

ARMENIANS AND THE VATICAN DURING THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH
CENTURIES:
MEKHITAR AND THE ARMENIAN CATHOLIC PATRIARCHATE

The challenge of Mekhitarian ECUMENISM and Latin-Roman loyalty

Boghos Levon Zekiyan

(published in *Het Christelijk Oosten*, 52 (2000), 3-4, pp. 251-267).

Preliminary considerations

In order to adequately speak of Armenian ecclesiastical tendencies or communities in communion with Rome starting from the XVIII century, the overall outline of ecclesiastical tendencies and trends within the Armenian Church starting from the XIV century (1) must be kept in mind. I will therefore refer to the research I carried out on the subject several years ago and make due here by pointing out the main conclusions (2). In that article I had identified four main tendencies beginning from the XIV century: *a)* the autocephalous tendency: in general, good relations with all Christians but without dependence on anyone; *b)* at the opposite extreme: the *Fratres Unitores* tendency (3) which asserts the need not only for hierarchical communion but complete ritual-disciplinary conformity with the Church of Rome as well, with the Latin rite obviously as the basis; *c)* those in favour of communion with Rome but only open to certain limited modification of the rite and discipline: a fairly common attitude among Uniate communities and quite

* I use the Hübschmann-Meillet-Benveniste transcription system for Armenian names: cfr. *Revue des Études Arméniennes* (= RÉArm, Paris). I have not used this system for the forms of names which have become commonly used today such as Mekhitar, Yerevan, Etchmiadzin, etc.; for the typical *-ian (ean, yan)/ianc'* inflexions of Armenian last names; and for the traditional initial *y*, transcribed using *h* given the late era dealt with here. Armenian words have a slight accent on the last syllable. The suffix *-c'i* of nicknames indicates origin. In the bibliographic notes, I have kept Armenian works to a minimum.

1. The "Apostolic" epithet (*A?ak'elakan*) is a relatively-recent official denomination which designates the autocephalous Armenian Church. In the past, it was simply designated as "Church of the Armenians" (*Hayastaneayc' Ekelec'i*). I will use the expression "Apostolic Church" as a name starting from 1742 when the First Armenian Catholic Patriarch, separate from the autocephalous hierarchy, was instituted by Pope Benedict XIV on the mountains of Lebanon in Bzommar.

2. B.L. Zekiyan, 'Les disputes religieuses du X^{IV}e siècle, prélude des divisions et du statut ecclesiologique postérieurs de l'Église Arménienne', in *Actes du Colloque Les Lusignans et l'Outre-Mer (Poitiers 1993)*, sous la dir. de J.-P. Arignon, Programme com'Science, Conseil Régional Poitou-Charentes, pp. 305-315, in part. 310-312. An English version of the same study was presented later at the New York Convention "The Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. At the Crossroads of the Crusades" (12-14 Nov., 1993) and was published under the title 'The religious Quarrels of the 14th Century Preluding to the Subsequent Divisions and Ecclesiological Status of the Armenian Church', *Studi sull'Oriente Cristiano*, I (1997), pp. 164-180. An Armenian translation of the French version appeared in *Etchmiadzin*, 1 (2000), pp. 106-125.

3. "Armenian" branch, which arose among the *Fratres Peregrinantes*, of the *Fratres Praedicatores*; cfr. R. Loenertz, *La Société des Frères Pérégrinants* (Roma, 1937), in part. pp. 104-

105, 141-150, 185-198; M.A. Van den Oudenrijn, *Linguae haicanae scriptores Ordinis Praedicatorum Fratrum Unitorum et Fratrum Armenorum Ordinis S.Basilii citra mare consistentium quotquot hucusque innotuerunt* (Bern und München, 1960, with an extensive bibliography); G. Petrowicz, 'I Fratres Unitores nella Chiesa Armena', *Euntes Docete*, XXII (1969), pp. 309-347; V.G. Matfunian, 'Die lateinische Mission in Grossarmenien bis zur Mitte des 18. Jahrhunderts', *Die Kirche Armeniens*, (Die Kirchen der Welt, Bd. XVIII), Evangelisches Verlagswerk (Stuttgart, 1978), pp. 165-174; H.L. Mirzoyan, *A Critical Analysis of the Armenian Philosophical of the 17th century*, Yerevan University Press (Yerevan, 1983, in Armenian).

typically characterizing the Uniate movements during the post-Tridentine era; *d*) those in favour of communion with Rome but convinced of the integrity of the Armenian faith and liturgical-canonic procedures and intent on maintaining them: for many reasons, this attitude almost appears as an 'ecumenical' *ante litteram* inspiration according to the Roman Catholic concept realised by the Vatican Council II (1962 - 1965).

These tendencies co-existed and challenged each other within the Armenian Church with varying equilibriums of force depending on the time and place and without very precise demarcation lines. In order to be more precise perhaps we could also add, almost as a subgroup, the position of certain representatives found in the first tendency who displayed rather irenic attitudes even in the theological field also, primarily in subsequent centuries.

The tendency linking up with the *Fratres Unitores* excluded, the other groups had illustrious representation all the way up to the highest echelons of the Armenian Church.

