

St. Vartan Church  
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*The St. Vartan Voice*

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Church Custodian: Wartkes Hagopian

Divine Liturgy Service—Sundays 10:30 a.m.

650 Spruce Street, Oakland, CA. 94610

Phone (510)893-1671

Fax: (510) 893-2102

Email: stvartanoakland@aol.com

Website: www.stvartanoakland.org



# St.VartanVoice

The Newsletter of St. Vartan Armenian Apostolic Church

Rev. Fr. Hovel Ohanyan, Parish Priest

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Fr. Krikor Zakaryan

## Holy Assumption: A Spark of the Divine

September 2020

A single feast day in our liturgical calendar illustrates the connection between the life in Christ and the abiding concerns of human existence. The “Blessing of the Grapes” is one of the most beloved ceremonies in the Armenian Church calendar. Most of us can recall people who would refuse to eat grapes until the fruit was “officially” sanctified by the local clergyman—a pious practice which dates back to an earlier era in the church’s history, when daily life revolved around the growing seasons of an agricultural society

Grapes do have a certain symbolic significance in Christianity (think of all the references which Jesus made to wine and to “the vine and the branch,” references which are still repeated in the Divine Liturgy). But for most people living during the early centuries of the church, the important thing about grapes was that they had to be harvested at a certain time of the year, and that, eaten as fruit or distilled into wine, they added something pleasing to life.

In other words, for our ancestors, the grape season meant both labor and recreation. Through the grape-blessing, the church gave it a further significance, one having to do with man’s sacred obligations to God. Thus work, play and worship were all brought together in this ceremony.

The church was in effect saying to its followers: “What is important to you—the labor of your days, the joy of your festivals—is important to God as well. His church is not some otherworldly institution which is concerned only with what happens to souls after they die; to the contrary, the church is deeply interested in the living, and in being a part of all the seasons of life.”

### An Intimate God

Such a sentiment flies in the face of the secular stereotype of Christianity as a puritanical and severe faith: an inhuman taskmaster that begrudges the sound of laughter and the joys of life.

But more than that, it is an example of what really sets our religion apart from other philosophies of life. The God of our fathers and mothers is not remote and aloof from human concerns. Indeed, He is profoundly moved by even the most ordinary experiences of life: our private troubles and our simple pleasures, the longings of our hearts and bodies, our gentle affection for family and friends. And God does not simply possess abstract knowledge of these matters; He has, if we may put it this way, first-hand experience in all of the human qualities, because He became a human being, lived among us, took on all our cares and concerns.

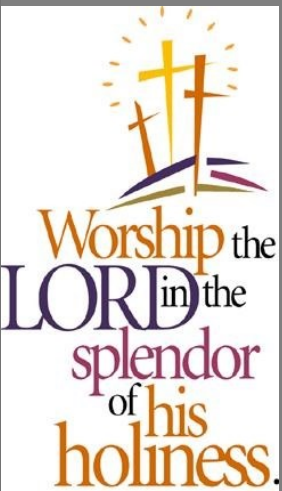
Far from demeaning human life, Christianity in the fullness of its teaching lends to mere life a new meaning which it never had before: a spark of the divine. And this new meaning is embellished and played out through the offices and sacraments of the church.

The occasion on which we celebrate the Blessing of the Grapes is a major feast day called the “Assumption of the Holy Mother-of-God,” and it, too,

### Bible Readings

Sept. 6 Mark 7:31-37  
Sept. 13 John 3:13-21  
Sept. 20 Mark 10:1-12  
Sept. 27 Matt. 24:30-36

Lift high the cross  
The love of Christ  
proclaim,  
Till all the world  
Adore His sacred name.



1 Chronicles 16:29



underscores a wonderful insight unique to Christianity.

The story of the Assumption concerns St. Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, and how having completed her life on earth, she was taken up in body and soul—"assumed"—into Heaven. This tender courtesy was performed by Christ many years after his Ascension, as a loving tribute to the mother who bore and raised him. What is interesting is how this story, which at first glance seems to be about the death of a pious soul, is transformed into a beautiful illustration of a very special—and very familiar—kind of love.

It is not uncommon in this world for grown children to want to share the fruits of their achievements with their parents, and to have their parents by their side. That sentiment is related to what Christ felt for his mother. Of course, this is comparing great things to small; but it is consistent with the Christian understanding that our common experiences of the world can offer us glimpses into the most cosmic truths.

### Something New in Heaven

One is reminded that before becoming man, God had no mother. The inhabitants of Heaven, the angels—beings of pure spirit—likewise have no mothers; only embodied, material beings do. Jesus touched on this general point during his earthly ministry when, in answer to a question about marriage in the Kingdom of God, he suggested that the ties binding us together on earth will not apply in Heaven (Mt 22:23-33). But the Assumption of Mary shows us another side of the story: even in Heaven, Christ's love for his mother endures. We might cautiously wonder whether Christ introduced something novel into Heaven, when he brought Mary to his side.

