

Worship in the Armenian Church (Some Assembly Required)

By: Fr. Daniel Findikyan

I hear it all the time: “Our worship services in the Armenian Church are too long.” “The service on Sunday is in a strange language and I can’t understand what’s going on.” “I can’t relate to it.” “It’s not relevant to my everyday life.” “I don’t have time.”

From a consumer point of view, who can fault the critics? In this day and age of limited resources, no one has time for tedious, archaic, drawn-out church services. The churches that are thriving in America are those offering a palatable, user friendly worship experience, churches that provide an attractive, immediately relevant, succinct Sunday morning service.

On the other hand, should the Church really design her worship using the same marketing strategy as McDonald’s? At that venerable American institution the emphasis is on convenience. You are in and out in less time it would take you to be seated in another restaurant. The menu is clear, colorful and concise. The product is attractively packaged and distributed, and the whole process of ordering, receiving and eating your lunch requires little or no thought, time or effort. This is exactly what is going on in many contemporary American religious circles nowadays. Everything is simple, attractive and nice: Jesus loves you, be happy. Their Sunday worship is just agreeable, convenient and effortless: sit in a pew, listen and reflect a while, then go home inspired.

But our worship in the Armenian Church is different. It seems to go out of its way to be obscure, indirect, abstract. It’s hard. But then so is the Church. So is being a Christian. Faith doesn’t come easily. Believing is tough. Things don’t make sense. There are contradictions. Anybody who tells you that it’s easy to be a Christian, to accept the Gospel, to believe in God, to understand the Bible, and to really integrate it all into your daily life obviously doesn’t know the first thing about what real faith and Christianity are all about. Look at the history of the Armenians and ask yourself if their more than 1500 years of bloody struggle to preserve the Christian faith was easy or convenient. Martyrdom and crucifixion aren’t pretty.

Part of the reason, of course, is that God is hard to nail down. Being almighty, infinite, invisible and everywhere, he is outside our usual categories of perception, apprehension and understanding. That makes worshipping Him, or finding Him for that matter, a fairly ambitious undertaking. Things would certainly be easier if God had an e-mail address.

No, real Christian faith was never intended to be easy. Jesus never claimed that following Him would be effortless and “nice.” No sooner had he called his disciples around him that he began to tell them what was really in store for them: wolves, swords, rejection, condemnation, flogging, hate, murder [Mt. 10:16-39]. The travesty of our day is the wildly popular fantasy that Christian faith and worship is all about feeling good, sitting back for a Sunday religious high to get you through the week. Too few people realize that real Christian worship demands a sizable investment of effort and energy and a considerable dose of endurance and perseverance.

The word “liturgy,” in fact, comes from a Greek root that means “work” or “energy.” So liturgy is actually all about people WORKING for God. It is a process that involves intellectual, spiritual and even physical SWEAT. It is not intended for the

mindless, the brainless, the gutless, or anyone who wants to squeak by with the least possible amount of effort and energy. This is no easy way out, sorry.

In the Armenian Church, we don't sit back and contemplate our faith. We DO it. We worship the Lord as Jesus told us, "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, *and with all your strength*" [Mark 12:30]. We throw ourselves totally into worshipping God, using our bodies and all our senses to dynamically affirm and celebrate our faith. Thoughts and intentions are abstract, personal, easily misunderstood. Actions, movements, gestures and deeds are concrete, public, bold and in-your-face. We don't wait for God to read our minds. We affirm to him and to the world (not to mention ourselves) the Christian faith that we believe. This is the kind of worship that the Armenian Church and all of the ancient Christian churches insist on.

Our liturgy is not brief and to the point. We say what we have to say once, twice, again and again. Our goal is not economy, it is thoroughness and public proclamation of our faith beyond the shadow of a doubt.

Our liturgy is not provided for you, much less to meet your "spiritual needs." It is not for your listening pleasure. The focus is not you, it is God. We gather together to give thanks actively and dynamically to Him who meets all of our needs. We don't sit in cushioned pews and think about our Christian faith, we stand on our feet, for hours, proud and tall in our God-given status as adopted brothers of Christ, God's precious children [Gal 4:25-27]. We don't just read the gospel and talk about it, we sing it, loud, with complicated melodies passed down from our ancestors.

We don't just think about the saving mystery of Christ's crucifixion, we imprint it on our bodies and souls by making the sign of the cross, dozens of times in each Divine Liturgy, clearly and plainly for all to see.

