

The Feast of the Holy Cross of Varak

The Armenian Church celebrates several feast days dedicated to the Holy Cross.

- Two weeks ago we celebrated the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.
- On the last Sunday of October we will celebrate the Feast of the Discovery of the Holy Cross.
- But this Sunday we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Cross of Varak.



These feasts all are based on historical events. Their liturgical arrangements are made by the Church in order to give more opportunity to the faithful to honor and worship the Holy Cross and to receive graces and blessings from it.

The great significance of the feast of the Holy Cross of Varak is the fact that it is distinctly an Armenian feast. While the other celebrations of the Holy Cross belong to the universal Church, the Holy Cross of Varak is distinctively an Armenian Feast dedicated to the Holy Cross of Christ. In a symbolic way it is the cross of the Armenian people. No other church nationalized a feast day of the Cross, but the Armenians did. The historical background of the Holy Cross of Varak is a fascinating story!

The Cross of Varak takes its name from the Mountain of Varak in Armenia. It is a relic of our Lord's wooden cross, upon which He was crucified. In the 4th century, a devoted and very beautiful Christian nun named St. Hripsime was running for her life. The Emperor, Diocletian, had ordered his Roman soldiers to capture all Christians. So Hripsime fled to Armenia and during her escape, she buried a piece of the true cross in the crevice of a rock in the mountains of Varak to keep it safe from her persecutors.

The old Armenian tradition tells us that 300 years later, while praying on Mount Varak, a hermit named Thotig, had a vision. He saw a shining cross with light radiating around it on top of the mountain. The light indicated to him the place where Hripsime had hidden the piece of cross so many years before. It was a miracle that this true piece of the Holy Cross was discovered! Furthermore, it is said that there was an overwhelming smell of incense where the cross was buried and the sweet fragrance could be smelled all over the land. Today we celebrate this discovery as the "Holy Cross of Varak."

The Church from the very beginning regarded the Cross of Christ as the instrument and foundation of man's salvation. Thus the Holy Cross has always been the object of respect and honor. Our Lord Jesus Christ as an offering and sacrifice to God, died voluntarily upon the Cross for us. From that time on, the Cross became the banner of glory of the Church as well as the symbol of Christian life, power strength, and inspiration. So does the Armenian Church hymn, which says:

"Rejoice Holy Church for Christ, the King of Heaven
today has crowned you with His Cross."

It was 650 or 660 A.D. when Catholicos St. Nersess III the Builder declared that each year the Sunday closest to September 28 or the second Sunday of Exaltation be dedicated to the Holy Cross of Varak. It is most likely on this day that he wrote the beautiful sharagan, "*Nushanav Amenahaght Khachivut*," (By the sign of Your all powerful Holy Cross), who is one of the most moving and popular sharagans (church hymns) of the Armenian Church.