

Various Requiem Services in the Armenian Church and Their Meaning

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Part I: The Different Requiem Services in the Armenian Church

In the Armenian tradition there are different rituals after the funeral services and the internment of a Christian. These are held at various intervals. For convenience we shall refer to them as requiem services. *The Book of Rituals* [*Mashdots*] has special services for:

- a) the morning after the internment, when the ritual is held at the grave site; (If the deceased is a clergyman, similar services but with different contents are held at the grave site for six consecutive days.)
- b) the morning of the seventh day of the internment, when the ritual is held at the grave site; (If the deceased is a clergyman, a similar service but with different contents is held on the fifteenth day.)
- c) the fortieth day of the internment: for laymen the fortieth-day requiem is the same as the seventh-day service; for clergy there is a special fortieth-day service; in the case of both a deceased layman and a clergyman the fortieth-day requiem is usually held on the closest (Saturday or) Sunday, when the name of the deceased is mentioned by the celebrant during the Divine Liturgy, particularly during the special prayers offered for the deceased;
- d) the first anniversary of the internment: for laymen the first anniversary requiem is the same as the seventh-day service; but for clergy there is a special first anniversary service; the requiem is usually held on a (Saturday or) Sunday that is the closest to the date of the first anniversary, when the name of the deceased is mentioned by the celebrant priest during the Divine Liturgy, especially during the special prayers offered for the deceased;
- e) memorial days: the requiem follows the Divine Liturgy on such days and is held at the grave site; there are five memorial days that follow the five major feasts during the year; the requiem for memorial days at the grave site can also be held on any day.
- f) the blessing of *Madagh*, the ancient *Agape* or 'love feast' is in most cases a requiem service, and the blessed food or meat is distributed to the poor and the public at large in memory of a deceased person/persons, whose name is/are mentioned in the prayer read by the clergyman.

Besides these, it must be noted that prayers for the deceased are said during the

liturgical hours and the Divine Liturgy, and a short requiem service is required during the Night Hour, if the Divine Liturgy will be celebrated on that day.

Part II: Why do we pray for the deceased?

The most basic teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ is: *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another* (John 13:34). This love is best expressed when we as loving brothers and sisters and as the true followers of the Lord come together to experience His presence in our midst: *For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them* (Mat. 18:20). In such an atmosphere of binding love and Divine presence our prayers unite and come out as if from a single source. This is what the Lord had in mind when he taught us the Lord's Prayer and stressed the use of the collective first person plural throughout.

Praying in one voice and as one person does not only indicate that we are all in agreement in our faith in God and in our expression of love towards each other, but also that we pray for each other. Prayer that is offered in unison will reach God: *Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven* (Mat. 18:19). Praying together is strongly stressed by St. Paul, who in his letter to the Romans, 15:5-6, states: *May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Common prayer is the very essence of the Church. And we must understand that while offering private prayers should be a part of our daily practice, they do not take the place of common prayer, since, according to the Holy Scriptures, we experience the presence of Christ in our midst as a group or a family, provided that we set aside our sinful ways and adhere to the divine command of love.

One may assume that all of this applies to those of us who are alive, since according to the general understanding, once a person passes away, he stops communicating with others and committing sin, and the sins committed during his lifetime are now a part of the record so to speak. The deceased will be judged at the great tribunal of the Last Judgment for the life they have led on earth. Consequently, why offer prayers for the deceased? Similar questions have been asked over the centuries and some Christians have rejected and do still reject the practice of praying for the dead. The Armenian Church is obviously not one of those Christian groups.

Prayers for the dead, which are well attested from the Old Testament, and requiem services are based on an understanding derived from the Holy Scriptures and particularly from the New Testament. We believe that the faithful who are deceased are still the Lord's: *If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living* (Rom 14:8-9). The faithful who are dead are merely asleep in

Christ. This concept, which is in St. Paul's epistles (1 Cor. 15; 1 Thes. 4 and 5) is one of the basic teachings of the Armenian Church, and the term 'asleep' in its past participial form [*nun-chets-ya*՞] is used formally in reference to a deceased person.

