

SERMON FOR ASSUMPTION SUNDAY, AUGUST 18, 1991

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, AMEN.

*Blessed art thou who art all blessed among women.*

These words are chanted in the Armenian Church every year on the feast of the Assumption of the Holy Virgin. We Armenians, unlike other Christians, always commemorate the anniversary of the dormition and assumption of the Holy Mother of God to Heaven, an important feast of the Church on a Sunday, the one that is closest to August 15th. On this day we also bless grapes and distribute them to the faithful.

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The Assumption of the Virgin is a very ancient feast, celebrated by the Armenians with great respect and joy. According to a tradition transmitted to us by very early Christian authors, our Lord promised His mother to have her bodily carried to heaven after her death. When the Holy Virgin passed away, Christ's disciples buried her body. Soon thereafter, the Apostle Bartholomew, who had been away at the time of the burial, requested to see the body of the Virgin for the last time. In the first century such a request would not have been unusual considering the burial customs of the ancient Jews. For it was customary to lay the body of a deceased person in the cavity of a rock, a tradition which is still practiced today in some parts of the Middle East.

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When the Apostles opened the grave of the Virgin, they discovered no trace of her body inside. The empty grave is still in existence today near the garden of Gethsemane and is the site of pilgrimage. The Armenians and the Greeks jointly hold the honor of guarding the sacred site.

The Assumption of the Virgin's body to Heaven, like the Incarnation and the Resurrection, are matters of faith. Trying to refute or explain such matters according to the laws of physics would be a futile exercise. We cannot question them, since they are beyond our comprehension. Although we are taught since early childhood to be logical and critical, we cannot apply these principles to faith since it does not fall into the category of things about which our knowledge derives

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through the process of logical thinking. Faith is a different kind of knowledge beyond logic.

We may be unable to explain scientifically how the Virgin was translated to Heaven, but we are well aware from the Scriptures why she was eligible for such an unusual honor and glory. The fact that she bore the Word of God within herself for nine months and gave birth to the Incarnated Word of God indicates that she was different from all the other women in creation. As the hymn states, she was the all blessed one among women. She was chosen by God because she was God-fearing, sinless and humble before her Lord. Since the time of the first created man, while he was still inhabiting the paradise, there had not been a sinless human being.

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We consider the Virgin as the archetype of the saints and look at her as an exemplar for us. Her present state in Heaven gives us hope that on the day of the Last Judgement we shall also be deemed worthy of becoming dwellers—in both body and soul—of the Kingdom of God. But it is important that we imitate our model, the Holy Virgin, in as much as we can, so that we may reach her level. We must strive to be like her, God-fearing, free of sin and humble, in order to be worthy of bearing Christ within ourselves. The communion we receive from the hand of the priest must actually make us experience the presence of Christ within ourselves. This is possible if we follow the Holy Virgin's example by submitting our will and ego to God's will, show our humility by setting aside our

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self-pride and make an effort to cleanse ourselves of sins. It is not easy to admit one's mistakes; our pride prevents us from admitting them and as a result we rationalize the major and minor sins we commit. And so, sins run rampant and control our lives. We lie, covet, cheat, gossip, indulge in pleasures beyond measure and commit the seven deadly sins and justify our actions and deeds by saying that we have done nothing illegal. Jealousy, deceit, gossip, gluttony, anger, arrogance, laziness and so on are not illegal but they destroy your souls. We must all be on guard at all times and never relax from correcting ourselves. Our goal must be the sinless state of the Virgin Mary as she lived on the face of this earth two thousand years ago.

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The Armenian Church blesses grapes on the day of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin for a specific reason. During the ceremony the deacon announces that we pray to God so that He grant us the blessed grapes as physical and spiritual nourishment. This is made possible through the crucifixion, burial and Resurrection of the Only Begotten Son. So that we would receive this gift, we must ask for the intercession of the Holy Bearer of God, through whom Jesus Christ was given to us "as the fruit of life and immortality." The grapes symbolize "the fruit of life and immortality." Christ likened Himself to the true vine. We must listen to His words: "Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me."

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On this day we have the joy of witnessing the vine branch bearing fruit. The elevation of a fine young man such as Michael Keyishian to the diaconate is an important event, since he is preparing to enter the service of God. Michael is a St. Nersess Seminary graduate. He already spent some time in Holy Etchmiadzin and will go Jerusalem to complete his education at the St. James Monastery before he becomes eligible for ordination. May God bless him and all of you. May the blessed grapes you take home with you today become a source of physical and spiritual nourishment for yourselves and your families so that you practice your faith and deserve to be called Christian. Amen.

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