The Symbolism of the Veil

By Wor. H. Meij

In the Royal Arch degrees, there is a ceremony called the “passing of the veils”. The veil, still used in many cultures and ceremonies around the world, has several symbolic significances.

In an old Royal Arch lecture, possibly as early as 1800, reads “the Veil of the temple signifies the Son of God, Jesus Christ, hanging upon the Altar of the Cross, as the teue veil between God and us…..” In this context, the word veil alludes to a promise, or bond. In ancient Rome a red veil, or a veil with red stripes, distinguished newly-married women from the unmarried, again signifying a bond between them and their husbands. It is also worn by widows, who made a profession of continence. The veil is also a symbol of the pre-enlightened state, hidden knowledge, secrecy, illusion, and ignorance. It conceals, but is often intended as protection rather than deception; it might also be a mark of modesty and virtue in many cultures, often worn by women and girls to display their lack of vanity. In earlier times, women wore veils to Church, to indicate their removal from the vanities of this world. Nuns too were veiled, as the expressions “to take the veil” for entry into cloister life.

According to the famed historian Josephus, there were four veils that adorned the Tabernacle. The white veil signified the earth, the blue veil signified the air, the purple veil signified the sea (because the purple color comes from murex, a shell-fish) and red signified fire. Today, the Passing of the Veils ceremony uses three veils, sometimes four.

Veils are also often used to cover a religious, or holy, object to keep it from the public. The significance again is less to conceal something; rather is signifies something special. In Exodus 34, we learn that when Moses came down Mt. Sinai, “the skin of his face shone”, which he had to cover with a veil as the people were unable to look upon his shining face. The Koran (7:44) mentions that a veil divides the damned from the chosen. The unbelievers tell the Prophet in Koran (41:4) that “between us and thee there is a veil”.

The verb, to reveal, comes from re-veil, which signifies to pull back or to cover again something with a veil.

Saint Ludmilla (860-921) was said to have been strangled by a veil, and hence the symbol is associated with her (see illustration below), and is the patron Saint of widows.
In ancient Rome a red veil, or a veil with red stripes, distinguished newly-married women from the unmarried. From the earliest times Christ was represented to the Christian virgin as a husband, the only One, according to St. Paul (1 Corinthians 7:34), she had to please. It was natural that the bride of Christ should, as the vestal virgins had done, adopt the veil, which thus symbolized not so much the purity as the inviolable fidelity to Christ which was to be reverenced in her. “There is here”, said St. Optatus, “a sort of spiritual marriage” (“De schismate Donatistarum”, VI; P.L., XI, 1074).

The taking of the veil then suggested an obligation of constancy, which forbade, first, illicit sexual intercourse, and afterwards marriage itself. Virgins took this veil themselves, or received it from the hands of their parents. It was worn also by widows, who made a profession of continence, and was called velum, velamen, maforte, flammeus (flammeum), flammeus virginalis, flammeus Christi (Wilpert, “Die gottgeweihten Jungfrauen in den ersten Jahrhunderten der Kirche”, p. 17). In addition to this private taking of the veil, there was early instituted another solemn clothing, which was performed by the bishop on feast days during the Holy Sacrifice (see St. Jerome, “Ad Demetriadem”, ii; P.L., XXII, 1108; and St. Ambrose, “De lapsu virginis consecratae”, v; P.L., XVI, 3726). Sometimes the bishop deputed a priest
for this purpose (Fulgentius Ferrandus, “Breviarum canonum”, can. xci; P.L., LXVII, 957). After a short time, the solemn consecration of virgins was reserved to the bishop, while priests gave the veil to widows. These virgins and widows were not all cloistered; those who entered a monastery received from the abbess a veil which symbolized their religious profession, and the virgins at twenty-five years of age received solemnly from the bishop the veil, which was the mark of a special consecration.

The veil thus became in convents of women the distinctive sign of the different conditions. Francisco Suárez (De religione, tr. VI, t. I, col. 11, n. 5) mentions the following as in use, or as having been in use: the veil of probation, generally white, given to novices; the veil of profession; the veil of virginal consecration, given only to virgins at the age of twenty-five years; the veil of ordination, which the nun received at the age of forty years, on becoming a deaconess, with the privilege of intoning the office and reading the homilies in choir (cap. Diaconissam, 23, c. xxvii, q. 1); the veil of predication, which abbesses obtained as a reward at the age of sixty years (cap. luvenulas, 12, c. xx, q. 1); the veil of continence, which with widows took the place of the veil of the virgins (cap. Vidua, 34, c. xxvii, q. 1). Tamburinus (De iure abbatissarum, d. 27, q. 2) mentions also a veil of penitence, given to penitent sisters. Several of these veils fell into disuse; at present, we know only the veil which forms part of the religious habit. Even that has disappeared in some newly founded congregations, e.g. the Little Sisters of the Poor. Where it still exists it is customary that the veil of novices should be white. The nuns of the mendicant orders did not receive the veil of the virgins, the imposition of which was still customary in the fifteenth century and did not disappear till the end of the sixteenth century. In the eighth and ninth centuries it was found necessary to issue ecclesiastical decrees to restrain abbesses from usurping the function of the bishop and solemnly conferring the veil themselves. See the capitularies of Aachen of 789, c. lxxvi (Mon. Germ. Hist.: Capit. Reg. Franc., t. I, n. 22, can. lxxvi, p. 60); Charlemagne, can. xiv, promulgated at the Sixth Council of Paris (829), l. I, c. xliii (Hardouin “Conc.”, t. IV, col. 1321; Abelard, Ep. viii, in P.L., CLXXVIII, 318 B). In the twelfth century Abelard made a rule that a white cross on the head should distinguish the veil given to virgins by the bishop from that of the other nuns (Ep. viii, P.L., CLXXVIII, 301).

The Roman Pontifical contains the imposing ceremony of the consecration of virgins. The gift of the veil is accompanied by these words: “Receive the sacred veil, that thou mayst be known to have despised the world, and to be truly, humbly, and with all thy heart subject to Christ as His bride; and may He defend thee from all evil, and bring thee to life eternal.” Wilpert quotes a very ancient form, which is common to the different liturgies: “Receive, O virgin, this holy veil, and wear it without stain until thou shalt appear before the judgment seat of Our Lord Jesus Christ, before Whom every knee shall bow, of those that are in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, for all eternity, Amen.”