

# 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 true 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 it 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.

QuickTime™ and a  
decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

Image of St. Ludmilla

From the **CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA**



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 revered 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 prelature, which abbesses obtained as a reward at the age of sixty years (cap. Iuenculas, 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](#)."