Venice, San Lazzaro, and Armenian rebirth in the eighteenth century

"Charming Venice, glorious Lady/ ... You will always recall my lyre/You, glory of brush and chisel...", from a poem written by Daniel Varujan (1884 - 1915), a great Armenian poet at the beginning of the century, entitled "Venezia" and published in 1913 shortly before he became the victim of the atrocious Genocide in 1915. For Varujan, as for Armenian sensitivity in general, Venice is not only the exotic city par excellence, the preferred reference of romantic reminiscences, or the singular biosphere for developing unrepeatabe inner thoughts. Neither is it only A PARTNER, OF past and faded glories, favourable or unfavourable according to the time. Rather, Venice is actively and effectively present in intellectual and spiritual life not only in the Diaspora culture but also in the Armenian fatherland. In fact, in the unanimous judgement of variously-inclined historians, the wave of cultural rebirth which permeated Armenian life during the XVIII century after almost two centuries of poorly-rewarded efforts due to turbulent political circumstances and heavy foreign control (4), disseminated from Venice thanks to the miraculously prolific cultural and religious work of Abbot Mekhitar (Mxit'ar) and his monastic order.

There is no need to insist on how much Mekhitar and his followers owe to the cultural context of Venice. The question of what destiny this work would have had if it had remained in that unknown corner of Morea, the city of Modone where Mekhitar initially took shelter after barely escaping confessional persecution in the Ottoman capital, is by no means pure rhetoric. We completely agree with K'iparian, a Mekhitarist himself, in the article 'MEKHITAR OF SEBASTE AND VENICE': «Venice was a true revelation for Mekhitar, in every sense of the word» (5).

We must ask ourselves, however, what considerations persuaded a government such as the Serenissima Republic which was so uninclined to improvisation, to partially repeal one of its recent laws - which banned the founding of new religious institutions in the city - in order to accommodate a small group of foreigners who, from a superficial view, could have presented all of the features of adventurous Utopians, albeit courageous. There is no doubt that the acquaintances made by Mekhitar in Modone with eminent Venetian individuals such as Admiral Alvise Sebastiano Mocenigo who later became Doge (1722 - 1732), and Angelo Emo, governor of Morea, should have considerably influenced the decision. It does not seem, however, that these acquaintances can sufficiently explain the exceptional nature of the reception and autonomous rights which were

granted.

4. For textual references see B.L. Zekiyan, 'Il monachesimo mekhitarista a San Lazzaro e la rinascita armena del Settecento', in *La Chiesa di Venezia nel Settecento*, (Contributi alla Storia della Chiesa Veneziana, 6), Ed.ni Studium Cattolico Veneziano, Venezia, 1993, pp. 221-222.

5. *Pazmaveb*, CXXVI (1968), p. 359.

It seems that the answer to this question must be searched for in the truly rich tradition of political, cultural, religious, and economic relations which, beginning from the era of Armenian rule in Cilicia, mutually involved both the Armenians and the Venetians. My previously-cited work can be referred to for a general overview of these relationships (n. 4). Here I would simply like to add that, from amongst the various factors, the beneficial treatment which Armenian merchants bestowed on the Venetian economy during its period of decline without a doubt plays a special role. In 1640, the Venetian Senate ordered "every advantage to this meritorious nation which trades large sums of money". Shortly thereafter, during the gloomy war years with Crete (1645-1669) when Armenian trade appeared as practically the only source of support for the exhausted Venetian economy, the Serenissima Republic decided on special measures "so that the trade of the Armenians, which we can say is unique at this time for the city, could be collected easily and be delivered promptly". It related, in fact, a report by the Five Wise Men "concerning the crisis of the present time, and extremely limited trade of this city, this Nation greatly supports it; the effort of the cities and the Levant being in its hands, according to the outgoing and incoming custom". Several later decrees by the Senate as well as more than one contribution of the Five Wise Men speak of the Armenians as a "well-deserving and most favoured Nation"; "recommended by the public acts" and "well-deserving as well as useful to and accepted by your Highness" (6).

The origins of the Mekhitarist Congregation in Constantinople

Mekhitar (7), named Manuk at his baptism (= child, a common name used among Armenians in honour of the Christ Child), was born in 1676 in Little Armenia in the town of Sebaste / Sebastia (today Sivas) which maintained a dignified rank as a merchant city even during the Ottoman era. When he was fifteen years old, Mekhitar entered the historic monastery of Surb Nšan (Holy Sign = Holy Cross). At the monastic ceremony in which he received his vestments, he was called by the name of his grandfather, Mxit'ar (= Comforter, in honour of the Holy Ghost). Unfortunately, the Armenian monasteries went through a period of decline beginning in the LATE FIFTEENTH century due to their almost exclusive intent on preserving their acquired heritage, therefore progressively losing a sense of healthy progress. The idealist adolescent felt unsatisfied. He began peregrinations through the vast territory of historic Armenia from Sebaste to Erzerum all the way to Etchmiadzin without his demanding needs being met. In 1691, Mekhitar had his first encounter with Western Christianity in Erzerum when he met a Jesuit scholar, perhaps the famous philologist and Orientalist Jacques Villote. He profoundly

6. Cfr. P. L. A. (Alishan), *Geonomia armena col rapporto alla Mostra Veneto-Armena, nell'occasione del terzo Congresso geografico internazionale* (San Lazzaro, Venezia, 1881), p. 4; B.L. Zekiyan, 'XoPa Safar ambasciatore di Sh...h 'Abbas a Venezia', "L'Oriente Moderno", LVIII (1978), p. 359.

