

Veil of Separation: The Altar Curtain in the Armenian Church



During Great Lent, the altar curtain remains closed in the Armenian Church to symbolize man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden and to emphasize the spirit of repentance and forbearance characterizing the 40-day period preceding Holy Week. Many churches replace the traditional altar curtain with dark and simple drapery bearing little or no embroidery.

Not until Palm Sunday, commemorating Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem, is the curtain re-opened with the special Turen Patzek (door-opening) service.

The tradition of using altar curtains in the Armenian Church is almost as ancient as the church itself. In A.D. 335, Macarius, the Bishop of Jerusalem, penned a letter to Catholicos Vertanes, the elder son and second successor to St. Gregory the Illuminator, in which the bishop addressed a series of questions regarding baptism and the Eucharist.

In that 4th century document, Macarius directed Armenian clergy to make use of curtains to separate the altar from the chancel, and the chancel from the nave.

According to Abraham Terian's seminal translation of the letter, Macarius writes: "The table of expiation is behind the veil, where the Holy Spirit descends; and the font is next to it in the same compartment, and out of honor set up on the right hand. And the clergy in their several ranks shall worship (there), and the congregation outside the veil, and the catechumens at the door, listening. Lest these partitions be effaced by encroachments, let each remain in his own station irreproachable."

In the early history of the church, the altar curtain was a common ecclesiastical feature. In later centuries, some churches—including the Greek Orthodox Church—replaced the veil with iconostases (or screens), but this tradition was not widely adopted by the Armenian Church. Today, most Armenian churches make use of a single curtain to partition the altar from the congregation at various points in the Divine Liturgy.

Altar curtains also became an important element of Armenian Christian art. The curtain shown above is part of a set of four altar draperies made for the Cathedral of Holy Etchmiadzin in 1791. It was imported from Madras, India—a city famous for its printed cloth in this period—where the curtain was likely completed by Indian artisans under the supervision of the local Armenian community.

The iconography of the curtain—which depicts Christ's crucifixion, burial, and descent from the cross—happens to be Dutch. It is based on the first Bible printed in the Armenian language in Amsterdam in 1666, which included illustrations by the Dutch artist Christoffel van Sichem.