

Catholic Armenians in Brazil¹

Armênios Católicos no Brasil

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Abstract:

This paper aims to trace a brief history of Armenian Catholics in Brazil, highlighting religious and lay leaders who helped to create an Armenian Catholic community in the city of São Paulo. It starts from the plan to set up a Mission in the city to the difficult task to build a church for the small but very committed community of Armenian Catholics in the city. The challenges, the discussions, the events and also a problematization of the role of the São Gregorio Illuminator's Church nowadays are all aspects commented on throughout this paper. The aim is therefore to analyze the history but also to incite the dialogue regarding the Church's future.

Keywords: Armenians; Catholic; São Paulo; Armenian Catholics; São Gregório Iluminador.

Resumo:

Este artigo tem como objetivo traçar um breve histórico dos católicos armênios no Brasil, destacando líderes religiosos e leigos que ajudaram a criar uma comunidade católica armênia na cidade de São Paulo. Começa desde o plano de estabelecer uma missão na cidade até a difícil tarefa de construir uma igreja para a pequena mas muito comprometida

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comunidade de católicos armênios da cidade. Os desafios, as discussões, os acontecimentos e também uma problematização do papel da Igreja do Iluminador de São Gregório na atualidade são aspectos comentados ao longo deste trabalho. O objetivo é, portanto, analisar a história, mas também provocar o diálogo sobre o futuro da Igreja.

Palavras-chave: Armênios; Católico; São Paulo; católicos armênios; São Gregório Iluminador.

Introduction

This paper aims to trace a brief history of Armenian Catholics in Brazil, highlighting religious and lay leaders who helped to create an Armenian Catholic community in the largest Catholic country in the world. With about 64% of its population, Brazil has around 170 million followers of the Holy See. Brazilians are closely followed by Mexicans (ROME REPORTS, 2018), who although in relative terms have a larger Catholic population than Brazil (77%) in absolute numbers there are 111 million Mexican Catholics. In the fourth most-populated country in Latin America and birthplace of the current pope, Argentina, Catholics decreased from 76.5% of the population in 2008 to 62.9% in 2019 (BEVILACQUA, 2018), until 1994, it was a requirement to be Catholic in order to be president or vice-president of Argentina. In these countries and in the rest of the continent, the Latin Rite predominates among Catholic believers, although there are expressive communities of Eastern Catholic Churches as well. Among the Eastern Rite practitioners in Brazil, the Greco-Melchites from the large Syrian community in the country stand out, with about 50,000-100,000 believers (EPARQUIE DE SÃO PAULO – BRÉSIL, 2013) and the Lebanese Maronites, have their houses of worship spread from the north to the south of the country but are concentrated in São Paulo where they number around 10,000 believers (BERCITO, 2021).

Among Eastern Catholics, one of the groups with the lowest number of believers and churches in Brazil – only one church, in São Paulo – are the Armenians. Created in 1981 and based in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the Apostolic Exarchate of Latin America and Mexico was modified in 1988, when Argentina became a separate Eparchy and the see of the Exarchate was transferred to São Paulo. The estimate made by the leaders in Latin America is around 30,000 Armenian

Catholics on the continent, with more than half of them in Argentina (16,000) and the rest in Mexico, Venezuela, Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile. The number is estimated at 7,000 Armenian Catholics in Brazil, especially in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, a city in which there is no parish (ARQUIDIOCESE DE SÃO PAULO, 2018). In an article published in 1997, Father Henrique Cervi estimated the number of Armenian Catholics in the whole country at 14,000 (CERVI, 1997, p. 63).

It is important to highlight the difference between Armenians and descendants who profess the Catholic faith in Brazil – not necessarily in the houses of worship of the Armenian Catholic Church – and those who have Armenian descent and attend the Armenian Catholic Church in São Paulo. In this sense, this chapter starts highlighting the trajectory of an Armenian priest in Rio de Janeiro in the 1910s named Etienne Brasil and later the community effort that took place in São Paulo from the 1920s on to create a building for the Armenian Catholic Church in the city.

A Catholic Armenian in Rio de Janeiro – Etienne Brasil and the Armenian Cause

Etienne Brasil's biography is unclear. Although he arrived in Brazil from France, he was born in 1882 in some part of the Ottoman Empire.² It is known for a fact that he emigrated to France in order to obtain a university degree, after having completed his secondary education at the French Lyceum Saint-Benoît in Constantinople (Istanbul). In Europe, he was ordained a priest of the Catholic Church, received a bachelor's degree in pharmacy and a doctorate in philosophy (BRASIL, 1917, p. XIV).

