

FEASTS OF THE HOLY CROSS

In September, we celebrate two feasts of the Holy Cross. The following is a description of those feasts which you can share with your students at the appropriate time.

Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 14)

The Exaltation of the Holy Cross is the major feast celebrated in honor of the Holy Cross. Other churches always commemorate this feast on September 14; in our church it is celebrated on the closest Sunday to the 14th making it variable between September 11-17. The Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross is solidly based on a glorious historical event.

In 610 King Khosrov of Persia waged war against Emperor Heraclius of Byzantium, conquered Jerusalem, and took the Holy Cross into captivity to Persia in 614 A.D. Heraclius regrouped and went against the Persians again. At that time the general of the Armenian troops was Mjejh Knouni who also managed to gather troops from Persian Armenia. Khosrov suffered a great defeat and was murdered by his son Gavad Shiroh, who died a year later and was succeeded by his son-in-law Khoryam. Khoryam ascended to the Persian throne through Emperor Heraclius's assistance on the condition that the Holy Cross be returned. After accepting that condition, the Holy Cross was returned to the Christians in 629. Its ceremonious journey from Persia to Garin, from Garin to Constantinople and finally back to Jerusalem was extremely emotion-evoking; it was elevated constantly along the way for the spiritual comfort of the faithful and everywhere it became a symbol of pious worship. It was this occasion which gave reason for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

In our church, the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross takes place with great ceremony and includes the ritual of the Procession and Blessing of the Four Corners of the Earth (Antasdan) which is performed that day. It is most likely that this particular ritual reflects the deep feeling and emotion aroused in Armenia when the Holy Cross was elevated and brought through on its return to Jerusalem from Persian captivity.



Holy Cross of Varak

(September 28)

This feast is particular to the Armenian Church. It is *our* feast of the Holy Cross and is an exemplary reflection of our national Church.

In the 7th century (660 AD) a solitary monk by the name of Totig who lived on Mount Varak, had a vision that upon the summit of that mountain was a cathedral with twelve pillars in the midst of which was a brilliant cross. A little later the cross in the apparition moved slowly down the mountain and rested upon the holy altar of the Monastery of Varak. Totig and his student Hovel rushed to the church and prostrated themselves before a holy relic there, which the vision revealed to be truly a piece of the Holy Cross.

St. Hripsimeh and her companions had brought with them a relic of the Holy Cross to Mt. Varak when they sought refuge there during their persecution and left it to the keeping of pious priests when they fled the area. After the death of the priests, the relic remained hidden in the secret place where it was buried. Many, like Totig and Hovel, for love of the Holy Relic, passed their lives as monks in seclusion in those mountains, praying for its revelation.

With great jubilation Totig took the good news of the revelation of the sacred relic to the Catholicos at Vaspouragan. The Catholicos, St. Nerses III, the Builder, rushed to Varak with General Vart Rushdouni, son of King Theodoros, whereupon he certified the authenticity of the Holy Relic. He thereupon ordered that each year the Sunday closest to September 28 (Sept. 25-Oct. 1) or the second Sunday of the Exaltation be dedicated to the Holy Cross of Varak. It is most likely that it was then that he wrote the entrancingly beautiful sharagan, *Nshanav Amenahaght Khatchivt*, "By the sign of thine all powerful Holy Cross," which is one of the most moving and popular of our church hymns.

– from "Saints & Feasts of the Armenian Church"
by *Patriarch Torkom Koushagian*

(Translated by Very Rev. Fr. Haigazoun Melkonian,
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