

Church Education: Learning About Our Theology

By Linda Jevahirian

Do you believe in God?

Yes.

What is your religion?

Armenian.

Armenian is not a religion.

Yes, it is. I go to an Armenian church.

What is an Armenian?

A Christian.

So, what is your religion?

I told you, Armenian.

Being a Christian is so tightly wound into being an Armenian that it is can sometimes appear like they are one in the same. Because we are a national church, closely tied to the history and identity of our ancestors, and practiced within the customs of our culture and heritage, it is easy to overlook our religious doctrines and practices. If you are looking for ways to learn more about being an Armenian Orthodox this survey of the numerous educational resources available locally, regionally and internationally, both in-person and online is a good start.

The Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church

The Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church is an Oriental Orthodox Church in communion with five additional churches, including, the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo Church, the Eritrean Orthodox Tawehedo Church, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, and the Syriac Orthodox Church. This list may seem alien, however they all share one critical belief – that Jesus Christ is both divine and human in one person. This conviction separated them from Eastern Orthodoxy in 451 A.D. following the Council of Chalcedon.

The Armenian Orthodox Church is apostolic, which means that it derives its authority from the succession of clergy handed down (literally by a placing of one bishop's hand on the head of the newly ordained), from the two apostles who spread the gospel to Armenia, Thaddeus and Bartholomew. Although we venerate these apostles, we consider St. Gregory the Illuminator to be our Patron Saint.

Church Worship

Worship in the Armenian Orthodox Church can be intimidating. First there is the Classical Armenian Language, *Krapar*. The haunting chants are overwhelmingly beautiful, but it can also seem like it is simply *clergy language not really meant for us lay folk to understand*. For this reason, the Divine Liturgy Book in the church pews has a complete translation and transliteration (the English pronunciation of the Krapar) of the service in both Armenian and English. Following along with the text is a good way to start learning the prayers and the structure of the worship. If you get distracted, which is bound to happen when there are so many things happening at one time, the page numbers are on the digital monitor to the left of the altar.

Then there is what seems like a combustion engine on all cylinders. The clergy are doing one thing, the choir another, the congregation another. Hands flying, people chanting, plates passing, candles burning – this part is not in the pew book. So how can we possibly connect to this ancient ritual if we do not know what is really going on?

Although there are nine distinct hours in the Armenian liturgical day, there are only a handful of services that are commonly celebrated in modern worship. The Divine Liturgy, *Soorp Badarak (Holy Sacrifice)*, is the central prayer of the Armenian Church that is celebrated on Sunday morning. At its heart is the sacrament of Holy Communion (*Eucharist*).

The Morning Service (*Aravotyan Zhamerkootyoon or Matins*) is celebrated immediately before Badarak on Sunday morning. During Lent the Sunrise Service (*Arevakal*), replaces the Morning Service. The Rest Service celebrated during the evenings of Lent is attributed to a twenty-four-stanza prayer, With Faith I Confess (*Havadov Khosdovanim*), by St. Nersess the Graceful, a twelfth century Armenian Catholicos. All three services have booklets with English translations that are often distributed at the lobby desk.

Does attending these worship services, even if you are following in the books, get you any closer to understanding the Armenian religion? Maybe, but maybe not as thoroughly as you would like. A little additional instruction can help you gain more insight into who, what, why and how. After all, these ancient rituals are complex in their origins and their application.

[The St. John Armenian Church website](#) has a plethora of information that will orient you to the faith, the liturgical services, the organization and hierarchy of the church, the

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sacraments, the prayers, the church history and the Christology of the church. It also includes the Weekly Church Bulletin, the Torchbearer and a link for donations.

Bible Study at St. John Armenian Church

The origins and practice of Armenian theology are rooted in the bible. Yes, the bible can look massive, be difficult to understand and can cause further confusion. For this reason, I recommend attending Father Aren Jebejian's Bible Study Class. This class meets two times per month on Monday night. It is an excellent way to delve into the deeper meaning behind the words of Jesus Christ and how our practices and beliefs are connected to the New and the Old Testament. These sessions will advance your faith journey and motivate you to go a little deeper than the printed page.

Catechism and Church Chats at St. John Armenian Church

Father Aren prepares lectures and presentations that address topics of the Armenian Church. Past subjects have included Badarak 101, church hierarchy, the heavenly hosts, Christology, the clergy vestments, the sacraments and many more. There are occasional guest speakers, such as book authors and experts on current events in Armenia, Jerusalem and the diaspora. These ninety-minute sessions are a great way to learn about the practices of the church and how to relate them to your worship.

