

## **TRANSFIGURATION - VARTAVAR**

Today is a major feast day, celebrating the transfiguration of Jesus on Mt. Tabor (Matt.17:1-9). It was a mystical transfiguration or change that His body underwent for a moment during his earthly life to reveal His divine essence to three of His apostles - Peter, James and John.

Being a major feast day, its message holds special significance for us whose meaning is shrouded in a mystical act from which it is to derive. The basic lesson of this feast is one of change. It tells us we will have to undergo a change to approach God. We have an idea of change because our lives are subject to change. Cycles of one's life introduces periods of new and different awakenings. With the completion of each cycle, knowledge is acquired from the years of experience from which we gain insight into problems for the next period. Jesus revealed His divine nature to three of His apostles. A Pharisee, by the name of Nicodemus came to Jesus one night and wanted to learn about God. Jesus told him that he had to be reborn to which Nicodemus replied, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter his mother's womb a second time and be born?"

It is not possible to explain God's total existence by the use of logic or rationalism. Rational explanation in attempting to explain God has its shortcomings because of its inherent inadequacies. God is not a definition nor is He a set formula. Birth of the Spirit is a mystery that for us of the Armenian faith took place in the sacrament of baptism. The Church, the Bible, the whole creation works on the baptized to bring a constant awakening of God's Holy presence through new revelations. Through the years one experience enriches and becomes more mature through a spiritual life whose source is the Blessed Sacrament. Maturity is not a stagnant condition but one of continual growth. It is like a plant ever blossoming new and fresh flowers. One is reborn even in old age. It is the fountain of youth.

Jesus said, "He who believes in me as the scriptures" said, "Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water." Unlike the physical changes these revelations or spiritual changes continually make life anew and keep us young our entire life.

## **TRANSFIGURATION**

Transfiguration is the least known and least appreciated of the five major feast days. It is literally overshadowed by the others. Easter is the most prominent, and rightfully so, for without the resurrection all else would fail. Christmas, despite the commercial atmosphere surrounding it, conveys the 'Good-News' of the humanization of God. Holy Cross, celebrated during the season of harvest, when the school year and other related activities begin to swing into high-gear, takes on solemnity due to the nature of the season. The Feast of Assumption of Mary, more or less, is remembered more for the 'Blessing of Grapes' than the Gospel lesson of God through Christ preparing a special place for all of his children (including his mother) in his heavenly abode, (John 14:2). Lastly, the Transfiguration, returning once more to the Christmas message, addresses itself to the divinity of Christ, God in man, but on a much higher and sophisticated level. Jesus is no longer the child in a manger but a grown adult, mature person in his early thirties. Again, the ancient pagan practices, such as the sprinkling each other with water and the name Vartavar, meaning being 'afame with roses' a name which has come down from the pre Christian era leaving a more lasting impression than God's word advocating a basic change of human heart and behavior.

The message of Transfiguration is one of change. Much is heard about change today in American political life. It is the one word that has made Ross Perot very popular without even articulating a program. The message struck home because people were ready to listen. The theme would not have carried in the last election or maybe not in the next. But it finds a large audience today from which all candidates want to benefit. The reason is because people have become utterly disenchanted and disillusioned with the performance of all called to leadership, a malaise that the recent past has implanted on the hearts and minds of the people. The present is the product of the past.

Change is inevitable. Either a person changes for the better or for the worst. One cannot stay the same. The human body is undergoing constant change every second. That is how one grows from childhood to adulthood on to senior citizenship. If inhibited, one's condition worsens. The whole process ends when the operation of the physical plant shuts down. The change that God speaks of through Jesus' transfiguration is not cosmetic or one needing a minor adjustment. It is not an added cologne or haircut. It is one of deep significance requiring a drastic change...a major surgery. Too often the major messages of God are given a sugary coating in order to become humanly acceptable and palatable. God's son is not sacrificed to effect minor changes or a slight adjustment or even to prompt verbal acknowledgment to His existence. The change sought requires discipline that is not in agreement to human inclinations. Humans do not like nor enjoy this change. It is required, though, to improve one's condition. The alternative is not a status quo, the staying the same, but the worsening of the present condition.

