

A Sacred Journey and a Guidebook

Meditation on “Journey”

In one of the beautiful stories of the desert fathers and mothers (the 3rd and 4th century believers who went into the desert wildernesses of the Near East and North Africa), a story is told of a particularly inspiring woman of prayer whose worship of God was admired far and wide. Impressed by the accounts of her exemplary life, a pilgrim set off to find her and study her ways. Coming upon her simple stone hut in the desert, the pilgrim watched through a window-like opening in amazement as the famed woman sat serenely with her eyes closed. Later, the pilgrim respectfully approached and, disturbed that he had not seen anything he might emulate, asked: “Dear lady, what do you possibly accomplish just sitting there?” To which she replied gently, “I am not just sitting! I am on a journey.”



The Armenian Angle

The earliest commentary on the Armenian Divine Liturgy in existence is that of Khosrov Antzevatsi (Khosrov of Antzevatzik) written in the 10th century. It became the source book for all Armenian commentaries to come and remains an invaluable resource for all liturgical studies.

Basic Actions: Proceeding, Censing, Signing, Bowing

Processions

Worship is a journey, a moving forward—sometimes it’s us moving toward God and sometimes it’s God moving toward us. Once in a while, it even seems like a parade or a march. Our destination is the Kingdom of God.

Actually, our procession begins when we leave our homes and drive to church. Once there, we proceed through the narthex into the nave, move to our pew and the journey continues. We move forward to the chancel for confession, communion and then again at the end of liturgy to kiss the Gospel. Then, of course, there are all the times during worship when God moves towards us. Can you think of any?

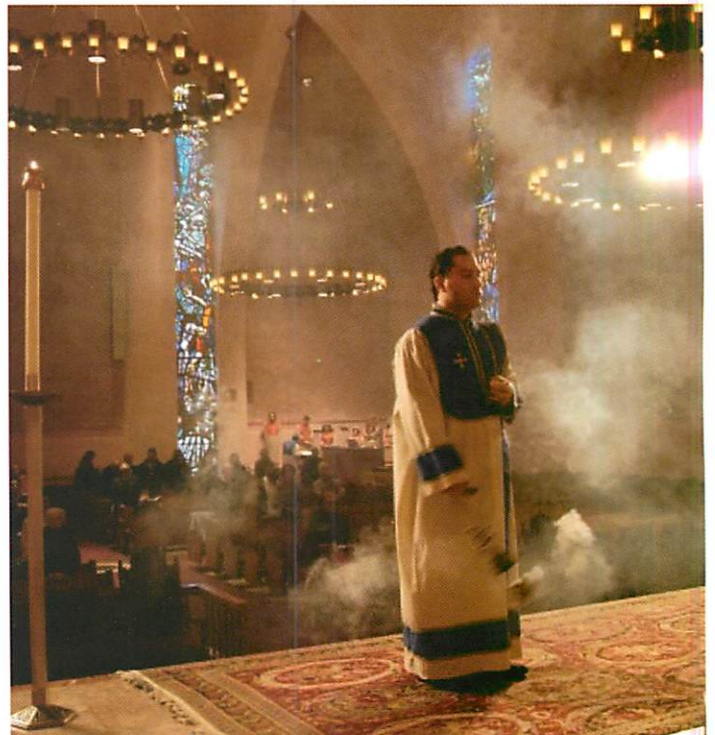
You have to think symbolically. For example, God is in the Bible and in communion. So when we see the deacon

(during *Soorp Asdvadz*) processing around the altar with the Gospel and bringing it to us, we see God reaching out to us through his Word. Later in the liturgy, when we see the priest hold up the chalice, within which rest the bread and wine/body and blood of Christ, we remember how God reached out to us through his Son, Jesus. How about early in the liturgy when the priest and deacons come down from the bema and proceed through the nave? We see the priest with the *poorvar*, censing the people. That reminds us how God came down from heaven in the person of Jesus Christ and walked among us here on earth.

Censing

Another thing we see (and smell) is the censing. This is usually done by the deacon, who swings the *poorvar*. As air hits the smoldering incense, smoke spirals upward. This is a very old custom, dating back thousands of years to Biblical times. The smoky fragrance rises toward heaven, taking our prayers to God.

It’s also a sign of respect or adoration when the deacon censes the altar, the baptismal font, the chalice, the gospel book, the bishop (if he happens to be visiting and is sitting in his special chair in the chancel) and, of course, the congregation. The deacon swings the *poorvar* **բարձրաւ** toward us, the people of God, acknowledging in us the image of God and our calling to holiness.



Sign of the Cross

The cross is the most important symbol of our faith, and crossing ourselves is a way of witnessing to the fact that our lives are intertwined with the way of the cross – it is part of who we are. (“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Mark 8:34)

The sign of the cross is one of the first things we learn as children. It illustrates our special status as children of God and expresses our belief in the saving power of the cross of Christ. When we cross ourselves in the lunchroom at school, for example, it is a way for us to witness to our faith. What are some times in the liturgy when you cross yourselves?

? What Do I Do...

Whenever the priest turns to the congregation and blesses us with the sign of the cross?

With a slight bow of the head, cross yourself in return as you receive this blessing from the altar.

The Body at Worship



Finally, we believe that the whole person—body and soul—should take part in worship. Therefore, the various positions of the body during liturgy have special significance and are expressions of our faith. Standing is the basic worship position. During the liturgy, just after the Kiss of Peace, the deacon says, “Let us stand in awe, let us stand in the fear of the Lord, let us stand straight and let us attend with good heed.” We stand because in Christ we have been redeemed, given back our true human stature, freed from being a slave to the sinful part of our nature.

