



REFLECTIONS ON POON PARÉGÉNTAN

*His Grace Bishop Vahan Hovhanessian, Primate
London*

The word *Parégéntan* (or *Barekendan*) is a compound Classical Armenian word of the roots *Pari* and *Gyank* meaning “good living” or “happy life.” In the Armenian Church traditions, the word is used as a title of the Sundays that precede fasting periods. Each of the five major annual feasts is preceded by a week-long period of fasting. The Sunday prior to each of these fasting weeks is known as the *Parégéntan* of that specific feast. The situation with Easter, the main Feast of Christianity—the celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus—is a bit different. Because of the centrality of the event of this feast to our faith, the fasting period preceding it is extended to two periods: 1) a week immediately prior to Easter Sunday, which is known as the Holy Week, and 2) forty days prior to Palm Sunday (Holy Week), which is known as Great Lent. Thus, the Sunday that ushers in this extended period of fasting is known as *Poon Parégéntan*, the “actual *Parégéntan*,” or the “real *Parégéntan*”.

For Armenians, *Parégéntan* in general meant a day of celebrations, festivities, eating, drinking, singing dancing, games and ceremonies. Armenians spent the day celebrating and feasting in anticipation of the forthcoming week of spiritual retreat, fasting, prayer and penance. The practice of eating and feasting prior to a fasting period is Biblical. According to the 14th-century St. Gregory of Datev the biblical base of the Armenian practice of *Parégéntan* is from the story of Elijah when the Angel of the Lord advised him to eat and drink “because you will be traveling a long road” (I King 19:7). Then Elijah “went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights” (I King 19:8). In our case, St. Gregory asserts, this long road is our annual Lenten journey of 40 days filled with prayer, fasting, self-examination, works of charity and spiritual renewal.

Traditionally, the period of *Poon Parégéntan* comprised two weeks that started with the Feast of St. Sarkis and concluded with the *Poon Parégéntan* Sunday. These were fun filled days for everybody. Many couples would wait until these two weeks to get married or be engaged. Not only the quality but the quantity of food was equally important. As the two-week period progressed, the numbers and variety of plates were increased.

The last day of the *Parégéntan* two-week period, i.e. *Parégéntan* Sunday, was filled with fun activities, street games and banquets. Most Armenians did not cook on that day. They rather consumed and finished all kinds of dairy and meat food in their homes. No trace of dairy product was supposed to remain in the house, because the next day was the first day of Great Lent. In fact, it was a custom on the day after *Poon Parégéntan*, the first day of Great Lent, for the Armenian housewives to clean their kitchens and get rid of traces of dairy and animal products. It was a day of boiling the utensils, plates, pots and pans.

The *Poon Parégéntan* experience included games and masquerade parties as well. After dinner, teenagers of the town would disguise themselves with a variety of costumes and masks and colour their faces. Boys and girls with different costumes and with the company of *Dhoul Zourna* would visit the Armenian homes in their village, to dance, sing and entertain the residents. The evening usually ended with the singing of a special hymn.

The entire village spent two weeks preparing for the arrival of the life-renewing experience of Great Lent (*Médz Bahk*). We may be centuries and miles away from our historic villages where and when all the above beautiful **customs** and practices were observed and celebrated. However, in our own families, homes and Armenian Churches, no matter where on this earth we may be, we can still celebrate *Parégéntan* and prepare for Great Lent. The public preparations we briefly summarized earlier, emphasize the importance of what our forefathers were preparing to welcome: Great Lent. It is the annual forty-day period of abstaining from certain food and pleasures; intensifying our prayer disciplines; and focusing on deeds of charity.

May I suggest that prior to this Sunday, this year's *Poon Parégéntan* Sunday, you finalize your fasting discipline for the coming 40 days of Lent. Armenians historically gave up dairy and animal products for the entire fasting period. Some observe this strict diet only during the first and/or last week of Great Lent. Others do it on **Wednesdays** and **Fridays** of Great Lent. Some people are more flexible in what they abstain from. Some, for example, eat fish on certain days during Lent. However, Great Lent is not only about fasting and dietary discipline. Fasting and giving up fleshly desires and pleasures is to allow us to focus on our spiritual needs and growth. Lent must include a prayer discipline. It is time to plan a daily prayer schedule or intensifying our prayer discipline (designating 2 or 3 times a day for personal prayer, and attending Church services more frequently). Great Lent must also include a component of charity and benevolent work (volunteering to help those less fortunate than us, or financially supporting charitable programmes).

Looking around us, we realize that the daily routine in an average Armenian family in the West has become more and more secularized. Most of our time is spent focusing on our worldly concerns, needs, desires and challenges. Rarely does our complicated business/social schedule allow us to pay attention to our spiritual needs. Consequently, we find ourselves living in a society infested with various kinds of immoralities, self-centered materialism and various kinds of abuse. I am reminded of a situation in the Bible when the followers of Jesus find themselves in the presence of a person afflicted with similar abuse and "possessed with demonic spirits." When they ask Jesus as to how such situations can be avoided, our Lord replied, saying: "This sort cannot come out by anything except by fasting and by prayer" (Matthew 17:21 and Mark 9:29).

Have a blessed and spiritually uplifting and renewing Lenten journey. See you in Church Friday Lenten Vigils or Sunday Badaraks or at our weekly Bible Study sessions, in English and Armenian, during Great Lent.