We don't just think about how great and powerful God is, we bow down to Him in worship, fifteen, twenty times in each Divine Liturgy, remembering that He is God and we are His creatures. We demonstrate our devotion to Him by a concrete, physical gesture.

We don't fondly remember Christ's last supper, we DO it, every Sunday, just as he told us to: "This is my body which is for you. *Do this in remembrance of me*. For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." [1 Cor 11:25-26]. And we don't waver when Christ says, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of this world is my flesh" [Jn 6:51]. We do what he said. Boldly, an act of hardcore, raw faith. Do we understand exactly, precisely, scientifically, mathematically, metaphysically, beyond the shadow of a doubt what he was talking about when he uttered those words? Of course not. But then, we know very well that if God is God, and we are not, then we probably shouldn't expect to be able to understand everything.

So we boldly approach the altar and receive holy communion, knowing that what we are receiving is not plain bread and wine anymore, but Christ himself, his body and blood, in a way that we readily admit, we don't completely understand. And that's OK. The greatest theologians, saints and fathers of the Armenian Church didn't understand it either; in the prayers and sermons that they wrote, they simply acknowledge this and call the whole thing a mystery. But it is a mystery which we know is life-giving and true.

Is all of this easy? Is it user-friendly? Will it fit conveniently into your schedule? No. You have to make the investment and do the work. That's how real, meaningful faith grows. When Christ called his disciples, He did not send them a professional video explaining the entire project, and 800 number to call for further information, a chauffeur-driven limousine, and a 90-day money-back guarantee. He said two words: "Follow me." They did. It wasn't easy and they had no guarantees except the Word of the Lord himself. We in the Armenian Church have the same Word plus a time-and-battle-tested tradition that reaches back to Christ's disciples themselves.

What does all of this mean? It means most importantly that you alone will decide how, if at all, to respond to God's call. There is certainly plenty of easy religion out there. Simple answers that require a minimal investment of your admittedly valuable time and energy. You are free to choose from any of them and hope that it will satisfy you for a while. Or you can choose an even easier route. You can escape and simply ignore the issue. Ignore God, ignore the Bible, put out of your mind the faith which your Armenian ancestors—your blood relatives—sacrificed their lives to hand over to you. Pretend the whole thing is a colorful fable, Jesus Christ, the early Church, the martyrs, the saints, the genocide. Go ahead and put out of your mind all those nagging human questions: good, evil, suffering, guilt, life, love, death... And by all means jump on the bandwagon with the critics and join their chorus of complaints about the Church, the priest, the hypocrites, the language, the politics, the male clergy. Don't worry, it doesn't take a genius to find faults, especially in the Church, which, like every other association of human beings in the history of civilization, is filled with a bunch of imperfect people, sometimes doing their best, often failing miserably.

Much more difficult is to refuse to fall prey to the stock condemnations; to go to church and to stubbornly seek Christ in the liturgy. Make the investment. Dig into the mystery of our salvation in Christ as it is proclaimed and celebrated in the Divine Liturgy.

Defy the supposed language barrier. Read the prayers. Pray them with the priest. Learn them by heart in English, Armenian, Japanese, or whatever, but know them—they are yours. Energize every prayer of the priest by following along and at the end loudly affirming, "Amen!"

Dare to publicly declare yourself a Christian by imprinting yourself with the sign of Christ's holy cross. Bow down and worship when the deacon invites you to do so. Recite the Nicene Creed and make the effort to understand and integrate that bold confession of faith into your own convictions. During the hymn "Der Voghormya [Lord, have mercy]" pray hard for every person in the Church, by name if you can, starting with the biggest hypocrite.

March forward and receive Jesus Christ physically, mystically, in his body and blood. Struggle to believe even without understanding every detail. Christ, the Son of God Himself has come into your life, into your body, in the most physical, real way. And you have received Him. You have become united to Him. He is with you.

Work to understand. Don't wait for someone to explain, ask, demand! And ask again and again if you're not satisfied with the answer. Read the Bible regularly, a chapter a day. It is the only text-book of the liturgy. Think, activate that brain God gave you, make the connections, make sense out of it all. Plow through the excuses and obstacles and find God. He is there, He is in the Armenian Church. He is waiting for

you. He is calling you. But He will not send a limousine. You must first knock, and then He will open the door [Mt 7:7].

Here's the final exam. Your choice: take-home multiple guess, or three-hour oral in front of the entire faculty. Which one is easier? Which one will more truly gauge:

WHO YOU ARE and WHAT YOU HAVE TO OFFER?

“For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” [Mt 7:14].