, but it knew Him not. So for this reason He came, that they might understand his light and become sons of God (Jn. 1:12). He came to confirm the law and the prophets (Mt. 5:17); He surpassed the examples and established the truth.<sup>217</sup>

However, people turned away from that Light many times throughout history because they were unable to comprehend the true Light and because "*they are friends with the terrors of deep darkness*" (Job 24:16-17). This same Light came down from Heaven and was incarnate. Unfortunately, His people did not accept Him and they loved the darkness more, because their deeds were evil and a product of the darkness (John 3:19-20). However, He came and He proclaimed Himself to be the Light of the world, and He invited all those who would follow Him to be the sons of the Light: "*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life*" (John 8:12). The incarnate Light came

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<sup>216</sup> *Blessing of the Waters Service 2001*, p. 5

<sup>217</sup> Thomson, p. 125

to regenerate the fallen nature of humanity and to raise them to their blessed honor, which was lost by the sin of Adam. The Light was not alone: the entire Godhead, the Holy Trinity, was present by the voice of the Father and by the descent of the Holy Spirit in a form of a dove. God Himself was incarnate, was made man to save His creation, and to cleanse the curse of Adam.

After singing this hymn, the celebrant pours the water cross-wise from a pitcher into the cauldron by reciting the Psalm 29: responsorial verse 3, followed by the Scriptural Readings (Isaiah 12: 3-6; Joshua 3:14-17; Exodus 15:22-27; 2 Kings 2: 19-22; Ezekiel 47: 1-12; 1 Corinthians 10: 1-4; Matthew 3: 1-17).

All of the readings of the service emphasize the importance of the water for the human life and show that the beginning of the salvation of the humankind takes place by and through the water baptism. As the physical life starts in and through the water, in the mother's womb, likewise, the spiritual rebirth takes place in and through the water in the baptismal font as a spiritual womb of the Church.

The source of our salvation is Jesus Christ, our Lord, who was the Rock in the wilderness from which the life-giving water flowed to save His people. And on this very day, the Lord performed great things for us by establishing the baptismal service through His own Baptism. He was in the Jordan River when His people were crossing the waters to enter the Promised Land. He is also present at each baptismal service to lead His newly-born children to the Promised Land.

The readings of the Water Blessing service connect our own baptism with the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ. Each year by celebrating Jesus' Baptism, we are renewing our own baptism, by reflecting and meditating about the salvific work of our Savior. God once more manifests Himself, opens Himself to us, through the loving act of His Incarnation and Baptism. In order to receive Him, it is important to have the internal and spiritual will, to feel Him within us, "*to commune with His love through the revitalization of His image in ourselves.*"<sup>218</sup> The readings form a bridge for us from

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<sup>218</sup> Karekin I, Sarkissian, Catholicos of All Armenians. *The Light of the Bethlehem Star from the Prism of Holy Etchmiadzin.* Etchmiadzin: Printing Press of the Mother See, 1996; p. 16

the Old Covenant and lead us to the Jordan River to be witnesses of the greatest event, to hear the voice of our Heavenly Father, to see the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of dove, to proclaim with John the Baptist, and to be in the presence of the Holy Trinity.

The readings are followed by the litanies proclaimed by the deacons over the waters:

For this water that is before us and for those who shall in faith receive blessing from this, let us beseech the Lord.

For this water to receive River Jordan's blessing with the grace of the Only Begotten who enlightened us, let us beseech the Lord.

For the Holy Spirit to descend into this water and give birth again to those who are baptized and become children of light and truth, let us beseech the Lord.

For this water to become the source of healing for souls and bodies, let us beseech the Lord.<sup>219</sup>

Even though the blessing of the water takes place inside the church, the water in the cauldron symbolizes the waters of the Jordan River. We are asking God to bestow upon this water the same blessing that the waters of the river received back then by the grace of the Lord. We are asking God to send the Holy Spirit upon this water, that all those who are already baptized and became the adopted children of the Light and Truth, would renew their vocation, to be the heirs of the Kingdom of God. This water will be used to heal people from their spiritual and physical illnesses.

After the proclamation of the deacon the celebrant says the prayer of St. Basil of Caesarea over the water.<sup>220</sup>

The Anamnestic part of this prayer shows that the supplication is addressed to God the Father, the first Person of the Holy Trinity, "*who art strong and doest works of wonder.*" Using embo-lisms and quasi-embo-lisms (direct and non-direct quotations from Holy Scripture) the author of this long prayer tells the story of the creation, how God made the heaven and earth and everything out of nothing. After creating everything, on the last day of the creation He created man from the dust and made him alive by giving "*thine all-*

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<sup>219</sup> *Blessing of Water 2007*, p. 12

<sup>220</sup> *Blessing of Water 2007*, pp. 13-17

*holy breath.*” And then the author continues on by remembering the fall of the man and the first sin ever committed against God. Although God closed the doors of the Paradise in front of men, He did not forsake us, for at the end of the time He sent His Only-Begotten Son to find the lost sheep and to reopen the gates of the Kingdom. Through His Incarnation, the Son of God became man, without sin, to restore the fallen nature of the human being and to return us where we belonged to be. He came and He called everyone to come back from darkness to light, from death to life. “*And He gathered all and brought them to the River Jordan,*” where He saw the scared dragon in the waters and by entering into the waters He trampled him under His heels and destroyed the power of the adversary (Psalm 74:13).

Why then should the Holy Spirit of God appear in the likeness of a dove? To teach those watching that in no other way can one approach the Son of God, except in sinlessness and righteousness and holiness that taking from the likeness of a dove, they might bear in themselves that form.<sup>221</sup>

After His Baptism, Jesus ordered all to go down into the water and to be baptized (Matthew 28:19; also John 13:14), and following His example, to trample the head of the dragon under the waters, and to become the adopted children of the Heavenly Kingdom. And by washing all of them, He invited them to be a part of His Body: the Church, “*which He protected with prophets, fortified with apostles, crowned with martyrs, and made joyful with the word of his Gospel.*”

And today, the Triune Godhead is present at the Baptism of Jesus in the church sanctuary. This day the earth becomes a new heaven by the appearance of the Son of God, who invites all the people to the Jordan River, and by cleansing the waters enlightens all present there, “*so that they may be holy through the water and may have life through the Spirit.*”

It is happening today, it is happening now. The Holy Trinity is acting to save the creation. In the supplication part of the prayer,

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<sup>221</sup> Thomson, p. 124

the celebrant asks God to come upon this water through His Holy Spirit and to cleanse them for the welfare of His faithful children, “*for the healing of the sick, for the salvation of souls and bodies.*”

After this long and beautiful prayer, the choir sings the hymn “*Ov Zarmanali*” (O wonderful mystery), composed by Catholicos Gregory III Pahlavuni (1113-1166) in the twelve century.<sup>222</sup>

O wonderful and great mystery made manifest! God the Creator coming to Jordan.

