MEKHITARISTS MARK VIENNA PRESENCE BICENTENNIAL

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This year marks the 200th anniversary of the establishment of the Mekhitarist Fathers in Vienna. The Austrian Postal Authorities have already issued a commemorative stamp to mark the occasion. Earlier, the Central Bank of the Republic of Armenia also issued a commemorative coin with a face value of 1000 drams meant to pay tribute to a unique Armenian institution that has played a critical role in engineering the Armenian Renaissance in the 19th century, thus opening new horizons of learning and knowledge before the Armenian people.

The Mekhitarists of Vienna, along with their brethren in Venice, belong to the Mekhitarist Congregation established by Abbot Mekhitar in 1700 in Constantinople, capital of the Ottoman Empire, and headquartered since 1717 on the island of San Lazaro, near Venice.

The Congregation was established with the express wish, objective and goal of its founder to serve "God and Nation", by bringing education and enlightenment to the Armenians through their studies, research and publication of our classical literature and history, while at the same time trying to cleanse the classical Armenian language from the foreign influences that had marred its original beauty and expression.

This concerted, dogged and planned effort by the Mekhitarist Fathers in Venice and Vienna was ultimately instrumental in reviving the interest of Armenians in the ancient treasures they had neglected for centuries and enabled Armenians to reconnect with their forgotten heritage, to discover its riches and thus take pride in the achievement of their forefathers. It was a period of enlightenment, knowledge, progress and new found dignity in the 19th century. It is this period that both Armenian and non-Armenian scholars have aptly called the "Armenian Renaissance", attributing its emergence to the actions, scholarly activities and dedication of the Mekhitarist Fathers.

In an article titled "Literature and Intellectual History from 1700 to 1915" critic and poet Vahe Oshagan writes: "What makes these elites remarkable is the fact that it was committed to the preservation of the traditional culture, to the faith and language of its forefathers, and to the survival of the Armenian nation".

It is within this context, therefore, that the bicentennial of the establishment of Mekhitarist Fathers in Vienna assumes a particular historical importance on account of the unique role they played in engineering this revival and leading it for two centuries. They had inherited this vision from their

founder Abbot Mekhitar (1676-1749), and true to their calling, sacrificed their comfort, their life and their earthly belongings to achieving this noble objective.

The darkest of times: decade and despair in the 18th century

The actions of the Mekhitarist Fathers, both in Venice and Vienna, are best understood when viewed against the backdrop of the times in which the Congregation was founded and the nature of the goals they set out to accomplish.

"At the beginning of the 18th century the Armenians and the entire east, were in the throes of the middle ages "writes historian Hrant Pasdermajian in volume II of his "History of Armenia", published in French in 1971 in Paris. French historian Edouard Jean Dulaurier (1807-1881), provides a broader perspective of the times in question in an article titled "Contemporary Armenian Society" also published in French in the "Revue de deux mondes " on April 15, 1854. In that article Dulaurier states that "the Armenian nation after all the disasters it had suffered , enslaved and under pressure, was quickly heading towards total intellectual failure. Her language and traditions were being lost bit by bit every day succumbing to the dialects and customs of the surrounding populations".

By 1700 the incessant and successive foreign invasions, persecutions and exactions of the earlier centuries had taken their toll on the Armenian population and were causing important population shifts away from traditional Armenian centers in favor of newer centers in Europe and Asia, thus creating a far flung diaspora with weaker internal links that could promote cohesion and ethnic unity, thus jeopardizing the continued existence of the Armenians as a single national entity.

Moreover, Armenians living in their historical homeland under three different political rules (i.e. Tsarist Russia, the Ottoman Empire and Persia), were slowly and gradually losing the vital national connections that make the concept of "one nation, one language and one entity" a viable proposition. Literally separated from each other by these warring and competing powers, Armenians found themselves serving three masters while slowly developing separate identities, reflecting the socio-economic and political realities of the environments in which they lived.

The visionary: Abbot Mekhitar (1676-1749)

It was in such dire circumstances for Armenia and Armenians that a child named Manoug was born at Sebaste (Sivas) on February 7, 1676. History will later recognize this child as Abbot Mekhitar or Mekhitar of Sebaste.

