

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY AND FORMATION



A GUIDE TO SPIRITUAL LIFE



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Written by Rev. Fr. Tateos R. Abdalian

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Preface

Don't let the title of this small treatise intimidate you.

Christian *Spirituality* simply refers to the activity of life for the Christian in communion with God. It is the occupation of the spirit, mind, heart, and soul, indeed the whole of one's life, as inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit of God.

In His farewell discourse to His disciples in the Gospel of John, Jesus says that after He departs, He will send them the Holy

Spirit: *I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever— the Spirit of Truth...It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you* (Jn. 14:16–17; 16:7). The presence of the Holy Spirit in us is the basis of our spiritual life.

In the Chrismation service, the newly baptized is anointed with the Holy *Muron*, which signifies the coming of the Holy Spirit to dwell in the believer and illuminate their senses, mind, and heart. Thus, the believer is an abode or temple of the Holy

Spirit. St. Paul says: *Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God* (1 Cor 6:19). He further summons us: *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship* (Rom. 12:1); and: *Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.* (1 Cor 10:31). A person who is a baptized Christian is inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit insofar as they listen and submit to the will of God in their life.

This can be overwhelming. Anyone of us may ask: *How am "I" to live a life like that when the world and I are filled with so much hatred, bigotry, anger, and evil?*

This booklet is meant to offer guidance for this challenging goal, using Scripture, Prayer, Worship, the Sacraments, and our own innate sense of right and wrong.

FOLLOW ME

Scripture tells us that Jesus chose twelve men to follow Him, to live with Him and learn from Him. Like all who are called to follow Christ, they first needed to undergo a process of growth and change, a process of devoting themselves to learning the teachings of their Master. For the Christian, we learn the teachings of Jesus by following His example in obedience to His Father through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the process of learning how to think and act within the context of the faith community, the Church. This process is called **Spiritual Formation**.

Spiritual formation has been defined as the ongoing process of God transforming one's life and character so that they reflect the life and character of Jesus Christ — accomplished by the Holy Spirit in the context of biblical community.

Spiritual formation is directed by the transformative works of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. Through discipleship, the believer learns to walk this new path and is changed. The essence of spiritual formation is hearing God in His Word, growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus, and bearing lasting fruit.

St. Paul proclaims:

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness,

carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. (Gal 5:19–23).

Spiritual Formation is inseparable from discipleship to Christ:

And so, the 12 men devoted themselves to their Rabbi, their Teacher, giving up their entire lives to follow and learn from him. (Luke 6:40).

The parting words of Christ to His Apostles were:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt 20:18-20)

Christ offers to mankind the joys and blessings of being one with Him. Learning and following Jesus’ teachings is a promise of closeness with God that becomes part of the fabric of life. This develops into a lifestyle which is intimate, open, and honest, true and abundant.

Doing all things to the glory of God is the

meaning and substance of life for a human being. This “doing” is the basis of Christian Spirituality: *Christian Formation*.

What is Christian Formation?

Christian Formation is what trains and allows us to understand and recognize the *culture* of the Kingdom of Heaven. Christian formation is not some ritualistic process of Church indoctrination that will turn us into modern-day religious fanatics. It does not give anyone a ‘pass’ to get into Heaven. Formation helps make us citizens of God’s Kingdom.

The Church has its own language (Scripture), customs, idioms (ways of speaking about and doing things), and its own context for viewing everything in this life and the next. Christian formation is only accomplished within the Church, for the Church is the earthly embassy of the Kingdom of Heaven. Like any embassy, that territory belongs to the homeland.

Christian formation is transformative - not legalistic - and requires attention to the interior life. Cultivating attentiveness in the spirit and maintaining stillness in the heart to listen to the *Holy Spirit* rather than other spirits takes work, guidance, and experience. Just as a physical body cannot be formed without effort and activity, so the soul cannot be formed by being idle or distracted. There are many spiritual practices or disciplines we can engage in to facilitate this process of transformation: solitude and silence, fasting and prayer, gratitude, worship, meditation and contemplation, service,

charitable giving, and many others.

