

Eastern Liturgy in the West: The Case of the Armenian Church

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I am not a specialist in the field of inculturation, so what I offer you is not at all a scholarly address; I will not in any way claim to be comprehensive or definitive in my remarks. That leaves me free to ruminate and to reflect with you on the topic at hand without the obligation to be systematic, or even to tie up loose ends. I shall speak to the topic of inculturation as a student of the history of liturgy and as a representative of the Christian East, specifically as a priest of the Armenian Orthodox Church, and as a practitioner of the Armenian Rite. My hope is that my remarks will leave many threads for you to pick at during our discussion later.

Let our ruminations begin, therefore, with a bit of background for the purpose of contextualization. The Armenian Church is one of the so-called Oriental Orthodox Churches. Along with the Coptic, Ethiopian, Syrian ("Jacobite"), and Malankara Orthodox Churches, the Armenian Church is distinguished from the other Orthodox Churches (Greek, Russian, and so on) by its Christology, that is, by its rejection of the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon and its particular formulation for understanding the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ. In liturgical rite, history, and spirituality, however, the Oriental Orthodox Churches are actually quite distinct one from the other.¹ Today the Armenian Rite is used or practiced by an estimated six million faithful of the Armenian Church, as well as approximately three hundred forty-four thousand members of the Armenian Catholic Church in communion with Rome.

What we call the Armenian Rite is a complete and integrated system of worship; a unique synthesis of liturgical usages and practices that expresses the instinctive, traditional response of the Armenian people to God's providential activity in history. That history begins with the Bible, of course. Medieval Armenian historians have traditionally viewed the history of the Armenian people in direct continuity with the Bible.² Since the proclamation of Christianity as the state religion in the early fourth century, Armenian historiographers have systematically and unapologetically interpreted their own unfolding history in light of their faith in Christ. Until the eighteenth century there simply is no such thing as Armenian secular history.

The Armenian Rite is a system of common prayer, that is, prayer for the community, composed, collated, and utilized by the Armenian people for the Armenian people, having its own distinctive inner logic and perspective.³ This system of worship includes not only the Divine Liturgy but also the services traditionally conducted each day—morning prayers, evening prayers, Compline prayers at bedtime, a unique and beautiful daily Sunrise Service, and various forms of all-night vigils.⁴ The rite includes the sacraments, which for us Armenians are traditionally not limited to seven, as they are in the West, but include blessings for the sick, a variety of very poignant penitential services, as well as all kinds of other liturgical ceremonies like funerals, the consecration of a church, the blessing of water, footwashing on Holy Thursday, the blessing of grapes, and many others.

Moreover, the liturgical Rite of the Armenian Church, properly speaking, is not even limited to church services. It comprises the texts of the prayers and hymns in all of their theological and poetic splendor; the system of organizing these liturgical texts for certain days; the selection and arrangement of church feasts throughout what is called the liturgical year; the cycle of saints' commemorations; the lectionary; even the vestments worn by bishops, priests, deacons, and altar servers. The liturgical Rite of the Armenians goes on to include the peculiar melodic

patterns of sacred music, and even the architectural structure of the church building and the sacred art that adorns it. After all, the church edifice must be designed to accommodate the liturgical services and rituals that take place within its walls (and not infrequently outside as well). All of this constitutes the Armenian Rite. Its rituals, prayers, hymns, and underlying theology are inextricably linked to the history, culture, and distinctive theological perspective of the Armenian people. The liturgy of the Armenian Church, in other words, expresses how the Armenian people have experienced and understood the Christian faith throughout the centuries.

The renowned specialist of Eastern Christian worship, my teacher Robert Taft, S.J., has expressed the role of liturgy in the Eastern Christian churches in these rhapsodic terms:

The key to the heart of the Christian East is its liturgy . . . It is only through the liturgy that Scripture, tradition, the Fathers, piety, spirituality—everything—is transmitted and lived. Sometimes . . . this expression of a living faith can become sclerotic, overgrown, too heavy. But underneath the overgrowth of centuries lie the jewels of a people’s incarnation of the gospel, waiting to be uncovered by someone willing to cut back the brush. I cannot imagine a more fitting, immensely rewarding ministry than to study the heritage of a people—and in the East that heritage is conserved and transmitted through the liturgy—in order to uncover its riches for the good of that same people, and of all peoples, to the unending glory of God’s eternal name.⁵