Once again, the simple, human love of child for parent is given that "spark of the divine," by being reflected in God Himself. And at the same time, perhaps, Heaven is granted a poignancy it did not have before, by bearing witness to the human love of a son for his mother.

Through the combination on a single day of the Assumption and the Blessing of the Grapes, the Armenian Church reminds us that God understands and embraces the entirety of the human condition. The things that are important to us—our work, our recreation, our connection to other human beings—are important to Him as well; in some measure He is with us through all of these things, sharing our heartaches as well as our triumphs, our defeats as well as our victories.

In becoming human, God reached out fully to us, His children. He did so not only to console us in our grief: He also wants to be with us in our happiest, most joyous moments. His presence in those times magnifies that joy, giving it power and meaning beyond itself.

By Christopher H. Zakian

### Our Deepest Gratitude

The St. Vartan Parish Council thanks the St. Vartan Ladies Society for their generous support of the Parish during the difficulties caused by COVID-19.

*"I thank my God every time I remember you."*

*Philippians 1:3*



### "Khanoot Update"

Thank you everyone for your support purchasing Khanoot items from Ladies' Society. We are currently sold out and appreciate your patience as we work to restock our freezer with your favorite Armenian goodies. We have started a wait list for upcoming items. Please contact Kristian Minasian at (408) 247-3772 to add your name, and ensure you won't miss out.

Construction of our online Khanoot has begun and we expect to be open in time for your holiday shopping. Visit [stvirtanoakland.com](http://stvirtanoakland.com) and sign up for weekly email to be notified as soon as we're ready to start taking your orders online.



Monday  
September 7,  
2020

## The Holy Cross and Armenian History

Every autumn, the Armenian Church celebrates the Exaltation of the Holy Cross—one of the five major feasts of the Church, and the most important of the four feasts of the Holy Cross.

The Exaltation refers to the True Cross on which Christ was crucified, which according to Church tradition was ceremoniously elevated for veneration on three occasions. It was first elevated by St. James the Apostle, the first Bishop of Jerusalem, who lifted the cross with the words, "We bow before thy cross, O Christ"—a formulation still used in the Armenian liturgy.

The second occasion involved the discovery of the True Cross after a period of some 300 years. In A.D. 326, Queen Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine, traveled to Jerusalem to identify the holy places associated with Christ's life. She authenticated the True Cross by placing upon it the body of a recently deceased youth, who was miraculously raised to life when he came in contact with the formerly discarded cross. According to tradition, the True Cross was overgrown with aromatic basil, which is used in the commemoration of the feast day today.

The third occasion came in the 7th century, when the Persians had seized the True Cross of Jesus after conquering the city of Jerusalem. Leading a coalition of forces, including Armenians, the Emperor Heraclius recaptured the cross and, en route to Jerusalem, passed with it through Armenia, where the cross was repeatedly raised up and venerated.

The cross is a source of great national pride for us as a khachagir—or "cross-bearing" nation. For over

the centuries, Armenians have borne Christ's cross with faith, hope and love. What was once an instrument of torture and death—comparable to the modern electric chair—became for us Christians the symbol of salvation, and victory over death. Naturally, to those with no faith, our veneration for the cross makes no sense at all.

Throughout our history, we Armenians have lived in the shadow of the cross. Armenians were (and still are) geographically situated on the "leading edge" of the Christian world. Having suffered for our faith in Christ, we have also shared in the passion of His Crucifixion. No wonder, then, that the cross would become preeminent among our national emblems, appearing on the domes and walls of our churches, on our altars, in our homes—even erupting out of the Armenian landscape, as stone khachkars. Imagine the impact this sign must have had on the minds of our ancestors in the Middle Ages! Everywhere they turned, the sign of the cross confronted their eyes in overt, but also rather subtle ways.

Our churches have cruciform plans, and our priests bless their congregations with crosses. We put chaplets with crosses on the heads of those making the marriage vow. Babies, both boys and girls, are given crosses at the time of baptism. We also give those children names like "Khachig" and "Khachadoor" (in medieval times, our ancestors used feminine forms of these as well). We even trace the lines of the invisible cross etched into the very architecture of the human body, when we make the Sign of the Cross.

During times of adversity and upheaval, the Holy Cross has been the most powerful support for the Armenian flock of Christ. And in times of peace, too, the sign of the Holy Cross has been and is our most abundant source of consolation. The cross casts its shadow over our lives, but it also sheds light, healing old wounds, and illuminating before us the way to God's kingdom. It guides us along a path of righteousness, whose ultimate destination is victory over the ills of the world.