What was made possible by the resurrection to enjoy the fruits as seen in the Assumption of Mary calls for the active participation in the Transfiguration where the dead and the living both are brought to life. A change where no longer does the past catch-up to the present but leads to the future. Change is inevitable. The sooner this is accepted one's existence is not only assured but more important, granted a better life.

**Unto Him (Jesus) is due glory, dominion and honor, now and forever, Amen.**

This is the third Sunday of the Feast of the Transfiguration that remarkable event in the life of Jesus of Nazareth which took place on Mt. Tabor when He revealed His divine nature, His divine being to three of His Apostles, Peter, James and John. The Feast Day is designated as one of the five major Feast days on the church calendar year.

The commemorative celebration is designed to make us mindful of our former state as the children of Adam and our calling through Christ, the new Adam, to become the children of God once more.

As the children of Adam we are the inheritors of a human nature which has become corrupt because of sin. Corruption is decay. Thus we are subject to die and to having diseases and sicknesses. The contamination of the elements in the universe and the corruption of the human mind and soul prevail because of sin. For all the power of worldly wisdom and reason and the genius of the human mind we are, unable to overcome death because of the embedment of corruption in our being.

We are called to become the children of God through Jesus Christ, the new Adam, who being sinless is incorruptible by nature. We become the children of God by submitting our will to the will of God thereby joining old to the new and making the old new. This is possible by allowing God to be a part of us and allowing Him to work within us by His Holy Spirit in directing the thoughts of minds,

inclinations of our hearts and ordering the behavior of our lives. The old is transformed into a new state that it enjoyed once before in the beginning and even more.

Where this has taken place there is a struggle for the new not to return to its former condition one of corruption and contamination. The old desires to regain the power and authority of its former state, is constantly endeavoring to weaken the new with the intent of eliminating it.

As long as man retains his attachment to the new, Christ and remains faithful to his calling as children of God through the new Adam, he can continue to enjoy his freedom from ways of the old which held him in bondage. Because of the new Adam, Jesus Christ always remains victorious thus reigns over the old eternally by virtue of His Holy Resurrection from the dead. For this reason we sing praises in our prayers to Him saying "unto Him is due glory, dominion and honor now and forever. Amen.

### **Why Still Vartavar?**

The canonical calendar book "Feast Day" was compiled and set forth by the Catholicos Simeon in the 18th century. On the cover page the chronological progression of the book is outlined beginning with St. Gregory the Illuminator. One of the major headings in the book is the canon of Transfiguration of Jesus Christ, which is one of the 5 major feast days celebrated annually in the Armenian Church. Immediately following, the word Vartavar appears, denoting that, that Sunday when the feast of Transfiguration is celebrated, is called the Sunday of Vartavar. All subsequent Sundays of this major feast use the name Vartavar. In all of the miniature calendar books issued annually by the major centers of the Armenian Church which enumerate the order of service for the day of a particular year, preference is given to the name of Vartavar over Transfiguration for the first Sunday of this major feast and all subsequent Sundays during the seasonal duration of that holy day.