Coffee with Hayr Soorp Zoom

A relatively recent ministry, Father Aren meets with parishioners via Zoom to answer questions about the church and other Armenian issues. The weekly check-in encourages fellowship and is a source of spiritual inspiration. There are no set topics, just an opportunity to discuss concerns and get connected with each other and with Hayr Soorp. The Zoom platform allows friends locally as well out of town to catch up.

Reverend Father Diran and Yeretzgin Rosalie Papazian Annual Parish Retreat

This seminar is a brilliant opportunity to explore the religious themes of the Armenian Church. For thirty-one years this program has taken place at St. John Armenian Church during Lent. In 2026 the program featured Eastern Diocese Primate Mesrop Parsamyan. Bishop Mesrop delivered an enriching presentation, "Connecting with God," an in-depth look at this ancient tradition and the role of the bible in Christian Meditation. Participants experienced a meditation in the church sanctuary led by Bishop Mesrop.

Saintly Women's Day

The St. John Armenian Church Women's Guild celebrates Saintly Women's Day each year in the spring. This program is part of the Women's Guild Central Council, an organization of the Eastern Diocese. The beauty of this service is a day dedicated to honoring the courageous, virtuous and faith filled women who have contributed to the strength of our faith. Their legacy is remembered through prayer and an inspirational history of the saints in the church sanctuary, followed by a speaker and lunch. In 2026 Saints Ashken and Khosrovitoukht were venerated.

The virtues of all our saints, female and male, are an essential part of the overall worship of the Armenian Church. Most notably are the Martyrs of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 who were elevated to the status of saints in 2015. Armenians pray to God through their saints, who have direct access to God – including St. Mary, Mother of God (*Asdvatsastin*).

Holy Week

The week before Easter is Holy Week. The services re-enact the eight days leading up to Jesus Christ's resurrection. The days of church worship start with Palm Sunday (Lazarus Saturday is the day before) and the Opening of the Doors (*Trnpatsek*) with subsequent days that include an evening Vespers Service remembering the Wise and Foolish Maidens, Prayers for Healing, Washing of the Feet followed by the Betrayal and Passion of Our Lord, Order of the Crucifixion, Entombment of Our Lord Jesus, Reading of the Scriptures before Divine Liturgy on the Eve of Easter (*Jrakalooyts*), Easter Sunday, and Merelotz which is a prayer of remembrance of the dead the day after each of the five major feasts. Holy Week is full of valuable lessons about Jesus Christ's Passion and Resurrection, and they are all brought to you live at St. John Armenian Church!

Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of America

The Eastern Diocese is home to Vemkar, the Zohrab Center and the Sacred Music Council which have myriad educational materials online. The Diocese also publishes a free weekly [eNewsletter](#) that includes the scriptures of the week, a prayer of the week, a list of upcoming saints and feasts and coverage of church related events. There are often enriching links to articles and videos about Armenian theology and the practices of the church. This link will take you to a [Bread & Salt video](#) about the opening of the

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doors service held on Palm Sunday. The Bread & Salt series is especially enlightening so look for additional videos while you are searching.

Vemkar

Vemkar is an online educational platform that includes resources for children and family, ACYOA, adult education, music, summer camps and the Armenian language. Educational series are held live on Zoom and recorded for viewing at youtube.com. Click here to access the video channel and look for the most current series [Ancient Paths, Living Wisdom: Spiritual Reading](#), as well as past lectures including a recent series on the Council of Nicaea. Vemkar also publishes the Armenian Church Daily Lectionary, (*Jashots Kirk*), a liturgical book containing the Old and New Testament passages for every day of the Armenian Church year. If you receive the Eastern Diocese yearly calendar the daily readings are on the back page.

The Krikor and Clara Zohrab Information Center

This organization is located at St. Vartan Armenian Apostolic Cathedral in New York. They offer in person events, such as book talks, lectures and film screenings, as well as online sessions, such as Armenian language classes both modern and classical, monthly sessions about new books by Armenian writers that are co-sponsored with [IALA](#) (International Armenian Literacy Alliance) and [NAASR](#) (National Association for Armenian Research), and a research library where scholars, students, or members of the public can read onsite. Their library can be searched online on their website. NAASR and IALA are also resources replete with educational material.

