

Wonder

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Title: **Some Thoughts on the Armenian Church** Author: **Deacon Ryan Ezras Tellalian**

We base a lot of our experiences in this world on physical stuff—things that we can touch, see, taste, smell, and hear. The more senses a thing can excite, the more real it seems to be. Because of this we also tend to attempt to attribute as many senses to a thing as possible in order to provide a more comprehensive experience of its existence. Think about it: if you were to hear a noise in the opposite corner of the room or smell something outside, do you not turn your eyes to determine its source?

For many, the feeling of awe inspired by God’s creation in its most beautiful and magnificent forms—cosmic or microscopic, complex or simple—is what convinces them of His existence. (Think Romans 1:20) Often these experiences can touch our souls rather deeply, yet our *modus operandi* all too often causes us to return to our “normal” state soon thereafter. No matter what it is to which we aspire in terms of asceticism and mortification, regardless of how separated from the world we might wish to become, the world remains important to us. And it should be.

One of the most powerful meditations can be that which focuses on the incarnation of Christ, God living with us, as one of us. Christ, by uniting Himself with our nature, showed us not only the example of how we ought to live spiritually, but through his actions also how we ought to behave. As our ultimate vocation, just we are created in the image of God, we are to grow in His likeness both internally and externally.

And while Armenian Orthodox theology is grounded in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, there is a particular focus on His incarnation. God spoke to humanity in various ways prior to the incarnation, but then spoke to us by His Son (Hebrews 1:1). Ours is not some abstract faith in something, some deity or power, that cannot be seen, but in a God who made Himself known to us as one of us in a very real way.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. (1 John 1:1)

St. John the Evangelist was also close enough to hear the heartbeat of Christ (John 13:23). And in the Divine Liturgy we taste Christ as we receive Him into our bodies and hearts in a special way.

A noteworthy point of incarnational theology is that matter matters—what we do physically matters, not only what we do with our own bodies to ourselves, but to and for others. “If any one thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this man’s religion is vain” (James 1:26). Again James emphasizes works to show one’s faith, “If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and

filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit?" (2:15) Love, because of the incarnation, is no longer a thing for us to have or feel, but a person—namely, Jesus Christ—for us to emulate. Only by emulating the works of Christ through our own human acts of mercy and healing can we truly call ourselves Christian.

Another plug for the Armenian Church: our sacramental theology is also unique. The Armenian word for sacrament, as in many other languages, literally means “mystery.” We tend to be comparatively comfortable with the concept of mystery, not feeling the necessity of exhaustively explaining every single element of our faith. And, generally speaking, our focus in the sacraments is on grace that is already present in our lives. It takes the notion of life as a sacrament to another level by positing that the sacraments are what we do as a response to what God has already done and is doing and will do for us, as indeed all our actions ought to be.

Armenians express their response to God rather well in their word for worship, *yerkirpakutiun*, which literally translated means “kissing the ground.” This is also the word used for “Let us bow down before God,” which would obviously be a full prostration (1 Samuel 24:8). Fr. Robert Taft comments, “A second characteristic of Armenian liturgy [. . .] is the extraordinary beauty and primitiveness of prayers that ask for nothing but the privilege of glorifying God.”¹

The Armenian Church also has been rather receptive to outside influences. We tended to adopt prayers, hymns, and rituals from the Byzantine and Latin churches, yet simultaneously adapting or “Armenianizing” them, maintaining the integrity of our own liturgical theology. Taft again comments, “Khosrov Andzewats‘i’s [a commentator on the Divine Liturgy] own receptivity often led him to be considered a Chalcedonian, as were numerous Armenian ecclesiastics, including [St.] Nersēs Lambronats‘i in the centuries after that dolorous misunderstanding. In view of the savage ethnic and religious tribalism now rending certain parts of the world, this could provide a lesson for us all.”²

Let us be found constantly in wonder of the mystery of grace in our lives, and let induce a disposition of openness to what others have to offer. And may our response to Christ’s incarnation always be in an incarnational way: worshipping Him, loving Him by loving others.

1 “The Armenian Liturgy: Its Origins and Characteristics,” in: Th. F. Mathes, R. S. Wieck (eds.), *Treasures in Heaven. Armenian art, religion, and society* (Washington 1998), p. 23.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

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Discussion Questions:

What role do your senses and your experience of the physical world play in your life of faith?

How can you better emulate Christ, love incarnate?

Do you think glorifying God is a privilege? Do you thank God for the gift of worship and prayer He has given to you?