It is uniquely in its liturgy, therefore, that a Christian community’s particular experience of the Christian faith—in other words, its distinctive witness to Christ’s Gospel—is to be found. This is particularly relevant to Eastern Christian communities, and it is certainly true for the ancient Christian faith of the Armenian people. How do the Armenians understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ? What does Christ’s resurrection mean to the Armenians? What aspects of the Christian faith do Armenians consider particularly evocative? The liturgy of the Armenian Church reveals how the Armenians have believed in God, how an ancient people, mercilessly oppressed and persecuted for most of its existence, rooted its identity in Christian faith, not as some inert cultural manifestation or transient philosophical movement, but as a life-giving, life-sustaining, life-defining reality.

Something more must be said about liturgy from an Eastern perspective. Liturgy in its fullest sense is simultaneously the means and the end of our Christian journey. All the churches of the Christian East share the conviction that the liturgy is more than common, corporate prayer. It is more than “the service of God offered by the people of God,” as one theological dictionary puts it.⁶ All of the Eastern churches share the belief that the liturgy is a genuine “participation” (*koinonia*) in the living Christ, to use St. Paul’s terminology (1 Cor 10:16). In the prayers, psalms, hymns, and rituals of the sacraments and of the services of the Daily Cycle, and most conspicuously in the Eucharistic Liturgy, our salvation is actualized, and the church’s true essence par excellence is manifested. The fathers of the Christian East rarely pass up the opportunity to avow that we actually experience Christ’s redemptive work by conducting the elements of the liturgy. The psalms and canticles of the Morning Office, for example, work on us. As we sing and pray them, as those sacred words wash over us, the salvation effected by Christ unfolds for us. They put us in touch with the Saviour, and with Christ’s redemptive acts in history. In the liturgy, Eastern and Oriental Orthodoxy insists, the “body” is joined to its “head”

(Col 1:18, 2:19), to continue with St. Paul's imagery. If that is the case, then we can say that in our devotion to the liturgy, in our participation in the liturgy, we indeed grow in the Orthodox faith. We come to understand more deeply what the faith is all about. Consequently, in the Christian East we understand liturgy to be an exercise, a kind of nourishment, a sort of catechetical school, by the grace of the Holy Spirit.⁷

The late Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann expressed this idea deftly:

Something happens in and through all these celebrations. Something happens not only in the Church but also in my life, in my life as an individual, as a member of a family, as a member of human society . . . something so beautiful, so heavenly, so crucial for real Orthodoxy that when we lose it—even though we can still build beautiful churches with domes and three-barred crosses and even know Orthodox melodies—we cease to be Orthodox.⁸

II.

Let's take a trip to Armenia. Allow me to lead you, via your imagination, on a visit to an Armenian Church in the old country. The church I have chosen is in the town of Etchmiadzin, about ten miles from Armenia's capital city of Yerevan, in the shadow of the biblical Mount Ararat. In this town the patron saint of the Armenian people, St. Gregory the Illuminator (or Baptizer) converted the pagan Armenian king, Drtad, to Christianity in the early years of the fourth century. Armenia thus became the first nation to proclaim Christianity as its official religion, some years before Emperor Constantine did the same for the Byzantine Empire, and several decades before the Christianization of the Empire actually took hold and became permanent. Around this time St. Gregory was bowed down in prayer in a field, when, in a vision, he saw Jesus Christ descend and mark the spot on which the first cathedral of Christendom would be built. Hence the name of the cathedral, and of the town, Etchmiadzin: "the place where the Only-begotten descended."⁹

But we are not going to visit the cathedral of Etchmiadzin. Follow me about a mile down the dusty road, in the same town, to another sacred edifice, the martyrion and church of St. Hripsimé. St. Hripsimé was a nun from Rome, who, together with some companions, fled to Armenia from the brutal persecution of Christians by the Emperor Diocletian. A beautiful young woman, she caught the eye of the Armenian king Drtad before his conversion by St. Gregory. When Hripsimé refused to yield to the pagan king's lascivious desires, he had her brutally tortured and killed, but not before the young maiden made a public profession of her faith in the risen Christ. Hripsimé died a martyr. Her earthly remains were gathered up by St. Gregory and her followers, and an unassuming church dedicated to her intercession was built over them.

