



Սուրբ Կարապետ Յայց. Եկեղեցի Պարոն Ռուժ, ԼԱ

Saint Garabed Armenian Church of Greater Louisiana
6208 Florida Boulevard Baton Rouge, LA 70806

The Celebration of a Name Day

Perhaps you have heard the expression "What's in a name?" For the Armenian Christian, the answer is, "a great deal".

In our Armenian tradition, as well as within the people of the various Orthodox Churches, a very important tradition practiced is the ancient Christian custom of taking the name of a Saint at Baptism. This custom is the bond that is established at Baptism between a Christian and the Saint whose name one bears. When we are addressed with this name, it shows honor to the Saint and in a way, invokes his or her blessing. We also directly show pious honor to Christ Himself when we accept and use a Saint's name, since Saints are precisely those who have been joined to Christ. Such an act of humility and spiritual submission was so important to the Early Church. Unfortunately, today, our regret is that so many of our people ignore this meaningful custom. But how and why did this practice begin?



The Circumcision and Naming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ

In the Armenian Church, the Nativity of Our Lord is celebrated on January 5-6. Eight days later, on January 13, the Church remembers the Circumcision and the Naming of Our Lord Jesus Christ, in accordance with the Old Testament Law when he was circumcised, as were all male infants, as a sign of the Covenant of God with the Forefather

Abraham and his descendants (Gen 17:10-14, Lev 12:3).

This act showed that the true descendants of the Patriarch Abraham were separated from the other nations by the sign of circumcision (a pre-figurement of Baptism), *"the circumcision made without hands"* (Colossians 2:11ff), and thereby became members of the God-ruled community of the Old Testament; that is, through circumcision, they entered among the chosen People of God.

The Fathers of the Church explain that Our Lord, the Creator of the Law, underwent circumcision in order to give people an example how faithfully the divine ordinances ought to be fulfilled. The Lord was circumcised so that later no one would doubt that He had truly assumed human flesh, and that His Incarnation was not merely an illusion, as some, however, wrongly believed.

After this ritual, the Divine Infant was given the name Jesus, as the Archangel Gabriel declared on the day of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary. "*And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the Child, His name was called Jesus, which was so named of the Angel before He was conceived in the womb*" (St. Luke 2:21). The name Jesus, which means "*the one who saves*", was an indication of His service, the work of the salvation of the world (Mt 1:21; Mk 9:38-39, 16:17; Luke 10:17; Acts 3:6, 16; Phil 2:9-10).

These two events - the Lord's Circumcision and Naming - remind Christians that they have entered into a New Covenant with God, that the very name "*Christian*" is a sign of mankind's entrance into this New Covenant and "*are circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ*" (Col 2:11). And the ritual of circumcision gave way to the Mystery of Baptism, which it prefigured.

Early Church Practices

One of the baptismal customs of the early Church note that when the catechumens (those preparing for baptism) had been taught everything that they were to learn, their teachers would lead them back to the bishop, and the bishop would recommend that they change their pagan names and adopt Christian ones, names to remind them of holy persons or of virtues. Thus, the Early Church attached great importance to a person's name.

A famous 4th Century Church historian, Eusebius, recorded the Christian practice of the time of giving the names of the Apostles to children. Also in the same work, we read that the Egyptian Christians renounced their pagan names for Scriptural names—usually the names of Prophets.

Celebration of Name Days

In the old country, there was the special tradition of our people to celebrate one's nameday rather than the birthday. The difference between the celebration of one's day of physical birth and of one's name day is that on the former, the person whose birthday it is becomes the center of attention, whereas on the latter, the saint is the focal point. Placing the saint as the center of attention on one's name day ties the whole celebration in with the entire Church. The individual is not alone in their celebration, but does so together with the whole Church.

Celebration of the nameday is also considered to be spiritually important, for the celebrating individual develops special spiritual ties with his/her Patron Saint and, consequently, with God, for one's name day is not only a day for celebration but also is a day for spiritual growth.

The individual should attend Badarak and receive the Holy Communion on the Sunday or feast that is nearest the saint's feast day.

The custom of the Armenians is to present a lighted candle to the individual in celebration with the words *anoonovut dzeranas* – may you grow old with your name – with the meaning that you are to grow old sharing the name of your saint as a blessing. This can easily be done at the end of Liturgy by the Priest on behalf of the entire congregation, while at the same time offering a special blessing.

At the Time of Birth

Today, of course, both the feast/name day and birthday can and should be observed.

When parents receive the joyous news that they will soon be blessed with a child, it is advised that they decide in a timely manner on the name to be given to the infant, remembering our Lord's name, "Jesus," was "given" by an Angel even before Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the immaculate womb of the Mother-of-God (Annunciation: St. Luke 1:31).

In contemporary times, following the exact same tradition that prevailed in the Early Church, children should be given the names of the Saints who have sanctified our Church and whose intercessions uphold our faith and our spiritual efforts, for their names are reminders of faith and virtue.

Armenians also have the good custom of giving a child the name of the Saint who is celebrated on or near the day of the birth, for it is the Saint of this name who is the patron of the child.

Also there is further custom of bestowing a name associated with the feast day that coincides with the birth. A few examples of this are: *Avedis* for the Nativity; *Haroutune* for Easter (Resurrection); *Vartouhi* (Rose) Transfiguration; *Mariam* or Mary for the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin; *Khatchig* for the Feast of the Holy Cross. The Pastors of parishes can assist with this information.

As the child grows, an important teaching that parents can offer to their children is the habit of praying to their patron saint and establish a special devotion, so that they may receive an abundance of God's blessings.

Not only should we hold our patron saint in special reverence, but also a child should have an icon of the saint in their room. On the feast day of the saint, the family ought celebrate the child's name day and the saint's day. This day is considered as our birthday into the Church and on this day we celebrate this important event.



Fr. Tateos R. Abdalian
Creative and Digital Ministries
Diocese of the Armenian Church