At age fifteen Manoug entered the monastery of Surp Nshan and was ordained a deacon, taking the name of Mekhitar. The young Mekhitar, thirsting for knowledge and spiritual guidance, travelled from one monastery to another (i.e. Etchmiadzine, Sevan and Pasen) in search of knowledge and learning but was deeply disappointed at the limited opportunities he found there for acquiring the knowledge he sought. Returning to Surp Nshan monastery he devoted himself to studies and self-improvement and was ordained a priest on May 17, 1696 by bishop Anania.

From the very first moment of his ordination, Mekhitar pursued two objectives. In the first place he wanted to set up an order of learned preachers (vartabets) devoted to the service of the Armenian people and its cultural and spiritual renewal. He also wanted to travel to Europe to acquaint himself

with the ideas and changes that were taking shape there so that he could bring the benefits of these changes to his compatriots.
It was in Constantinople that Mekhitar gathered nine followers in 1700 to establish his cherished religious order that became known as the Mekhitarist Congregation after his death. However, facing inter-communal, sectarian and religious persecutions, he and his followers soon decided to move to Morea, a Greek city under Venetian rule, to be safe from religious persecution he had faced in the Ottoman capital. His stay in Morea was cut short by the war between Venice and the Ottoman Empire. The war resulted in the defeat of the Venetians and the loss of Morea as Venetian territory. Fearing Ottoman reprisals, Mekhitar and his followers moved again and finally found refuge on the island of San Lazzaro, near Venice, where he established his monastery in 1717. Since that date the monastery of San Lazzaro has become the center of Armenian culture and learning in Europe and the world. It also became a center for scholarly publications that brought fame to its academy of scholars and made it a point of reference for Armenian studies to worldwide specialists.
Mekhitar and his followers had already begun the publication of scriptural, spiritual, and theological works and texts while in Constantinople. These activities were continued by Abbot Mekhitar, his followers and the next generations of monks in San Lazzaro, Venice.
The Mekhitarist Fathers under the guidance of Abbot Mekhitar busied themselves also translating a large number of books, ranging from the early Fathers of the Church and the works of St. Thomas of Aquinas to Homer and Virgil as well as to the best known poets and historians of later days.
Mekhitar distinguished himself with a literary output of 14 personal works and 27 translations or editions of scriptural, spiritual, theological or classical works. The most notable one is the "Dictionary of Armenian Language", which took almost twenty years to complete and which was published three weeks after his death in 1749 while the second volume was published in 1769. This marked the beginning of the tradition of philological and linguistic studies that characterized the work of the Mekhitarist Congregations both in Venice and Vienna. Abbot Mekhitar also undertook and completed the publication of a new edition of the Bible in November of 1735. This was an epoch making publication that ranks high in the long list of achievements of the Mekhitarist Fathers.

The score of Mekhitarist mission

There were two main avenues through which the Mekhitarist Fathers carried out their mission. The first was in the field of linguistics which Mekhitar himself pioneered. In 1727 he published a grammar book for vernacular Armenian and in 1730 a more substantial and authoritative grammar of classical Armenian. The crowning moment of his efforts was the publication in 1749 (three weeks after his death) of Volume I of the first comprehensive dictionary of the Armenian language. Mekhitar had worked on this for over twenty years and produced a definitive dictionary after much research of the original meanings of the words. Volume II was published in 1769. Through his dictionary of classical Armenian, Abbot Mekhitar established the foundations of the Armenian language as a modern and standardized literary medium, expunging from it foreign words and regional variations that had deformed its original and classical beauty.

The second avenue which the Mekhitarist Fathers pursued to accomplish their mission was printing. Principally, by means of the innumerable periodicals, pious manuals, Bibles, maps, engravings, dictionaries, histories, geographies and other educational and popular literature they published over the years, they provided the nation with scientific and scholarly references that established Armenian learning on solid grounds. In doing so, the Mekhitarist Fathers pioneered numerous academic disciplines in Armenian learning that did not exist until then.

Recognizing the unique role the Mekhitarist Fathers have played in the history of the Armenian nation, and paying tribute to them for their multifaceted achievements , Pope Paul John II (1920-2005) in a pastoral letter dated on July 3, 2001 and addressed to the Mekhitarist Order marking the 300th anniversary of establishment of this Armenian Catholic Congregation wrote: "The characteristic element of the Mekhitarist spirituality is the search for holiness, through an intense prayer life and no less demanding dedication to cultural studies, primarily focused on the great Armenian patristic sources. Mekhitar wanted to safeguard the Armenian monk-doctor from losing himself in an itinerant life, with the weakening of the profound sense of his own identity. For this reason he laid down that the monks should live a common life in monastic house, under the protection of obedience. The monasteries thus became centers of spiritual formation and cultural studies , and exercised an extraordinary influence on that intellectual aristocracy that was in great part at the origin of the cultural , political and social rebirth of the Armenian people in successive periods" (see Vatican Archives: www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2001).