The beautiful church that we are visiting today replaced the original one in the year a.d. 618, some fourteen hundred years ago. What strikes the eye first is the sheer enormousness of this edifice. With stone walls four feet thick, it exemplifies the major achievement of Armenian sacred architecture: the construction of massive, fortress-like churches that had to withstand not only the constant tremors of this seismically active region, but also the perpetual assaults inflicted by Armenia's bellicose neighbors. In the early period these were Persians and Arabs, later Seljuk Turks, Mamelukes, and Mongols.¹⁰ Yet while standing tall and strong, the Church of St. Hripsimé radiates a delicate grace and beauty that echoes the young martyred maiden, and

perhaps somehow exhibits the character and spirituality of Armenian Christianity.

It is early Sunday morning. Old, rotund women shrouded in black make their way around the perimeter of the church building. They pause at each face and kiss the cold stone walls of the church, raising their hands high and mumbling unintelligible entreaties as they make their way around the church in an ageless personal devotion. For these pious women Christianity is not an ideology. The Church is not a compartmentalized component of their lives to be reconciled with other pursuits and aspirations. Theirs is the real world. Their incentive is the selfsame shining ray of hope celebrated by the first pious women who went to the tomb to anoint Christ's body.

We step into the doorway on the rutted, dusty stone floor that has received a millennium-and-a-half of Armenian worshippers. A vast pillar-less space opens before us, crowned by an enormous conical dome that soars a hundred feet above. It is as if the sweeping dome envelops and embraces all who enter the church.

There are no pews. People move freely about the open worship space, their prostrations and ritual gestures unrestrained by furniture. Old and young, they gravitate toward alcoves tucked into the rear corners of the sanctuary. They are lured by the crackling of burning votive candles packed too tight into a crude, sand-filled candle-stand. A young mother offers her prayer to God while her child reaches to light his taper from flames leaping a foot above burning pools of melted beeswax.

Faint light flickering from the candles is absorbed by the cavernous space. It is dim, but not dark; grave, but not gloomy. Narrow openings sliced out of each face of the drum supporting the cupola allow only thin shafts of light to stream in. The medieval architect was also an astronomer; the narrow slits are positioned precisely to catch the light of the sun as it courses the daylight sky.

At the far end of the sanctuary, toward the East, rises the bema, a stage-like platform elevated four feet above the nave. This is the inner sanctuary, the holy of holies; on it the tiered altar table rests, the sacred space for the Eucharist. A lone, faded oriental rug in front of the altar table, the only floor-covering in the church, marks this holy ground where the priest offers the eucharistic sacrifice. The ministers who climb the steps up to the bema to the altar space first remove their shoes, like Moses.

But it is still very early on Sunday morning. The eucharistic liturgy has not yet begun. The priest and the deacons, distributed in two choirs, stand in the chancel area before the elevated bema and conduct the early Morning Office, or, to translate more literally the Armenian, they "sing the hour." Sweet incense wafts upward, carrying prayers to God in an old and familiar fragrance that seizes the imagination of Armenians and invites them to a holy place.

Meanwhile, something similar is resonating in the airwaves. Open on a rickety podium in the chancel is a heavy book containing the well-traveled words of the Psalter. These words from the old Greek Septuagint were adopted by the Armenians and recast into their own language in the early fifth century, just months after a unique alphabet had been created for the express purpose of translating the Bible into Armenian. Generations of scribes have transmitted this version across the generations to be appropriated anew, to be sung and prayed.

Today our deacon in the church of St. Hripsimé once more transforms black ink on a page into