St. Paul writes:

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Rom. 12:2).

St. John Chrysostom explains this passage:

For the fashion of this world is groveling and worthless, and but for a time, neither has ought of loftiness, or lastingness, or straightforwardness, but is wholly perverted. If then you would walk upright (or aright), figure not yourself after the fashion of this life present. For in it there is nought abiding or stable.

As we are called to Christianity, our union with God is a continual seeking of *transformation* into the likeness of God. We are pilgrims, always on the journey of *becoming* that which we seek to become, in this case, a Christian. It is a never-ending growth process, an ascent toward God, requiring a process of persistent and continual learning.

Why is it so important for the Christian not to conform to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of the mind?

The Commentary of St. Jerome (342-420) addresses this when looking at the relation of the branch to the vine in John 15:

The theme of this uninterrupted discourse is the relation of the Christian to Christ, the community of life that they share, and Christ's life

as the source of the good works of Christians. The figure of the vine and the branches presupposes that the Christian life is essentially one of activity, of bearing fruit: union with Christ is not only the condition of bearing fruit, it also demands this.

While there is the Gospel understanding of the relationship of Jesus to His followers, the allegory of the vine stems from the Old Testament account in Exodus, recounted in Psalm 80:8-11:

You uprooted a vine from Egypt; you drove out nations and transplanted it. You cleared the ground for it, it took root and filled the land.

The mountains were covered by its shadow, the highest cedars by its branches. Its branches reached the Mediterranean Sea, and its shoots the Euphrates River.

The psalmist prays for the return of God's saving presence in verses 14 to 19:

O God of Heaven's Armies, come back. Look down from heaven and take notice. Take care of this vine, the root your right hand planted, the shoot you made to grow.

. . . and for the coming of the divine power of the king who though a mere mortal, that is the son of man, is the man of thy right hand endowed by the Lord with more than human power.

May you give support to the one you have chosen, to the one whom you raised up for yourself. Then we will not turn away from you. Revive us and we will pray to you. O Lord God of Heaven's Armies, restore us. Smile on us. Then we will be delivered.

The passage from John's Gospel includes in it all the Old Testament associations of God's care and judgment on the vine, but at the same time goes beyond them by identifying Jesus as the true vine. Thus, Jesus is the true Israel, the Son of Man in whose stem is incorporated the branches, the branches being the people of God who find their fulfillment and life in Him.

Our Lord Jesus Christ says: *I have chosen you out of the world* (John 15:19). We have been called out of this world to become citizens of another world: the Kingdom of God. That Kingdom begins now, in this life, continues after we leave this world, and will reach its consummation at the Second Coming of our Savior. To dwell in that Kingdom, to be its citizens, we must be transformed. This transformation is the whole purpose of our lives as Armenian Orthodox Christians.

Transformation is a change, a conversion.

To journey toward communion with God is to have a beginning. His Holiness, Karekin I of blessed memory, during his pontificate as Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia, explained that it is at the Feast of the Nativity of Christ that the obligation

of mankind to make a personal effort in welcoming the Savior mystically begins.

Through Christ's incarnation God was revealed to human persons in personal form. Man, in his turn, being constantly in search of a Savior, a Messiah, a preacher of the truth, a source of happiness, went forward to meet him in his revelation. Deep in his soul he felt the breath of love, peace, concord, brotherhood for which he had aspired so long and so desperately.

He goes on to say:

The feast of the Nativity of our Lord, therefore, does not remind us only of the descent of the heavens upon the earth, but also of the elevation of the earth to the heavens, i.e. the effort of human beings toward the discovery of the Truth, of God himself.

The coming of the Messiah brought about change in the Jewish world. This *effort of human beings toward the discovery of the Truth, of God himself*, while it changed everything that the Jewish people were wanting, expecting, and waiting for, now became incumbent upon them and all of mankind; to seek a willingness to see this revelation.