The sources and the bibliography do not converge on what would be Etienne Brasil's real name before he was ordained. There is in the enrollment book of the French Lyceum Saint-Benoît the record of a student named "Et. Iknadossian", of Catholic religion, who studied at the establishment from 1896 to 1901. The name

2. The year of birth is confirmed by the Brazilian National Library's database, where some books of his authorship are deposited, as well as by the documents of his naturalization process deposited in the Brazilian National Archives.

– although abbreviated – the annotation on the religion and the dates indicate that the record is in fact about Etienne Brasil.

Etienne Brasil belonged to a wealthy Ottoman Armenian family, part of the Francophile Catholic Armenian minority inhabiting the Ottoman Empire, for whom French education was highly desirable. This would explain why Etienne Brasil went to study at the French high school and not at one of the Armenian colleges in Constantinople, in addition to the probable reason why he did not master the Armenian language. If the “apostolic” Armenians, that is, faithful of the Armenian Apostolic Church, had in their patriarch in Constantinople the maximum authority of the Armenian *millet* recognized by the Sublime Porte, the faithful of the Armenian Catholic Church were regarded with suspicion by the sultan. In 1828, 20,000 Catholic Armenians were expelled from Constantinople on charges of being French agents in the country (TERNON, 1996, p. 48-49). The persecutions reached the east of the Empire, where more deportations were announced and assets of the Armenian Catholic Church were confiscated, generating protests from France, which pressed for the Porte to institute a Catholic *millet* unifying the faithful of the various Eastern Churches subordinated to the Holy Apostolic See – Melkites, Maronites, Chaldeans, Armenians and Syriacs who lived on the borders of the empire.³

Although we do not have more information about Etienne Brasil’s family, he mentioned *en passant*, in correspondence sent to the Brazilian government, that he was the nephew of Paul Petros XIII Terzian, Armenian Catholic Patriarch of Cilicia between 1910-1931.⁴ Terzian was one of the most prominent Armenian religious leaders on the international scene in the early 1920s. In his book published in 1920, Etienne Brasil reaffirmed that he was the nephew “of the Supreme Patriarch of the Armenian Catholic Church, Mgr. Terzian, and a close relative of other personalities” (BRASIL, 1920, p. IX).

The exact reason for Etienne Brasil’s emigration to the country is also unknown. It is known, however, that the priest’s first stop was Rio de Janeiro, for

3. Ibid.

4. *Legação Armênia no Brasil*, 25 de janeiro de 1921, AHI, 281/2/4.

a short period, in 1907, before heading to Salvador, Bahia, around 1908, where he stayed for about a year before returning to Rio de Janeiro.⁵ At that time, he signed his articles as a professor, sometimes at the Grand Seminary of Bahia, sometimes at the Episcopal Seminary of Bahia.⁶ During the time he remained in that state, Brasil dedicated himself to the study of the religiosity of Africans and Afro-descendants and the customs of local indigenous peoples, publishing the results of his research in *Anthropos*, two of these articles being republished in the *Revista do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro*, signing as Etienne Ignace Brasil.

Upon moving to Rio de Janeiro, Etienne Brasil became the chaplain responsible for the chapel of Nossa Senhora da Boa Viagem, in Niterói. Meanwhile, he shared his clerical activities with the meetings of the Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Fluminense and the Society of Geography of Rio de Janeiro, thus expanding his social network. The Institute's activities and meetings were widely covered by some papers from Rio de Janeiro, through which it is possible to observe the role of Brasil in the activities of the Instituto, as well as in the production of research and texts on various subjects that were often read at the meetings.

In 1912, being part of the intellectual circles of Niterói and Rio de Janeiro, Etienne Brasil began to publish articles in the press on a wide range of topics, signing as a priest, doctor, and professor at some educational institutions. In a resume sent to Avetis Aharonian in 1919, Etienne introduces himself as the founder and former director of two teaching institutions.⁷ He participated in the intellectual, educational and information media in Brazil from his status as a Catholic priest of French education.

5. Naturalização de Etienne Ignace Brasil ou Etienne Brasil. NE 3.925 ano 1925, código 24391, not. 713, fl. 4/30.

6. Brasil, Etienne, "Le fétichisme des nègres du Brésil", *Anthropos*, Bd. 3, H. 5/6, (1908); Brasil, Etienne, "La Secte musulmane des Malês du Brésil et leur révolte en 1835", *Anthropos*, Bd. 4, H. 1 (1909).

7. Additionally, in his resume, Etienne Brasil claims to be a member of the National Museum, of the Geographical Society of Lisbon, of the Historical and Geographical Institutes of Pará, São Paulo and Bahia. Letter from Etienne Brasil to Avetis Aharonian. Rio de Janeiro: 4 de outubro de 1919 (Armenian Revolutionary Federation Archives).