—Very Rev. Fr. Krikor Maksoudian and Christopher H. Zakian

### Basil at the Foot of the Cross

The Armenian Apostolic Church celebrates the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (Khachverats in Armenian) on the nearest Sunday of September 15. The aromatic herb basil has long been associated with the Holy Cross. Etymologically, it is related to basileios, the Greek word for king. According to a pious legend, the Empress Saint Helena found the location of the True Cross by digging for it under a colony of basil. Basil plants were reputed to have sprung up at the foot of the Cross where fell the Precious Blood of Christ and the tears of the Mother of Sorrows. A sprig of basil was said to have been found growing from the wood of the True Cross.

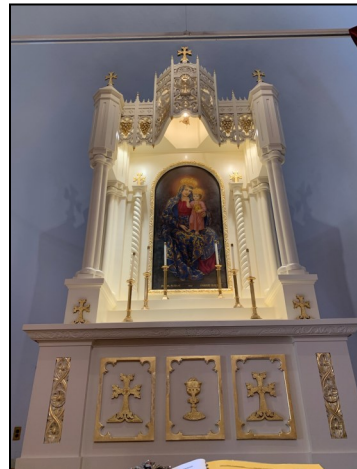
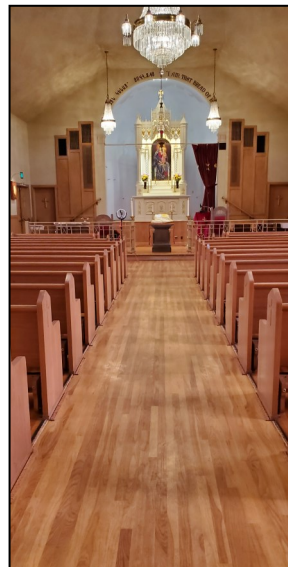




### Sanctuary Renovations

While St. Vartan Church remains closed for in-person worship, renovations have continued in the sanctuary. The old carpet has been removed. Fr. Krikor and Yn. Anush Krikorian, Seta, Nazar and Sevan Jindoian, and Wartkes Hagopian cleaned and repainted the altar. Fr. Krikor re-applied gold leaf to the crosses on the altar. The chandeliers were cleaned and the old lightbulbs were replaced with energy-saving LED lights. The walls, windows, and window sills in the sanctuary, balcony and entryway were dusted and cleaned.

The renovation will continue with new carpeting being installed, as well as tile for the floor of the main and side altars.



### Clergy Video Conference

Fr. Krikor Zakaryan and St. Vartan Chairman Dicko Shahvekilian participated with other Diocesan clergy and Parish Council Chairs and members of the Bay Area and the Pacific Northwest, in a video conference meeting with the Diocesan Primate on July 30, 2020.

Discussions included the reopening of the Saturday and Sunday Schools, the reinstatement of the Diocesan Camp program requiring the full participation of all parishes, without exception. The Primate presented a thorough report wherein he introduced the newest missions that have been established at the Western Diocese including the Bridging Generations and the formation of the Deacons' Executive Council, encouraging the engagement of all parishes in the God-pleasing missions. The former aims to cater to the religious and spiritual needs of the faithful between the ages of 20-40 and to bring them closer to God and the Armenian Apostolic Church through Bible Training Classes, educational lectures and pilgrimages. The Bridging Generations mission is meticulously designed to prepare the lay ministry leaders of tomorrow.

The latter, whose goal is to establish a deacons' database, would facilitate the inter-Diocesan communication between the altar servers. Other topics including immersion in the community life through college (meetings with Armenian Student Associations) and hospital visits, tending to the spiritual needs of the elderly, and praying with parishioners. More specifically, this organization of Deacons will organize fellowship opportunities like retreats, educational lectures, and spiritual discussions. Each priest was requested to assign one Deacon to the Council.

Other topics of discussion included the humanitarian assistance to Lebanon, missions and outreach programs in Armenia, the enhanced archival department of the Western Diocese and the implementation of security measures on all Diocesan levels.