Recall the story of Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, a Pharisee, and a member of the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Council for the Jews, who comes to Jesus at night to meet and question him (John 3:1-2):

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night

and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person."

Nicodemus recognizes Jesus as a "teacher come from God" as he openly confesses. But he was so shackled to the traditional ways of his people and his Old Testament roots that it was basically impossible for him to understand when Jesus said: "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God." His obvious lack of understanding Jesus' words is seen by his question of "How can a man be born when he is old?"

While Nicodemus understood that Jesus is a teacher from God, meaning one whose teaching is truly in accord with God's mind, Jesus will show him that He is from God in a way that Nicodemus has not yet understood.

Nicodemus associates himself with those who believed in Jesus because of the signs and miracles He had been working. As with the disciple's initial faith, this profession of Nicodemus will be of no value unless it fixes itself upon Jesus as He truly is.

Before him stood the revelation of the Kingdom of God, yet it was almost unreasonable for him to understand Christ's words which pointed to a new dimension of spiritual life. Nicodemus was slow in his immediate response and was hesitant to take this step to the new vision that had dawned upon him by the words of Jesus.

The Kingdom of God cannot be seen merely through miracles like the ones that impressed Nicodemus. It can only be experienced through a

spiritual birth from above.

At the very beginning of our Divine Liturgy, we state the destination of our liturgical offering:

Blessed is the kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and always and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

We cannot prepare ourselves for “Thy Kingdom come” if the Kingdom of God has not already been given to us, if we have not had the taste of that Kingdom already communicated to us. We could not make it our hope and desire if it were not revealed to us as a glorious and radiant beginning in Jesus Christ.

John makes a point to tell the reader that Nicodemus had come to Jesus out of the darkness. Throughout John’s Gospel, we see this contrast of darkness and light, symbolic of good and evil, ignorance and knowledge. Only after the crucifixion of Jesus and at the end of the Gospel, is Nicodemus now in full light for all the world to see:

Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. (Jn 19:39-40).

In our search for spiritual growth we must first ask the right questions. We are called to go through a deep and self-revealing examination, to see our potential and the opportunities which are offered to us.

It is through personal commitment and choice that we will begin to understand our faith and be transformed by it; to seek the Kingdom of God; to make it understandable to others. We must see its truth and power, otherwise our understanding will be nothing more than intellectual, abstract, and non-committal.

Repent and Prepare

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'" (Matt. 3:1-3).

To repent means that we regret our past conduct and now choose a different path. We are to search our minds, to understand our wrongful actions and do things differently; to choose the path which leads to life (Matt. 7:13-14).

As we repent of our transgressions, we also must *prepare the way of the Lord*. No undertaking, challenge, or mission of importance can be successful without proper preparation, which always requires a period of learning.

St. Paul writes to the Christians of Ephesus:

In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of

the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory. (Eph. 1:13-14)

We are to seek that *word of truth* by learning of it and hearing it in the proclamations of our Lord. We are to strengthen our faith and *believe in Him* by learning from Him. We are to seek being *marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit* in order to receive our inheritance of becoming God's own people. We are to be *marked* by our baptism into the Lord and our chrismation into the Church.

As Jesus was about to begin His earthly ministry, we read:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. (Matt 3:13-15).

Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan (of blessed memory) explains: *The Lord Jesus himself received baptism and chrismation in the river Jordan. He was baptized with water at the hands of John the Forerunner and thus showed his solidarity with sinful men. He expected his followers to be baptized with the baptism with which he was baptized and so instructed his disciples (Matthew 28). The Church faithfully and diligently observes Christ's ordinance to baptize all those who wanted to enter into his Kingdom. Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no*

one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” (Jn 3:5). *Through baptism and chrismation, a person enters the Church as a member of the body of Christ. His original or adam-ic sin is forgiven. He takes upon himself the obligations as well as the privileges of membership in the Church of Christ and has personally committed to the Christian cause as a citizen in the Kingdom of God, where a new status is conferred on him.* Each person who bears the seal of Christianity is challenged by the words of our Lord: *“Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.”* Christianity is more than intellectual truth or metaphysical abstraction. It is Jesus Christ.

