

Controversy of The Cross

The cross has always been controversial. As Paul the Apostle tells us, the most advanced cultures of his day, the Greeks and the Jews, could not accept it. It was blasphemy to one and foolishness to the other. How could God be killed as a criminal? How could the way to eternal life come through such agonizing suffering and death? The cross remains controversial in our own day 2000 years later. Where battles about it in ancient times took place in the public square, with beatings and arrests, today the fight is more civil, albeit no less heated. For decades, as we are all aware, the courtroom in America has been the venue for the debate about the controversy of the cross, namely should this powerful religious sign be allowed in public places. What perhaps many of you aren't aware, is that the Armenian community of Northern California recently placed itself right in the middle of one such controversy of the cross, and their efforts-it seems-have been blessed by God.

Have you heard of the Mount Davidson Cross? It is a San Francisco Historical Landmark, sitting atop the highest point in San Francisco, surrounded by the Mount Davidson Park. The first cross was erected in 1923, commemorating all the California pioneers he made their way to the coast through much trial and danger. In 1933, after it was damaged several times including being burnt down by an arsonist, it became a 103-foot permanent concrete steel monument. President Franklin D. Roosevelt inaugurated the lighting of the cross via telegraph from the White House on March 24, 1934. Sunrise services were held at the cross every Easter, and were broadcast nationwide up until the 1970's.

The controversy erupted however in 1991, when several organizations, including the Americans United for Separation of Church and State, sued the City of San Francisco for owning a cross on city land, and several court battles ensued. Eventually the courts forced the City to either tear down the Cross or sell it to a private entity.

So on July 12, 1997, the Council of Armenian-American Organizations of Northern California (CAAONC), a coalition of over 30 Armenian-American Organizations outbid other groups, and purchased the Cross from the City of San Francisco. The sale was unanimously approved by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, and then overwhelmingly approved by voters of San Francisco. The CAAONC thus became the legal owner of the Mt. Davidson Cross and assumed the responsibility for maintaining it. The cross can be seen from all around the city when it is lit up, on Easter and on April 24th, Armenian Genocide Memorial Day.

The cross has always been controversial. In today's reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians Paul famously said "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong." Paul lays out the reason why the cross engenders so much passion for followers of Christ. Much more than a symbol, the cross is evidence of God's power to free us from the tyranny of our sin. And for Armenians, of course, it is evidence of God's power to deliver a humble and persecuted people-time and again-from annihilation at the hands of enemies from without and within.

Though I have a hard time understanding people who automatically find a cross or other religious symbol on public land as threatening or offensive, I do know that the controversy over the cross will continue, because it has been going on for two millennia. And though the courts in this country have mostly determined that a cross cannot be displayed on public property, it really makes no difference in reducing its power. For the real power in displaying any cross, as exemplified in the Mt. Davidson case, is in our hands, in the hands, hearts and lives of believers. The real power of the cross is that a very diverse group of Armenians in California, love the Lord and his cross enough to come together to purchase an entire park in the highest rent district in America. They love the Lord enough-like us here at St. Hagop-to continue our ancestor's ancient devotion to the cross. It is this devotion which has time and again-as individuals and as a people-transformed our brokenness and sorrow, into blessing and joy, so that our lives shall ever exalt His name, now and always; amen.