St. Nersess Armenian Seminary

Although the focus of St. Nersess Seminary is on clerical education, they offer summer youth programs, retreats, and altar server programs. The [Sacred Music Lab](#) can be accessed on their website and includes a collection of musical scores and recordings of our church music. The same link includes information about the Sacred Music Council regional education sessions for clergy and for choir members.

The Armenian General Benevolent Union

The AGBU is the world's largest non-profit Armenian organization providing educational, cultural, socio-development and humanitarian programming. In addition to their charitable work, they offer [online classes](#) on language, music, art, architecture, history and culture.

Religious Art and Architecture

Religious art serves as a bridge between the tangible world and the divine, functioning primarily to express faith, educate believers, inspire devotion, and create sacred spaces for worship. It transforms abstract theological concepts into visual narratives, enhancing personal piety, fostering communal memory, and guiding spiritual contemplation.

Armenian churches are full of art depicting holy and sacred events. At St. John Armenian Church we are blessed with beautiful mosaics that illuminate our saints and the events of Christianity. The sanctuary is also decorated with paintings that illustrate the life of Jesus Christ. We acknowledge and revere these icons as they enhance our literacy of Christianity and remind us of what is important in our faith. When you are in the sanctuary, look up at the apostles illuminated in the stained-glass windows circling the dome.

Our own Rev. Father Garabed Kochakian recently exhibited his iconic paintings at St. John Armenian Church. They illustrate an exquisite walk through Holy Week. The collection is published in a booklet, [The Great and Holy Week - The Easter Story through Armenian Sacred Art](#), explaining the historical purpose and religious connection of each painting. See how much you can learn about these events just by looking at the pictures – every picture tells a different part of the story!

The Alex & Marie Manoogian Museum at St. John is also a walk through Armenian history and religion, including ancient manuscripts, sacred vessels and vestments. These works are published in a coffee table book, [A Legacy of Armenian Treasures: Testimony to a People—The Alex and Marie Manoogian Museum](#), that can be purchased at the St. John bookstore. To experience the museum, consider attending the Sanctuary and Museum Tour to learn more about the art and architecture of the church, as well as insight into the museum exhibits.

Sacred Music

The hymns and sacred music of the Armenian Church tell a magnificent story of our Christian faith and culture. From time to time, the Director of Music, Deacon Rubik Mailian, speaks about the creation and history of our music and the church fathers who wrote and composed it. Like the great art of the church, the music is one of the central teachers and illuminators of our faith. The St. John Komitas Choir will be celebrating their 100-year anniversary in 2027 so watch for upcoming programs.

Literature

Armenian literature is filled with books and publications about Armenian religion, history, culture and traditions. Visit the St. John Armenian Church Bookstore, which is open after church on Sunday, at the church picnic, at the church bazaar and by appointment.

A new addition to the bookshelf, [The Prayers of a Righteous Man: A Lenten Journey with St. Gregory of Narek](#), by St. John Parishioner, John Merigian is an inspirational book that accompanies the daily journey of Lent. St. Gregory of Narek's prayers are a theological and poetic expression of our religion and faith.

Pilgrimage to Jerusalem

The pinnacle of any journey through Armenian Christianity is a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in Jerusalem to experience the ministry of Jesus Christ and to witness the empty tomb. Right before your very eyes the life, death and resurrection become real. A visit to the Armenian Patriarchate located in the Old City of Jerusalem illuminates the deep connection of Armenians to the roots of Christianity. At the monastery, this walled campus within the walls of the Old City, are several Armenian churches, an Armenian school, an Armenian library of ancient manuscripts and an Armenian museum. Long, long ago Armenians walked 666 miles to Jerusalem to witness the empty tomb. This is the icing on the cake of the past, present and future of our deep faith, our exquisite culture, our ancient heritage and our continual unity as Armenians.

Rev. Father Vazken Movsesian

Fr. Vazken's ministry of online education can be found online at [Epostle.net](https://epostle.net) and at [Armodoxy for Today Podcast](#) on Spotify. His lectures and videos teach basic concepts,

as well as more involved issues of the church. This is a good place to learn about the practice and meaning of things like baptism, candles, crosses, the closed curtain, and more. He speaks to those who are seeking a deeper understanding of orthodoxy.

Conclusion

Discovering the origins and practice of Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christianity will illuminate and strengthen your faith. Using the resources outlined in this article is a passage into the greater journey, however, the extensive resources available in the stratosphere go far beyond this report, so start surfing!

Do you believe in God?

Yes.

What is your religion?

Armenian Apostolic Orthodox and I practice it through the lens of the Armenian Church.