

THE FEAST OF THE HOLY CROSS OF VARAK

*Before Thy Cross, O Christ, we prostrate ourselves;
Glory to Thee and to Thy Holy Cross. Alleluia.*

These are the words of a chant that come to us from very ancient times. Throughout the centuries, we have venerated the Cross of Christ, singing its glory in our churches. Today, the Armenian Church celebrates yet another feast dedicated to the Holy Cross, the Feast of the Holy Cross of Varak. It is a celebration unique only to the Armenian Church and its historical background is a fascinating story indeed.

The Cross of Varak takes its name after a mountain named Varak in Van, in the province of Vasbouragan, in the heart of historic Armenia, today in Eastern Turkey (Asia Minor).

The Cross of Varak is a relic of our Lord's wooden cross, upon which He was crucified. It was discovered on Mt. Varak in the 7th century. Earlier in the 4th century, St. Hripsimeh, a young virgin or nun, had hid the relic of the cross in the crevice of a rock on Mt. Varak. Hripsimeh did this to keep it safe from her persecutors while she was fleeing from the advances of the Emperor of the Roman Empire, Diocletian.

The heathen Emperor has instituted a widespread persecution of Christians in his territory, so Hripsimeh and her 40 nun companions escaped to Armenia. The Emperor wanted Hripsimeh for his wife for her exceptional beauty, but because he was a heathen, she refused to marry him. So she was forced to flee with her companions to take refuge among the rocks of Mt. Varak.

The Emperor Diocletian heard of her escape and sent soldiers after her and the 40 nuns. Hearing of this, Hripsimeh hid the relic of the Cross of Christ on Mt. Varak and continued her escape to the capital city of Armenia, which at that time was an independent kingdom and outside of the jurisdiction of the Roman Empire.

In Armenia, when King Drtad heard about the arrival of this Christian group of nuns into his territory, he ordered them to appear before him. At first sight of Hripsimeh, King Drtad instantly fell in love with her and wanted to marry her; but Hripsimeh refused him, because the King was also a heathen. The King was violently enraged, and Hripsime and all the nuns were martyred on the spot.

The cross remained hidden among the rocks of Mt. Varak for 300 years. Tradition tells us that in the year 650 A.D. a hermit named Thodik, while praying on Mt. Varak, saw a vision of a luminous cross with light radiating around it, indicating to him the place where the cross was hidden. Thus, the relic of the true cross was discovered miraculously, hence the name "the Cross of Varak." 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.

The Catholicos of the time, St. Nerses the Builder, hastened to Mt. Varak and verified the authenticity of the miracle of the relic, proclaiming the discovery of the true Cross a feast day, naming it the Holy Cross of Varak.

It is very interesting to note that the Armenians were not satisfied setting aside three feast days of the Holy Cross, which are universally celebrated by all the ancient churches. Instead, they created their own feast day of the Holy Cross, the Holy Cross of Varak, which is distinctively an Armenian feast day of the Holy Cross, solely belonging to the Armenian Church. We are compelled to ask the question...why so?

Because the Armenian people, during the course of their long history of oppression, persecution and invading of our land, needed a spiritual anchor upon which they could lean, be comforted and strengthened. Armenians needed to be reminded that everything will eventually end up in triumph through the power of the Cross of Christ. By believing in the Cross, we discover that with God's help we will be able to bear our crosses, and with our abiding faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, we will be ultimately victorious. The cross *before* Christ meant death, but the Cross *after* Christ means life.

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.

Adapted from a sermon by the Rev. Fr. Diran Papazian, Pastor Emeritus of St. John's Armenian Church of Greater Detroit