

Finding a Way to Pray Together

A Community Becomes The Church

How did the church grow from a loose fellowship of passionate but also doubt-stricken believers? Many, even among the Lord's own 12 disciples, were torn apart by seeing Jesus die. *What kind of Savior was this?* was the question on the minds of many who did not yet understand that Jesus came to redeem the world from sin and not from the Romans. Let's imagine the church growing during these first few centuries.

Leaders Build and Cultivate Believing Communities

The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was a huge turning point for launching a world-wide faith. Read Acts 2:1-4 to remember this miracle. Suddenly, the disciples (literally, people who are learning and studying from a master) become apostles (literally meaning "sent out") so they themselves turn from passive listeners to active doers. Thaddeus and Bartholomew, at different times in the first century, go to Armenia. Other people of fiery conviction join in the missionary task of sharing the good news everywhere. St. Paul, formerly the arch-persecutor Saul, goes on three famous missionary journeys throughout the Roman Empire, building up Christian communities and converting people to the Way.

Part of this evangelization continues in the form of correspondence. Paul's New Testament epistles are letters to new Christian communities helping them sort out their questions and challenges. In addition to converting people, the apostles became the original community "elders," paving the way for the development of an evolving leadership structure of deacon, priest and bishop.

By the end of the first century, Christianity had spread from Palestine to Syria, Greece, Asia Minor and Rome. By the second century, North Africa was home to important centers of Christianity, especially in the cities of Carthage and Alexandria. A few centuries later, St. Nooneh converts the nations of Georgia and Albania of the Caucasus.

The Number of Believers Grows

The earliest Christians were basically Jews who were following the charismatic Jewish rabbi, Jesus. Eventually, their views became not complementary but antithetical to Jewish teaching and so Christians became a religious group unto themselves. Persecuted by the Romans, early church history is filled with accounts of believers brutally martyred. But very quickly, from having once been

initially rejected by the larger population, Christianity began to spread like a powerful fire.

From the 12 converts in Jerusalem (Acts 1:15), numbers grew into the thousands in only a few decades (Acts 21:20). By the mid-third century the number was in the millions!



Who's Who

St. Nooneh came to Armenia in the late 3rd century with Hripsime and the group of nuns fleeing the Emperor Constantine. She went on to Georgia and Albania (not the same Albania of today) and successfully preached the faith, converting many. Her missionary work in Georgia was underwritten and supported by St. Gregory the Illuminator, the first Catholicos of the Armenian Church, who granted her certain clerical ecclesiastical authority while she was there.

The World Converts!

The Roman Empire became "officially" Christian by the late 4th century. This was a gradual process, beginning with the conversion of Emperor Constantine – it was he who legislated toleration through the Edict of Milan in 313 and then declared Sunday a day of rest in 321 – and then, finally, with Emperor Theodosius' (379-95) policies, such as outlawing paganism and heretical sects, which established an orthodox Christian state. Armenia did so decades earlier, c.301, becoming the first Christian nation.

The Faith Needed Defining

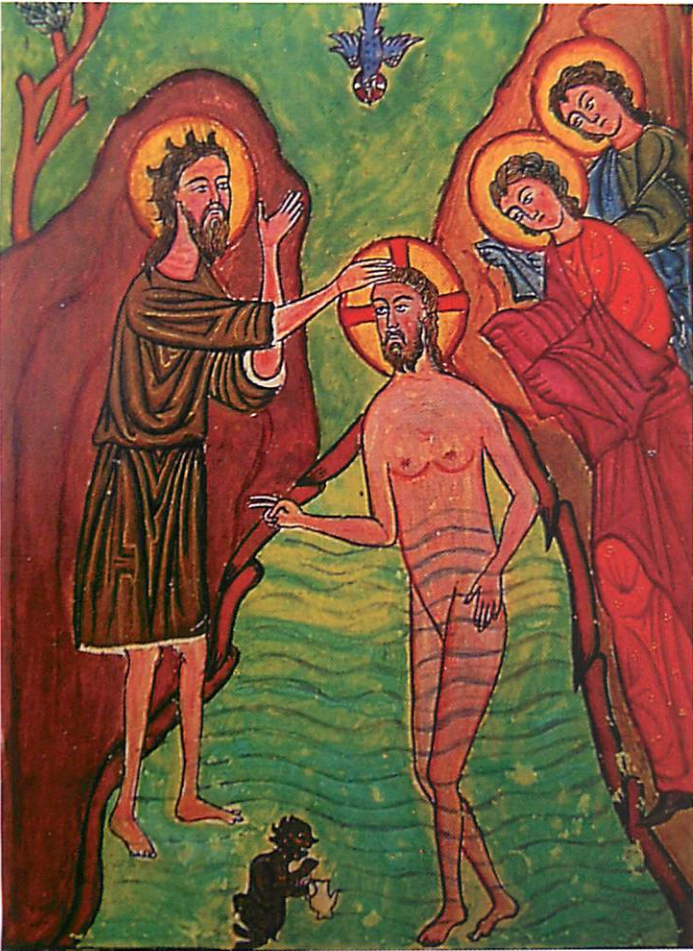
As numbers and communities grew and members joined the faith through a variety of baptismal rituals, questions naturally emerged. How was Jesus divine and human at the same time? How could an ordinary woman be the Mother of God? What does it mean to be baptized? These were resolved in a number of ways, but particularly through general church councils such as the first three Ecumenical Councils (Nicaea, 325; Constantinople 381; Ephesus, 431). The first two of these resulted in the Nicene Creed which we continue to recite every Sunday. Aristakes, St Gregory the Enlightener's son, represented the Armenian church at Nicaea.