the heartfelt, poignant prayer of his people by a musical-sacramental art as yet unknown to theorists and textbooks, yet practiced for centuries. In a quantum moment, our deacon scans the Armenian words of Psalm 118 (119), absorbs them, turns them in his mind and in his heart and in his imagination. Then he brings the words of the Psalm to life in music. The melody is not fixed and predetermined, nor is the deacon guided by the medieval Armenian pneumes printed above the psalm text; the art of deciphering these indigenous musical symbols was lost centuries ago, the victim of one of the periodic bouts of ethnic, intellectual, and cultural genocide perpetrated against the Armenians by various Turkic tribes during much of their history. Our deacon is guided, rather, by the conventional musical framework of one of the distinctive Armenian melodic modes of the *octoechos*. Within the limits set by convention and tradition, our deacon is free—indeed he is expected—to exploit the full musical potential of the given mode—melody, rhythm, ornamentation, dynamics, rubato, vocal effects—in order to interpret the words of the psalm, to give it a sacramental thrust as expressively and effectively as he can. What results is neither rote melody, nor merely words set to music, nor even mere psalmody, but a prayer whose words and spirit have been assumed and given impetus in music. Armenian hymnody is a kind of prayerful, musical exegesis.

What we have witnessed in the church of St. Hripsimé is a taste of the Armenian people's distinctive incarnation of the Gospel in their life and reality; a sample of that "something so beautiful, so heavenly, so crucial" that Schmemmann envisions in the liturgy.

III.

As a result of the sad vicissitudes of Armenia's history, today more Armenians live outside their homeland, throughout a world-wide diaspora, than within the current geographical boundaries of the Republic of Armenia. After the Armenian capital of Yerevan the most populous Armenian city is Moscow. After that comes Los Angeles. As the Armenian people have migrated throughout the world, they have taken with them their church and their liturgy. Every Sunday the Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church is celebrated in New York, Detroit, Philadelphia, Charlotte, Hollywood (California and Florida!), Dallas; Montreal, Vancouver; Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires, London, Paris, Geneva, Milan, Sophia, Istanbul, St. Petersburg, Samarkand (Uzbekistan), Athens, Aleppo, Beirut, Kuwait City, Baghdad, Teheran, Cairo, Addis Ababa, Calcutta, Sydney, Singapore. And this is just a sampling.

How has the liturgy fared in its global emigration? In October 2001, during the year-long celebrations surrounding the seventeen hundredth anniversary of the proclamation of Christianity as the official religion of Armenia, I was invited to speak to a conference at the University of Southern California co-sponsored by a number of Armenian Church and cultural organizations. The topic assigned to me was: "The Liturgy of the Armenian Church: Relevance and Reform." Well, this gives us some idea of how successfully the Armenian liturgy has engaged the mostly college-age audience that received me. Evidently these young people do not perceive Schmemmann's "something so beautiful, so heavenly, so crucial" in our liturgy.

To put it very simply, our liturgy has become somewhat dysfunctional. By that I mean that the Divine Liturgy is no longer accomplishing what it is supposed to accomplish as effectively as it once did. In specific ways our liturgy is not doing today what it was designed to do, what it claims to do, and what our church fathers said it should do. The vision of the liturgy perceived by the black-shrouded women at St. Hripsimé has become blurred in the eyes of many of our

faithful today. Our people are not flocking to the liturgy as we wish they would. Many complain that they do not "understand" the liturgy, or they "don't get anything out of it." Some wonder why the liturgy cannot be modernized, the symbols updated, to become more relevant to their very modern American lives; adapted to engage and respond to a world far removed from the one in which it was conceived. These kinds of remarks from many people suggest that there is a dysfunction in our liturgy, or at least in our apprehension of the liturgy, its nature and purpose. The complex sociological, cultural, and political environment in North America challenges the traditional liturgical life of our churches. The exalted vision of the liturgy I tried to describe is not being communicated to many of our people. I would like to illustrate this assertion by offering three manifestations of this liturgical crisis under the rubrics word, ritual, and mind.

Word: language of the liturgy. There is currently an active and highly controversial movement in the United States to translate the language of the Armenian Church's liturgy into English. Officially, and very recently, by decree of the Supreme Catholicos and Patriarch of All Armenians, the liturgical language was declared to be everywhere and always Classical Armenian. Old Armenian differs decidedly from the eastern and western modern Armenian dialects, somewhat as Latin differs from Italian. Educated native Armenian speakers would recognize some words of a prayer offered in Classical Armenian, but most would have only the vaguest sense of its meaning. The vernacular is increasingly used in the celebration of the sacraments, but not in the Divine Liturgy or the Daily Office.