7. Regarding the life and work of Mekhitar see: M. Nurikhan, *Il Servo di Dio Abate Mechitar, sua vita e suoi tempi* (S. Lazzaro, Venezia, 1914); idem in French: *L'Abbé Mékhitar, sa vie et son temps (1670-1750)*, *ibid.*, 1922; B.L. Zekiyan, *Mekhitar di Sebaste rinnovatore e*

pioniere, S.Lazzaro, Venezia, 1977. For the history of the order and bibliographic information see: V.G. Matfunian, 'Der Orden der Mechitaristen', in *Die Kirche Armeniens*, (cit. n. 3), pp. 193; B.L. Zekiyani, 'Mekhitar de Sébaste', in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*; G. Amaduni, 'Mechitar e Mechitaristi', in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione*. See also the recent and moreover meticulous work by M.K. ARAT, *Die Wiener Mechitaristen Armenische Mönche in der Diaspora*, Böhlau Verl., Wien-Köln, 1990; although it only deals with the history concerning the Mekhitarist branch in Vienna and contains some oversights regarding the separation of the two branches, the extensive bibliography which often refers to both the Venetian and Viennese branches is useful.

8. The city was officially called Istanbul only after proclamation OF the TurkISH Republic in 1923 according to the general policy of creating Turkish toponyms. In this particular case, however, the most probably Greek derivation of the new name went unnoticed.

impressed the young speaker and was probably the person who gave Mekhitar the idea of going to the West to pursue what he was looking for.

Ordained presbyter at the age of twenty on popular insistence in his native Sebaste, Mekhitar began to contemplate the notion of founding a new order. Impelled by this ideal, Mekhitar arrived in the capital of the empire, Constantinople (Konstantaniyye) (8), where he showed the project to one of the most illustrious *vardapet* (9) of the time, Xaç'atur A?ak'elian, a former student of Propaganda Fide and vicar of the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople, Melk'isedek', suggesting that he assume responsibility for the initiative. The vardapet politely declined the proposal believing that it could not possibly be realized. Mekhitar did not give up. A group of approximately ten young people had already united with him. In 1700 in Constantinople and in modest accommodations in the district of Pera (Beyo°lu), Mekhitar began community life and an apostolate (in print) with them, supported by the preaching of his own lips. On 8 September 1701, the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the small group solemnly sealed their consecration with God under the maternal protection of the Virgin.

Mekhitar was able to stay in Constantinople for only a short time since he was forced to secretly escape persecution in the imperial territory and find shelter at Modone in Morea, under Venetian rule. In 1715, the Ottoman conquest of the peninsula would force him to a new exile which was unfortunate for him at the time but in our opinion a godsend for his work. This time, however, he would discover a second homeland in the heart of Europe in one of the major centers of Western culture: Venice.

Mekhitar and the Armenian Church

In order to place these latest subsequent developments in the life and work of Mekhitar in their correct context and order of importance, clarification must be made, albeit brief, regarding both the position

9. *Vardapet*, literally "expert, scholar" (the word which translates the "expert" or "rabbi" of the Gospel), is a hierarchical figure typical of the Armenian Church. Chosen from the celibate clergy according to monastic tradition and recognized as *vardapet* at the end of a rigorous *curriculum studiorum* with a special liturgical rite connected to the awarding of the magisterial "staff" (*gawazan*) which distinguished their rank, they were the theologians and official preachers. They enjoyed special canonic privileges and were highly considered by both believers and the upper echelons of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Saint Mesrop Maštoc' (362-439), inventor of the Armenian alphabet (c. 405), is traditionally considered to have been the first *vardapet* of the Armenian Church from whom all later *vardapet* of subsequent epochs uninterruptedly and consecutively received the

power and privileges of their rank. In regards to *vardapet* rank and historical function in the Armenian Church, see: G. Amadouni, 'Le rôle historique des hiéromoines arméniens', in *Il monachesimo orientale*, (Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 153), Roma 1958, pp. 279-305; R. Thomson, 'Vardapet in the Early Armenian church', *Le Muséon*, LXXV (1962), pp. 367-384.

10. Extensive literature exists on Chalcedon and the Armenian Church: For an initial approach, see: K. Sarkissian, *The Council of Chalcedon and the Armenian Church* (London, 1965; New York, 1975); B.L. Zekiyan, 'La rupture entre les Eglises Géorgienne et Arménienne au début du VII^e siècle. Essai d'une vue d'ensemble de l'arrière-plan historique', *Revue des Etudes Arméniennes*, n.s., XVI (1982), pp. 155-174; K. Maksoudian, 'The Chalcedonian Issue and the Early Bagratids. The Council of Shirakawan', *Revue des Etudes Arméniennes*, n.s., XXI (1988-89), pp. 333-344; V.A. Arutjunova-Fidanjan, 'The Ethno-confessional Self-Awareness of Armenian Chalcedonians', *ibid.*, pp. 345-363; B. Ananian, *Recherches sur l'histoire de l'Eglise Arménienne du Ve au VIe siècle* (S.Lazzaro, Venezia, 1991, in Armenian); A. Lidov, 'L'art des Arméniens chalcédoniens', in *5th International Symposium on Armenian Art. Proceedings, (Venice 30 May - 3 June)* (San Lazzaro, Venezia, 1992), pp. 479-495; N. Garsoian, *L'Église Arménienne et le grand schisme d'Orient*, (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 574, Subs. 100) (Peeters, Leuven, 1998).

of the Armenian Church from a theological and ecclesiastical point of view as well as Mekhitar's viewpoint.

