

File: Armenian Clergy
Bishop Papken Vazkian

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Colorful Armenian Church Changing

By a Star Staff Writer

An inscription on the wall of the Jefferson Memorial declares "no man shall be compelled or otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinion or belief."

Fifteen centuries earlier, the same spirit was proclaimed by a gallant leader of a small nation which defied a tyrannical king, declaring that "no intimidation, torture or death can compel his people to deny the universal truth which is embodied in the belief of Almighty God and revealed by Jesus Christ through His teachings."

This was the reply given by Vartan Mamigonian to the Persian king who was forcing the Armenians to adopt the sun and fire worship.

The Rt. Rev. Bishop Papken, pastor of St. Mary's Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church at 42nd and Fessenden Streets NW,

knows how dear Armenians in America hold Jefferson's words, and how his countrymen the world over revere the stance of Vartan Mamigonian.

View Is Firsthand

Just recently he got a firsthand view of the love for freedom — especially in matters of worship — when he went to bishops' conference of the church. The conference was at Christendom's oldest cathedral, the Mother Church in Etchmiadzin, Armenia, U.S.S.R., dating back to 301 A.D.

Papken, who is legate for the Armenian Church in Washington, was heartened by the new sense of religious freedom the faithful expressed in the Soviet republic. "It is much more free than it was when I first went there in 1955, and the living conditions are much better. But let it be known, they've still got a long way to go."

Twenty-five bishops and the patriarchates of Istanbul and Jerusalem met in Etchmiadzin ("the descent of the only begotten Son") to move toward modernizing and reforming the church which claims the loyalty of most of the world's 5 million Armenians — 300,000 in the United States.

One of the biggest steps was to authorize translating the Old Testament into modern Armenian. The present translation uses the Armenian of the 5th Century. The New Testament already is in the modern language.

The bishops also agreed to shorten the services and the sacraments, and to make their list of fast days more reasonable. Presently there are about 150 fast days each year. Soon they will be cut down to less than half that — to Fridays and certain days during Lent.

Becomes Restrictive

This greatly affects when an Armenian couple may be married. They are forbidden to marry on a fast day, and with almost half the days of the year considered such, the choices are very limited.

The Armenian church, which long has been tolerant of others, endorsed the aims of the ecumenical movement. In fact, they are cooperating with other Orthodox churches, Roman rite churches, and mainline Protestants around the world to set a fixed date for Easter.

The Armenian bishops will co-operate, that is, so long as it comes on a Sunday in April, their preference being the second or third Sunday. The move was prompted by the United Nations and religious leaders, including Pope Paul VI, have been pushing it.

In another ecumenical development, Pope Paul informed the conference through observers that any Armenian priest may celebrate mass in any Roman rite church because, as Papken explains it, Catholicos Vazkian II befriended Roman Catholic priests during a time of need.

They tabled motion covering celibacy. As the church now rules, only those who are parish priests may be married. Bishops and archimandrites (corresponds to monsignors, who in the Armenian rite are eligible to become bishops) may not marry.

The issue was divided, 12 to 11, with those who wanted the change in the minority. The question within the next two years will go before the National Ecumenical Convention.



BISHOP PAKKEN . . . Changes Made

ically is limited to Syria, Lebanon and Cyprus.

Some within the church feel that since Armenia is under Communist control, the Communist influence is too great. Not so, says Papken. "We have complete autonomy and they never tell us what to do except to be loyal to our faith and to the governments of our countries."

Nonetheless, some churchmen have rallied around the Antelias Catholics, clamoring for a church authority for Armenians outside the Soviet bloc.

Papken believes this trouble eventually will pass, however, with no serious rift in the church.

The conference also was the time for the Blessing of the Holy Oil, an element used in sacraments and in anointings. This becomes, once every seven years, a moving and colorful event for Armenians.

Instead of the Catholicos extending his hand for the blessing, an artificial hand is extended, embellished with relics of their national and church hero, Gregory the Eliminator, dating

back to the last part of the 3rd Century. The spear believed to be that which pierced Christ's side while he was on the cross also figures into the blessing, along with a large part of the cross itself.

general conference of laymen and priests. Then Catholicos Vazkian will decide the issue.

Which Are Worthy?

One problem facing the church is how to canonize those who died for the faith during the Massacre of 1915. Up to 1 million died, but not all for the faith. A screening committee has been set up to determine, from what evidence is available, who should be canonized.

There was consideration of world problems, and concern over a problem of their own. This centers on the rightful role of the patriarch of Antelias, whose geographic realm histor-