Like the faithful who are alive, the faithful who are deceased are a part of the corporate body of Christ and therefore of the Church. Those who are asleep in Christ and have reached the end of their earthly lives in the faith are referred to as the 'first born' or the Victorious Church. Death does not separate us, the living, from those who are asleep, since God the Father made Christ *the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all* (Eph 1:21-22). And if we are truly *members of his body* (Eph 5:30), we must follow *the will of God in Christ Jesus* for us, by loving each other, by *always seeking to do good to one another and to all* and by praying *constantly* (1 Thes 5:16-17). As stated above, we as individuals pray not only for our own selves and our family members, but also for the entire body of Christ, the church, which includes those who are asleep in Christ. In this regard, our church fathers since the sixth century cite the prayers of the wretched mother who pled with Elisha to revive her dead son (2 Kings 4) and the tearful supplication of the widows that led St. Peter to revive Tabitha (Acts 9). On the basis of these Abraham, bishop of the Mamigonians, concludes: "Now, if the prayers of relations can bring one back to life from death, then the power of God is very great; therefore let us who, living, ask for remission of their sins through God's forgiveness, trust that they who die in hope shall receive remission of their sins" (*The Hist. of the Caucasian Albanians by Mouses Dasxuranci*, translated by C.J.F. Dowsett, Oxford Univ. Press, p. 30.)

The Scriptural evidence also suggests that those who are asleep in Christ pray for themselves and for us. That the souls of the deceased are conscious and concerned about the living is best reflected in Christ's story about poor Lazarus and the rich man. The latter begs the patriarch Abraham to send someone to his five brothers still alive to warn them of what is in store for sinners (Luke 16).

The indissoluble union of the living and the victorious Church is also the basis for seeking the intercession of the saints before God. Asking a saint for his/her intercession merely means that we ask him/her to pray for us.

Part III: The Duration of the Mourning for the Deceased

Service on the day after the internment

Before anything is said about the duration of the mourning period and the services following the internment, one must answer a question frequently raised by parishioners. Does one start calculating the time of mourning from the day when the deceased has died or from the day of his internment? This was never an issue in the old days, since the deceased is buried on the day that he dies. If the death occurred later in the day, the burial took place on the following day. Today, in countries where there is a wake prior to

the burial, time should be calculated from the day of the burial services and the internment.

In the Old Testament one encounters different traditions about the length of the mourning period after the demise or the internment of an individual. The services in our Church that follow the internment are derived from ancient Hebraic practices. Our service at the grave site on the day after the burial seem to fall back on the one-day mourning and fasting that is recorded in Samuel 1:12 and more clearly in Samuel 3:35. In the first instance King David mourns for King Saul and his son Jonathan and in the second, for Abener. The mourning, accompanied by fasting, continues after the burial until the sunset. In our present practice of holding service at the grave site on the day after the internment, which is no longer observed in the parishes of the Eastern Diocese, the major prayer said by the priest has a section in which God is implored to relieve the mourning and the sadness of the bereaved and to accept their moderate tears as a pleasing token and not as a cause for anger. The priest also prays to God to console their hearts by sending His grace and to strengthen their perplexed souls by dispatching the Holy Spirit. (It must be noted that the prayers in the funerary services at home/funeral home, and at the church do not contain any words of consolation for the bereaved. These are to be found only in the final long prayer of the internment service and in the short service right after the internment, which is done at the home of the deceased.)

Requiem service on the third and seventh day [yotnorék] after the internment

In the Old Testament mention is made of a seven-day fasting/mourning period especially in connection with the burial of the remains of King Saul and his three sons. The inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead *took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh and fasted seven days* (1 Samuel 31:13). A seven-day period of mourning/fasting was traditional among the ancient Hebrews as also seen in the case of Joseph who *observed a seven-day period of mourning for his father* (Gen 50:10) Jacob. A seven-day period is also mentioned in Job's case, when his three friends commiserated with him, weeping, and renting their robes, sprinkling dust upon their heads and sitting on the ground for *seven days and seven nights* (Job 2:12-13).

Notwithstanding these citations that have a direct bearing on our practice of holding a seventh-day service at the grave site, St. Krikor Datevatsi, a fourteenth century theologian, states in his *Book of Questions* (p. 391) that our tradition is based on the Divine command cited in Numbers 19:11-12, namely, *“He who touches the dead body of any person shall be unclean seven days; he shall cleanse himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, and so be clean; but if he does not cleanse himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not become clean.* St. Krikor Datevatsi also refers to a “third-day service,” which is no longer observed for laymen. In a Christian context the seventh-day cleansing process is for the deceased. The prayer of the seventh-day service states: *Receive [O Lord] his/her soul in a place of light and in a place of rest, among the saints and the ranks of the righteous, and rest him/her in the lap of Abraham with your other illustrious saints.*

The key word is the Armenian *soorp* [*saint*], which means ‘one who has been cleansed.’ The seventh-day service also marks the end of intense mourning on the part of the bereaved.

According to St. Krikor Datevatsi, in his days the Armenian Church also observed the beginning of the new month after the internment. Unfortunately this author gives us no clue whether there was a special requiem service on that occasion. In modern practice, it is customary in certain communities to observe the Saturday evening after the internment when the bereaved and their friends gather at the home of the deceased and the parish priest says a prayer. This observance is called *Giragamood* [*‘Sunday eve’*].

The Forty-day Mourning Period

The forty days of mourning [*karasoonk*], says St. Krikor Datevatsi, has as its precedent the wailing over Jacob/Israel. The Scriptures, however, merely refer to Jacob’s dead body being embalmed by Egyptian physicians: *So the physicians embalmed Israel; forty days were required for it, for so many are required for embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days* (Gen 50:2-3). For this passage the Septuagint has: *And they fulfilled forty days for him, for so are the days of embalming numbered.* It seems as if St. Krikor Datevatsi has mistaken the days for embalming with the mourning period. But his comment and our tradition are based neither on the Hebrew Scriptures nor on the present reading of the Septuagint, but on the ancient Armenian version of the Bible, which reads: *and the embalmers embalmed [literally, covered] Israel. And his forty days were fulfilled; for so were the days numbered of those who were buried.*

We saw above, in the examples taken from the Old Testament, and know from various Armenian writers that besides wailing for the dead and other similar expressions of grief, the bereaved also abstained from eating rich foods, drinking and even bathing. The association of mourning with fasting and the example of Jacob presumably led to the present practice of observing a forty-day mourning period, which is now very popular among us. The practice was probably further developed under the influence of the forty-day Lenten period, during which the Church requires absolute abstinence from rich foods. The fortieth day of the internment marks the end of mourning, when the bereaved make a request for and participate in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, following which they go to the grave site for a requiem service. Today the requiem service is held in the church and a shorter service is done at the grave site.

The significance of the first anniversary [*dareleets*] of the internment, and thereafter an annual observance of the burial is not clear, but the Book of Rituals does mention the *dareleets* and in our present practice the tradition has been retained. At the first anniversary the family of the deceased makes a request for and participates in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, following which they go to the grave site for a requiem service. Today the requiem service is held in the church and a shorter service is done at the grave site. The other anniversaries can be observed in the same manner. The annual observance is probably ancient, since it was faithfully implemented in the case of martyrs.

In the case of the *karasoonk*, the *dareleets* and the annual observance the bereaved ask for the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. This is important to know, since the Divine Liturgy is celebrated for the entire church, both for the living and for the members of the ‘victorious church.’ In medieval times, people made substantial donations to monastic institutions and requested for the celebration of the Divine Liturgy on behalf of the souls of their beloved. The inscriptions on the walls of monasteries bear witness to this practice.

Hokehankeesd

The common requiem service [*hokehankeesd*] is, as stated above, usually conducted five times a year, on the day following the major feasts, and is held at the grave-site, following the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. In most modern Armenian cemeteries, the Divine Liturgy is celebrated in the cemetery chapels. In the past, all the requiem services required the preparation of food and its distribution to the poor. This was the Armenian Christian way of providing for the deprived. This tradition is partially observed today in the form of the *hokejash*.

Madagh

Madagh, the ancient love feast of the early Christians, is in its modern context usually a service in memory of a deceased person. But on many occasions the ritual can also be held for general votive purposes or for a particular purpose. In all cases it involves the slaughter of animals such as sheep, poultry and so on. The service is done not at the grave site but near or on the grounds of a church, monastery, pilgrimage site or a holy place. It is imperative that the cooked meat be distributed to the poor.

These services, practices and traditions give us an opportunity to pray for our deceased dear ones and to receive consolation through the grace of the Holy Spirit.