The Armenian Church belongs to the category of so-called pre-Chalcedonian Churches because of their rejection of the Council of Chalcedon. They profess a purely nominal 'monophysitism' IN THE WAKE of Cyrillic-Ephesian Christology. The first formal and official rejection of Chalcedon by the Armenian Church seems have occurred around the middle of the VI century. In any case, a strong Chalcedon tendency will remain in Armenia for some time yet, even if minor (10).

There has been much discussion on the reasons which led the Armenians to side against Chalcedon. I wish to avoid unilateral emphasis on positions relating to a purely theological or exclusively political plan. It seems to me that a group of factors, assembled under the generic category of 'religious policy' and therefore including theology, rights, culture, and secular policy, could explain the anti-Chalcedon tendencies of the Armenians. In any case, Armenian Christology always remained within the substantive orthodoxy in spite of the rejection of Chalcedon. That is to say, the official doctrine of the Armenian Church, as expressed by its most influential Fathers and scholars in its liturgy and teachings, never maintained commingling of the human and divine qualities of Christ or even the absorption or assimilation of humanity on behalf of the divinity thus reducing the reality and concreteness. Furthermore, detachment of the Armenian Church at that time in fact regarded the patriarchal see of Constantinople or rather the Byzantine Church. From the XI century onward, in fact, when the Armenians came into direct contact with the Church of Rome, they initially established a warm relationship of reciprocal esteem and trust. Unfortunately, Rome also gradually developed a suspicious and humiliating attitude towards the Armenian creed, rite, and rights which was usually based on a poorly-hidden superiority complex and an obvious desire to predominate, not at all different from the previous, secular, and unfortunately, not so prudent Byzantine attitude (11).

It is in this historical-theological-political context that the various fundamental types of ecclesiastical attitudes mentioned at the beginning were formed among the Armenians. As already stated, even the fourth tendency which we qualified as 'ecumenical' *ante litteram*, although the weakest with respect to the others, nevertheless also included illustrious representatives up through the echelons of the Armenian hierarchy: among Mekhitar's contemporaries, for example, we recall the previously-mentioned patriarch Melk'isedek' of Constantinople whose vicar, Xaç'atur A?ak'elian, had declared unity with Rome but with an 'ecumenical' approach. The same Catholicos of Etchmiadzin Nahapet I of Edessa, in office when Mekhitar visited the patriarchal

monastery, would later be deposed for a brief period due to his acceptance of Rome; he would be returned to the patriarchal throne, however, because of the general esteem he enjoyed. Even among the upper echelons, therefore, there was considerable wavering in tendencies within the Armenian Church. The same Mekhitar would later state that almost half of the bishops of his nation shared more or less the same viewpoint as he did. He therefore did not agree with the opportunity of erecting an Armenian catholic patriarch since this institution would have definitively drawn borders and sanctioned separation. This effectively happened while Mekhitar was still alive in 1742 with the creation of the Armenian Catholic Patriarch of Cilicia at Bzommar in Lebanon (12).

11. For more information, see: B.L. Zekiyan, 'Riflessioni preliminari sulla spiritualità armena. Una cristianità di «frontiera»: martyria ed apertura all'oikumene', *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 61 (1995), pp. 333-365, in part. 355-358.

12. For details and bibliography cfr. B.L. Zekiyan, 'Il monachesimo mekhitarista a San Lazzaro', (cit. n. 4), pp. 233-234.

13. Regarding such attempts, see: A. Out'ounjyan, 'The question of union of the Armenian communities of Constantinople and M. Č'amč'ean', *Banber Erevani Hamalsarani*, 1978, no. 3 (36), pp. 201-212 (in Armenian); S. JemÆemian, 'The movement for union of 1809 in Constantinople and Father M. C'amč'ean', *Handes Amsorya*, CI (1987), pp. 897-910; Id., 'The Echo of the History of Armenians of Father M. C'amč'ean', *Bazmavep*, CL (1992), 147-161 (French résumé: p. 162).

Nevertheless, more than one attempt to unite through an 'ecumenical' understanding was made even after this date, primarily promoted by the Mekhitarists of Venice (13). Unfortunately, extremist tendencies from both parties prevailed and, with the creation of the catholic primatial see in Constantinople in 1829 (which in 1867 would assume the patriarchal title of Cilicia as well), union would cease to be considered and the respective confessional denominations would be defined once and for all. If we consider with what kind of enthusiasm and in what terms the patriarch of Constantinople, Hovhannes Kolot (1715 - 1741), announced the publication of the *COMMENTARY* of Mekhitar *on the Gospel ... according to St. Matthew* (1737) from the pulpit - a true *summa* of the Christian doctrine in exegetical style which includes more than a thousand pages - exclaiming: "Today a new light in the Armenian Church has come forth; this book is a treasure given to us by God" (14), we can only resignedly regret the path taken by history just a few years after Kolot's time.