For many, I am sure, nothing could be more self-evident than the notion that worship should be celebrated in the language of its celebrants.¹¹ Surely the generations of saints responsible for codifying the words of the Armenian liturgy intended that their prayers and hymns would be comprehended by the people; indeed, that these words, expressing the deepest faith convictions of our people, would have inspirational, transformative—yes, even catechetical—potential. Let us take, for example, this hymn from the Armenian Night Office, composed by the great Armenian hymnographer, theologian, and ecumenist St. Nersess (Shnorhali) the Gracious (†1173):¹²

Arise, O my glory, arise! And I shall
arise in the morning. Alleluia!

Arise with the vigilant angels, O children
of the supernal Sion. Alleluia!

Arise, sons of light, in praise of the
Father of light. Alleluia! [1Th 5:5]

Arise, all of you saved by the blood, and
give glory to the Savior. Alleluia!

Arise, new people; sing a new song to
Him who makes all things new. Al-

leluia! [Ps 96:1]

Arise, brides in the Spirit, awaiting the
coming of the holy Bridegroom. Al-
leluia!

Arise, you, who burn with light, like the wise
holy virgins. Alleluia!

Arise and prepare oil for your lamps
with warm tears. Alleluia!

Arise and sleep not, slumbering like the
foolish virgins. Alleluia!

Arise, let us fall down and worship with
tears, saying: Alleluia!

Arise, why do you sleep? Lord, do not
forsake us.

Arise, Lord, and help us, and we shall
give glory to your holy name.

Now and forever to the Father and to
the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Is it even remotely conceivable that this sublime meditation, with its elegant ecclesiology, might have been composed and integrated into the liturgy for any reason but to summon God's people in the Armenian Church to acknowledge the gracious dignity of their redemption in Christ, and to live their lives in a manner worthy of this divine vocation? Imagine the impact that this daily hymn would have on worshipers to whom its words are intelligible: extracts and images from sacred Scripture, selected and knitted together according to the deepest theological instinct of the Armenian Church, repeatedly wash over them, awakening faith and devotion; an anamnesis of God's philanthropy, a living Bible study, a catechesis of prayer, the *lex orandi* truly shaping the *lex credendi*.

By contrast, the best-intentioned congregant who has not studied Classical Armenian hears "*Zarteeq park eem zarteeq yev yes zartyayts aravodoos, alleluia,*" and is left to extract spiritual nourishment from the stirring melody alone, while taking for granted that the repeated refrain, "Alleluia," must be indicative of something worth praising.

Then what prevents the Armenian Church hierarchy from translating the liturgy into the vernacular? Among many other reasons—few of them indisputable—is the socioethnic complexity of the Armenian diaspora today. In short, there is no single vernacular Armenian. As I noted earlier, Classical Armenian evolved into two modern languages—more diverse than dialects—that are spoken in various parts of the world today. Even if the hierarchy were to authorize a more complete inculturation of the liturgy, abandoning modern Armenian for the spoken language of the diocese or even the local parish, the problem would remain. For many Armenian Church parishes in North America English is not the only vernacular. When I was assigned as the visiting pastor of the nascent Armenian community in Charlotte, North Carolina, I found a congregation composed of a smorgasbord of socioethnic subgroups: second and third-generation American-Armenians; settled first-generation American-Armenians from Middle Eastern countries; recent immigrants from Middle Eastern countries; new immigrants from Armenia; and new immigrants from Russia, Azerbaijan, and other former-Soviet republics; and of course non-Armenian spouses and friends. It was a linguistic nightmare. None of my parishioners had anything approaching a working knowledge of Classical Armenian. About half of the American-Armenians knew little or no modern Armenian. The immigrants from Russia and Azerbaijan spoke Russian and halting English; their elders understood some Armenian but had no English, while the children knew no Armenian but had quickly acquired fluent English.

Then there were the more subtle sensitivities. Many of the immigrants—refugees, really—wanted to hear their ancestral language in prayer even if they did not comprehend it. This generation had lost loved ones to ethnic cleansing carried out in Azerbaijan in the late 1980s. They mimicked the sentiments of many of the children of the great Armenian genocide of 1915 perpetrated by Ottoman Turkey. For these people sacrificing the ancestral language is tantamount to betraying the blood of the Armenian martyrs and actually perpetuating the genocide.