The major feast of Transfiguration recalls an event in the latter part of Jesus' earthly ministry, a happening of major importance, the reason why it is considered among those regarded as major. It is about a happening that took place on Mount Tabor and witnessed by three of His apostles, Peter, James and John. In a vision, witnessed by all three, Jesus revealed His heavenly glory as the Son of God. The voice of God the Father was heard by the apostles during the vision in which He expresses His pleasure in His Son and exhorts the apostles to take heed to His word. The prophets Moses and Elijah also appeared in the vision but not in the resplendent appearance of Jesus. Moses represents the Law as expounded in the Old Testament and Elijah the prophetic aspect. As a history of the people of Israel, the Old Testament has two major divisions: "The Law" and the "Prophets." The Armenian Church uses several names to describe this episode in Jesus' Life. The most common is "The resplendent" figuration" while two other names conform to the English usage of Transfiguration, or the altered figuration of Jesus. The word Vartavar which became associated with the major day, has nothing to do with any of the above mentioned. It means dressed or decorated with roses. It has its roots in the pre-Christian era belief of the Armenian people, centered on the goddess, Anahid. Hers was the most important feast day during the heathen period. Each year her temple was filled with roses. Anahid was considered to be the mother and sustainer of life. King Artashes (Artaxias) sent a courier to her temple in Eriza to pray before her statue so that she would grant him recovery from his illness. When the early Armenian Church fathers experienced difficulty in changing the people from their ancient practices, they wisely incorporated them into the life of the church, giving them Christian meanings. Ancient practices were Christianized. What is surprising is the continued use of the name and giving it priority over the other

names denoting the Christian and biblical significance of the feast day. One can understand why this was necessary hundreds of years ago but why should the name associated with a non-Christian practice be given preference over that relating to an event essential to man's salvation? The Old Testament would not be part of the Bible if it were not for the New Testament. It would be a collection of books considered holy by the adherents to its belief, but devoid of the "Good-news" message of salvation. In the case of this particular major feast, the Armenian Church Fathers opted to return a part of the old and give it primacy importance. It may be for sentimental reasons or because of nostalgia but Christianity was not founded for nostalgic or sentimental purposes. The past is important, an indispensable tool in the daily operation of man's life. It conveys valuable information and experiences to the present age. It should be remembered and days set aside to commemorate important events so not to repeat past mistakes but rather to build on their accomplishments to serve the common good. It should not, however, be considered nor classified above those deemed crucial to human life now and in the future. It would be like putting an old patch on a new suit of clothes in order to make it look better. Can a new suit be made from "old" patches?

Vartavar was a wonderful ancient Armenian feast day. It can and should be remembered in educational discussions, seminars and retreats on ancient Armenia practices or talks at social gatherings but its place on the calendar of the Feast of Transfiguration is outdated. Only a name reflective of the event surrounding the Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ on Mount Tabor should be used, in both the Armenian and English languages- The Feast of Transfiguration or Resplendent Figuration of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Feast of the Transfiguration /Vartavar**  
**""Holy God, Holy and Almighty, Holy and immortal**  
**Who was revealed on Mount Tabor, have mercy upon us."**

God has a plan and we are all part of it. God does not need it but we do, because we need to be told and explained to. We are the ones who need direction. Tell me, we often say, so that I will know what to do!"

This plan of God is composed of five parts and if put together like pieces of a puzzle, a full picture emerges as to what this plan is all about. The five parts of the plan are the five major feast days of the church calendar year. One of them is, "The Feast of the Transfiguration" found in the Gospel according to Matthew 17:1,2. And after six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light." Jesus' appearance changed. The three Apostles, Peter, James and John witnessed this event seeing Jesus' divine nature, His Godhood. They believed Him to be God, as we see in Peter's statement which he said on behalf of the apostles telling Jesus that, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God". (Matthew 16:16)

Since the plan is for us, what significance does this happening hold for us?

It tells us that we, in order to approach God, must undergo a change; a change of heart, attitude, behavior, etc. That is to say, we are not to lean upon the inclinations of our heart, or trust in the desire of our human nature to lead us in this life; but rather we are to seek-out that which God has planned for us as revealed to us by Jesus through His Holy Church. Jesus tells Peter {Matthew 16:17,18}, "Blessed are you Simon Peter, for flesh and bone has not revealed this to you but my Father who is in heaven and I

tell you, you are rock and upon this rock I will build my church and the powers of death shall not prevail against it"(Matthew 16:17,18)

This is only one part of a five part plan. We will have to know what the other parts are and understand their meaning also if we are to know what the full plan is all about.