Mekhitar, a great pioneer of ecumenicalism

Apart from the frequent use and abuse of the term 'ecumenical', it seems to me that "*unitatis redintegratio*" research which will be put forward, favoured and promoted by the identically-named document of the Vatican II on ECUMENISM, defines the ECUMENISM officially assumed by the Roman Catholic Church in its essential ecclesiastical purpose and sense (15). If so, the fundamental principle of searching for a basis for unity irregardless of apparent differences can be considered as the basic ecumenical methodology. With ECUMENISM understood in these terms, the Christian community unfortunately does not exactly boast, in general, a rich history of ecumenical figures and events. The Armenian Church, instead offers a relatively consistent tradition in this respect in which the saint Nerses Šnorhali (1102 - 1173, catholicos from 1165) stands out. He definitely figures as one of the rare and great prophets of the ecumenical spirit and theology of the entire Christian culture. Mekhitar, abiding by the explicit testimony of biographies, was an avid reader of the Armenian Fathers and scholars ever since his youth. With the express intent to understand and clarify their Christology and ecclesiastical positions, he without a doubt knew Šnorhali well and

was moreover inspired by him to continue a tradition which, although minor, remained alive even in subsequent centuries.

14. M. Č'amč'ian, *Storia degli armeni*, vol. III, San Lazzaro, Venezia, 1786, p. 775 (in Armenian); B. Kiuleserian, *Il Patriarca Hovhannes Kolot*, (Azgayin Matenadaran/Bibliotheknational, 46) (Wien, 1904), p. 49.

15. Cfr. regarding this and the remainder B.L. Zekiyian, 'Un singolare itinerario di spiritualità dalla frontiera all'oikumene. Riflessioni sulla spiritualità armena', *Chiese cristiane d'Oriente*, in *Religioni e Sette del Mondo*, Quarterly magazine on religious culture, I (1996), N° 4, Dec. 1995, pp. 37-41.

16. For a detailed explanation cfr. B.L. Zekiyian, 'Un dialogue oecuménique au XII^e siècle: les pourparlers entre le catholicos St. Nersès Šnorhali et le légat impérial Théorianos en vue de l'union des Églises arménienne et byzantine', in *Actes du XV^e Congrès International d'Études Byzantines - Athènes, Sept. 1976*, IV, *Histoire. Communications*, Athènes 1980, 420-41; repr. with light variants under the title 'St Nersès Šnorhali en dialogue avec les Grecs: un prophète de l'oecuménisme au XII^e siècle', in *Armenian Studies, Études Arméniennes in memoriam Haïg Berbérian*, Lisboa 1986, 861-83; Id., *Les relations arméno-byzantines après la mort de St. Nersès Šnorhali*, in *XVI. Internationaler Byzantinistenkongress. Akten*, II/4, *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik*, 32/4, 331-7; Id., 'The Armenian Community of Philippopolis and the Bishop Ioannes Atmanos Imperial Legate to Cilicia', *Between the Danube and the Caucasus. Oriental Sources on the History of the Peoples of Central and South-Eastern Europe*, Budapest 1987, 363-73; Id., 'Nersès de Lambron' and 'Nersès Šnorhali', in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, XI, (Paris 1981), coll. 122-34, 134-50. See also: P. Ananian, 'Narse IV Klayetzi', in *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, IX, (Roma 1967), 750-3; E. Suttner, 'Eine 'Ökumenische Bewegung' im 12. Jahrhundert und ihr bedeutendster Theologe, der armenische Katholikos Nerses Schnorhali', *Kleronomia*, 7, 1 (1975), 87-97; H. Khatchadourian, 'The Christology of St. Nerses Šnorhali in Dialogue with Byzantium', *Miscellanea Francescana*, 78 (1978), 413-34.

Mekhitar creatively assimilates and transposes the principles formulated by Šnorhali (16) in the circumstances of his time. Still very young, he goes out in order to preach harmony, love, and brotherhood between Armenian factions which are confessionally opposed, trying to mediate in any case not only between them but also with the Latin world which was directly involved and partially responsible for the situation. Mekhitar speaks and acts with the precise intention to: *a*) remove the shadows of fanaticism; *b*) emphasize the things which unite instead of those which divide; *c*) highlight basic possible convergences irregardless of apparent divergences; *d*) convince about the need for compromise on everything that is not required by the faith's unity. He was unfortunately greatly misunderstood during his time and was practically an unheard *vox clamantis in deserto*. Misunderstood to the bitter end by the 'autocephalous' groups, misunderstood by the 'Latinophiles', misunderstood after all by the Roman Curia itself, although 'tolerated'.

For Mekhitar this was not a problem of changing 'confessional denomination' or in blunt terms, an "abjuration of the Armenian schism" or "conversion" according to the coercive values of the era which, in spite of everything, still exist today. He was of the firm conviction that the traditional faith of the Armenian Church was substantially orthodox, notwithstanding certain differences in formulation. He was furthermore convinced that it could not deal with a formal separation of the Armenian Church, at least in its totality, from the Catholic communion. He therefore negatively judged the position of the Latinophiles, not only because they alienated or lessened Armenian identity but also because they tended to create a community distinct from its hierarchy which, in his opinion, would preclude the path to any eventual understanding - which is exactly what happened. Finally, Mekhitar had his own view regarding the *truly vexing* question of communication *in sacris*; a view which was based on both his now clear convictions regarding the faith and identity of the Armenian Church and his pastoral and missionary experience.