O river, fear not, for I am thy Creator. I have come to baptize and wash away sins.

This day the well-pleased voice of the Father came down from heaven as witness to the Beloved son.

Exhort O river, exhort O river Jordan, with exuberant voice sang John the Great Forerunner.<sup>223</sup>

The hymn is also describing the wonderful events, which took place at the Baptism of our Lord. There is a great conversation happening between the Creator and the river, which is in the fear with the entire creation by the visitation of the Lord. The Creator of all, God Himself visited His own creation to be baptized in the waters of the river and to wash away the sin from the face of the world:

In the same way He came and completed the covenant which He made with our fathers (Genesis 17:7; Luke 1:72). He came down to the waters and sanctified the lower waters of this earth, which had been fouled by the sins of mankind.<sup>224</sup>

After this hymn the celebrant immerses the Holy Cross (symbolizing our Lord Jesus Christ) into the cauldron of water, and taking the silver dove-like container filled with Holy Myron, he blesses the water three times.<sup>225</sup> After blessing the water, the celeb-

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<sup>222</sup> Arevshatyan; p. 44

<sup>223</sup> *Blessing of the Waters Service 2001*, p. 19

<sup>224</sup> Thomson, p. 122

<sup>225</sup> “The Greek Church has a similar service. In Russia the ceremony is usually conducted on the bank of a river. The Cross is dropped in the freezing river and the lucky godfather is the one who succeeds in swimming fastest and retrieving the Cross.” (Hacobian, p. 31)

rant takes the Holy Cross out from the water<sup>226</sup> and gives it to the Godfather of the Cross to hold.<sup>227</sup> Then the celebrant pours out the Holy Myron from the beak of the dove while singing the hymn of the Holy Spirit.<sup>228</sup>

The service concludes with a benediction, blessing the faithful with the silver dove while bidding the Grace of the Holy Spirit upon everyone. After the service, the faithful come forward to receive portions of the Blessed Water and by kissing the Holy Cross, which the Godfather holds for them. They take the blessed water home for the many blessings, which it bestows. Some people drink it, some people pour it upon their sores, some people mix it into the preparation of bread and food, and some people sprinkle it upon their hearth and garden.

For centuries, humanity had been expecting a Savior, the Messiah, or the Anointed One, to save the world. The Birth of Christ was the fulfillment of all prophecy. Man had turned away from God and had sinned. Only God could save humanity from its sinful ways and deeds. Therefore, He sent His Son to save His creation. As St. John says, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:16). This was the purpose and the message of the Incarnation of the Son of God.

Through this Incarnation, Jesus united the human and divine natures to show men that they are the children of God, opening the heavenly way to His Kingdom. Moreover, the beginning of this journey is through the water baptism, the first sacramental mystery established by the example of Jesus Christ in the Jordan River: *“Christ is born every day. He is in this world forever and He is with*

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<sup>226</sup> See Matthew 3:16; Jesus is baptized, emerges out of the water, and at that moment, the Holy Spirit descends upon Him. In commemoration, the Cross is taken out of the cauldron of water before the Holy Myron is poured.

<sup>227</sup> According to the tradition of the Armenian Church, the godfather of the Cross after the Water Blessing service takes the Holy Cross with him home and after 40 days (on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord) the priest of the parish visits the family of the Godfather and after blessing their house with that same Cross, he takes it back to church.

<sup>228</sup> This part of the service is very similar to the Baptismal service (see chapter 2).

*us always. He lives in the hearts of the pure, in the hearts that have room for Him and in the hearts that prepare room for Him.*"<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Sion Manoogian. *The Mission and Message of the Armenian Church*. Edited by Dennis R. Papazian. New York: Meditation Press, 1983; p. 10

## Washing of the Feet service

On Great and Holy Thursday, the focus of the Church turns to the events that took place in the Upper Room (in Armenian *Vernatun*, Վերնատուն).

In the Upper Room, Jesus Christ had invited His disciples, those whom He loved to the end (John 13:1); to share in what has now become known as the Last or Mystical Supper. During that meal, Jesus established and instituted the Sacramental Mystery of the Holy Eucharist<sup>230</sup>, identifying Himself with the bread and wine:

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Matthew 26:26-28)

After establishing the Sacrament, as the Holy Gospel mentions, Jesus washed the feet of His disciples as a sign of His perfect love, His profound humility and service.

I would like to mention here that Washing of the Feet was not a new ritual in the lives of the Israelites. Even to this day, many parts of the Middle East preserve the ancient custom of removing shoes, and sitting on the floor to eat a meal. In the absence of individual utensils, diners extend their right hands into common serving plates while seated cross-legged on a mat or carpet.<sup>231</sup> Therefore, it is customary for the diners not only to wash their hands, but also to wash their feet before sitting down on the dining carpet. Washing the feet upon entering a house was an act both of respect to the company and of refreshment to the traveler: “*Washing the feet did*

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<sup>230</sup> The Synoptic accounts are found in Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-39.

<sup>231</sup> Smith, p. 737

*not rise to the dignity of a ritual observance except in connection with the services of the sanctuary (see Exodus 30:17-21). ”<sup>232</sup>*

However, it held a high place among the rites of hospitality. Guests ordinarily were offered water and vessels for washing the feet (Genesis 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; 43:24; Judges 19:21). It was a yet more complementary act, denoting equally humility and affection, if the host himself performed the ritual for his guests (1 Samuel 25:41). In the Gospel of St. Luke we see the “*sinful woman*” washing the feet of the Lord with her tears and anointing them with the perfume. As well as we hear Lord rebuking the host: “*You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair*” (Luke 7:36-44).

