

We lived this last 10 years confronting an unprecedented disaster, a tsunami caused by nature. Such a tragedy adds to the burden human beings and particularly youth face as a result of human-made tragedies, such as wars, violence, poverty, unemployment, persecution, and the world's overwhelming sense of meaninglessness and uncertainty. These are times when people question, pray and yearn for spirituality.

Indeed, the word “spirituality” which is widely used today, is employed in different contexts and with different connotations. In Christian life, spirituality means entering into communion with God, being with God.

Being with God: Is this not the very meaning and purpose of Christian life? Is this not the way a Christian should live his or her life? God became man in Jesus of Nazareth in order to be with us. The evangelist describes Jesus Christ as Emmanuel, which means God with us. In fact, in Christ God became a man with us, like us and for us in order to restore the image of God that had fallen in human beings. Through the incarnation, by becoming man, God recovered the authentic humanity in human beings. In Christ, God became the true life of the world.

Christian spirituality invites us to acknowledge Christ, in word and deed, as the centre and the purpose of our life. Christian spirituality calls us to fill our entire life, thoughts and actions with Christ, and it challenges us to follow Christ as the only way of our life.

Indeed, Christian spirituality is essentially life-centred and life-oriented. It is deeply rooted in Christ. The Christ-event is the recreation of life; Christ is the life. Hence, whoever is in Christ is endowed with a new quality of life, with the “*abundant life*”, the “*eternal Life*” (John 1:16).

We expect our youth to sustain and enrich their lives with the spirituality that is rooted in the Bible, in the teachings of the Armenian Church and which has been experienced and witnessed for centuries by our Church.

The world of today offers many kinds of spirituality with attractive names. Our youth are called to avoid the false spirituality that cause moral decay, endanger identity, destroy community, abuse religious principles and traditions and promote violence and death.

Indeed, following Christ means to become the promoter of life-centred and life-oriented spirituality. The Armenian Church, with its rich spiritual heritage and moral teachings, can offer a life-centred spirituality to the youth as they prepare themselves to become the leaders of our Church and people.

The Bible In the Armenian Christian Tradition

When I consider the role of the Bible in the Armenian Church and in the life of the Armenian people, I am reminded of the role played by blood as it circulate in the human body. Throughout the history of the Armenian Church, the Bible has occupied, as it does today, a central place. It gives the liturgy a special significance, a strong sense of communication with the presence of God. And the dominant presence of the Word of God in the liturgy is intended to communicate to the Armenian people the love and the care of God. For their history is truly understood only when one understands the essential influence of the Bible with its record of eternal; truth for salvation through God's word and deeds.

Now, I am fully conscious that I am not here to make rhetorical statements or to exalt the Church I represent or the nation to which I belong. What I have said above must be substantiated by concrete examples from the history, liturgy, literature, and present-day life of the Armenian people.

The Name

Let me then begin with the very name of the Bible. The full Armenian name for it is ASTOUADSASHOONCH, regularly used by the ordinary people, and not confined to a class of ecclesiastics or theologians. It means *Divinely*

Inspired Book. But the Bible is often called simply ASTOUADSASHOONCH, which means *The Breath of God*. The name has its origin in St Paul (II Timothy 3:16); but whereas Paul uses the idea in a casual way, the Armenians have recognized in it a rich theological reality which, indeed, defines the bible in its deepest and truest sense. The word points to the very essence of the Armenians' attitude. For them, the Bible actually is the Breath of God that springs and spreads out in the form of a spiritual and intellectual power to bestow grace and wisdom which transcends the literal meaning of the word as such. If the Bible, as we shall see later, has exerted a strong impact upon the life of the Armenian people and has occupied a unique place in Armenian history, this word, ASTOUADSASHOONCH, with the spiritual and theological connotation it generates in the minds of the Armenians, has a great deal to do with its influence.

The Bible in History

Let us now look at the Bible from the perspective of Armenian history. When did the Armenian people first come into direct with it?

The Christian faith preceded the text of the Bible in Armenia. As early as the first century, apostolic missions brought Christianity to our country. According to the earliest tradition, Christianity was first preached in Armenia by *St Thaddeus and St Bartholomew*, two of the twelve Apostles of Jesus. A continuous stream of missionaries came from both Cappadocia, northwest of Armenia, and from Edessa in the southwest, representing the two main traditions Eastern Christendom: those moulded in the Greek and Syriac languages and cultures. The foreign missionaries trained Armenians to help them in their evangelistic task, and the Bible was liturgically read in Greek or Syriac, depending on the area of cultural affinity. Thus, the southern regions received the Syriac influence, and the western and central areas heard the Bible in Greek. Until the beginning of the fifth century, and particularly in the second half of the fourth, organized groups of monks travelled around the country and preached the Gospel, reading from the Bible in Greek or Syriac and then orally translating it into Armenian and commenting on it in Armenian. They were officially known as "Translators" (*VERDSANOGHK, which means also interpreters*).