Unfortunately, we cannot confront such an intricate question at this time. Therefore, the lengthy series of articles by Mardiros Abadjian (Martiros Apačian) (17) could be a learned and shrewd guide.

The formation of the Armenian Catholic Patriarchate

The question of *communicatio in sacris* upset the entire East between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and almost constituted the main stumbling block for a reconciliation of spirits among the Armenians. In truth, in 1718 Mekhitar had even succeeded in convincing Rome of the advantages of a less radical attitude (18). The rigorist tendency, however, soon prevailed and was certainly an important factor, within the context and complexity of other related factors of equal or minor weight which we will take into consideration in a moment, leading to the creation of the Armenian Catholic Patriarch represented by Abraham Arciwian in 1742. He took the name of Abraham-Petros I. His successors, following his example, consistently added the name Peter to theirs. Therefore, the historical numbering of the Armenian Catholic Patriarchs is added to this second name.

As stated, we cannot go into subsequent developments regarding the various confessional and ecclesiastical tendencies in Armenia here. The position of Mekhitar and his school, in this regard, was alienated in a historic crescendo which developed from prevailing rigorism in the *communicatio in sacris* because of the creation of the Armenian Catholic Patriarch in Cilicia, because of the humiliating

17. M. Abadjian, 'La questione della «*communicatio in sacris*» nel secolo XVIII e la formazione del patriarcato armeno cattolico, *Bazmavep*, 139 (1981), pp. 129-182; 141 (1983), 215-232; 146 (1988), 155-172; 147 (1989), 244-258; 148 (1990), 146-161, 413-418; 149 (1991), 461-476; 150 (1992), 202-214. More succinctly: J. Johannes Card. WILLEBRANDS, *Mekhitar e l'unione dei cristiani* (Venezia, 1977), extr. from *Bazmavep*, 145 (1977), pp. 417-436.

18. Cfr. M. ABAGIAN, art. cit., 139 (1981), pp. 165-171; *Letters of Mekhitar*, an edition *ad usum internum* only, n. 50.

defeat of the double attempt at union by the Mekhitarists of Venice in 1809 and 1820, because of the policy of Pius IX which accompanied the most Latin-like tendencies within the Catholic community, and finally, because of the clear defeat of the thesis at the Vatican I regarding the "untimeliness" of the definition of pontiff infallibility, which the two Venetian Mekhitarist council bishops had adhered to.

Among the factors contributing to the formation of the Armenian Catholic Patriarch, the following five can seemingly be credited with a predominant role: *a)* the continuity of the trends and tendencies in favour of communion with Rome since the days of the Kingdom of Cilicia; *b)* the exasperation produced by the attitude of the *Fratres Unitores* which prevented constructive dialog between moderate tendencies in favour of communion with Rome and zealous tendencies in favour of the ethno-cultural identity of the Armenian Church; *c)* the exasperation produced by the most extreme circles of the autocephalous faction who more than once did not hesitate to turn to secular Ottoman authority in order to limit the growth of the "papists"; *d)* the absolute prohibition BY ROME of every form of *communicatio in sacris* which offered no other alternative than to arrange for one's own hierarchy in order to avoid 'Latinization' of the community; *e)* finally, the general post-Tridentine position which strongly pushed in this direction.

In 1742, when Mekhitar got word of the imminent arrival of bishop Abraham Arciwian in Rome in order to receive the patriarchal pallium from the hands of Benedict XIV and to be appointed the first Patriarch of Catholic Armenians in history by him, Mekhitar, in a memorable letter (19), did not hide his extreme perplexity regarding a situation which definitely did not agree

with his view or ecclesiastical position - easily deduced from that which has already been discussed. Mekhitar's viewpoint, however, was not the position which prevailed in the Catholic Church. On the contrary, it was not only a secondary voice but almost suspiciously "Catholic" as well. Therefore, the events took their course and Arciwean was appointed Patriarch of Catholic Armenians, adding the traditional primatial title of the Armenian Church as well: Catholicos. He was therefore recognized as Catholicos-Patriarch with the special title "of the House of Cilicia" (Tann Kilikioy) (20).

In 1830, the Sublime Porta (Holy Door) officially recognized the creation of a primatial see in Constantinople for the Armenian Catholics. This implied official acknowledgement of them as "millet"; that is, a distinct ethno-religious community with its own community statute.

In 1867, Pius IX, going along with the vote of the primate of Constantinople, Mons. Anton Hasun (primate since 1846), decreed the union of the primatial province and the Patriarch under a single jurisdiction represented by the primate and transferred the patriarchal see to Constantinople. This famous "Reversurus" bull gave place to enormous turbulence within the same Armenian Catholic community.