At the Last Supper, the Lord taking a towel and basin, washed His disciples’ feet and wiped them with the towel. It was not to observe a custom, for the disciples were mystified by it. There is no doubt that Jesus gave it the spiritual significance of symbolic cleansing of the believer from the defilement of present sin just as baptism symbolizes cleansing from all sins<sup>233</sup>: “*Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you*” (John 13:10).

When a Christian fails and becomes defiled in thought, deed or word, he does not thereby cease to be a Christian; he does not cease to be a child of God and have to begin all over again, because there is only one baptism. He simply needs to have his feet washed – he needs to have his walk cleansed, he needs to rise from his fallen stage and continue to walk with Christ to Christ.

Jesus gives a great lesson of love, service, and humility, in the sense that there is greatness in being humble (Matthew 20:25-28). If the Lord knelt and washed our feet, then we too must do the same for each other. That is the purpose of the action and the reason for the commandment, as we read in the Gospel: “*I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you*” (John 13:15). As the “host” of the Heavenly Kingdom, Jesus bows down in front of His guests as a servant, and by washing their feet one by one; He invites them to share a part with Him in His Kingdom. Again, by

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid; p. 737

<sup>233</sup> Tenney, p. 588

keeping the old custom, He gave a new meaning to it; a spiritual meaning. Being a Jew, it was absolutely clear for the disciples that they could not enter the house of the host without washing their feet, and now, the Creator of Heavens and Earth Himself kneels and washes their feet. What an honor, and what kind of humility!

Following the commandment of the Lord, the Armenian Church maintains the Washing of the Feet on Holy Thursday, and considers the act to be a sacramental mystery because the Lord Himself has instituted it.

### **The “Washing of the Feet” Service and its order in the Armenian Apostolic Church<sup>234</sup>**

The Washing of the Feet service “*Otnloway / Vodunluvah*” (Վոննւղիւ) was originally held in the late afternoon in the Armenian Churches, specifically at the Tenth Hour, which corresponds to 4:00 pm.<sup>235</sup> At this time faithful come to church and the celebrant “*comes to his knees, as did Christ, and washes the feet of twelve men, as was done to the disciples.*”<sup>236</sup> It is noteworthy to mention that for many centuries it has been the custom for priests to wash the feet of ALL of the faithful present, male and female, old and young, in the narthex as a precursor for individual participation in the upcoming mysteries of sharing in the Passion of Christ: “*In the 11<sup>th</sup> century the then Catholicos Grigor V kayaser established a more formal ceremonial character to the Washing of the Feet.*”<sup>237</sup>

The order of the service clearly directs that the celebrant should divest himself of all vestments indicating rank, and should gird himself with a towel. Furthermore, the celebrant is to kneel and

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<sup>234</sup> To describe the order of the Washing of the Feet service we used the publication of the Eastern Diocese. This publication contains the English translation of the service by Rev. Fr. Kevork Arakelian: (Washing of the Feet 1976)

<sup>235</sup> “The author of the service is St. Ephrem the Syrian, one of the great fourth century church fathers of the East. The service was translated into Armenian in the fifth century, and the current form of the ritual was put to use at the order of Catholicos St. Gregory the Martyrophile at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century.” Krikor Maksoudian. *Frequently Asked Questions about the Armenian Church*. New York: St. Vartan Press, 2004; p. 160

<sup>236</sup> Samoorian, p. 729

<sup>237</sup> Arevshatyan; p. 45

wash the feet “*of everyone present in the church, starting from the oldest to the youngest.*”<sup>238</sup> Not only the Ritual Book of the Great Holy Week, but also the *Tawnacoyc/Donatsooyts* (Directorium)<sup>239</sup> and *Jashots’ Kirk* (Lectionary)<sup>240</sup> of the Armenian Church indicate that the highest-ranking clergyman should preside over the service and wash the feet of everyone, from the oldest to the youngest. This reflects the Jerusalem origin when the bishop himself would kneel and wash the feet of everybody in the church, while the other clergy “*form a circle and sweetly sing the proper hymns.*”

According to ancient rites, not only a given number of feet were to be washed, but, after the high-ranking clergy washed the feet of the priests, the latter in turn were to wash the feet of the entire congregation present.<sup>241</sup>

Today, it has become customary in the Armenian Church to wash only the feet of twelve men, representing the Twelve Apostles. It is interesting to note that the Gospel of John never mentions how many disciples were present in the room when Jesus washed the feet, and there is always a point of great discussion amongst Armenians whether the feet of Judas were also washed (otherwise, only eleven men ought to be present in today’s representation). If we insist on the idea of twelve male people, as a symbol of twelve Apostles for the washing of the feet, then it was to the same twelve male people that Jesus gave bread and wine and said: “*Do this in my memory*”(Luke 22:19). Should we also assume that only twelve male people should receive Holy Communion?

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<sup>238</sup> *Avag Shabat (Great / Holy Week) of the Armenian Apostolic Church, according to the Canons of our Holy Fathers and Blessed Translators.* New Julfa, Persia: All-Savior’s Cathedral and Monastery Press, 1895; p. 398

<sup>239</sup> *Jhamakirk Adeni (The Book of Hours of the Armenian Apostolic Church, with the Psalms of David and Directorium of the Feasts), 4<sup>th</sup> Edition.* Jerusalem: Printing Press of the Armenian Patriarchate of Saints’ James, 1915; p. 472

<sup>240</sup> *Jashots Kirk (Lectionary of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church), in Two Volumes.* Jerusalem: Printing Press of the Armenian Patriarchate of Saints’ James, 1873; p. 215

<sup>241</sup> Ormanian, *Dictionary*, p. 34

It is time to rediscover the ancient meaningful and impressive practices of our Church and perform the ceremony of the Washing of the Feet in the chancel and wash the feet of everyone.<sup>242</sup>

The service starts with the preparation of the Altar. The clerics first prepare the vessels for the washing (a basin with the water in it, butter/oil for the blessing, and a towel) and then they place the Chalice on the Altar as a liturgical presence of the Lord.<sup>243</sup> In addition, they put a Holy Bible and a Holy Cross on the Altar together for veneration. The service starts with a lamentation of the Psalm 51: responsorial verse 7:

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

Have mercy on me, O God, According to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.

Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.

Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow...<sup>244</sup>

The cleansing from the sins takes place through and by the water. In the beginning God created this element to give life and to regenerate it, to clean the dust and the dirt and to bring the beauty and the perfection. Yes, we are born with a sin; the sin of Adam, but

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<sup>242</sup> Arnak Kasparian. *Challenges*. Tenafly, New Jersey: Saint Thomas Press, 2013; p. 110

<sup>243</sup> There is considerable study in the Armenian Church with regard to the liturgical combination of the Holy Eucharist on Holy Thursday and the placement of the Washing of the Feet. The rubric about placing the chalice upon the altar-table may, in fact, refer to the complete Offertory as a part of the Holy Eucharist.

<sup>244</sup> *Washing of the Feet*, pp. 1-5

You and only You can wash us and make us clean and ready for the adoption. Yes, our lives and deeds are sinful, but not because we want and desire to sin, but because, as St. Paul says:

As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. (Rom. 7:17-19)

After this lamentation, the choir sings the hymn which depicts the story in the Upper Room. The words of our Lord saddened His Apostles and they were in confusion and troubled. One of them would betray the Lord. They looked at each other but could not say anything. The Lord knew the betrayer, and let him sit with them and share the meal. Who was that person? Who was ready to turn his face from the Savior, from the One who gives life, from the One who just washed their feet as a servant? How could a person think to do it? However, Lord came to accomplish His mission; to save His creatures by washing their sins in the baptismal font:

This day was erected the font of baptism for the remission of our sins.

This day the Lord washed the feet of His disciples, and thus spoke to them, saying:

One amongst ye, brethren, will betray me unto death, and that one can be pointed out amongst ye, my disciples.

Then, hearing this, Peter looked inquiringly at John to ask who this might be.

The words spoken by Jesus saddened the disciples, and they were all troubled.<sup>245</sup>

After this beautiful hymn the celebrant says “*Lord, have mercy*” fifty times, and then recites the first prayer, which is addressed to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who is the Creator of angels and humankind. Using quasi-embolisms the author of the prayer tells the story of the Incarnation of the Lord and the purpose

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid; p. 6

of it, as well as the events in the Upper Room on the Great and Holy Thursday. God, in front of whom all the knees are bowed “*in heaven, and on earth and under the earth*” (*Philippians 2:10*), now comes to this room and by kneeling in front of His creatures, washes “*the feet of mortals, setting us thereby a great and beautiful example.*” Now we are asking God to grant us forgiveness through “*this seemingly insignificant water.*” We are especially praying for the sins of pride and arrogance that Satan brought to our weak nature. We are beseeching God to remove these sins and to fill our hearts with His life-giving humility, sweetness and kindness of heart, and love, “*which are the crown and keystone of the ordinances,*” so that with the pure and clean heart we may also wash each other’s feet and with that humble spirit we may be able to celebrate, to confess, and to glorify our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

After saying this prayer, the celebrant pours water crosswise into the basin by reciting the Psalm 29:3, followed by the Scriptural Readings.<sup>246</sup>

The first three readings from the Old Testament explain how God ordered Moses to make a basin for washing and to put it between the altar and the tabernacle. He also ordered the priests to wash their hands and feet before entering and offering their sacrifice on the altar, “*they shall wash their hands and their feet, lest they die.*” (*Exodus 30:21*). The next two readings are about the fulfillment of the construction of the Temple by King Solomon. The readings are especially focused on the making of the bronze basins, which were put in their proper places in the Temple for the priests to wash themselves before offering the sacrifice. The reading from the book of Isaiah is prophecies that God will never leave those who are thirsty for righteousness and who always call His name. Because of the sin and the attacks of the adversary, we become a dry land, which by the grace and the compassion of God will become “*like grass amid waters, like willows by flowing streams*” (*Isaiah 44:4*).

There are two Epistle readings in the service and it is noteworthy to mention that we have the same reading from the first letter

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<sup>246</sup> Exodus 30:17-21; 3 Kings 7: 38-40; 2 Chronicles 4: 2-6; Isaiah 44: 2-6; 1 Corinthians 10: 1-4; 1 John 4: 7-21; the exhortation by John of Eriza “God is love”; John 13: 1-11; at the conclusion of the washing John 13:12-15.

to Corinthians for both services (Water Blessing and Washing of the Feet), where the holy Apostle talks about the life-giving water which flowed from the supernatural Rock. The second Epistle reading is from the First Letter of St. John, where the author extols love. If we want to have a relationship with God, then we must love each other and must try to find Jesus in each other. Out of that love God created everything and gave us the honor to be the masterpiece of His creation. Out of that love God became man and was sacrificed on the Cross to save us. If we want to love God, then we should love each other first, as He loved us. *“Whoever says, “I love God,” but hates his brother is a liar. The one who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love the God whom he has not seen.”* (I John 4:20) It was through that love that God knelt and washed the feet of His disciples. It was through that love that God established the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist and made His Body and Blood as the food of life eternal.

Of interest in the course of the Washing of the Feet service is that after the Epistle readings, before the proclamation of the Holy Gospel, one of the clerks reads the discourse of John of Eriza on Love of God. This discourse is mainly based on the first Epistle of St. John; it is an exegesis of the letter: *“For Love loves those who love... For God is love and desires love from those who are pure in their heart, and sincere in their faith.”*<sup>247</sup>

After reading this discourse and after the proclamation of the Holy Gospel (John 13:1-11), the deacons sing a litany, which also tells the story of the Incarnation and the events in the Upper Room. This long litany ends with the beautiful hymns sung by the choir, *“Mystery of this Day,”* and *“My heart trembles.”* The mystery, which was foretold by the prophets, is fulfilled and accomplished today. The Incarnate God fell on His knees, by putting on an apron, washed the feet of His lowly creatures, and honored them. Now Lord, we are asking you to wash us from our sins and to make us partakers of your Kingdom.

After the hymns, the celebrant says the prayer over the water and the oil. The entire prayer is addressed to Jesus Christ, our Lord, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. He is the God Almighty and

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<sup>247</sup> *Washing of the Feet*, p. 13

Wonderworking, who is sitting on the chariot of the Cherubim and glorified and confessed by the Seraphim to be One of the Holy Godhead. He is the One, who through His love came down from Heaven and took our body to save those “*who were created out of dust.*” Although He came into the world, He always stayed in unity with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and by that, He fulfilled the law and prophets and established the New Covenant. Then He came to the Upper Room and by establishing the sacrament of the Holy Communion, He knelt and washed the earthly feet of His disciples.

