FEASTS OF THE CROSS

Every autumn, the Armenian Church celebrates Khachverats: the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. It’s 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 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.

On the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, the Divine Liturgy is marked with an antasdan service (blessing of the fields) during which the processional cross is adorned with basil (a symbol of royalty) and the four corners of the church are blessed as a symbol for all the world.

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. They cannot understand how so base an instrument could be at the center of our worship, of our churches and altars. But we see in the cross the instrument on which our Lord sacrificed Himself in order to cleanse mankind of its sins. The cross for us is the instrument of life: a divine sign that shows the power of life over death. It is for this reason that Christians throughout the world venerate the Holy Cross.

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 pre-eminent 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.

Why did our ancestors surround themselves with crosses? Perhaps because they understood that human nature being what it is, all of us are prone to making the wrong choices. So, in anticipation of their own moments of fateful decision, they dotted the landscape with crosses, to unavoidably remind themselves of “the power of God.” To view the cross as a sign of God’s power is not simply to recall that He is watching us, knows the secrets of our hearts, and will judge us accordingly (although this, of course, is true). But more significantly, the cross is our evidence that God has used —and will use—His power to help us in our times of trial: that through His son, He has stretched forth His hand to mankind as a whole, and to every human individual, to redeem us, guide us, support us—and make us worthy of His kingdom, in spite of our mortal tendency to defy Him.

The Armenians of old took this power very seriously. One of their favorite sayings was: Sourp Khachn yeghitsi eents oknagan—”Let the Holy Cross be my support.” We today could benefit from their wisdom, by keeping our own thoughts focused on the mystery of the Holy Cross.

Such veneration should not be confused with idolatry. We worship the idea or the mystery behind the Holy Cross. Our expectation and hope from the sign of the cross is a reflection of our faith in the Resurrection of Christ. The presence of that sign at every stage and every turn in our lives reminds us that His blood was shed over the original cross, to free us as individuals from our sins. As frequently as we confront a cross, we must be aware of the sacrifice that Christ made on our behalf. More to the point, we must consider why that sacrifice was necessary—and what is asked from us in response.

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