Patriarch Hasun was much-discussed during his life and afterwards because of his initiatives on canonical reform and the restructuring of the Armenian Catholic community with the Latin discipline as the criterion and model. An initiative which deserved unanimous recognition, rather, was the founding of the Congregation of the Armenian Sisters of the Immaculate Conception

19. *Letter n. 712.* Mekhitar had already clearly explained his thoughts regarding this to the Propaganda Fide cardinals back in 1721 (Letter dated 22 February 1721: in *Schiarimenti e Documenti*, an anonymous collection of documents regarding Mekhitar and the order, without an indicated place or date). After recognition of the new patriarch by the Holy See, however, Mekhitar states a deferential respect in his letters, conforming to his principle of unconditional obedience to authority even when having a different opinion. He acted similarly in Rome even after the prevailing rigorist tendency regarding the *communicatio in sacris* by strictly ordering that his disciples cut short any discussion to its regard.

20. The Catholicos of the autocephalous church and titular of Cilicia, carries the title "of the Great House of Cilicia" (*Meci Tann Kilikioy*). The more "humble" naming of the Catholic Patriarchs-Catholicoi had perhaps been dictated, notwithstanding everything, by a sense of traditional ecclesia to not split the titles at the hierarchical echelons within the same rite.

in Constantinople in 1847, which he devotedly promoted and protected. The well-deserved order of Antonian monks, unfortunately, had an opposite destiny. Their extinction is largely connected to the exasperating disputes and divisions caused by the ecclesiastical policy of Hasun, whose patriarch ended with resignations in 1880. Hasun then went to Rome where he became cardinal and founded the Armenian Pontifical College in 1888 (21).

The patriarchal see remained in Constantinople until 1922 when the victory of Kemalist forces in Turkey and the end of international protection of Constantinople became imminently clear. The trauma of genocide undergone by Armenians of the Ottoman Empire during 1915-16, whose survivors had just begun to recover from the horrors, pushed the person in charge at that time, Mons. Hovhannês Nazlian, Apostolic Visitor for the Patriarch, to transfer the patriarchal see once again. It is now at Ashrafieh, a suburb of Beirut, near its original location in Bzommar, Lebanon, much nearer in truth to the land of Cilicia, the title carried by the Patriarch-Catholicos. The transfer became final at the patriarchal synod held in Rome in 1928. The Motherhouse of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception was likewise also transferred to Rome.

It must be remembered that the Mekhitarists of Venice also gave their support when the Catholic primatial see of Constantinople was instituted since by now it seemed like the last possible

solution given the impossibility of mitigating the discipline regarding *in sacris* communication in order to avoid complete 'Latinization', including the rite, of those adhering to the Roman communion. Another 'historical' convergence between the Venetian Mekhitarist school and the Armenian Catholic Patriarch occurred towards the end of the last century. Thanks to the ascension of Leone XIII, the Hassun conflicts which divided the Armenian Catholic community during the time of Pius IX and the patriarch Anton Pietro IX Hassun (1867-1880, primate of Constantinople SINCE 1846, cardinal in Rome since 1880), were suppressed. The new patriarch, Stephanos Azarian, willingly allowed Abbot Ignatios Giureghian (Kiwreghian) of Venice to publish the entire order of the Liturgy of the Hours with its relative hymns and tropes (*šarakan*) without any 'corrections' on the transmitted text, stating only brief explanations of

21. In truth, an earlier Armenian Pontifical College had been founded in Rome by Gregory XIII in 1584 in order to help "the entire Armenian population" by instructing their best sons. He did this in consideration of his Christian faith and in remembrance of the generous help which they had lent, more than any other Eastern population, to the Crusades. All of the costs of the college and the alumni were supported by pontifical funds. It lasted, however, only a few months. Gregory's successor, Sixtus V, immediately expressed his intention to close it at the first audience granted to Cardinal Santoro, "protector" of the college, stating an absence of funds in the St. Angelo reserves (according to the Pastor, however, the situation could not have been that critical given that 326,000 gold and 33,500 silver shields were held at St. Angelo's). Santoro continued to support the alumni for some time at his expense after abolition of the pontifical contribution even though this did not please Sixtus V. In the end, all of the alumni were sent home during the autumn of 1585 (cfr. *Primo centenario del Pontificio Collegio Armeno in Roma (1883-1983)*, pp. 84-86 (Italian text; tri-lingual edition in Armenian, Italian, and English).

22. Regarding the **Patriarch and the Armenian Catholic community**, in addition to Abadjian (cit. n. 17), cfr. M.J. Terzian, *Le Patriarcat de Cilicie et les Arméniens Catholiques (1740-1812)* (Beyrouth, 1955); V. Tékéyan, *Le Patriarcat Arménien Catholique de Cilicie au temps de Grégoire Pierre VI (1812-1840)* (Beyrouth, 1954); Gr. Petrowicz, 'Gli Armeni nell'impero ottomano e in Polonia', in *S. Congregationis de Propaganda Fide memoria rerum*, vol. III/2 (Roma-Freiburg-Wien, 1976), pp. 58-63; Id., 'Origine dei monaci antoniani armeni', *Bazmavep*, 143 (1985), pp. 143-148; N. Setian, 'Gli armeni cattolici nell'impero ottomano', Roma 1994. On the **Armenian Evangelical Church**, officially formed in 1846 and recognized by the Ottoman empire in 1850, see V. H. Tootikian, *The Armenian Evangelical Church* (Detroit, MI, 1982). On the **Ottoman concept and system of the "millet" especially concerning Armenians**, cfr. A.K. Sanjian, *The Armenian Communities in Syria under Ottoman Dominion* (Cambridge, MA, 1965).

controversial steps. The edition is, without a doubt, still the best one among those existing today. It was released in 1898 and also became the *textus receptus* in the Armenian Catholic Patriarch, contrary to the Missal which remained marked by the 'corrections' of the censor of the Propaganda of 1677.