### **FEAST OF THE TRANSFIGURATION – VARTAVAR**

**"Holy God, Holy and Almighty, Holy and immortal Who was revealed on Mt. Tabor, have mercy upon us." [Trisagion (Soorp Asdvadz) for Transfiguration]**

God has a plan, and we are all part of it. God does not need it but we do, because we need to be told and explained to. We are the ones in need of direction. The comment is often heard, "Tell me, so that I will know what to do!" God's plan is composed of five parts; and if put together like pieces of a puzzle, a full picture emerges as to what the plan is all about. The five parts of the plan are the five major feast days of the church calendar year. One of them is an incident in the life of Jesus. "The Feast of the Transfiguration" as recorded in the Gospel according to Matthew 17:1,2 ..."And after six days, Jesus took with him Peter, James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart from the others and there He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light." Jesus' appearance changed. The three apostles, Peter, James and John witnessing this saw Jesus' divine nature as in His Godhood. They believed Him to be God, as seen in Peter's statement which he said on behalf of the apostles telling Jesus that, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God".(Matthew 16:16)

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\*A few lines further on, Jesus reprimands Peter telling him "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God but of man." Like Peter, a mortal being vulnerable to the whims and capricious tendencies of the human spirit, we too often find ourselves wind- tossed in the sea of life seeking a stable immovable rock upon which to rest and set our anchors. As a haven for our souls, the Church serves this purpose to steady and calm us during unsteady times in an uncertain world.

### **The Transfiguration of Jesus on Mt. Tabor. (Mt. 17:1-9)**

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us whose meaning is shrouded in the mystical act from which it is to be derived.

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It is not possible to explain God's total existence by the use of logic or rationalism. Rational explanation in attempting to explain God has its shortcomings because of its inherent inadequacies. God is not a definition nor is He a set formula. The birth of the Spirit is not the same as that of the body. The birth of the spirit is a mystery that for us of the Armenian Faith took place in the sacrament of Baptism. The Church, the Bible and all creation works on the baptized to bring a constant awakening of God's Holy presence through new revelations. Through the years one's experience enriches and becomes more mature through spiritual life whose source is the Blessed Sacrament.

Maturity is not a stagnant condition but one of continual growth. It is like a plant ever blossoming new and fresh flowers. One is reborn even in old age. It is the fountain of youth. Jesus said, "He who believes in me as the Scriptures said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'"(John.7:38) Unlike the physical changes these revelations or spiritual changes continually make life anew and keeps us young our entire life.

**St. Matthew. 16:1-16**

**Jesus said unto his disciples, "But who do you say that I am" and  
Simon Peter answered and said, "You are Christ, the Son of the living God."**

The Tabernacle Feast Day of Transfiguration commemorates the event in Jesus' life that took place on Mount Tabor before the Apostles Peter, John & James in a vision in which the Prophets Moses and Elias appeared; a vision Christ's face shone as the sun and His raiment was white as the light. It was the revelation of the divine nature of the Son of the Living God - one of the Holy Trinity. God became man so man could be like God, perfect and now able to return to his former state as it was in the Garden of Eden

The transfiguration therefore was the full revelation of God frightening the apostles witnessing this divine revelation. The Apostles were afraid as mankind would be if it found itself in the immediate presence of God in all of His Glory. Suddenly a Voice came from heaven stating that "This is my Beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased; listen to him."

As they descended from the mountain Jesus charged them to tell no one of their vision until the son of man be raised again from the dead. The Revelation of God is a slow and economically wise process. It works through minds and souls of man, especially the heart persuading him to repent and recognize his true being by listening to the Word of God speaking within him and in his conscience returning him once more to life within the life graced again before God.

