

Armenian duality

Church head cites basic goal plus 2-cultures life

By JIM ASKER
Post Reporter

The leadership of what might be called an ethnic church carries a dual responsibility, says Archbishop Tor-kom Manoogian, primate of the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of North America.

"Commitment to the basic mission of our church . . . communicating through our priests the teachings of Christ" comes first, Manoogian said.

But that goal can hardly be separated from the task of helping parishioners preserve the traditions, art and language of their homeland while adapting to the fast pace of life in modern America, he said.

Perhaps nowhere is that job more difficult than in Houston, where one frequently may feel overwhelmed by freeways and fast-food franchises.

Manoogian was recently in town for groundbreaking ceremonies for the construction of the city's first Armenian church, St. George's, on Synott Road between West Belt and Texas 6.

Manoogian said he has a "vision of Houston as the center of Armenians in the South."

About 300 Houston area families now belong to the church, said its pastor, the Rev. Terening Kondralian, and "we average three to four families a week adding to our parish."

"PROBABLY THERE ARE a few thousand Armenians scattered in Texas," Manoogian said. And since he believes "once an Armenian, you are an Armenian for life," Manoogian sees his task as organizing "the scattered church into an organized



TORKOM MANOOGIAN

church."

But many Armenians, particularly first-generation Americans, seem to be seeking more to blend in. Many have dropped the "-ian" ending their last names and are reluctant to leave the Baptist, Episcopal and Methodist churches they joined before St. George's was organized in the mid-1960s, Manoogian said.

The Armenian Church is one of the oldest Christian bodies in the world. After years of persecuting Christians, a pagan king of Armenia was converted by St. Gregory the Illuminator in 301 A.D. This made the country, which straddles the border between Turkey and the Soviet Union, the first one to officially become Christian.

Echmiadzin Cathedral, with its distinctive dome and which has been copied in other Armenian churches, was built in 303 A.D. after St. Gregory had a vision of Christ coming down from the heavens with a golden hammer.

Although Echmiadzin remains the seat of the church, which is autonomous from other Christian sects, most Armenians have emigrated, Manoogian said. Many fled in the early 1900s, when an estimated 200,000 to 600,000 Christians were massacred in the Young Turks revolution.

MANOOGIAN, WHO WROTE a 1973 book about the period, said the figure was more like 2 million, but the tragedy remained largely unnoticed by the rest of humanity "because the world was involved in World War I."

Many Armenians fled to Middle East countries, but a large number came to the United States, Manoogian said, adding there are now 600,000 here.

"The Armenians couldn't accept the idea of the melting pot," Manoogian said of the immigrants. "They escaped the Turks to preserve their own identity."

"In a sense, they created their own ghettos here," he said. And because of the harassment the children felt, it was the second generation that largely sought to sublimate their ethnic background, the primate said, "because they didn't want to be considered foreigners."

"Considering the circumstances, they were wise in taking that action," Manoogian said.

"But after World War II, America realized instead of being a melting pot it could be a beautiful garden with many colors," he said, so today there is a "back to our roots" trend among Armenians.

"Now we are part of American society, and we are glad of it," Manoogian said. But Americanization has brought problems, too.

The church, which strongly believes in the family, is especially concerned with the effects of modern life on youth and family unity, Manoogian said.

MANOOGIAN, 51, said his job as head of "one of the largest dioceses in the world," covering all of North America except California, "sorely tries the physical and intellectual endurance."

Based in New York, the primate spends much of his time on the road visiting his 50 parishes. He has just been re-elected to an unprecedented fourth four-year term as primate.

The Armenian Church generally holds the doctrinal beliefs of the Eastern Orthodox Church but is monophysitic — that is, it does not accept the duality of Christ, or belief that he was mortal while on earth.

While not diminishing the tribulations Armenians' forebearers faced, Manoogian sees new strains placed on those beliefs and church unity.

"There is no question about (the church's) adaptability to the new circumstances of a new world," he says, however. "Now it is our turn to prove ourselves."