The social, cultural and political rebirth that the Mekhitarist Fathers brought to their nation is usually referred to as "the 19th century Armenian Renaissance" by the majority of Armenian historians and scholars. This renaissance, renewal or rebirth came as a result of the planned, interconnected and focused effort undertaken by the Mekhitarist Fathers that manifested itself specifically through notable achievements in the following fields:

Publication of Armenian classical texts

The Mekhitarist Fathers were, from the very first day of the establishment of their congregation , instrumental in the study, and publication of texts of classical Armenian authors of the 5th century. This covered historiographical and theological works that were long forgotten and neglected by generations of Armenians. Thanks to these efforts the works of these classical writers and authors (i.e. Khorenatsi, Agathangelos, Goriun, Yeznig, Pausdos, and Yeghisheh etc.) as well as others were brought to the attention and appreciation of Armenian readers. The Mekhitarist Fathers translated a wide range of such works into Latin and other European languages, thus showcasing the treasures of Armenian literature to academic circles. Before long, the Mekhitarist Fathers came to be known as scholars who delivered to Europe the long-lost knowledge of the Armenian past while bringing to Armenians the culture and heritage of Europe, both ancient and modern.

Cleansing of the classical Armenian language

The Mekhitarist Fathers produced and published also grammar books and dictionaries,

standardizing the rules of the classical Armenian language. They also adopted modern European techniques (chiefly German) for the study of classical works and pioneered the study of linguistics among Armenians. "The Dictionary of the Armenian Language" prepared by Abbot Mekhitar and published in 1749 was a pioneering work from that perspective. Already in 1727 he had published a grammar book for vernacular Armenian and in 1730 a more substantial and authoritative grammar of classical Armenian. Others soon followed. During 1836-1837 the Mekhitarist Fathers published "The New Dictionary of the Armenian Language" jointly authored by Mekhitarist Fathers Gabriel Avedikian , Khatchadoor Surmelian, and Meguerditch Avkerian. To this eminent list of linguists we must add the names of such luminaries as Father Arsen Pakradouni, (1790-1866), Mathew of Eudocia (1715-1777) and Meguerditch Asgerian (1720-1810) who through translations of foreign texts showed how Armenian could be written in its purest aesthetic form and construction.

Research and Study of Armenian history

The Mekhitarist Fathers also excelled in historiography. The towering figure in this endeavor was Father Mikael Chamchian (1723-1823). Chamchian wrote a three volume "History of the Armenians" (published in 1785 through1786). This became the definitive Armenian history text in this formative period of the modern Armenian scholarship. He used all the available sources of the time, both Armenian and foreign, to author and publish in 1785, the complete history of the Armenian nation. The three-volume publication became the basis of the Armenian critical history.

An impressive number of Mekhitarist Fathers devoted their life to the study of Armenian history. The most celebrated and prominent figure among them is Father Ghevont (Leo) Alishan (1820-1901), a beloved and cherished name in Armenian literature. He produced a varied and rich literature on history, geography, ethnography, philology, botany and archaeology. Among the most notable works he produced are the Illustrated Geography of Armenia (1853), Fragments and Vestiges of Armenia (1870-1902), and monographs devoted to certain regions of Armenia such as Shirak (1881), Sisuan (1885), Ayrarat (1890) and Sisakan (1893) that enhanced our knowledge and understanding of the past of our historical homeland.

Translation from and into Armenian

The Mekhitarist scholars translated, between 1825 and 1850, some 130 volumes of European literature, including major works of Greek and Latin as well as Italian and French classics. Translating European literature into Armenian has served the triple purpose of enlightening the uneducated public, perfecting a literary language and catching up with the civilized world. The most important works belonging to antiquity and modern times in Greek, Latin, Italian, French, German and English were translated into Armenian by the Mekhitarist fathers during this period. For example, Father Haroutiun Avkerian (1774-1849) translated John Milton's "Paradise Lost" in 1824. Followed translations from Plato, Lamartine, Dante and other major figures of European literature. The Mekhitarist Fathers translated into Latin and Greek also the texts of the early fathers of the church whose originals were lost, but whose Armenian translations dating to the 5th, 7th and 10th centuries were miraculously

preserved in Armenian manuscripts. Among these documents were the "Letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch", some works of St. Ephraim the Syrian, notably a "Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul" and an edition of Eusebius' "Ecclesiastical History", just to name a few. Father Meguerditch Avgerian (1762-1854) was the scholar who undertook this task. The publication of these works caused a great sensation among academic and church circles in Europe at the time, a fact that enhanced further the reputation of the members of this congregation and the importance of Armenian manuscripts as repository of universal heritage.

