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## HOME BLESSING: A POWERFUL ARMENIAN TRADITION

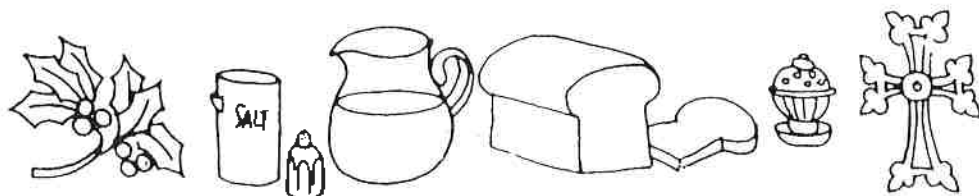
The home is not blessed to make it holy since all that God created is good and holy. It is rather for the purpose of *dedication* or *rededication*, a reminder that the home reflects the Kingdom.

Decades ago in Armenian villages, the *dzookh*—which has come to be the word for “parish” but which literally means “smoke”—was defined by groups of chimneys or homes. In this way two or three village priests would divide the care of the flock in a town. They would bless the homes of families in their jurisdiction.

Traditional times of the year for Armenian homes to be blessed are Eastertide (the fifty days following Easter), Christmastide (until February 14, The Feast of the Presentation), and after having moved into a new home. A rich and evocative blessing, the *Dnorhnek* has practically fallen into disuse along with many other blessing rituals, chiefly because the world is no longer popularly perceived as sacred and in need of repeated prayer and anointing.

This perception is indeed perplexing considering that there has arguably never been a time when God’s blessings were more needed!

At a home blessing, every member of the dwelling assembles with the priest to sanctify together four life-giving gifts.



### Bread

Bread is blessed as a potent symbol of God’s greatest gift offered back to him in the form of a humble loaf. The staff of life, it is the vital spiritual food of Holy Communion, where it represents the ultimate convergence of the sacred and the profane.

*“This is the bread which came down from heaven . . . whoever eats this bread shall live forever” (John 6:58).*

### Water

Water, the symbol of chaos out of which God created the world is also essential to life. God drew forth life from the formless waters (*Genesis 1*); we ourselves float in a liquid womb; without water we quickly perish; and in the water of baptism we are “washed clean,” die to sin, and are reborn in Christ.

### Salt

Salt is an important, universal household staple. Salt seasons and purifies. *"You shall present (rams) before the Lord, and the priest shall sprinkle salt upon them and offer them up to the Lord as a burnt offering"* (Ezekiel 43:24). A newborn baby in biblical times would be rubbed with salt. Christ called his disciples the "salt of the earth."

### Incense

Incense is an ancient symbol of prayers rising to God as well as of the individual soul burning with the love of God. *"May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice"* (Psalm 141:2).

### Nushkhar

It is a custom in some communities for the priest to bring with him a *nushkhar*, the round flat wafer of blessed bread stamped with a crucifix or plain cross and designs of grapes and wheat. Traditionally, this is placed in a container where salt, rice, wheat or flour (or other household staple) are stored as a symbol of the presence of God's blessing.

The Armenian home blessing service gathers these gifts and all who live in the home to be cleansed, blessed, and bestowed the protection of the Cross, of the Word (Scripture) and of the Holy Trinity. In this beautiful ritual, "old things pass away; behold, all things become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

## Armenian Christmas



The traditional Armenian Christmas Eve (January 5) service is *Jrakalooytz* which is so named because the faithful hold candles as a symbol of the light of Christ. After the service groups of faithful would greet each other with the good news "Christ is born and revealed! Blessed is the revelation of Christ!" and would sing Christmas sharagans in front of homes just like modern carollers.

In some Armenian communities, a merry feast would follow, consisting of shredded chicken with wheat, cinnamon and olive oil (*herriseh*). Boiled spinach was often included as it is believed to be what the Virgin Mary ate on the eve of Christ's birth. After dinner, children would scramble to the housetops and hang down handkerchiefs over the roof, singing all the while. Then family and relatives would fill the handkerchiefs with raisins and fried wheat as well as coins. On Christmas morning, the children would again be presented with treats, often apples with coins stuck inside, from their parents and friends.