The First Letter of Peter explains:

Baptism which corresponds to this [the days of Noah where eight were saved through water. (I Peter 3:20)] now saves us, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him. (I Peter 3:21-22).

Of Water and Spirit

In the Early Church, there was much required in preparation for baptism by adults seeking to become Christians. *Catechumens* - candidates preparing for baptism – had to be introduced to the

representatives of the Church by someone who was already a Christian. It had to be determined whether the intention of the candidate was honest and what his condition was in life. The Church was strict with regards to the conditions for those wishing to enter her fold. And this strictness and high standard only served to increase the magnetic power of the Church.

When the three years of the catechumenate were over, the candidates for baptism had first to be examined. But this was not an examination regarding the knowledge which they had acquired, but rather an examination of their conduct to ascertain whether it corresponded with Christian ideals:

And when they are chosen who are set apart to receive baptism, let their life be examined, whether they lived piously while catechumens, whether they honored the widows, whether they visited the sick, whether they have fulfilled every good work.

It is quite tragic that Baptism has been reduced to a ceremonial ritual with limited understanding of its importance. Today, with infant baptism becoming universal, this preparation has become merely one of historical interest. While baptism is the sacramental entrance of the catechumen into the body of Christ – the Church – it is a reminder of the significant role it plays in our spiritual transformation.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters,

by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Rom. 12:1).

To be able to offer ourselves in this way, one must have the *courage to struggle and triumph over the Adversary*, for the presence of the devil does all that can be done to prevent us from achieving what St. Paul demands.

If there is one thing we learn from spiritual experience, it is that evil is not to be explained but faced and fought. This is the way God dealt with evil period he did not explain it. He sent his only begotten son to be crucified by all the powers of evil so as to destroy them by his love, faith, and obedience. This is the way we must also follow.

In the baptismal rite, which is an act of liberation and victory, the exorcism comes first because on our path to the baptismal font we unavoidably "hit" the dark and powerful figure that obstructs this path. It must be removed, chased away, if we had to proceed.

Exorcisms therefore are the beginning of the fight that constitutes the first and essential dimension of Christian life.

After rejecting the temptations of the devil to turn away from God the Father, Jesus declared to him: *"Away with you, Satan!* In the Baptismal Rite of the Armenian Church, the candidate echoes Jesus' words by turning to the West, symbolic of

darkness, evil, and ignorance, and states their Renunciation of Satan.

We renounce Satan and his every deceit, his wiles, his counsels, his goings, his evil will, his evil angels, his evil ministers, his evil agents, and his every evil power, renouncing we renounce.

At its conclusion, the candidate (the baptismal sponsor in the case of an infant) turns to the East, the light and knowledge of God, and offers the baptismal creedal declaration:

We believe in the all Holy Trinity, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and the annunciation of Gabriel, and the nativity of Christ, in his baptism, in his passion, and his crucifixion, in his three day burial, his resurrection, his ascension is God, his sitting at the right hand of the Father and his awesome and glorious second coming, we confess and we believe.

As Fr. Schmemmann's statement explains, only after we remove the obstructive evil force of Satan from our lives can we begin to follow Christ and allow Him to play that significant role in our spiritual transformation.

Through our baptism we arise from the waters clean, as a new creation, unshackled from past sins, and released from the old filth. We put on the garment of salvation, Jesus Christ, to enable us to have an open mind and receive transformation in becoming a Christian.

We have the joy of being named a Christian.

We receive the Holy Spirit, the true life which comes from the life-giving breath of God, to become a member of the Church.

With the power God has now bestowed upon us, it is incumbent upon us to obey the words of Christ: *But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.* (Matt 6:33).