## **TRANSFIGURATION - VARTAVAR**

In the 3rd year of Jesus' ministry, the Apostles Peter, James and John went with Jesus up Mount Tabor and there witnessed the transfiguration of his appearance. Moses and Elijah appeared and talked with Jesus. The Apostles were dumbfounded that they did not know what to do or say and Peter speaking on behalf of them said to Christ, "If you will, let us make three tabernacles one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." At that moment, a bright cloud overshadowed them and a voice spoke from out of the clouds saying, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased; listen to Him." The Apostles became so afraid that they fell to the ground and hid their faces and as they came down the mountain He told them not to tell anyone of what they had seen until the Son of man rose again from the dead.

### **MEANING OF VARTAVAR** **(To Beautify with Roses)**

It was an old pagan custom to decorate the temples of Asdghig which is the Ashdishad and Innaan that later became the Monastery of St. Garabed, to decorate these temples with roses; on that day at the beginning of the Armenian New Year which began on August 11 and is called the month of Nuvasart (Nova-New, Sareda-Year, New Year). These two places were the center of pagan worship in Armenia and, therefore, a very important holiday. In order to offset the strength of that day, the Feast of Transfiguration with its glorious message of ornating the souls of man with a garment was established and the pagan custom incorporated such as decorating with roses, sprinkling each other with water with a green plant and the releasing of doves. It was an old pagan custom to decorate the temples of Asdghig which is the Ashdishad and Innaan with its glorious message of ornating the souls of man with a new garment was established and the pagan custom incorporated such as decorating with roses, sprinkling each other with water with a green plant and the releasing of doves. Although paganism is no longer with us these practices have remained and even the name Vartavar has become synonymous with Transfiguration. Although they were pagan customs the faithful would like to think of them as being a tradition handed from the Old Testament in the days of Noah when he released a pigeon which brought back an olive branch that indicated that life was nearby.

### **Transfiguration**

This was not an act of God through Christ proving to Himself that He was able to do this or that Christ was truly the son of God, but an apparition for the benefit of all mankind. All of His revelations and acts have deep practical and pragmatic significance. Man must change is the real substance of this message. Like a piece of dough in the hands of a baker or a piece of cloth in the hands of a dressmaker, are subject to change to serve a purpose, so to man must change his ways; man must change his appearance in the eyes of God so that he can be used for a purpose that God has intended for him. God works slowly and economically. He takes His time, but when the time for action comes, it's both fast and furious. Jesus didn't tell His apostles to go spread word around as to what had happened. When Peter answered Jesus' question as to who he thought Christ was and when Peter answered "thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God", Christ charged the disciples to tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ. For God there is a time and a place for everything.

## **TRANSFIGURATION**

Mt. Tabor - change of appearance of Jesus in revealing His divine nature where the Prophets Moses (law) and Elijah (Prophets) appear talking with Jesus as to what was to happen to Him in Jerusalem. Peter's proposal to make three tabernacles: Reason being so that moment would be with them forever - as the saying goes "Don't take this away from me". A cloud comes and covers them and a voice from the cloud that of God the Father indicating that...This is my son in whom I am well pleased." The experience is overpowering, something that the three Apostles cannot stand up to face. They fall to the ground and do not have the courage to rise up until they hear the voice of Jesus and feel the touch of His hand beckoning them to rise. He admonishes them to tell no one until after His resurrection. This event is recorded in the three gospels called the synoptic gospels -Matthew, Mark and Luke.

The 5 Major Feast Days tell us of some aspect of God's plan for salvation for members of the human race as an act of Reconciliation. The message is for a need to change, a change of direction towards God and a change of heart in order to enjoy God's presence who does not turn from us because His Love is one full of mercy, a merciful love for us, but who does not like nor approves of what we do. This is implied in God the Father's statement - "This is my Son in whom I am well pleased".