But this method of spreading the Word was discouragingly ineffective. Historiographers of the fourth and fifth centuries have unenthusiastic testimonies about the state of Christianity in Armenia. Although the people were baptized as Christians, these commentators usually complained about the indifference and apathy of the people; in fact, the new converts were not being led to Christian life, because they had no direct access to the Word of God in their own language. They knew of the Bible, but they did not know the Bible. Christianity seemed to

them something, as it were, outside their national, domestic lives, imposed upon them and alien to their own cultural ethos.

In the words of a fourth-century writer, Faustus of Byzantium, (*PAVSTOS BIUZANDATZI*) “day and night the monks intensely poured Christian teaching upon them (the people), as if it were a torrential rain falling from clouds; but none of them, not one single person, could understand a word”. There was a kind of unseen but impenetrable umbrella between the Word and people! The Bible, in the ears of the Armenians, was a foreign language which could find no direct way to their hearts and minds.

A fifth century historian, Lazarus of Pharbi (*GAZAR PARBETSI*) describes the lifelessness of Christianity in Armenia at the opening of the century: “The Church worship and the Scriptural Lessons were conducted in the Syriac language in the churches and monasteries of the Armenian people. The inhabitants of this big country (Armenia) received no benefit from them because they could not understand the Syriac language”.

Evangelistic work under such circumstance could at best be a slow process with disheartening effects on the preachers. It is true that *St Gregory the Illuminator* had officially converted the Armenians, and *King Tiridates III* had proclaimed Christianity as state religion as early as in 301; but this conversion was simply of formal and official nature. The nation needed to deepen its Christian faith by absorbing it into the whole fabric of the national life.

And surely there could be no other means of achieving such a vital task than by making the people have direct access to the original record of the Christian faith – the Holy Scriptures. A Church without the Bible in the hands of her faithful could not stand very long nor remain very firm in the midst of a pagan world. The Armenian Church Fathers were deeply conscious of the urgent need for an Armenian translation of the Bible. But at this time no Armenian Alphabet existed.

Finally, at the beginning of the fifth century, a Church divine, a monk, *Mesrob Mashtots*, devoted to missionary action in the remote provinces of Armenia, succeeded in devising an alphabet adequate to render all the subtleties of Armenian pronunciation. The great work of translation followed, under the wise and masterly guidance of *St Sahak the Catholicos* and *St Mesrob* himself.

The translation was first made from Syriac version of the Bible. Later, between 430 and 440, it was thoroughly revised on the basis of a text of the Greek Septuagint which was brought from Constantinople by Armenian students who had been sent there, as in other centres of high learning, to be closely acquainted

instituted a widespread persecution of Christians in his own territory. The Emperor wanted Hripsime for his wife, for her exceptional beauty, but she refused to marry him for being heathen, and thus she was forced to flee with her companions and to take refuge among the rocks of Mt. Varak.

The Emperor heard of her escape and sent soldiers after her and the 40 nuns to apprehend them. Hearing of this, Hripsime hid the relic of the Cross of Christ on Mt. Varak and continued her escape with her companions to the capital city of Armenia. At that time Armenia Proper was an independent kingdom and outside of the jurisdiction of the Roman Empire.

In Armenia, when King Drtad heard about the arrival of this Christian group of nuns into his territory, he ordered them to appear before him. At the first sight the King instantly fell in love with Hripsime for her beauty, and wanted to marry her; but Hripsime refused him, again for the same reason, because the King was heathen.

The King was violently enraged, and all the nuns were martyred on the spot; but their martyrdom forever changed the destiny of the Armenian people, by becoming the first Christian nation by the royal edict of the same King Drtad, who was changed from a sinner to a saint.

The Cross remained hidden among the rocks of Mt. Varak for 300 years. Tradition tells us that in the year 650 A.D. a hermit named Thodik, while praying on Mt. Varak, saw a vision of a luminous Cross with light radiating around it; this luminous vision indicated to him the place where the Cross was hidden; and thus the relic of the true Cross was discovered miraculously, hence the name "the Cross of Varak."

The Catholicos of the time, St. Nerses the Builder, hastened to Mt. Varak and verified the authenticity of the miracle of the relic and proclaimed the discovery of the true Cross of Christ as a feast day, naming it the Holy Cross of Varak. This is the historical sketch of the feast. As you see, the Holy Cross of Varak is genuinely an Armenian feast day dedicated to the Holy Cross of Christ.

In a symbolic way it is the Cross of the Armenian people. No other church has any nationalized feast day of the Cross. Later the Monastery of Varak was built on that spot and became a great center of learning and cultural activity, until the time of the Genocide.

It is very interesting to note that the Armenians were not satisfied having set aside three feast days of the Holy Cross, which are universally celebrated by all the ancient churches; for the Armenian people this was not enough, and they