

A General Overview of Armenian Water Blessing Service

(The text is an extract taken from Rev. Fr. Hovel Ohanyan's book *Water as a Symbol of Spiritual Rebirth in the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Holy Church* with some contextual revisions)

According to the tradition of the Armenian Church, the first Water Blessing service was conducted by St. Gregory the Illuminator at the River of Aratsani. As the Armenian historian Agathangelos tells, a great miracle happened at the time of the mass baptism, when the waters of the river stopped and then turned back again, a light appeared and stood over the waters of the river, and the sign of the Holy Cross appeared and remained until the end of the service.

The next historical testimony about the Water Blessing Service is preserved from the 11th century, and indicates that the service was performed by the Armenian Catholicos Petros Getadardz (1019-1054). By the invitation of the Emperor Basil of Byzantium, Catholicos Petros went to participate at the Water Blessing service in the stream that flowed through Trabizon (Trebizond). Armenian historians testify that great miraculous events occurred when the Armenian Catholicos blessed the waters of the river with a cross by pouring some Holy Oil into the water. Almost all of them wrote that a great light appeared to them, which was shining from the hand of the Catholicos and from the Holy Oil. Some of them testify that by the blessing of the Armenian Catholicos the waters of the river stopped and started running back, which gives rise to the fact that the Catholicos Petros was called "*Getadardz*" (the one who turns the course of the river). The next historical account is from the thirteen century, when a European monk by the name of Canonicus Willebrandt visited the Armenian King Levon the Great (1190-1220) in Sis, the capital of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. On the way to a pilgrimage to Jerusalem he had remained in Cilicia for four months enjoying the hospitality of the Armenian King. With great detail, Willebrandt testifies how the Armenians celebrated Theophany and the

Water Blessing service. Prior to the service, he writes, they observed twelve days of penance and on the day preceding the feast they fasted, and in the evening they celebrated the Divine Liturgy and received Holy Communion. On the next morning, the King and nobles, together with all the people, went to the riverbank with a great procession, where the Armenian Catholicos, along with the Greek bishop, blessed the waters of the river by immersing a large cross into it. After the service the King and the others sprinkled themselves with that blessed water and then they started the celebration. A noteworthy account is preserved by the Fortescue, who in describing the Water Blessing service in the Armenian Church testifies that after celebrating the Divine Liturgy with a great procession, carrying the Holy Cross and Holy Oil, the people took the blessed water from the church to sprinkle in their houses and into the neighboring wells and streams. According to Fortescue, after concluding the service in the church: *“The procession then proceeds out of doors and the same ceremony is performed at the neighboring rivers and fountains.”* As we can see from all of these historical accounts, the Water Blessing Service of the Armenian Church was held outdoors, upon the riverbanks or near the seashore. In the course of time, because of practical difficulties, it became a necessary practice to celebrate Jesus’ Baptism within the church sanctuary: *“Later, because of subsequent Islamic prohibitions within the Ottoman Turkish Empire, this and other public out-door rituals were henceforth accomplished within the confines of the churches.”* Today the outdoor practice is preserved only in Jerusalem, where the Armenian Patriarch leads all of the clergy and faithful to the Jordan River to celebrate the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Water Blessing is offered directly upon the waters of the Jordan River. As we mentioned in the Second Chapter, many pilgrims descend into the Jordan River and are baptized (or immerse themselves if they have already been baptized) during the Octave of the feast of Theophany of our Lord. In so doing, the pilgrims are connecting their own baptism with the Baptism of our Savior,

who became a true example for all of us through His own Baptism. The rubrics indicate that the Water Blessing Service is to be performed after the offering of the Holy Eucharist on Theophany Day. In many parishes, in order to accommodate the traveling of parishioners, the service is immediately appended to the liturgy, but theologically, the service is associated with the Ninth Hour of the Day. The citation from Genesis 3:8 (in the Armenian Version) correlates the period between the Ninth Hour and the Tenth Hour (that is, the Evening) with the fall of the first human being. Consequently, the salvation of humanity is accomplished on the Cross at the same hour of the day, and in the Armenian tradition, the descent of Jesus into the Jordan River also takes place at the same hour. The celebrant, holding a Cross and the Holy Gospel and the Holy Myron, accompanied by the altar servers and the godfather of the Cross, proceeds to the cauldron of water which has been placed on the bema of the church, singing the hymn “Light of Light”:

Light of Light, You were sent from the Father, and became incarnate of the Holy Virgin to regenerate the corrupted Adam. The voice of Your Father from heaven bore witness, saying, “This is my son,” and the Holy Spirit, in the form of a Dove, revealed You. You, O God, appeared on earth and walked among men and saved the universe from the curse of Adam.

