

**On celebrating "Veiled" Liturgy
(Gots' Patarag) on Sundays of Lent
Great Lent Curtain
in the Armenian Church**

Rev. Dr. Nerses Nersessian



I have read Very Rev. Michael Daniel Findikyan's article "Hanging by a thread: The closed curtain during Great Lent in the Armenian Church" Ejmiatsin December, 2016, pp. 22-53 and wish to submit the following observations.

I would like to begin my comments with a general remark Michael Vasey makes in his article "Eucharist, Sacrifice and scripture": "we should abandon the effort to treat a powerful image as if we were lawyers with a hostile witness". The bona fides of any piece of theological imagery can only be grasped in the light of how it functions in a whole context of speech and action, prayer and reflection. Joanne M. Pierce concludes her "Vestments and Objects" with this conclusion headed "Changing Use and Changeless Meaning". I wish to quote in full:

"It is clear that as the Christian liturgy itself changed and developed over the course of the past twenty centuries, the vestments and vessels used during these celebrations did also. Not only have their various shapes and sizes changed, and their ornamentation become more or less elaborate, but also their significance to the rites has been understood and interpreted differently by different generations. One thing should remain clear, however: in a Christian faith founded on the key theological concept of the incarnation no physical expression of that incarnate and redeemed reality can be dismissed as insignificant". The most instructive evidence of this is that through the centuries theologians have composed commentaries to remind the "good people who worship faithfully" the changing use and changeless meaning of the liturgy: Khosrov Andzewatsi, Nerses Lambronnatsi, Yovhannes Archishets'i, Vazgen Vardapet [Vazgen Ist Palchian, Catholicos of All Armenians] and Tiran Nersoyan and many others. It is harsh to say that "much of liturgy so familiar and dear to them [the Armenian faithful] actually has very dubious origins" or "liturgical accoutrements – are cryptogenic". It is accepted that the Armenian liturgy "stands in the same relation – as daughter

– to the Byzantine as the Ethiopian to the Alexandrian. The Armenian Mass liturgy presents East Syrian elements, which go back to the period of the Christianisation of Armenia; as well as Roman elements, which have been preserved, from a period of rapprochement in the later middle ages. But indigenous material also exists in plenty". The whole purpose of the commentaries listed above was to check the infiltration of foreign elements and to prevent clergy from introducing cuts and additions or changes in the way the Liturgy is celebrated as for instance - administering the communion into the hand of the faithful, during lent coming out from behind the curtain and offering communion; interrupting the Liturgy to administer Confession, or celebrating Divine Liturgy during Lent without vesting.

The first distinctive feature which in the author's estimations falls in the category of "dubious origin" is the unusual custom of closing the curtain that separates the elevated bema or altar at the beginning of Great Lent and keeping it closed throughout this most solemn season "... a practice unknown to any other Church in Christendom". This is not the whole truth. In early churches fabrics were used to cover altar tables and for curtains that stretched between columns in the chancels and in the naves. Representations of such curtains occur in Armenian miniatures. The four miniatures in the Gospel of Ejmiatsin (Matenadaran.No.2374, ca.6th century) - The Annunciation to Zacharias- the Annunciation to the Virgin, the Adoration of the Magi, and the Baptism, each in different ways illustrate the New Testament theme of Epiphanies (Astutshaytnut'yun). The element in the miniatures that is relevant to our purpose is the rich architectural background of the miniatures formed of basilica-like structures flanked by buildings with two columns interlinked with embroidered and richly coloured drapery. In a Fragment of a Gospel (Matenadaran Nr.9430, ca.10th century) named "Sanctuary of the Holy Sepulchre" depicts a temple - a rotunda with a conical roof with marble columns and curtains hanging from the semi-circular dome. In the Second Ejmiatsin Gospel (Jerusalem 2555, ca.1000) the tempietto structure representing the Holy Sepulchre, with hanging curtains resembles the iconography in the Ejmiatsin Gospels. Prof. Bezalel Narkis states "The resemblance between the two Ejmiatsin manuscripts suggests a common prototype, rather than a direct link between them". At the beginning of the Eucharist the deacon instructs "the catechumens, those of little faith and those who are penitents and who are unclean not to approach the divine mystery" and