Education and the network of Mekhitarist schools

In addition to the literary and historical studies the Mekhitarist fathers created a network of Armenian schools, persuaded that education and enlightenment were essential for saving Armenia and Armenians from darkness and ignorance. These schools were opened particularly in areas where the local Armenian population was devoid of institutions devoted to Armenian learning. The first schools were opened in Hungary in 1746, and then spread to cities and centers of Armenia and Western Armenia from thence to cities in Ottoman Empire and Persia, Iran. After World War I, Mekhitarist Fathers opened schools in Paris, Constantinople, Aleppo, Beirut, Buenos Aires and Los Angeles to cater to the needs of the survivor communities of the Ottoman Genocide of Armenians. The Armenian school in Istanbul today, known as The Pangalti Lyceum, was established in 1825 and is the oldest Mekhitarist School in the world still serving the Armenian community since its inception.

Collection of ancient manuscripts

Abbot Mekhitar and his successors collected Armenian manuscripts and saved them from destruction thus protecting our cultural heritage. With the collection of manuscripts, the Mekhitarist Fathers were also collecting primary sources for further and future research. Thus a treasure began to accumulate first on the island of San Lazzaro, then in Vienna. To-day the Mekhitarist libraries in Venice and Vienna have more than 8000 manuscripts jointly. This collection is second to the collection held in the Armenian Repository of Manuscripts in Yerevan (Madenataran) and the one found at the Armenian Patriarchate in Jerusalem.

Vienna Mekhitarists' path to scholarly reputation

Following internal disputes, a number of Mekhitarist Fathers separated from the Mother House in Venice in 1773 and settled first in Trieste then Vienna in 1811. The Mekhitarist Fathers soon were busy there too training new seminarians and organizing missions into historical Armenia in pursuit of the goals and objectives of their founder.

A decree signed by the Austrian Emperor Franz I on December 5, 1810 recognized the presence of the Mekhitarist Fathers in Vienna and permitted them to set up a printing house .
In time, the Mekhitarist monastery in Vienna, like the one in San Lazzaro in Venice, became a major center and point of reference for Armenian culture and studies worldwide. It amassed collections of antiques, artistic ceramics, sacred silverware, mostly of Armenian origin.

The monastery amassed collections of antiques donated by benefactors, in particular coin collections (5000 historical Armenian coins and 20,000 from other nations). The art gallery prides itself with a wide collection of works by well-known Armenian painters. Moreover, the Mekhitarist Fathers of Vienna collected a total of 2800 ancient and valuable Armenian manuscripts.

As in Venice, the Mekhitarist Library in Vienna accumulated significant ancient and modern printed books that formed the basis of research on a large scale. The result today is over 170,000 volumes and the largest collection of Armenian newspapers and periodicals in the western world. As a result, the Vienna branch of the Mekhitarist Congregation became a center for scientific research in the philological disciplines, a trait that distinguished it from the center in Venice. Influenced largely by the German academic standards, the Mekhitarist Fathers of Vienna devoted their considerable energies to the critical analyses of classical historians, to linguistics to archaeological research and the study and revival of the classical Armenian language known as "Krapar".

The Mekhitarists of Vienna made great strides in linguistic studies with the works of Father Hovsep Katerdjian (1820-1882) who excelled also as a translator of Cicero, Xenophon and Bossuet, in addition to authoring a "Universal History"; Another prominent figure was Father Matatia Karakashian (1808-1913) who focused on the Armenian of what was known as the "Golden Century" and published a critical "History of the Armenians" (1895). Ghevond Hovnanian (1817-1897) philologist and translator; Clemens (Kghemes) Sibilian (1824-1878) Archeologist and numismatist; Arsen Aydenian (1825-1902) Linguist, author of "Grammar of the Modern Armenian Language" (1866); Hagop Dashian (1866-1933) Philologist ,linguist ;. Grigoris Kalemkerian (1862-1917) philologist and linguist; Gabriel Menevishian (1864-1936) linguist and Armenologist; Nerses Akinian (1883-1963) philologist; Hamazasp Voskian (1895-1968),expert on Armenian monasteries, Vahan Inglizian (1897-1968) and Bedros Der Boghossian (1898-1980), philologists are some of the Mekhitarist Fathers in Vienna who achieved fame in their research of Armenian history, linguistics.