After singing this hymn, the celebrant pours the water crosswise from a pitcher into the cauldron by reciting the Psalm 29: responsorial verse 3, followed by the Scriptural Readings (Isaiah 12: 3-6; Joshua 3:14-17; Exodus 15:22-27; 2 Kings 2: 19-22; Ezekiel 47: 1-12; 1 Corinthians 10: 1-4; Matthew 3: 1-17). All of the readings of the service emphasize the importance of the water for the human life and show that the beginning of the salvation of the humankind takes place by and through the water baptism. As the physical life starts in and through the water, in the mother’s womb, likewise, the spiritual rebirth takes place in and through the water in the baptismal font as a spiritual womb of the Church.

The readings are followed by the litanies proclaimed by the deacons over the waters:

For this water that is before us and for those who shall in

faith receive blessing from this, let us beseech the Lord.

For this water to receive River Jordan's blessing with the

grace of the Only Begotten who enlightened us, let us beseech the Lord.

For the Holy Spirit to descend into this water and give

birth again to those who are baptized and become children of light

and truth, let us beseech the Lord.

For this water to become the source of healing for souls and bodies, let us beseech the Lord.

After the proclamation of the deacon the celebrant says the prayer of St. Basil of Caesarea over the water. The Anamnestic part of this prayer shows that the supplication is addressed to God the Father, the first Person of the Holy Trinity, "*who art strong and doest works of wonder.*" Using embolisms and quasi-embolisms (direct and non-direct quotations from Holy Scripture) the author of this long prayer tells the story of the creation, how God made the heaven and earth and everything out of nothing. After creating everything, on the last day of the creation He created man from the dust and made him alive by giving "*thine all- holy breath.*" And then the author continues on by remembering the fall of the man and the first sin ever committed against God. Although God closed the doors of the Paradise in front of men, He did not forsake us, for at the end of the time He sent His Only-Begotten Son to find the lost sheep and to reopen the gates of the Kingdom. Through His Incarnation, the Son of God became man, without sin, to restore the fallen nature of the human being and to return us where we belonged to be. He came and He called everyone to come back from darkness to light, from death to life. "*And He gathered all and brought them to the River Jordan,*" where He saw the scared dragon in the waters and by entering into the waters

He trampled him under His heels and destroyed the power of the adversary (Psalm 74:13). Why then should the Holy Spirit of God appear in the likeness of a dove? To teach those watching that in no other way can one approach the Son of God, except in sinlessness and righteousness and holiness that taking from the likeness of a dove, they might bear in themselves that form.

The celebrant asks God to come upon this water through His Holy Spirit and to cleanse them for the welfare of His faithful children, “*for the healing of the sick, for the salvation of souls and bodies.*” After this long and beautiful prayer, the choir sings the hymn “*Ov Zarmanali*” (O wonderful mystery), composed by Catholicos Gregory III Pahlavuni (1113-1166) in the twelve century:

*O wonderful and great mystery made manifest! God the
Creator coming to Jordan.*

*O river, fear not, for I am thy Creator. I have come to
baptize and wash away sins.*

*This day the well-pleased voice of the Father came down
from heaven as witness to the Beloved son.*

*Exhort O river, exhort O river Jordan, with exuberant
voice sang John the Great Forerunner.*

The hymn is also describing the wonderful events, which took place at the Baptism of our Lord. There is a great conversation happening between the Creator and the river, which is in the fear with the entire creation by the visitation of the Lord. The Creator of all, God Himself visited His own creation to be baptized in the waters of the river and to wash away the sin from the face of the world:

In the same way He came and completed the covenant which He made with our fathers (Genesis 17:7; Luke 1:72). He came down to the waters and sanctified the lower waters of this earth, which had been fouled by the sins of mankind.

After this hymn the celebrant immerses the Holy Cross (symbolizing our Lord Jesus Christ) into the cauldron of water, and taking the silver dove-like container filled with Holy Myron, he blesses the water three times. After blessing the water, the celebrant takes the Holy Cross out from the water and gives it to the Godfather of the Cross to hold. Then the celebrant pours out the Holy Myron from the beak of the dove while singing the hymn of the Holy Spirit.