Penetration of primarily American evangelical missions among Armenians dates back to the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1847, they also received imperial recognition as "millet" (22).

The work of the Mekhitarists

In spite of the turbulence connected with the separation from the Motherhouse of Venice of

a group of monks who first settled in Trieste and then in Vienna in the Austrian empire²³, the long priorate (1749-1800) of Mekhitar's immediate successor, Abbot Step'anos Melk'onian, constituted one of the most fruitful periods in the life of the order; on the contrary, the period in question gave the final boost to that intense ecclesiastical, spiritual, missionary, cultural, and scholastic activity which would later have a fairly strong and broad impact on the entire Armenian population in the fatherland and on the diaspora all the way in far-off India. It is rightly acknowledged as the Golden Age of the order's history; a phase which reaches its peak between approximately 1780 and 1850. During these years, the following writings were published: *History of the Armenian people from their beginning until 1784* (1784-1786) in three volumes by Mik'ayēl Č'amč'ian; the *Commentary on the Psalms* (1815) by the same author in ten volumes; the large theological works by Gabriēl Avetik'ian, nicknamed at the Sapienza "The terrible theologian"; the numerous volumes of biographies of Saints and Fathers by Mkrtič' Awgerian (known in classical philology as Johannes Baptista Aucher); the publication of the New *Theasurus* of antique Armenian, *Nor Ba?girk' Haykazean lezui* (1836-1837), considered one of the most exemplary and immortal works of Armenian philology.

The following events also occurred during the same period: *a)* the two above-mentioned attempts at ecclesiastical union (1809, 1820), founded on exemplarily ecumenical bases, whose failure was certainly not a result of their promoters; *b)* the relaunching of the scholastic system among the Armenian people; *c)* the systematic promotion of publishing for the public and periodic printing which brought about the founding of the magazine *Pazmaveb* (today *Bazmavep*) in 1843, the oldest magazine in Italy still published today and the fourth oldest in the world. During the second half of the century, the youngest Viennese school added contributions of primary importance and originality to this massive work, such as the works by Fathers Gat'ōrč'ian (Caterdjian), Taš'ian (Dashian), Hovnanian, and Sipilian, inspired by the most rigorous criteria of Germanic philology; during those decades, rather, an absolute phenomenon developed in Venice: Father Levond Alishan who could have been considered to embody an entire academy all by himself. It was, in fact, the ray of hope of these worthy academicians who already at the beginning of the nineteenth century persuaded Napoleon to save the San Lazzaro monastery from confiscation, the only one at that time which remained unharmed amongst the various monasteries and convents of Northern Italy.

If from the religious point of view the term 'ecumenicalism' best qualifies the Mekhitarist concept and work, from the cultural point of view it can best be described by that which we will call 'Christian humanism'. Man was their central point: man in its totality, in the complex multiplicity of his transcendental and immanent dimensions. Work which therefore involved vast areas of interest: from the scientific production of Armenian works in various fields and from the translation of classical Western masterpieces ranging from Homer to Montale in versions which were often incomparable, to the treatises and manuals on religion, history, pedagogy, beekeeping, fowl breeding, sericulture, accounting, navigation, agriculture, and so on.

The Mekhitarist commitment, in the exclusively religious sphere as well as in the humanistic field, expressed itself not only through writings and publications, but equally so through live contact with the people, sought after and realized primarily in the numerous, widely-disseminated, and quite prestigious schools of the order. Among the 29 institutions founded by the Fathers of Venice from 1746 (Elisabethopolis) to 1956 (Buenos Aires) and among the 11 institutions founded by the Fathers of Vienna from 1774 (Trieste) to 1979 (Los Angeles), the Moorat and Raphael 'Venetian' Colleges (Padova, Venice, Paris) and the 'Viennese' School of Constantinople/Istanbul merit special mention since they were among the major educational centers of the new generations of Armenians for a century and a half.

²³ Both branches now united again in the General Chapter, celebrated with the participation of all their members, on July 19th, 2000.

Other proof of this unique religious-cultural-humanistic commitment on behalf of the Armenian nation, is the profuse loving care the Fathers used in collecting and preserving the treasures of Armenian spirituality and civilization: manuscripts, antique coins and seals, liturgical objects, all kinds of relics, and specialized libraries which are proudly displayed to visitors and kindly made available to scholars in both of the monasteries in Venice and Vienna.

An Armenian scholar and writer, Aršak Čhōpanian (Archag Tchobanian), said: “A people which generated a spirit like Mekhitar's cannot despair”. Notwithstanding various impending difficulties, the Mekhitarist monasteries in Venice and Vienna, immersed in the heart of Europe and Christian civilization, even today stand as rays of hope for the Armenian people, extended towards their fourth millenium of history.

TO:
Prof. J.J.S Weitenberg
Rivierforel 25
NL – 2318 MG L e i d e n