Others objected to English in the liturgy not so much ideologically as instinctively. For native Armenian speakers, to address God in the common, spoken idiom rings crude and harsh to the ear. “We must not speak to God in the same language as we speak to the butcher,” one man told me. Non-native Armenian speakers can not truly understand such a response.

Still others saw the use of English in the liturgy as a betrayal of orthodoxy. Armenian Protestants are known for praying to, and hymning, God exclusively in the vernacular.

The cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of the Armenian Church’s faithful poses a significant challenge to her liturgy’s ability to unite, spiritually nourish, and catechize her people, as it consecrates them to the Father.

Ritual: transplanted and rejected. As the vicissitudes of their history have scattered them throughout the world, wherever they have landed Armenians have instinctively reassembled themselves as church. In so doing they have transplanted a very “Eastern” style of worship into the hub of the modern world. Rituals and symbols that arose spontaneously in another world, eloquently evoking there the beliefs and sentiments of the people of that world, have now to speak to the hearts and minds of a community far removed chronologically, geographically, and culturally from the place of their origin. Like a transplanted organ that does not take, there are signs that the Armenian liturgy is being rejected by many Armenians of the new world.

Western Christians should recall the ritual sumptuousness of Eastern liturgy, a seemingly

extroverted approach to the worship of God, where gesture and movement inherently co-exist with verbal prayer in a kind of doxological dance. Armenian churches are traditionally pewless for a reason: to facilitate ritual movement and interaction among God's worshipers in the liturgy. Western Christians often come away from Eastern liturgies a bit dizzied, like an introvert who has been overwhelmed by the prolonged company of an extrovert. In like manner cradle Orthodox are puzzled and not a little agitated when invited, in a Protestant or Catholic service, to bow their heads for a few moments of silent, personal reflection following the Gospel reading or the homily.

On the other hand, these distinctions between Eastern and Western attitudes toward worship must not be overdrawn. How, after all, do the categories of East and West relate to a fourth-generation American-Armenian's impression of worship in the Armenian Church of Oakland, California?

Like all ancient Eastern rites, the Armenian Church has preserved a version of the ancient ritual known as the Kiss of Peace. During the preanaphoral rites of the Eucharist, Armenians are bid by the deacons to "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (see Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14). The deacon descends from the elevated bema and offers the ritualized kiss to representatives of the community, who, in turn, pass it along until everyone has received the greeting. The ritual is of course intended to remind Armenians that the sacrifice offered at the altar is futile if they do not first reconcile with one another in their daily lives. The kiss also elegantly and intimately anticipates the love-engendered unity brought about by the Saviour's crucifixion, realized sacramentally in holy communion. In the Armenian Church the kiss of peace is relatively less ritualized than in many other rites where it is practiced. The person offering the kiss bows his head to the left and then to the right of the one receiving the kiss, not quite cheek-to-cheek, while he says, "Christ is revealed among us."

I diverge into these minutiae of ritual for a reason. Some years ago I was invited to celebrate the Divine Liturgy at St. Vartan Armenian Church in Oakland, California. I was not surprised that the church was nearly empty at the beginning of the service. I had long since grown accustomed to my people's less than scrupulous attention to the clock on Sunday mornings (perhaps itself a result of the liturgy's failure to captivate our people). What did surprise me was the sudden influx of a large number of younger people as soon as the Kiss of Peace had been offered. It seemed as though people had been accumulating in the narthex waiting for that moment to enter the sanctuary *en masse*. "They don't like the Kiss of Peace," the pastor explained to me forthrightly after the service. "They feel awkward having their personal space invaded, and embarrassed at not knowing the proper words to say when giving and receiving the kiss." Dysfunctional liturgy, I thought; a beautiful, meaningful, biblical ritual whose significance and import have been distorted owing to a conflict between the liturgy itself and the cultural norms of its celebrants.

Mind: the "modern" need to understand. American-Armenian worshipers in America today bring to the liturgy a mindset quite different from that of the pious old woman who was making her devotional circuit around the exterior walls of the church of St. Hripsimé in Armenia. Our faithful in America are for the most part highly educated, and they want to understand what they are seeing, hearing, and experiencing in the liturgy. They want to bring intellect to worship. They want to get their head around what they are trying to believe. They bring to church all that they have learned and experienced in the technologically advanced, scientific, and secular world we

live in. They bring science and logic to theology and liturgy. They want to bring what they see as scientific certainty to their faith. I doubt that the woman at St. Hripsimé worries too much about reconciling her faith with modern science.