Yes, our feet are getting dirty and dusty by walking the way of Satan and becoming slaves of our sins. We are becoming dry land with NO life in us. However, as the Lord ordered the waters to produce life in the Fifth Day of the creation (Genesis 1:20-23), in the same way He saved His creation on the fifth day of the week through the water. Through the grace of God and by the descent of the Holy Spirit, water cleanses the filthiness of sin from us:

...and sanctify this water for the forgiveness of our sins, directing our footsteps in the path of virtues that, our feet being strengthened, we may, armed with Thy Cross, walking in the everlasting way of Thy commandments.<sup>248</sup>

Water is the element which cleanses us from our sins. Through water God grants us forgiveness and directs our footsteps from darkness to light, from death to life, from Satan to God. By washing our feet from the dust of sin, we receive new strength to rise from our fallen stage, and having the Holy Sign of our victory as an indestructible weapon for us, to walk according to His will and to continue our way to gain salvation.

Next, the celebrant prays over the “oil”.<sup>249</sup> Here is one of the unique observances of the Armenian Church, that during the Washing of the Feet service, we bless butter instead of (or with the) olive oil. Some of our church scholars mention that we use “*butter as a substitute for olive oil, since olive trees did not grow in the*

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid; p. 26

<sup>249</sup> “Even though not mentioned in the story of the Last Supper, in the Gospel there are several references to anointment with precious oils, and on that basis the anointment with oil is added to the washing with water.” (Ormanian, *Dictionary*, p. 34)

*harsh climate of historic Armenia.*”<sup>250</sup> However, in my personal conversation with one scholar of our Church, Rev. Dr. George Leylegian, I was amazed to learn that the usage of the butter during the Washing of the Feet service comes directly from the Holy Bible, from the book of Job; “*when my steps were washed with butter, and the rock poured out for me streams of oil*” (29:6). Almost all the Armenian translations of the Holy Bible that we have checked (in classical or modern Armenian) in this verse use the word *kogi* or *karag* (*կարագ*), which in Armenian means butter. Unfortunately, in many English translations instead of using the word *butter*, they use *milk* or *oil*.

According to the order of the service, after washing the right foot of the faithful, the celebrant anoints the top of the foot. However, according to Dr. Leylegian’s testimony<sup>251</sup>, in the past the celebrant anointed not the top, but the heel of the foot, the sign of strength to crush the head of Satan under his clean and anointed foot: “*The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you*” (Romans 16:20; see also the reference to Genesis 3:14-15).

The prayer over the butter<sup>252</sup> refers to Christ’s anointing by Mary (John 12:3). It refers also to the holy Apostles, who receiving the same kind of blessing through the grace of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, passed this tradition on to the faithful. In the same way the butter is blessed to anoint the feet of the faithful so that the same Spirit of God’s grace would dwell in us and would strengthen us to fight against the adversary:

And now, like that same blessed oil, we bless this oil to anoint the feet of Thy believers, and we beseech Thee, of Thy love for mankind send down on us the same Spirit of Thy grace, that He may come and dwell in us and heal the wounds of our souls.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Krikor Maksoudian; p. 160

<sup>251</sup> Leylegian, George. Personal interview. Oakland, December 21, 2013

<sup>252</sup> “There is a custom that continues in many areas for the faithful to bring very pure butter to the church to be blessed. After it has been used at the altar the faithful take some home to be used as a healing salve for eye and ear ailments, or to be rubbed on the forehead to restore the sick to health.” (Bedrosian, p. 171)

<sup>253</sup> *Washing of the Feet*, p. 28

After this prayer, they bless the water and the butter/oil for three times with the Holy Cross and with the Holy Gospel by singing:

Amen. Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia. May this oil and this water be blessed and sanctified by the sign of the Holy Cross and the Holy Gospel, and through the grace of this day; in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and always and unto the ages of ages. Amen.<sup>254</sup>

After the blessing of the water and the butter, the celebrant, taking off his liturgical vestments, puts on a towel and kneeling down washes and anoints the feet of twelve men, representing the twelve Apostles. And those, whose feet are washed, kiss the Holy Gospel and the Cross and the celebrant's right hand. And while the washing takes place the choir sings the proper hymns, which all refer the events in the Upper Room. When the washing is completed, the celebrant putting his Liturgical vestments back on proclaims the Gospel of St. John (13:12-15) and they all conclude the service with the dismissal prayer and singing the Lord's Prayer:

May you will be blessed by the grace of the Holy Spirit.  
Depart in peace and let our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of us.  
Amen.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid; p. 29

<sup>255</sup> Ibid; p. 33

## Water usage in a few other Liturgical Rites of the Armenian Church

The Ritual Book of the Armenian Apostolic Church (*Mashdots*), which contains the rites for the sacramental services and other ceremonial rituals, gives specific orders and suggestions for the use of water during certain ceremonies.

### Canon of the Washing of the Cross

The ceremony for the healing of aches and illnesses, for an abundant harvest and for the healthy growth of plants and vegetation is called “*Khach’alva*” or “*Khach’ahangist*” (*Խաչախաղիչիւն*) (Washing of the Cross).<sup>256</sup>

The service begins with a citation of Psalm 6 and a hymn, and continues with Scriptural readings. The first reading is from 4 Kings (2:19-22) where the prophet Elisha says: “*Bring me a new pitcher,*” and taking the pitcher, he proceeds toward the source and mixing some salt with water, declares, “*Thus says the Lord, I cure this water; henceforth let there be neither disease nor barrenness.*” Following the prophecy from Old Testament, and the Epistle reading from Galatians (6:14-18), we proclaim the Holy Gospel from St. John (7:37-39), where Jesus Christ declares Himself to be the Water of Life and invites all who are thirsty to come to Him and to drink from that Water. Afterwards, the priest says the prayer, beseeching God, the Creator of all beings, who came onto the earth in a human body, and commanded baptism as the washing with water for the remission of sins, and blessing the water with Elisha’s hand, wipes away its evil and mortal effects:

And now, O Lord, let the graces of the Holy Spirit descend into this water; bless this water with your invisible Right Hand and the power of the Cross and let anyone who drinks of this water be

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<sup>256</sup> *Dzisanan vor asi Mashdots*, p. 73

healed... Bless, Lord, this water, with the power of the Cross so that the people drinking of this water may have a painless delivery... Bless, Lord, this water with the power of the Cross, with the priest's hand and in answer to the people's plea, so that all the plants and vegetation stay healthy and void of caterpillars and other harmful agents, and produce more abundantly for the people.<sup>257</sup>

After the prayer, priest blesses the water thrice while singing the water-blessing hymn "*May this water be blessed and sanctified...*" and then they conclude the service with a dismissal prayer and they all sing the Lord's Prayer.

