



The Exaltation of the Holy Cross (Khachverats)

Every autumn, the Armenian Church celebrates the Exaltation of the Holy Cross—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 the 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 "antastan" 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