The self-conscious desire to bring brains to belief is a sign of modern times. It is the manifestation of a cultural outlook quite different from the one in which our liturgical rites were formed, and were interpreted by the fathers. We, as the result of modern science and our understanding of the universe, not only have a far deeper grasp of the nature of the world that surrounds us than our ancestors did, but we also have far more control over that world and over our own destinies. This is not the place to probe theories of cultural history. What is important is that the modern mentality affects church life as well. People begin to ask unprecedented questions about God, about faith, and about the liturgy.

As a professor of liturgy who is also a priest, I am constantly invited by Armenian church parishes to speak about the meaning of the Divine Liturgy. My hosts invite me in the sincere expectation that I will explain in an hour or so what it all means. Surely there must be someone out there, they assume, who can decipher all of these arcane symbols and movements for them, elucidating all of those strange theological words, and reducing the Divine Liturgy to, say, six easy steps. They hope in vain that I am the one to do this.

Inevitably after my forty-five minute talk I field questions like: Why can't we shorten the liturgy? Why can't we reduce it to its most essential parts? Would the liturgy be "invalid" if we skipped the Trisagion? How can bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Jesus? Can we say "Lord have mercy" once with feeling instead of three times? These are very modern questions. Increasingly, we have to help our people realize that the liturgy is not easy to "understand." It is far from obvious how or why a little bread and wine should become the vehicle for the living Son of God. It is an issue that the fathers and saints of the Armenian church did not "understand" either. They called our Sunday worship service the "Great Mystery." They could believe without "understanding." And this belief was not some vague optimism but a driving faith in a real and living God who, they were convinced, loved them and sustained them.

Alas, many modern, educated Americans are rather uncomfortable in the realm of mystery and faith.

The ability to live peacefully in mystery, what the poet John Keats in the early nineteenth century termed "negative capability," is nothing new to the Christian East.¹³ Armenian liturgical texts (as in all Eastern rites) are a virtual festival of apophatic theology, negative descriptions expressing what God is *not*. He is without limits, infinite, unreachable; he cannot be grasped; he is indescribable, uncontainable, unspeakable, incomprehensible, and more. Hear, for example, this prayer from the Armenian Liturgy of the Word:

O Lord our God, whose power is inscrutable and whose glory incomprehensible, whose mercy is beyond measure and compassion infinite, according to your abundant love of mankind, look down upon this your people and upon this holy temple and make abundant your mercy and your compassion to us and to those who pray with us. For to you is befitting glory, dominion and honor, now and always and unto the ages of ages. Amen.¹⁴

Does this mean that we are to suppress the questions that come to mind about our faith and

worship? Are we to switch off our brains and commit intellectual suicide in order to have a meaningful liturgical experience? By no means; not if we believe that our faith is true. If it is all true, then it will ultimately stand up to any scrutiny we may subject it to. Let us not forget Jesus' promise, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and *you will know the truth*, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32); as long as one searches in faith and humility.

I have a sense that deep down we Westernized, "enlightened" Armenian Christians fear that if we peer too deeply into the "mystery" of our faith we will find that the emperor isn't wearing any clothes. I believe that many people fear that if they probe beyond the clichés and allegories, they may find that the liturgy is in fact meaningless; that the Christian faith is, after all, nothing but fictive legends and childish myths; that in the end it is the opiate of the people. They forget the counsel of Scripture:

My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; yes, if you cry out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God (Prov 2:1-5).

Short of such a determined quest undertaken in faith, however, and in the absence of a new mystagogy that engages, rather than flees from science and honest intellectual inquiry, the Armenian and other Eastern churches in the same predicament will continue to foster in their people at best a superficial faith, compartmentalized and isolated from the rest of reality; or at worst indifference and rejection.