when the Chalice is placed on the altar representing "Christ in our midst has been revealed; He Who Is God is here seated" once again the deacon instructs "Any one among the faithful that is unable to partake of this divine mystery and have gone outside the doors, should pray". At this point it was expected that catechumens would assemble in the section of the church called 'gavit' (zhamatun) and close the doors. The earliest examples of gavit date back to the 10th century - Vahanavank' (911), Khotakerats vank', Gndevank' (996), Horomos (1020-1038). The majority of these were later used as mausoleums for the deceased of the nobility. The doors, but more especially the central door are also furnished with a veil, as if prohibiting all profane access to the bema. The Armenian Church possessed the same arrangement as the East. Among the four minor Orders of the Armenian Church there is an office for the ordination of the Doorkeeper (Drnapan). Archdale A King in his description of the Interior "Arrangement of [Armenian] Churches writes 'A genuine iconostasis, in imitation of the Greeks, is occasionally found in Armenian churches, as arrangement which some archaeologists from a study of extant ruins have considered primitive. Be that as it may, the normal Armenian practice is to have two curtains (waraguir) stretched on wires across the sanctuary, placed one in front of the other. Tradition ascribes the origin of the custom to a canon (8) of which Macarius, bishop of Jerusalem who in 340 informed Vrtanes: "The altar shall be furnished with a curtain; a curtain shall likewise hang down before the sanctuary, within which only the ministers officiating may enter: the other ministers present shall take their station outside it, each according to his rank". F.E. Brightman sees in these curtains a relic of those which once hung on rods between the columns of the ciborium of the altar. The large double curtain hanging before the entrance of the sanctuary conceals the altar, celebrant and deacons at various times during the liturgy. It is drawn during Lent except on Palm Sunday and the Annunciation, to symbolise the expulsion of our first parents from the Garden of Eden. The second curtain hides the priest from the deacon at the communion of the former and it is drawn after the liturgy.

In the East, the custom of veiling the altar during the Eucharist seems to have begun in the fourth century; as time progressed, the chancel barrier and icon stand developed into the sanctuary "wall" known as the iconostasis in some Eastern rites, making the use of curtains obsolete. In the Armenian tradition the use of the curtain has

continued with minor changes. On ordinary Sundays, the veil is drawn three times during the "The Prothesis (Annunciation) [Առաջադրութիւն A4], 'The Fraction' [Բեկումն C3b] and the third time during "The Thanksgiving" [Գոհարանութիւն, [A4,C3b C4c] and on the Great Lent the entire liturgy is celebrated behind the curtain when the church becomes "the place of expiation of men" [«Եւ մարդկան քաւարանիս»] besides being "the dwelling of holiness and place of praise, habitation of angels" [«ի յարկի սրբութեան եւ ի տեղւոյս փառարանութեան, հրեշտակաց բնակարանիս» The Prayer in the Sanctuary].

The use of embroidered "Veils, Linens, Frontals, and Rugs" is common to all liturgical traditions and their use has evolved in different ways during the course of time. Among the "Vestments and Vessels" listed in use in the Armenian liturgy are the following - Dastarak (Sudarium), Korbura (corporalis), Tashkinak (finger-towel), Skihi Tsatskots' (palls or chalice veils), silken cloths or elaborate "throw-over" frontals made of fabric or sometimes of metal. In the Byzantine rite from the fourth century references are found to large "architectural" cloth or veil canopies used for veiling the altar during the Eucharist and as time progressed it developed into the sanctuary "wall" known as the iconostasis, making the use of veils obsolete. In the West, from the seventh century, rings or rods for fabric altar veils were attached to these frames in some places. However, altar veils in the West seem to have fallen into disuse, certainly by the thirteenth century perhaps because of the increasing need for the people to be able to see the newly introduced Elevation of the Host at the consecration. It has been suggested that the custom of veiling the sanctuary area during Lent (in England, Germany, parts of Spain and Italy) are vestiges of the more general use of altar veils. For example, in the eleventh century it became the practice in some churches to erect a special veil in front of the altar called a "hunger cloth," from the fifth Sunday of Lent (formerly known as the first Sunday of Passiontide). It was only drawn aside at the reading of the Gospel at the parish mass on Sundays. In another practice veils were hung before the crucifix on the rood beam during lent. Both these veils were made of unbleached linen or Holland; they formed part of the general shrouding which took place in churches at the beginning of Lent and continued until the eve of Easter Sunday. This covering is known as the Lenten array. The veils often had emblems of red, black or blue stencilled on them; and the emblem frequently gave a hint of the

