

Catholics Elect New Patriarch

The Armenian Catholic Hierarchy and Community Face Daunting Challenges

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

In mid-October, Cairo-born Bishop Bedros Tarmouni, 59, was elected Catholicos Patriarch of the Lebanon-based Armenian Catholic Church by the Synod of Bishops at the Monastery of Bzommar. Unlike the Armenian Apostolic Church, lay representatives do not participate in the election of a Catholic patriarch. The Synod is made of clergy delegates representing Catholic communities in Europe, the Middle East, the US, South America and Armenia. The new leader will be known as Patriarch Nerses-Bedros XIX.

Tarmouni replaces Patriarch Hovanes Bedros XVIII who tendered his resignation last month. No details were given about the reasons for the resignation, which was officially announced by the Vatican.

After graduating from the Levonian School in Rome and having completed his theological studies, Tarmouni was ordained a priest in 1965 to serve the Armenian Catholic community of Egypt. He was ordained a bishop in 1990 and became a prelate in Egypt. Through the years, he has served as a member of the Catholic Patriarchate's Synod.

Following his election, Patriarch Tarmouni sent his greetings to Lebanese President Emil Lahoud and pledged support to Lebanon's development. He explained that the Patriarchate is the "Mother Church" of Armenian Catholics and plays a significant role in Lebanon's spiritual life. The new Patriarch addressed special greetings to the Catholic community in Armenia calling for spiritual renewal.

Armenian-Catholic relations go back to at least the 12th century during the period of the Crusaders and their ties with Cilician Armenia. Later in the 14th century, through the missionary activities of the Franciscan and Dominican orders, a "Latinizing movement" gained ground among the "liberal

elements" of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

However, it was only in the 19th century that the Armenian Catholic Church was formally organized as a separate church. In 1831, when a new constitution for Christians living in the Ottoman Empire was instituted, the Catholics were legally recognized as a separate millet – an autonomous Church affiliated with Roman Catholicism – in the Ottoman Empire, with their own hierarchy and their own Catholicos-Patriarch.

In the early 18th century, two Mekhitarist monastic congregations were established in Venice and Vienna. These monastic orders

communion with Rome" and pledges allegiance to the Pope as the supreme head of the church. For centuries, controversies, theological debates and mud slinging have gone on between the Armenian Apostolic and Armenian Catholic churches. Even as recently as a few years ago, when the Armenian Catholic church announced a "return" to Armenia after its independence, clergymen in both churches exchanged bitter words over who was to "reevangelize" Armenians after 70 years of Communism. The Armenian Apostolic Church has not fully accepted the "validity" of the Armenian Catholic Patriarchate and has seen it as a "separated" community. In turn, Armenian Catholic clergy have consistently questioned the Armenian Apostolic Church's theology and history and some have branded it as "heretical."

One of the direst challenges facing the Armenian Catholic Church today is the lack of new recruits and novices for the priestly vocations. The problem is most acute at the Monastery of Bzommar where the majority of novices and newly ordained priests are not Armenian. Since the last decade, there is a rapid "Arabization" of the clerical ranks of the Armenian Catholic Patriarchate in Lebanon.

In addition to internal personal disputes and the continuing controversy over the extent of Vatican control over the Patriarch, the Patriarchate and

the Mekhitarist Congregations, the role and activities of the Armenian Catholic Church in the Republic of Armenia remains a subject of debate and controversy, complicated by the attempts of the Vatican to reassert itself in the region. Even as the Mekhitarist congregations are relatively more successful in preserving the "Armenian character" of their rite, the Armenian Catholic Patriarchate will have a daunting task to reassess its mission and role in the coming years. ■



are autonomous and do not fall under the jurisdiction of the Armenian Catholic Patriarchate, although they are affiliated with the Vatican.

According to Vatican sources, some 250,000 Armenians are members of the "Armenian Rite" of the Catholic Church (others put the number closer to 150,000) with communities in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, Jerusalem and the US.

The Armenian Catholic Church is in "full