### **Canon for blessing water-wells**

According to an old custom, the blessing of the wells, as well as its cleansing – "if it was considered desecrated" - was also done ceremonially.

The priest would go near the new or desecrated well, carrying the cross and the Holy Gospel. He would ask for forty pails of water to be drawn and would recite Psalm 29 and while burning and offering incense over the opening of the well, they sing the hymn "*Source of Life.*"<sup>258</sup> Then the priest pours the contents of the pails into the well, making the sign of the cross, and after the Scriptural readings (4 Kings 2:19-22; 1 Corinthians 10:1-4; Matthew 3:13-17) says the following prayer:

Lord, our God, who is the Creator of everything visible and invisible, who made the waters and the earth, and placed man over everything, now cleanse, with your omnipotence, this well and its waters from all its desecrations and impurities, so that people may use it for their needs.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid; p. 74

<sup>258</sup> Hakob Hakobyan. *Nerses of Lambron*. Yerevan: 1971; p. 296

<sup>259</sup> *Dzisarar vor asi Mashdots*, p. 198

## Canon against Drought and for the Rain

In the religion of all nations, there are special ceremonies to protect against drought and to beseech rainfall. The Book of Rituals (*Mashdots*) also includes special prayers against drought. Rain is essential for the safety of people and the productivity of their fields and orchards. When nature delayed the rains or failed to bring them down, people resorted to the intercession of religion; and by means of national ritual customs, they besought God to shower rain upon the earth. Taking into consideration this old custom and the people's devotion, our Church fathers have composed a special prayer for this occasion:

Our Lord, God, who, because of those who were jealous of you, heard Prophet Elijah's lamentation, and ordered the heavens to stop raining, so that the fruits would not grow on earth; and also, in answer to his petition, you granted the cooling dew; now we beg you to send us the rain which we badly need; bring delight onto the face of the earth for your people's sake. You are our God benefactor, and it is befitting to you power, dominion and glory, Amen.<sup>260</sup>

At church, during religious ceremonies and services, special prayers are offered for the weather, the rain and the abundance of fruits, so that God may safeguard the abundance of harvest and happiness to men. Throughout the centuries, Christians have prayed, on their knees, to God Almighty and merciful whom they trusted, to provide them with an abundant harvest. The prayers and entreaties gave them some hope that the next day's harvest would be productive. During church services, the weather, the rain and the harvest would be appropriately mentioned in prayers and sermons; thus, when praying to God and beseeching Him, special mention is made in favor of "*temperate weather, sweet rain and abundant produce, Lord we beseech You,*" or "*Augment the sweet water fountains and increase the fertility of our vegetation and plants.*"

At dawn and at dusk, when people are headed to work or returning from work, the clerk or priest, standing under the church

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid; p. 245

arches with the first rays of the sun, singing hymns composed by the Church fathers and with incense, implored, and still do, that the weather may be clement, that there be timely rain, and that the soil may be fertile and productive to supply enough food for the people.<sup>261</sup>

### **Canon of the Blessing of Crops**

In the old days, special rites were also performed for the blessing of the fields (*Andastan*),<sup>262</sup> the seeds, the wheat, the barn and presses; through prayers, people besought God to bless the clouds and ensure that the sweet dew descend on the fields so they could enjoy the earth's prosperity and the security of the fields:

Lord God Almighty, who bringest up the clouds from the corners of the earth, and makest the lightening to flash among the rains, who bringest the wind forth out of thy treasure house, who callest the waters of the sea, and pourest them out upon the face of the earth. We beseech thee, Lord, and we pray thee and invoke thee, and adore thee, confessing our sins, and ask of thee thy plenteous mercy. Open the cataracts of the heaven, send the clouds to drop down their rain, gladden the whole earth.<sup>263</sup>

In the Armenian Church, one of the most impressive and significant services is the “*Andastan*”; the word refers to the fields or the surrounding countryside. This service is performed solemnly, on festive days and particularly on Sundays between Easter and Pentecost. During the ceremony, the procession advances to the courtyard to bless the four corners of the world with the Cross and the Holy Gospel, by expressing a special plea and blessing for each quadrant of the world: the East, West, South, and North, and bless each side. The important thing of this service, however, is that the blessing of the lands, fields and fertility are solemnly mentioned, which makes one realize that Christianity, also, ceremonially presented requests and pleas to God for the productivity and abundance of the yield:

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<sup>261</sup> Manukian, p. 68

<sup>262</sup> *Dzisanar vor asi Mashdots*, pp. 243-245

<sup>263</sup> Conybeare, *Rituale Armenorum*, p. 222

This service of Andastan is frequently celebrated by many Christians, especially Armenian Christians. In the Armenian Church it is performed twenty-five times during the year... The Andastan on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross is the most ceremonies. A cross is placed on a tray and adorned with sweet basil and rosewater and is then carried into the field, the world, manifesting Christ in our lives.<sup>264</sup>

### **Home Blessing Service<sup>265</sup>**

One of the most popular services of the Armenian Church is the “Home Blessing Service,” which is usually performed after Christmas and Easter, when the parish priest visits the houses of his flock and takes the Good News of Theophany and the Resurrection of our Lord to the families. The strong Christian family becomes the mirror of God’s Kingdom. The family is the most intimate church, the dwelling place of God:

But also, the collective family unit is sanctified as the “mini-kingdom,” – that is, the church, the people of God. In this way, through their lives and with all their gifts, by the sign of the Holy Cross and Words of the Holy Gospels, God’s omniscient presence is manifested in their world He created.<sup>266</sup>

During the service priest blesses the bread, the water, and the salt, which are the symbols of God’s infinite love and care. With the blessing of these three most essential gifts for the physical welfare of the human being, the entire household receives the same blessing:

The bread, which symbolically represents the Word of God, grants life to all those who taste it. The salt seasons our food and makes it delicious and edible. It represents man in this world with his words and deeds... Finally, water which is the most essential element of life figuratively represents cleanliness. It is through water

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<sup>264</sup> Garabed Kochakian. *Bless, O Lord: Services of Blessing in the Armenian Church*. New York: Diocese of the Armenian Church of America, 1989; pp. 25-26

<sup>265</sup> *Home Blessing according to the Rite of the Armenian Church*. New York: St. Vartan Press, 2007

<sup>266</sup> Kochakian, p. 41

that we are cleansed by baptism, renewed in Christ, and united with Him.<sup>267</sup>

After the service all the members of the family drink from that blessed water, and then the priest sprinkles the blessed water in all the corners of the house.