During liturgy there are also times when we bow or kneel. We do this, for example, during times of repentance such as confession. We also kneel as a sign of reverence or respect or deep devotion such as when the chalice is presented to

Up Close and Personal

For you, what’s the most meaningful gesture or word(s) of our Divine Liturgy?

the priest. We bow for the same reason: *before the cross or the chalice or the altar.*

We do sit at specific times at liturgy, mostly as a concession to modern standards of comfort. Originally churches had no pews - everyone stood or knelt for the entire liturgy.

We sit for the epistle readings, the great litany (more on that later), and the sermon, for a few instances.

Two Movements in a Symphony of Faith

We can begin our consideration of the Divine Liturgy itself by looking at it as a journey of two movements. What do we mean by “movement”? Here are some dictionary definitions:

- In music, a symphonic movement is defined as a “self-contained section of an extended composition.”
- In literature, “it’s a progression of events in the development of the plot.”
- In poetry: “the rhythmical structure in a composition.”
- In general, “a series of actions and events taking place over a period of time and working to foster a certain principle.”
- “An organized effort by supporters of a common goal.”

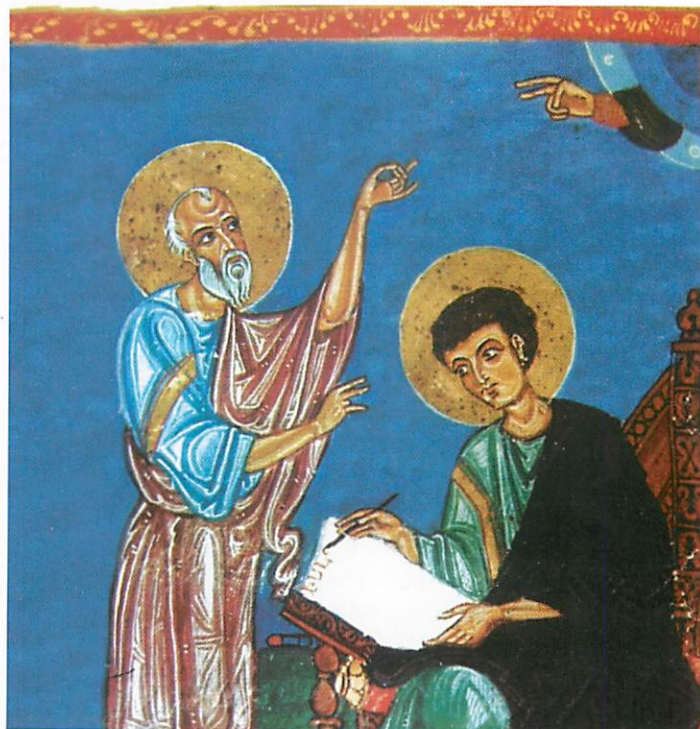
How do these definitions help you understand the idea of “movement” in the Divine Liturgy?

In the “first movement” of the Divine Liturgy, Jesus comes to us through his Word, the Gospel reading.

In the second, through his Body and Blood, or Holy Communion.

In a very fundamental way, each of these is an “incarnation.”

When Jesus was born to a specific woman, Mary



(Asdvadzadzin) in a specific place (Bethlehem – in Hebrew “place of bread” interestingly enough), at a specific time, which we now mark as the year One, God was said to have been made *incarnate*. Think of the words of the Nicene Creed:

“Who for our salvation came down from heaven, took body, **became man (human)** was born perfectly of the Holy Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit...”

Use It or Lose It

Okay! We’re ready to turn to our official guidebook to our journey. Skim through your Divine Liturgy book and describe it as if you were explaining to a friend what its important features are (the first is done for you as an example). Reading the section “How to use this Book” will be an important first step:

1. Divided into two parts: the first for those who can read Armenian; the second – English and English transliteration of the Armenian.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.
- 11.
- 12.



Who's Who

St. Basil of Caesarea (c.330-379 AD) is credited with compiling the liturgy most widely used in the early centuries of the Armenian Church according to documents from the first half of the 5th century. St. Basil is considered one of the great church fathers, known for his leadership, scholarship and devotion to the poor.

The Least You Need to Know

- ✓ The Divine Liturgy is a journey to God that begins the minute we leave our homes for church.



Dictionary Definitions

Incarnation: To invest with bodily nature and form, from the Latin *incarnare*: to make flesh (the word “carnival” means “removing meat” a reference to the pre-Lent revels that would mean eating meat for the last time before Lent). The Incarnation is the eternal Son of God becoming the man Jesus, at once both fully human and fully God.

- ✓ The signing of the cross and other bodily gestures are part of the “total body workout” of worship.
- ✓ The Divine Liturgy consists of two main sections, the Liturgy of the Word - when Jesus is present in Scripture, and the Liturgy of the Eucharist – when Jesus is present to us in the bread and wine.
- ✓ These “movements” are preceded by a preparation and a conclusion and final blessing.
- ✓ We need to learn how to use the Divine Liturgy book as we would need to learn how to use any other guide or reference book, including the Bible!

QUICK QUIZ

Fill-in

1. The word for God becoming a human being is _____.
2. The earliest commentary of the Armenian Divine Liturgy we now have was written in the _____ century.
3. The person at the altar who most often uses the poorvar or censer is the _____.
4. When the priest turns from the altar to bless us, we respond by _____.
5. In the 5th century, the liturgy most widely in use by Armenians was written by _____.
6. There are _____ major parts to the Divine Liturgy.