### St. Vartan Church Parish Council gratefully acknowledges the following donations:

**In honor of Lisa Manoogian's birthday**—Don and Lisa Manoogian

**New technology for the church**—Don and Lisa Manoogian

**LED lights**—Edward and Armineh Jamgotchian

**Grape Blessing donation**—Dicko Shahvekilian, Claris Sarkis, Wartkes Hagopian

**Sanctuary renovations**—Gail and Robert Kezerian, Carole Chang

### In Memory

#### † Seranus Zeki

Hilda and Vahe Mener (Orphan Fund), Nadya and Arto Yagjian (Orphan Fund), Berc and Alice Eldemir (Orphan Fund), Ray and Reyhan Shepherd (Orphan Fund), Gary and Satenik Eldemir (Orphan Fund), Viktorya Arten (Orphan Fund), Aline Box, Uzun and Demirkian Families, Hasmig and Anto Cingoz, Rose Sagatelyan

#### † Sean Cassidy (Son of Michael Cassidy and Bev Terlep)

Harvey and Nora Hanoian

#### † Peter Hanoian III (Brother of Harvey Hanoian)

Vartan and Arlene Hovsepian

#### † Potts Cahill

Jack and Barbara Bousian

#### † Gohar Atebekyan

Kegham and Roxanne Boghossian

#### † Fr. Mesrob Sarafian for his book, *Life's Lessons Learned*

Caroline and Stuart Arakelian, Kathy Agajanian

### News From Our St. Vartan Family

#### Birth Announcement



Noeme Angel Azizian was born on July 6, 2020 to proud parents Shaunt & Lorena Azizian, and ecstatic big sister, Elise. The blessed grandparents are Ara & Angel Azizian and Ron & Liz Ojakian.

#### Bulletin Bloopers

*These sentences actually appeared in church bulletins or were announced at church services:*

The Fasting & Prayer Conference includes meals.

Scouts are saving aluminum cans, bottles and other items to be recycled. Proceeds will be used to cripple children.

The sermon this morning: 'Jesus Walks on the Water.' The sermon tonight: 'Searching for Jesus.'

Ladies, don't forget the rummage sale. It's a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Bring your husbands.

Don't let worry kill you off - let the Church help.

Miss Charlene Mason sang 'I will not pass this way again,' giving obvious pleasure to the congregation.

For those of you who have children and don't know it, we have a nursery downstairs.

Next Thursday there will be try-outs for the choir. They need all the help they can get.

Irving Benson and Jessie Carter were married on October 24 in the church. So ends a friendship that began in their school days.

A bean supper will be held on Tuesday evening in the church hall. Music will follow.

At the evening service tonight, the sermon topic will be 'What Is Hell?' Come early and listen to our choir practice.

Eight new choir robes are currently needed due to the addition of several new members and to the deterioration of some older ones.

Please place your donation in the envelope along with the deceased person you want remembered.

The church will host an evening of fine dining, super entertainment and gracious hostility.

Pot-luck supper Sunday at 5:00 PM - prayer and medication to follow.

The ladies of the Church have cast off clothing of every kind. They may be seen in the basement on Friday afternoon.



## Parish Council Update

My faithful and fellow parishioners,

Just this past Sunday, our halls were ringing, our streets buzzing and our kitchen and grill filling the air with the savory and unmistakable smells of Kabob and Boureg. The streets along our Church were lined with cars, all patiently waiting to pick up their pre-paid meals to enjoy with their family and in the safety of our own homes, providing our parishioners the opportunity to briefly visit each other, albeit from car-window to car-window. You could even see the excitement on everyone's faces, even through the masks to help protect themselves and others from the current pandemic we continue to face. As parishioners pulled up in their cars, along the McKinley Ave side of the church, they were greeted by Der Hayr himself as he handed out the grapes which were just blessed a few moments earlier and then moved up to our next "drive through" window where they were handed their meals to take home and enjoy.

In typical Armenian fashion, we created our own mini-traffic congestion. Cars stuck in gridlock on the street, as windows were rolled down and smiling eyes were soaking up the comforts and friendly faces of their fellow parishioners, the likes we haven't seen since the beginning of March, unbelievably almost half a year ago! It was both comforting and encouraging to see the turnout and the support you all provided to both our church and our community.

To say we had a great turnout for our first meal fundraiser would be an understatement, having sold over 220 meals, all of which will be a great benefit to the churches expenses. None of this would be possible without the dedication and support of our volunteers whom I'd like to thank here.

As they say, it truly takes a village, and this fundraiser was no exception. Please help me in extending a warm and heartfelt Thank You to the individuals who made this event possible; Our very own Der Hayr, Yn Anush, Emma and Grace; Nicole Vasgerdsian and Talia; Nazar and Seta Jindoian; Anto and Hasmig Cingoz; Nataline Jindoian; our master grill chefs, Bob Kezerian and Steven Donikian; Carole Chang; Ara Azizian; Zaven Kaneian; Kim Bardakian; Wartkes Hagopian; The Sahagian family, and last but not least, our pillars in this community, the entire Ladies Society.

Thank you from the bottom of our hearts and on behalf of the entire community family, without your dedication none of this would be possible.

We hope to continue to provide these types of fundraising events, and ask that you keep an eye out for our next event, which will be announced on our website at [stvirtanoakland.com](http://stvirtanoakland.com).

Gratefully, Dicko Shahvekilian