The messages of the Major Feast Days point toward the Feast of the Assumption of St. Mary into Heaven. She is a child of God accepted into eternal life which gives hope to all of us - children of God through adoption at the time of our Baptism. The Feast of St. Mary tells about the motherhood of God. Much is said about God's Fatherhood against the role of Motherhood; about Masculinity than of His Motherhood-Femininity. The two though are inseparable.

Mary's life of Pure and Sanctity helped her with God's help to retain her Spiritual Sanity, a delicate balance which can be easily disrupted. It is not difficult to lose sight of God to turn away back to old ways - Lesson of this feast is a constant reminder to strive to counteract the forces of evil which attempt (quite successfully) in turning us away from God. So to turn towards home with God's help our ways are needed to be acceptable by Him as that of His Son, Jesus, in order for us to hear His blessed voice saying "A child in whom I am well pleased".

### **Lesson: Wednesday before the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Transfiguration** **Matthew 18:15-18**

A portion of this morning's Gospel reading is a testy lesson dealing with some aspect of Christian ethics. It has to be understood in the context of the season in which it is read. Presently, we are in the season of Transfiguration. God's message to mankind through this particular act of Jesus' life is one of change. Man is called to change his ways so that they may be acceptable before God. In other words, it is a call to return to God and the blessings once had by us human beings as they were meant for us in the beginning. With this, a faith and trust is established in God from which an individual derives a faith and trust in one's own self. This is shared with others where an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect prevails which are the basis and solidarity of brotherhood.

In this morning's lesson, a serious problem arose between two persons who are of the same faith. Often we hear the remark, "What's the difference since we all believe in the same God." This is true in the general sense. The question arises though is not only 'in who', but the way we believe. These two



persons had a common belief, that is the manner and way that they believed in God concerning church teachings, customs, and traditions. As such, there was a bond of trust which united them which extended over the other members of their church. The seriousness of the sin committed dissolved the trust they had between themselves. Distrust arose. The one who recognized the problem saw the harm that it was bringing to the committer or the sin and the danger it presented if it penetrated into the congregation. The victim was confronted with the difficult task of bringing this to his brother's attention. It is not easy to tell a close friend with whom you have much in common about his personal weakness. It could undermine their friendship.

If the personal approach of speaking alone is unsuccessful, he is called upon to bring 2 or 3 others with him to persuade their brother. The person who has been sinned against will have to convince the others of the wrong committed, and they will have to agree as to the seriousness of the act. They will have to be willing to accompany him in their meeting with the brother at fault. The guilty brother may not look upon this as a gesture of goodwill but rather as an attempt to "bully" him into submission. It could cause him to become emotionally upset and to lose his composure. It is difficult under such circumstances to maintain a conversation where reason and understanding prevail.

If this fails, then he is asked to bring it to the attention of the entire faithful, those belonging to the same church. This may prove the most difficult part and an ultimate test of brotherhood of believers. All are concerned as children of the same family for the well-being of their brother and sisters in faith, but they are equally concerned with the integrity and health of the church as well. In allowing a gross transgression to remain uncorrected is an invitation for the same and similar infectious diseases to spread amongst themselves so it is brought to bear upon the transgressor to recognize his wrongdoing and to hear from him his desire for change in his life.

If this is not successful, then the person is to be considered as an unbeliever, that is those who although may display a confidence in themselves, do not have faith in the future of mankind because of their lack of faith in God; or considered as a tax collector who were despised in the society in which they lived, even those who attempted to live an honorable life such as Zacchaeus mentioned in the Gospel of Luke (19:1-10).

In closing, the Apostle Peter asks Jesus "how many times do I forgive him (my brother)? Seven times?" The Lord's reply was "seventy times seven" meaning an unlimited amount of times.

The method called for is a difficult one to implement. If done properly can assure the continued good health and solidarity amongst a particular family of believers. If not done properly, it could bring untold damage, even the demise of the church. The overall spirit though is a call for change from the old ways to one founded and established in faith and fidelity.