

Understanding the Liturgical Calendar of the Armenian Church

(A brief introduction for Christian educators)

Part I

The Armenian Apostolic Church, like most churches, uses a liturgical calendar, but with its own unique features, to mark its feasts and fasts and seasons. As Christian educators, it behooves us to have a working knowledge of our church year, as it is one of those basics of our faith. And for that, we simply need to know some facts and a few (calendrical) principles. So, I will first introduce (I) **the cycle of days of the week**, and then discuss (II) **the cycle of seasons**.

This poster is a pictorial representation of our 2017 liturgical calendar, or church year. And before I speak about the cycle of days and seasons, let me first say a few words about the structure of this poster,.

Structure of the Poster

As you can see, the **seasons** of the church year, are depicted in different colors with the names indicated in the **outermost ring**. The **innermost ring** shows the **months** of the year, as a frame of reference. The **weeks** of the year are represented by the **sectors** of the circle, each slice is a week, 52 weeks going around clockwise. **Sunday** is the first day of the week, the rest of the days, moving towards the center, with slots for each day. That is basically it. For instance, Friday, January 6, is our Christmas. The next slot is Saturday, January 7 (the end of the week). The next slice, the sector of the circle, is the following week, and the first day of that week is Sunday, January 8. And the following Sunday is January 15, and so forth. It is that simple.

I. Cycle of Days of the Week

Not all days are the same. We have two major categories:

- Feast days
- Days of fasting

The Feast Days are further divided into two groups: Dominical and saints

So, days are classified as either **dominical days**, or **saints' days**, or **fasting days**. A word about each.

Dominical Feasts

Every Sunday is a dominical feast, our weekly feast, our weekly celebration. The Armenian word for Sunday is *Giragi*, which comes from *Kyriaki* (in Greek), meaning of the Lord or the Lord's. So, Sunday (*Giragi*) is the Lord's day, a dominical day (*derooni/deroonagan or*). Sunday is the first day of the week, *mi-ya-shapat* (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1), the day Jesus rose from the dead. And from the earliest days, Christians assembled on the first day of the week for worship (which included the liturgy of the word and the eucharist), as we read in Acts 20:7, Colossians 4:13, I Timothy 4:13, and elsewhere.

On Sundays all the festivities in our Church are dedicated to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, without exception, and on certain Sundays, other aspects of the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ are also celebrated (for instance, the feast of Pentecost).

In a few cases, weekdays become dominical days—when a fixed feast falls on a week day, like, the Nativity-Epiphany of our Lord Jesus Christ, on January 6, *Diarnuntarach*, the presentation of the Lord to the temple 40 days later, on February 14.

And during the Easter season, the entire season, every single day, is dominical. Easter season is one long celebration of the resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

Feasts of Saints

In addition to dominical feast, we have **feasts of saints**. In our tradition, saints are commemorated on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. There are some exceptions to this rule. Let me just mention two that stand out: 1) During the Easter season, saints are not celebrated at all (as evident on the poster). Why? Because, as I said, every day is a dominical day. And 2) during Great Lent, saints are celebrated on Saturdays only (I'll explain why in a minute).

On saints' days, the church remembers and celebrates those Christians who have borne an exemplary witness to Jesus Christ and to his gospel—these include the holy apostles, the martyrs, the confessors, the holy teachers, and people from all walks of life, male and female, young and old. And in 2015, to the list of saints, the Armenian Church added the Holy Martyrs of the Armenian Genocide.

Fasting Days

Now, the church does not *only* celebrate. There are also **days of fasting**, days set aside for self-restraint and self-examination in light of the gospel. Our church designates **Wednesdays** and **Fridays** as days of fasting. Again there are exceptions. For example, during the Easter season (until Ascension) fasting is forbidden. Why? Because all the days of the Easter season are dominical days, and fasting and festivities or celebrations do not go together. They are simply not compatible. For the same reason we do not have feasts of saints during the weekdays of Great Lent, only on Saturdays (as I mentioned earlier). We also have 10 **weeklong fasts** preceding major feasts and other festivals, observed from Monday through Friday—for example, the Fast of the Catechumens, all indicated on this poster. And, of course, we have the **Fast of Great Lent** (*medz bahk*) before the Feast of the Holy Resurrection (Easter). Here is a basic principle: Before every celebration there is preparation, preparation has to precede every celebration.

So, these are the three types of days in our calendar—Dominical days, Saints' days, and Fasting days.

Next, we'll discuss the cycle of seasons.