

Araj Asdvadz

I've been working furiously on the Avedis newsletter this week since I have been back, so my mind is in PR & communications mode. The essential question for communications is how do you capture people's attention and the essence of an event, theme or idea with the fewest words & images? Since, as of today we are in the Season of Assumption, I've been puzzling over how to convey the meaning of today's great feast on the front cover of the Avedis, concisely and powerfully, with one image and a few words. The official name of today's feast isn't PR friendly. ՏՈՒՆ ՍՈՒՐԲ Աստվածածնի Վերափոխման եւ Խաղողորհնէք: The Feast of the Assumption of Mary the Mother of God and the Blessing of the Grapes, as a title, is a bit of a communications nightmare. It's much too long, and the words are not easily grasped. (I will be kind to you and not ask what exactly is the Assumption). But I will ask you to ponder how you would capture the meaning of this feast with a couple words and an image. I'll give you a hint, it's on the cover of today's bulletin.

This splendid image does indeed capture much of the meaning of today's feast, and we will get back to it soon, but let's start with the words. I found a few taglines which may work to capture the profound meaning of this feast in a few words. How about, 'You'll never come second by putting God first.' That's nice but still eight words. 'Put God first you'll never be last.' That's only seven. How about simply, 'Put God First.' That is hard to beat with just three words. But actually in Armenian you can beat that! We have a great idiom, Առաջ Աստուած/ Araj Asdvadz. God first. Its full meaning doesn't come across in English. It's not a statement or command, 'God First.' It's the shortest of prayers which I encourage you to say all the time and why not cross yourself. Araj Asdvadz, kind of like 'God willing,' is a prayer of surrender, but even more humble. No one knows the will of God, but Araj Asdvadz; wherever God is, whatever God wills, whatever God's timing; Araj Asdvadz, we trust and we follow.

What does Araj Asdvadz have to do with The Feast of the Assumption of Mary the Mother of God and Blessing of the Grapes? Well, today's feast is nothing less than our yearly, tangible reminder of who belongs in first place. In the blessing of the grapes we carry on the Old Testament commandment of God that whatever is first; first born child, first born animal, first fruits of harvest, these belong to God. As grapes were always the first fruit to come out of the harvest, we acknowledge these first fruits as belonging in a special way to Him who gave the entire gift of this year's harvest. In the yearly blessing of grapes we refresh ourselves in a life lesson we are to use every day, every hour; if not for God we would have nothing, we would be nothing. And as we grow stronger in this discipline of putting God first, we are promised that all other important things will fall into place, 'Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,' says Jesus 'and all these other things will be given to you as well (Mt 6:33).'

Now there is one problem with communications, catchphrases and slogans. They make things very simple, but that does not make them easy. It is so easy to say that our priority is God, then family, then work, but it is so hard to live it. Somehow the priorities of our deepest self get usurped by the priorities of our lesser self. A famous business man put it this way: "I believe in God, my family and my work, but when I get to the office, I reverse the order." Why do we reverse the order? Why do we tend to spend our lives on less important things rather than the most important ones? Well, apparently it's part of our great tragic flaw as humans. From the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, down to each of us, we tend to put ourselves before others and our anxieties before our trust. We want to be gods, rather than let God.

The good news, though, is that we have help, a wonderful example and method to follow in growing out of our bad habits. This is where the image we chose for our bulletin cover conveys profound meaning. The image conveys that the rule of Araj Asdvadz is not just for God's creatures, but runs all the way to the top; to God himself. With the arrival of Jesus into the world, even God would follow his own rule of offering up his first fruits, his first born to the world. Through the humble obedience of Mary, whose Assumption we celebrate today, God offered up his first-born son, Jesus, as the first fruit, the first man of the new Heavenly Kingdom. By His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, the path to salvation and eternity was opened to all humanity.

And so today, as we bless the first fruits of the harvest, let us always remember to offer the first of our time, the first of our riches, the first of our love to God. To recall that before we were born to our parents, we were born to God. To know that before we put on our clothes each morning, we are to put on Christ. To trust that before anything good comes, God comes first. Such that, Araj Asdvadz, in his grace we will grow to the full stature of what we were called to be; now and always and unto the ages of ages, Amen.