The Mekhitarist Fathers achieved fame in other areas as well. Their printing house in Vienna became a point of reference for the imperial government that ordered in 1849 the printing of Hungarian banknotes, and in 1854, ordered school books to be printed for the Ministry of Education. With its ability to print books in a multitude of foreign languages, the Printing house of the Mekhitarists in Vienna became an institution by itself in modern times.

The Mekhitarist Fathers of Vienna also founded in 1887 a periodical named "Handes Amsorya" that soon became a noted philological and linguistic publication. In addition the Mekhitarist Fathers started publishing ,beginning in 1889, a series or collection named "National Library" that encompasses the new research and studies on Armenian History. Approximately 300 volumes have been published in these series that are constantly replenished with new research and studies published by the Mekhitarist Fathers in Vienna.

Appreciation

A handful of dedicated , learned and selfless priests, called to action by the vision of their founder, have succeeded in engineering one of the most impressive and awe inspiring miracles in the history

of Armenia and Armenians, building upon the work and traditions of St. Mesrob Mashdotz, the creator of the Armenian alphabet and the "Golden Age" in our Literature". In doing so the Mekhitarist Fathers played the most crucial of roles in the "national awakening" of Armenians in the 19th century.

They retrieved and researched the Armenian history, literature, geography and language, and presented these to Armenians and the contemporary world through their publications. They were also instrumental in disseminating nineteenth-century European ideological and cultural currents in Armenia and among Armenians. Thus they consciously and systematically carried out an enlightenment project on behalf of the nation and laid the groundwork for future development. Historian John Douglas gives the following appreciation for the role they played in Armenian history : " Both monasteries (i.e. Venice and Vienna) served and continue to serve as important strongholds for the Armenian culture in the diaspora dedicated to scholarship and the preservation of the Armenian traditions. The monks wrote and published books and periodicals and helped develop the modern language" (see The Armenians, John M. Douglas, New York, 1992,p.273). Another historian, Reuben Adalian adds: "There has been no institution in Armenian history to compare with theirs, and the scientific and research centers operating today in Armenia and in the Armenian diaspora have not been in existence long enough to begin to match the Mekhitarian output" (see Reuben Adalian, From Humanism to Rationalism: Armenian Scholarship in the Nineteenth Century, University of Pensylvania,1992, p.1).

These are some of the laudatory expressions of appreciation given by Armenian and non-Armenian scholars with regard to the mission and objectives achieved by both the Mekhitarist centers in Venice and Vienna that give an idea to the scope and extent of the national mission carried out by the Mekhitarist Fathers in the past centuries. The accumulated knowledge, studies and treasures kept in these two European centers would require extensive and comprehensive research to make fully justice to the content and scope of the work accomplished by these Fathers.

In the meantime, the mission continues both in the diaspora and independent Armenia. To face the challenges of the modern times, the two branches of the Mekhitarist Congregation have been reunified now after a "schism" that lasted more than 250 years. Indeed, at a general extraordinary meeting held at San Lazzaro from July 10 to 21, 2000 the members of the Mekhitarist Congregation decided to create a unified congregation, with the convent at San Lazzaro being considered the mother monastery, and the convent in Vienna being considered the first principal monastery. Welcoming this development , His Holiness Karekin II, the Catholicos of All Armenians in a letter addressed to the Mekhitarist Congregation wrote on July 22, 2000: "We are confident that the reunified Mekhitarist Congregation will continue to serve the needs of the Armenian nation with greater vigor and energy in the spiritual and cultural fields for the glory of God."

Pope John Paul II, in his pastoral letter of July 3, 2011, called upon "the dear sons of Mekhitar ... to hold on to this heritage and keep it alive... Do not be afraid to be open to new horizons, rethinking and updating ancient forms, if the needs of the time require it".

In the ancient monasteries of the Mekhitarist Fathers in Venice and Vienna these words resonate

with the praise and thanks of a grateful nation that has seen and experienced the benefits of a cultural miracle.

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