The Armenian Church faces a major and multi-faceted challenge in the years ahead. We must prayerfully discover how fully to engage our people who are, to various degrees, becoming rooted in a culture very different from, and in some cases hostile to, the culture in which our liturgy and Christian vision were forged centuries ago. We will have to convince our people that their Christian tradition, culture, and life represent a viable way for us to live in Christ today. We must reflect seriously on the Christian mission of the Armenian Church in America today. Is our *raison d'être* merely to reach out to, and to serve, Armenians? Will the Armenian Church in America consign itself to the role of spiritual custodian of the steadily assimilating Armenian ethnic ghetto in America? Or does the Armenian Church have a vital message to third-millennium America? A distinctive, truly apostolic Christian witness that is old but new; one, moreover, that is certified by the blood of countless martyrs? Our church will have first to discover for itself, and then to fulfill its God-ordained role in the market-place of North American churches, denominations, and rites. We will have to do this with great care and prudence: engaging and challenging American society and culture, while not betraying our own Christian identity and distinctive Christian witness. These challenges represent the path ahead, not just for the Armenian Church, but for all ancient Eastern churches that have been transplanted into the United States and other cultures. It is in some ways a frightening path, but an exciting one since, as I am increasingly convinced, it is ordained by divine Providence. I thank you for inviting me to reflect on it with you today.

ENDNOTES

1. For a recent descriptive survey of these rites see Christine Chaillot, "The Ancient Oriental Churches," in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B.

Westerfield Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 131-69.

2. See Abraham Terian, *Patriotism and Piety in Armenian Christianity: The Early Panegyrics on Saint Gregory*. AVANT: Treasures of the Armenian Christian Tradition 2 (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press and St. Nersess Armenian Seminary, 2005); *ibid.*, "Surpassing the Biblical Worthies: An Early Motif in Armenian Religious Literature," *St. Nersess Theological Review* 1 (July 1996), 117-44. Robert W. Thomson, ed., *Elishe: History of Vardan and the Armenian War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 9-21.

3. The best presentation of the overall history and features of the Armenian Rite is Robert F. Taft, S.J., "The Armenian Liturgy: Its Origins and Characteristics," in *Treasures in Heaven: Armenian Art, Religion and Society, Papers delivered at the Pierpont Morgan Library at a Symposium organized by Thomas F. Mathews and Roger S. Wieck 21-22 May 1994* (New York: The Pierpont Morgan Library, 1998), 13-30.

4. For an historical, comparative study of the Daily Offices of the Armenian Church with complete bibliography see my *The Commentary on the Daily Office of the Armenian Church by Bishop Step'anos Siwnec'i (c. 685-735): Edition of the Long and Short Recensions with Liturgical Analysis*. *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 270. (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 2004).

5. Robert F. Taft, S.J., *Beyond East and West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding*, 2d rev. and enlarged edition (Rome: Edizioni Orientalia Christiana, 1997), 304.

6. "Liturgy" in *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 128.

7. For further reflections on these ideas see Robert F. Taft, S.J., "Toward a Theology of the Liturgy of the Hours," in his *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1986), 331-65.

8. Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturgy and Life: Christian Development through Liturgical Experience* (New York: Orthodox Church in America, 1983), 74.

9. The story of the conversion of the Armenian king and of the Armenian people to Christianity is recounted in the fifth-century *History of the Armenians* ascribed to a certain Agat'angelos. For an English translation see R. W. Thomson, *Agathangelos: History of the Armenians* (Albany: State University of New York, 1976).

10. Nina G. Garsoïan, "The History of Armenia," in *Treasures in Heaven: Armenian Illuminated Manuscripts*, ed. Thomas F. Mathews and Roger S. Wieck (New York: The Pierpont Morgan Library and Princeton University Press, 1994), 3-23, presents a convenient summary of Armenian history by one of its foremost living scholars.

11. Here I do not intend "celebrants" in a clerical sense, but in the ecclesial sense of all of God's people gathered for the liturgy as concelebrants of the Eucharist, and, by extension, of the church's entire liturgical life.

12. My translation of *Žamagirk' ateni [Book of Hours]*, (Jerusalem: Sts. James Press, 1915), 187. I am not aware of any previous published translations of this hymn.

13. For a thought-provoking reflection, see Kathleen Norris, "Exile, Homeland and Negative Capability," in her *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 53-70.

14. Daniel Findikyan, ed., *The Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church with Modern Armenian and English Translations, Transliteration, Musical Notation, Introduction and Notes* (New York: St. Vartan Press, 1999), 12

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