

Exaltation of the Holy Cross – Shield of Faith

*Delivered by Rev. Fr. Ghevond Ajamian
St. Sarkis Armenian Church, Carrollton, TX
September 17, 2017
Gospel Reading: John 3:13-21*

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, the fifth and final of the Armenian Church's tabernacle (major) feasts. Today we celebrate and remember the opening and consecration of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in 335. This church, or cathedral, is in Jerusalem and it includes the tomb of Christ and the crucifixion site, known as Golgotha. According to all accounts, during the consecration ceremony, the patriarch took the relic of the holy cross and lifted it up for all to see and revere.

This feast has many hymns associated with it, and in the hymns, there are many names for the cross and one of them is *shield of faith*. We hear this same phrase in St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians when he says, "And in all of this, by taking up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the Evil One." Naturally, St. Paul is reminding us that this war we wage against evil is a spiritual war, yet he does not mention the cross in this letter, but our Church Fathers and we Armenians have understood his reference to the shield of faith as the cross.

The cross, throughout history and our faith, has been used as a shield, a weapon and a symbol of strength. It is a miracle that the cross, which was a symbol and instrument of death, torture and execution, is now a symbol of life, strength and protection. Armenians have taken this to heart and in our hymns to the Holy Cross, there is a phrase repeated many times, which says, "May the Holy Cross be a refuge for us". This was even more true during the Armenian Genocide.

During the Genocide, there was a village in the northern Ottoman Empire which had no men left, but only the elderly and young. People saw the invading Turks, coming from the north by boat over the sea. The old priest of the village, who had read in the lives of the saints, that with faith and the Lord's cross, many victories had happened during naval battles, especially when the cross was lowered to the water.

So the priest called together the entire town and performed the Blessing of the Four Sides of the Earth (antasdan). He went to the four sides of the village and prayed for protection. When he arrived at the northern side, the side the enemy was coming from, he prayed and

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said, “Blessed, protected and guarded by Providence be the north side of the world.” And he placed the cross into the water, when already the Turkish curses, “gyavoor” (infidels) could be heard. As he placed the cross, an invisible force began from beneath the waters, creating large waves and in a moment, the enemy’s boat had flipped and sunk, saving the village from destruction.

We see the strength and protection the holy cross provides us, and it is for that reason we wear it as jewelry, we have it as tattoos, and we hang it in our cars, homes and workplaces, but we also have it imprinted upon us. At the time of chrismation, during the baptismal service, the priest takes the holy chrism (myuron) and anoints the one being chrismated in the sign of the cross on nine parts of the body. Yet this is not the only time we are imprinted with the Holy Cross, but every time we make the sign of the cross.

Making the sign of the cross should be the very first thing we teach our children about our faith (and God forbid someone says that the child is too young to learn). Making the sign of the cross is a prayer and confession of faith in and of itself. We take our three fingers on our right hand (thumb, pointer and middle finger) and bring them together, symbolizing the Holy Trinity.

We then touch our forehead, reminding us that the Father resides in heaven above and He sent His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to earth, bringing our hand to our stomach. This also reminds us that through Holy Communion, Jesus Christ resides in our bellies. Then through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus healed all those on His left and right, and today the Holy Spirit protects and guides us on our left and right, finally residing in our hearts.

When we hear the name of the Holy Trinity or Christ’s name, before and after prayers and meals, when we wake up and lie down to sleep, when we travel and whenever we feel we need protection, we make the sign of the cross because the cross is our refuge.

So as we celebrate and remember the Holy Cross being exalted and lifted up at the consecration of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, let us also always remember the power and protection the cross possesses. St. Paul says we preach the crucified and risen Christ, so let us preach Christ to all we see through the one of the greatest expressions in the shield of faith, the sign of the Holy Cross.

Amen.