### **K'ahanayat'agh (Burial of a Priest)<sup>268</sup>**

Like all ancient Churches, the Armenian Church reserves a special respect for a member of the clergy who has completed his earthly sojourn and has fallen asleep faithfully in the Lord. It is unclear whether the ritual for washing a corpse may also have been applied to the laity in previous centuries, but in recent times, this service has been reserved in great solemnity only for the clergy. At the commencement of the service of the "Burial of a Priest," the other clergymen go to the house of the deceased priest and wash him secretly apart from the congregation, even his family members. The canon prohibits the presence of the women at this ceremonial rite. While washing the body they say Psalm 51: "*Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.*" After reciting this Psalm they proclaim the Scriptural readings. The first reading is from the book of Ezekiel (36:25-28), which not coincidentally is the same lection for every Baptism, and the second one is from Hebrews (10:19-25). Both readings emphasize the importance of the cleansing of our lives and hearts with water. Water cleanses us and makes us an empty vessel (empty from our sins) for the dwelling of the Holy Spirit. After the readings they clothe the deceased in a white alb and they put a censer and incense in his hands and a cross with the Gospel in his arms. After all of this they proclaim the Gospel of St. John (18:1-11) after which the priest says the prayer:

And Christ shall make us worthy of the washing of that upper chamber, where with his own holy hands he took water, poured it into the bowl and washed the feet of the apostles... Let

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<sup>267</sup> *Home Blessing*; p. viii

<sup>268</sup> Conybeare, *Rituale Armenorum*, p. 243

us be eager to enter within, having washed our hearts from the self-reproach of evil acts, and having bathed our bodies in the water of holiness of the font through repentance, and being cleansed of the stain of transgressions.<sup>269</sup>

Once again, we find that water symbolizes cleansing and preparation for the soul of the person to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven purified from the filth of this world.

### **Consecration of a new Church<sup>270</sup>**

During the blessing of the laying of the foundation stones of a new church, a special ceremony is performed over the stone-crosses that will serve as a foundation; first, they are washed with water and wine and consecrated with Holy Myron; then they are wrapped in a white cloth and handed over to the godfathers who place them in the foundations.

Again, during the consecration of the church, the principal stone of the altar (*Vemkar, Վեմքար*) (in the name of Four Evangelists), as well as the twelve wall-crosses (representing the Ten Apostles, St. Gregory the Illuminator, and St. Paul the Apostle)<sup>271</sup> for consecration, is first cleansed with water and wine, and then consecrated with the Holy Myron.

Besides consecrating the foundation, it is also customary to celebrate the Name Day of the church and on that occasion, at the end of the Divine Liturgy, the water is blessed with the Holy Relics of that Saint or with the Holy Cross, and distributed to the faithful.

### **Water usage at the other services**

Before proceeding to the altar to offer the Holy Eucharist, the celebrant priest washes his hands with water while reciting the Psalm 26:6 “*I wash my hands with holiness, and I go around your altar, O Lord*”; he then publicly confesses his sins. Later, following

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid; p. 247

<sup>270</sup> *Order of the Blessing and Consecration of an Armenian Apostolic Church*. Hollywood, CA: Western Diocese of the Armenian Church Press, 1998.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-17

the Offertory of the Holy Gifts, the priest incenses the presentation upon the altar-table, and purifies his hands with water.<sup>272</sup>

During the blessing of the chalice and the cross<sup>273</sup>, as well as during the consecration of painted pictures in the Church<sup>274</sup>, it is also a canonical rule to first wash them with water, dry them with a cloth, then clean them with wine, and then anoint them with the Holy Oil.

All the rites and prayers dedicated to water that appear in all these Liturgical Rites of the Armenian Church emphasize the ideas of water cleanliness and its abundance, temperate weather and abundance of rain and harvest. God's intercession is implored so that through the Epiclesis of the Holy Spirit, water shall cleanse people's spirit and they may obtain an abundant harvest by means of water.

The essential role and purpose of all the ceremonies are closely related to people's lives: to keep them away from sin and to let them develop a pure heart; they also revolve around the idea of the abundance of daily nourishment which is assured by means of water.

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<sup>272</sup> Arshen Aivazian. *Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church*. Los Angeles: Western Diocese of the Armenian Church, 2005; p. 18 and 36

<sup>273</sup> *Dzisanan vor asi Mashdots*, p. 210

<sup>274</sup> *Consecration of an Armenian Apostolic Church*, p. 35

## Afterward

I begin my conclusion with a form of confession. The national history of Armenia indicates that within the first generation following the events of the Pentecost experience in Jerusalem, an unspecified number of people living in Armenia were converted to Christianity. Missionaries were sent, perhaps from Jerusalem, and more likely from Antioch, Ephesus and Edessa to preach the Good News to the Armenian people, and in turn, these missionaries cultivated subsequent generations of disciples in Armenia. These disciples were later honored with the titles of “saint”, “bishop”, and many became martyrs. For the next two thousand years, Christianity evolved in Armenia, sometimes flourishing, sometimes languishing, sometimes encouraged by the authorities, sometimes persecuted by the authorities. In the interim, the Faith of the Armenian people continued to be developed and nurtured, and in spite of many dark decades along the way, Christianity managed to remain living and life-giving.