object that it veiled. In the Roman rite it is customary in some places to cover all crucifixes, statues and pictures with purple-toned veiling from the eve of Palm Sunday until the vigil of Easter. The purpose was to block the altar from the view of the



congregation, sometimes explained as a "fast of the eyes". Today "Hunger cloths" reduced in size are designed and displayed as objects for meditation.

It may be "the Bibliography on the liturgical use of curtains is scanty and also could be that evaluation of patristic evidence needs to be reconsidered in the light of more recent scholarship" but there is no doubt that in the past and today the intention of "Closed Divine Liturgy" [Gots' patarag] has been to "fast of the eyes" of the congregation from witnessing the physical presence of Christ in Church.

Archbishop Shnorhik Galustian the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople in his book "The Golden chain of the Sundays of Lent" [«Մեծ Պահքի Կիրակիներու ոսկի շղթան»] very clearly states that although in Bun Barekendan [Great Carnival] is not counted among the 40 days of Lent, but according to the rubrics and instructions of the Tonatsoys is counted as the first among the six Sundays of the 40 days of Lent". Bun Barekendan celebrates marks the "blissful, happy" life of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise is marked on the Second Sunday of Lent named «Արտաքաման Կիրակի». The "Penitential church hymns of Great Lent" to which Patriarch Ormanian is referring to is possibly the "Canon of Repentance" [«ԳԿարգն Ապաշխարութեան»]. According to Patriarch Ormanian the pre-feast rite is called Nakhatonak [«Նախատօնակ»]. In early times generally and today the liturgical day begins after sunset and which is also the beginning of the next day. The Armenian Church even today follows this practice. After the ritual of "nakhatonak" the rite of the following day is celebrated. The Liturgies on the Eve of Nativity and Theophany (January 5th) and Easter Eve [«Ճրաֆալոյց» =Lucernarium] are celebrated after sunset since the canon law forbids celebrating Divine liturgy twice on the same day on the same altar. During Maundy Thursday [«Աւագ Հինգշաբթի»] the calendar instructs to celebrate divine Liturgy in remembrance of the Last supper in the morning, followed by the "Washing of the Feet. In modern times" The Commemoration of the Passion, Crucifixion (Night Vigil) which the Calendar instructs to perform on

Good Friday is performed after the Washing of the Feet on Maundy Thursday while the Burial ritual is conducted in the afternoon of Good Friday. The evening Services of Saturday (Easter Eve) inaugurate the Paschal celebration, for the liturgical cycle of the day begins in the evening. The Easter Eve (Lucernarium) Patarag begins with the Vesting, the Purification, the Accession and the Prothesis.



Սրբոց Յակոբեանց տաճարի աւագ խորանը

ԿԱՆՈՆ ՍՐԲՈՑ ԹԱՐԳՄԱՆՉԱՑ

ՕՐՀ. ԱԿ - Որք զարդարեցին տնօրինարար զիմաստս անեղին, հաստատելով յերկրի զգիր կենդանի հովուել զհօտ նոր Իսրայէլի. երգով քաղցրութեան հրնչմամբ զԱստուած օրհնեցուի:

Որք զերկրաւոր մեծութիւն փառաց խաւար կոչեցին, ապաւինելով ի յոյս անմահ Փեսային աննար բանին արժանի եղեն. երգով քաղցրութեան հրնչմամբ զաստուած օրհնեցուի:

Որք զօրութեամբ Հօր իմաստութեան էին անեղի հաստատեցին զաբոռ սրբոյն Գրիգորի քարգմանութեամբ նըշանադրութեան. երգով քաղցրութեամբ հրնչմամբ զաստուած օրհնեցուի:

Որք նորափետուր բանիւ զարդարեալ պայծառագգեցան եկեղեցիք Հայաստանեայց ի ձեռն սրբոյն Սահակայ. երգով քաղցրութեամբ հրնչմամբ զաստուած օրհնեցուի:

