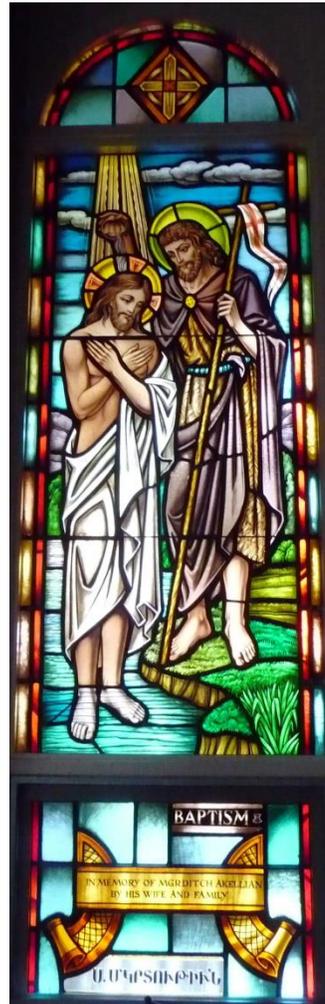


NATIVITY & BAPTISM



“In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to give him homage...’ they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.” (Matthew 2:1-11, NRSV)

The Armenian Church celebrates the holy birth (*Sourp Dznoun*) of Jesus Christ on January 6. In Armenian tradition, this feast day commemorates not only the birth of Christ, but also His baptism by John the Baptist, his revelation as God incarnate, and the arrival of the Wise Men. The Baptism is

commemorated through the "Blessing of Water" ceremony, which follows the Divine Liturgy on January 6.

On the eve of the Feast of the Nativity and Theophany of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Jrakalouyts Divine Liturgy (the lighting of the lamps service) is performed in honor of the manifestation of Jesus as the Son of God (theophany). It is customary for the faithful to hold lit candles during this special service. On the following day, the mystery of our Lord's baptism in the River Jordan is remembered in the ceremony of the *Jurorhnek*, or the "Blessing of Water."

In ancient times, this ceremony was celebrated by the riverside or sea shore, but, for various reasons, it is now performed inside the churches. During the ceremony, the cross is placed in a large bowl of water, recalling Christ's immersion in the Jordan River. Blessed oil, or Holy Chrism (Muron), is dropped into the water from the beak of a dove-shaped container, symbolizing the appearance of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove at the baptism and the voice of the Father proclaiming to all that Jesus is His Son.

The Holy Chrism is prepared in Holy Etchmiadzin (the Mother Church of Armenians) and is blessed by the Catholicos assisted by the bishops. Muron contains olive oil, balsam and the essence of forty different flowers and herbs. At the end of the ceremony, members of the congregation are given the blessed water to drink, thereby sharing Christ who is the Living Water. As water is essential to the life of the body, drinking the blessed water is essential for eternal life.

Why January 6? Even at the time of the Holy Apostles, the traditions in the Christian churches in the different parts of the world were not uniform. In fact, the Birth of the Lord was probably not observed at all in the very early Church. Later, the mysteries of the birth and baptism of Jesus Christ began to be observed on January 6. By the end of the 3rd century, Christmas in Rome was celebrated on December 25, which coincided with a major pagan feast and allowed Christians to celebrate without notice and persecution. The Eastern churches, meanwhile, continued to observe Christmas on January 6. The Armenian Church has maintained that ancient tradition to this day, whereas the Greek-speaking Christian world switched to the Latin tradition at the end of the 4th century.

Armenian-American households may exchange Christmas gifts on December 25, since it is the custom in American society to do so. In some of our churches in the United States, it has become traditional to observe the feast of St. Stephen the Proto-Martyr on Christmas Eve (December 24), though that feast is movable and may not always fall on December 24.

If possible, the faithful should fast during the seven-day period preceding January 6, as a week of fasting is traditionally observed before each of our five major holy days. On the evening of January 5, families attend church and participate in the celebration of the Christmas Eve Divine Liturgy as the church starts each new day at sundown. They customarily return on the morning of January 6 to participate in the Divine Liturgy and Blessing of Water.

Inscriptions read:

Baptism - In Memory of Mgrditch Akellian by His Wife & Family - Installation 1965 Construction
Nativity – In Memory of Mardiros & Haiganoush Khachmanian by Mr & Mrs Peter Jesraly
Installed during 1965 Construction

ADAPTED FROM TEXT FOUND at <http://www.armenianchurch-ed.net/feasts/feastschristmas/about/>