I am part of a bridge generation, straddling the final years of the Soviet occupation of Armenia and the formative years of the independent Republic of Armenia. Armenia was absorbed into the Soviet Union in 1920, and within a short time, the atheists seized the upper hand with regard to both the practice of Christianity and the education regarding religion destroying and closing almost all the churches.<sup>275</sup>

But in the rest of the churches, similar to the stories which I have heard from my Orthodox brethren living in other Soviet-controlled countries, there was generally a small cluster of grandmothers. By in large, these elderly ladies did not know how to read and write. However, these grandmothers became the sentinels of Orthodox Christian Tradition in each of the churches were miraculously had not been closed. While they may not have known the theological symbolism of water, but they were aware of the

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<sup>275</sup> Igor Troyanovsky. *Religion in the Soviet Republics: A Guide to Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Other Religions*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991; pp. 112-113.

liturgical services. The reason that I am citing these grandmothers is because Christianity in Armenia, as well as in diaspora, was preserved by the staunch observance of traditions through them.

My upbringing in Soviet and now independent Armenia was quite normal, to the extent that many “Armenian” traditions were either cited within the context of pagan origins or without any context at all. Therefore, it never occurred to me that water, in the services of the Church, had any particular meaning or symbolism. The “tradition” of sprinkling people with water on the day which we call “*Vardavar*” was never explained in the context of the great baptism of the first Christian monarchy of Armenia on the Feast of the Transfiguration.

As I delved further and further into my research, suddenly I discovered the Christian understanding of water as the symbol of life, as the symbol of re-birth, and as the symbol of Jesus Christ, the only divine who can quench our spiritual thirst.

If the aim of this thesis were to enhance the greater library of knowledge about water and Christian symbolism, then I cannot claim to have achieved such a goal. As the reader can see, I have simply gathered existing information and presented it in another format. Rather, it is the result of challenging me to ask very poignant and serious questions about my own faith, my own tradition, my own Church which has made this dissertation the cause for personal transformation. I have acquired a greater appreciation for the grandmothers in the Soviet-controlled churches, and an awe-filled respect for all of those priests who perished in Siberia because they dared to pour water into a font and baptized a child into it. I have acquired a greater knowledge for the reasons that we, as Christians, include water in every form of liturgy and in every argument regarding theology. I now recognize the immense challenges which I must face as an Armenian priest pastoring a one-hundred year old congregation in California in which the knowledge base of Christianity is just a half a step better than in post-communist Armenia. I am therefore truly humbled by the entire experience of preparing this thesis, and must confess that now, more than any time since my ordination, I have an unwavering commitment to preach and to teach the theology and the life-giving joyfulness of water in the life of the Armenian Church.

What I have accomplished and reached in this work is tremendous. A lot of hidden mysteries were uncovered for me about the usage of the water in the everyday lives of our people. One of the grandmothers who kept the Christian faith alive in Armenia was my grandmother, who could not read or write, but she knew many of the Psalms and almost all the prayers and hymns of our Ritual Book by heart. As a little child I always saw her pouring out water on the road after saying farewell to family and friends. When, as young children, we were frightened by something, she would sprinkle water on our faces and said the Lord's Prayer. What was that, and why was she using water in that kind of strange way?

These were the questions that led me on this path to rediscover the hidden mystery of the water and the water usage in the Church and in our lives.

In the schools and universities during Soviet times, when there was neither God nor faith, we could not learn more about water. We grew up and received our education in the midst of such darkness, without knowing that the same water was created by God, and that the first and last element mentioned in the Holy Bible is water. Although some of us were baptized at night in our grandparents' homes, we had no idea that we were becoming Christians and becoming an adopted child of the Heavenly Father through that water.

However, without understanding, people kept using water not only as a necessary element in their household, but also in their religious beliefs. People had an extraordinary and unbelievable faith and trust in the water, seeing in it an inexplicable magical power to heal, to revitalize and to offer eternal life, and these benefits and attributes of the water were considered extremely vital to men. Through the ages, the water has survived, among all nations, through legends, stories and magical and religious beliefs, and passed on from generation to generation.

Water received a totally different and new meaning in the Christian era. If God cleansed the world by Flood through the water in the Old Testament, in the New Covenant the human being became the symbol of the world and the baptism service became that very "flood" which cleansed the sin of the men. The teachings of the Armenian Church about water and water usage in the sacramental life are based on the Holy Bible. Throughout the centuries the

Fathers of the Armenian Church developed their own exegesis and spread the Light of Jesus Christ in the Armenian Land. Water became a way of spiritual rebirth and regeneration in the Armenian Church. Water was created by God at the very beginning of creation to give life, and with its life-giving power water became the way of the adoption in the Armenian Church.

If people used the water for their physical cleanliness during the ritual ceremonies, especially for the entrance to the Temple, in the Christian world the water became the way to earn and to enter the Heavenly Kingdom. After the Baptism of our Lord, the water baptism became the way of salvation and spiritual cleanliness; it became the ladder and the bridge connecting us with the salvific work of our Lord. In the Armenian Church each individual Baptism is a sacramental re-presentation of the great Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Jordan River.

The Jordan River is the font *par excellence* for our Lord's Baptism and the prototype of the baptismal font in the Church. The font becomes the womb of the Mother Church, symbolically containing the waters of the Jordan River and giving birth and new life to all those who come to follow Jesus and to seek salvation. The waters of the Jordan River mystically flow into the baptismal font. The word "adoption" and the idea of the becoming the co-heirs with Christ is indelibly marked in the minds of the faithful. For centuries the Armenian Church led her children to God, by nourishing and watering their spiritual lives with the word of the Water of Life.

Life is full of dangers and temptations. Our lives are always under the attacks of the evil one and that is the reason that our feet are constantly soiled as we stumble on our earthly way to God. To clean them and to stand firm in our journey towards God, the Creator and the Lord knelt and washed the dirt of sins from our feet and gave us a great example to serve and to help each other to reach to God with clean mind, heart and soul. I now finally understand that was the reason that my grandmother was pouring out water on the road, to clean and to protect us from the attacks of the evil one.

Therefore, whenever and wherever we use water in our daily lives and during our church services, we should always keep in mind that Jesus is the ONLY and TRUE WATER necessary to our lives. He is the One who invites all of us to have life with Him, to share

that life-giving water with us and to transfigure our lives and our inner kingdom into the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit:

Jesus answered and said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life. (John 4:13-1)

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