A Guide to Spiritual Life

A sampling of various resources that will serve as guideposts are suggested here:

Scripture

Each year the Eastern Diocese sends their yearly calendar to the faithful. On its back pages you will find the Scripture readings prescribed for each day. Start to read them, at least the Gospel passage, each day. You can also access these by going online to vemkar.us → Resources → Liturgical Calendar → Daily Scripture Reading, or by downloading the VEMKAR app on your mobile phone and navigating to the “Liturgical Calendar” section on the home page. Read the Gospel passages prescribed for Sundays before you attend Liturgy. Ask yourself in prayerful meditation: what is Jesus saying to me and to each of us?

Prayer

Prayer is inner conversation with God from the heart, mind, and soul. Speak with Him; then listen for His response in your life. Use the prayers of the

Church, such as the Lord's Prayer, and also sit and rest in humble silence before your Creator.

Worship

Attend the Divine Liturgy hopefully each Sunday. Remember one cannot be a Christian in isolation but only in community. Arrive before Badarak begins to give yourself sufficient opportunity to release captivity to the outside world. Focus on the Kingdom of God. As the Epistle and Gospel are read, pay attention: *Broskhoumeh!* Listen to the words carefully.

When the Nicæan Creed is offered, which begins with "We believe . . ." offer it with faith, belief and assurance that it speaks the truth. Remember you are a part of the "We". If it needs some study, take the time to do it.

Sing with the choir; respond to the Deacon's litanies with prayer; offer the Kiss of Peace enthusiastically; pray for others; focus your attention on the Cross which sits upon the altar; prepare yourself properly to receive Holy Communion.

And finally, wait a few moments after Liturgy has finished to say your concluding prayers before leaving.

Sacraments

The Sacraments are dynamic ways in which God relates Himself with His people through the Church. Each are a living channel of grace where we meet God during the most important experiences in our lives. Through the Sacraments, the Church offers us a gift to experience God in an embodied way.

In the West, the number of Sacraments has been identified as seven: Baptism; Confirmation

(Chrismation); The Eucharist; Confession and Repentance; Holy Orders (Ordination); Holy Crowning (Marriage); The Anointing of the Sick.

However, if we see the Sacraments as a channel of God's grace, we may also include: the Consecration of a Church or a Holy Picture/Icon; The Blessing of Water at Epiphany; the act of prayer; love of others; living a Christian life through the Gospel; and many other Spirit-infused activities.

Whenever in attendance at a baptism, wedding, or ordination, pray earnestly for the participant(s) that they receive the grace of God, to have it become the foundation of their lives.

On your wedding anniversary, remember the prayers and blessings that were offered on your wedding day as a reminder of the sacredness of your marriage.

Conclusion

As mentioned, spiritual formation and development is an individual journey. To get to your destination, you yourself must make the effort. One can lead you but cannot travel the path for you, only with you.

Again, in the words of Karekin I:

The propagation of the Christian faith was, and always is, closely related to the inner rebirth and regeneration of those who became the instruments of the spread of Christianity in human history. This is not true only in the case

of Christ's disciples, but also for all the missionaries of the latter centuries who ventured to throw themselves into the unknown worlds of non-Christian peoples. They were moved by the same power of spiritual regeneration. There is no way to the Kingdom of God if the experience of continuous revival has not become a common, dominant factor in the actual life of men and women as individuals, and of the church as the one fellowship and bond of unity in Christ.

Any aspect of Christian life in action which is not directly or indirectly, yet truly, related to this renewed state of Christian consciousness among those who confess themselves as Christians, unnecessarily lack in authenticity, strength and impact.

As you progress on your journey, you will develop and form a deeper understanding of your relationship with God. It will lead to a more fulfilled life. St Paul in writing to the Philippians said it best:

“. . . for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Phil 4:11-13)

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DIOCESE OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH OF AMERICA (EASTERN)

630 Second Avenue, New York, New York 10016
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