Formalizing a Day of Remembrance

So... the number of Christians is growing exponentially, home churches have expanded into public gathering places, baptisms have become so numerous that they can no longer take place on Easter Sunday after the traditional Lenten period of instruction but must be done throughout the year, the church leadership has established an authority deriving from the first apostles, and the community of believers has developed a way to pray together in remembrance of the Lord. Let's see what that looked like in the middle of the second century.

How They Worshipped Way Back When

Justin Martyr (c.100-c.165) was one of the great Christian "apologists" of the early centuries. An apologist is someone who would argue systematically to prove the truth of Christian doctrines. This was an important occupation in those



Up Close and Personal

Armenia was the first official Christian nation. How does this fact make you feel? Why? What challenges does this fact pose to today's Armenian Church members?

years when Christianity was under attack from paganism, humanism, and all kinds of other "isms." Apologetics continues to be an essential branch of theology.

The following description of an early Divine Liturgy as celebrated in Rome can be found in Justin Martyr's 1st Apology, c. 155 A.D., chapter 67, entitled "Weekly worship of Christians":

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits.

Then when the reader concludes, the president verbally instructs and exhorts us to the imitation of these excellent things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent by saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a partaking by everyone of the Eucharist, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons.

And they who are well-to-do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who supports orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in prison and the strangers who are on a journey, and in a word takes care of all who are in need.

But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, when he changed darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead.

Digging Deeper

Underline all the phrases that describe what believers did. Then paraphrase them in order below. The first one is done for you.

1. They gathered in one place.

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

10. _____

11. _____

12. _____

How is this the same as we celebrate badarak today?
How is it different?

? What Do I Do...

About sitting and standing? It can be confusing!

The pew book gives very clear indications as to when to sit and when to stand. Your parish may have electronic wall monitors that also indicate whether you're to be sitting, standing, or kneeling and what page of the liturgy you should be on. But if in doubt, stand – that's never inappropriate. And it's a must at a number of key moments of the liturgy such as the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Gospel reading, among others.

The Divine Liturgy: A Brief Historical Review

Those early "dinners" of bread, wine and fellowship shared by Christian groups became the central act of the evolving communities. Modeled on the synagogue gatherings (as well as Jewish fraternal meals known as *khaboorahs*) during which bread was broken and shared, a cup of wine blessed and shared and prayers and hymns sung — these meals featured Scripture reading, psalm singing, preaching, and a shared meal.

While the fellowship (*agapé*) meals continued, the ritual of bread and wine moved to a central place in Sunday worship. Believers understood that in receiving this bread and wine, they were sharing in the very body and blood – that is, the very essence – of their Lord.

"He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him." John 6: 56

Over the centuries, the form of this liturgy developed into a basic format with its local variations and influences. As a matter of fact, because there was so much improvisation of prayers, etc, efforts to permanently "fix" the text began as early as the 4th century.

In Armenia...

...there were five texts in circulation until one of them, called the Liturgy of St. Basil, seemed to prevail by the fifth century. Of the other four, all translations from Greek, one of them later became the basic text for the liturgy as we know it today (in use since the 10th century at the latest).

As of 1177, when St. Nersess of Lampron wrote his commentary on the *badarak*, the liturgy has remained unchanged with some minor exceptions, for example, modifications made as a result of contact with Roman Catholic Crusaders (the use of the bishop's mitre), or the insertion of the popular "*Der Voghormya*" hymn in the 18th century.



Dictionary Definitions

Badarak Պատարագ: "Sacrifice," Classical Armenian, referring to the ultimate sacrifice God made through the suffering and death of his Son, Jesus Christ, for our salvation.

The Least You Need to Know

- ✓ By the mid-third century, Christians grew in number from less than a hundred to millions world-wide.
- ✓ This growth inspired councils and prolific writings, all of which further defined the faith of the church.
- ✓ The Roman Empire officially becomes Christian by the late 4th century, although Armenia did so decades earlier, becoming the first Christian nation.
- ✓ The earliest description of an actual Divine Liturgy can be found in a treatise by Justin Martyr in the mid-second century and greatly resembles our own in its basic structure.
- ✓ From five original liturgy texts, the liturgy we celebrate today in the Armenian Church was more or less fixed by the 12th century.

QUICK QUIZ

Fill-in

1. Three followers of Jesus who went out into the world in the 1st century to spread the good news of Christ were: _____, _____, and _____.
2. St. Paul's epistles were letters to _____.
3. The woman who converted the nations of Georgia and ancient Albania to Christianity was _____.
4. Armenia became the first Christian nation in the year _____.

True or False

1. Armenia was represented at the Council of Nicaea by St. Gregory the Enlightener. _____
2. Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. tolerating Christianity. _____
3. Christianity grew slowly in the 1st to 3rd centuries. _____
4. The earliest description of Christian worship is from the 5th century. _____