In a newspaper from April 1915, there is a call for admission exams for the Teixeira de Freitas Law School in which Brasil's name appears among the candidates for future lawyers,⁸ a profession he would practice from the 1920s until his death in 1955. As reported by the newspaper *A Razão* – in a column specially designed for the Syrian-Lebanese community – Etienne Brasil reportedly performed above average in the exams required for graduation in law:

the government inspector [...] publicly declared [...] that no student had presented such perfect work since the foundation of the school. It is a comforting achievement for the intelligent Armenian race and significant proof for the Syrian community, to whom the skillful lawyer intends to offer his professional services.⁹

The association with the Syrians was used instrumentally by Etienne Brasil and other compatriots, such as Levon Apelian, who was often on the board of Syrian entities in Rio de Janeiro and named his fabric import and export business “Casa Libanesa”.¹⁰ In a letter to Avetis Aharonian in 1919, Etienne Brasil stated that, in the reorganization of the Armenian Center in Rio de Janeiro, Levon Apelian would occupy the presidency, as “he was a very rich businessman who was involved with the Syrians (who are more than 120,000 in Brazil!), having been elected their president”.¹¹ Thus, Etienne Brasil used Apelian's prestige with the Syrians of Brazil to convince Aharonian that his network of contacts has enough influence in the country to work in favor of Armenian interests. Over the years, the Armenians in Brazil would seek to distance themselves from the image of the Arabs, moving away from the label of “Syrians” for all the peoples of the so-called Near East who were Christians. In the words of Jeffrey Lesser, “the leaders of the Armenian community [...] formed at the end of the 19th century,

8. *O Imparcial*, 8 April 1915, p. 9

9. *A Razão*, 5 April 1921, p. 4.

10. Among positions he held in entities such as the Syrian-Brazilian Red Cross (*Cruz Vermelha Sírio-Brasileira*), Apelian was elected president of the Syrian-Brazilian Club (*Clube Sírio-Brasileiro*) in 1918, an institution of which he was also the main funder. ‘Casa Libanesa’ literally means ‘Lebanese House’. *O Paiz*, 19 April 1918, p. 10; para a “Casa Libaneza”, cf. *A Epoca*, 31 July 1918, p. 28.

11. From Etienne Brasil to Avetis Aharonian. Rio de Janeiro, 16 de setembro de 1919: “era um negociante muito rico que estava no meio dos sírios (que são mais de 120,000 no Brasil!), tendo sido eleito presidente desses”

defined their place even more aggressively, trying to separate themselves from the ‘Arab’ immigrants. They insisted that Armenians were white, and ‘a legitimate and heroically Western ethnicity’ (LESSER, 2001, p. 110).

Although the period after 1915 was the most fertile for Etienne Brasil as a columnist, it is no longer possible to find texts signed by him as a priest after he was admitted to the law school. From then onwards, the former ordained member of the church would be referred to as ‘doctor’, ‘sir’ or ‘professor’, maintaining his role as an authority of knowledge in Rio de Janeiro at the beginning of the 20th century. This leads us to believe that, for Brasil, beginning his legal studies and setting aside his cassock were interconnected events, even though, as with other events in his life, the exact reason and time of the abandonment of the priesthood are not fully known. One can speculate that one of the reasons was emotional: in the naturalization process of Etienne Brasil, it is said that he married the Portuguese woman Maria Emília Gonçalves da Mota on June 25, 1918,¹² with whom he lived until 1944, when she died.

During the Armenian Genocide, Etienne Brasil was a prolific columnist, denouncing the persecution of Armenians and other Christian peoples in the Ottoman Empire in the Brazilian press, always invoking the status of an ex-priest and intellectual of European background. With the end of the war and the short-lived independence of Armenia in 1918, Etienne Brasil worked as a diplomat of the Armenian Republic in South America. He would play a key role in the recognition of the new republic by the South American nations and garner support to help Armenians in humanitarian crisis.¹³ After the Sovietization of Armenia and the loss of his diplomatic post, Etienne Brasil would dedicate himself exclusively to law, not getting involved or speaking out on Armenian issues. He died in 1955.

The Armenian Catholics in São Paulo – The Construction

12. *Naturalização de Etienne Ignace Brasil ou Etienne Brasil*. NE 3.925 ano 1925, código 24391, not. 713, fl. 13v. (Arquivo Nacional, Brazil).

13. See Heitor Loureiro’s Pragmatism and personalities: Etienne Brasil and Brazilian engagement with Armenia, 1912-22, in *Aid to Armenia: Humanitarianism and intervention from the 1890s to the present*, edited by Joanne Laycock and Francesca Piana and published in Manchester, by Manchester University Press in 2020, pages 34 to 49.

of a Church

The Sovietization of Armenia during the 1920s and the weakening of Etienne Brasil's political position as an Armenian representative in the country coincided with the arrival of the largest influx of Armenians to Brazil, particularly to São Paulo, which at that time was challenging Rio de Janeiro as the economic and industrial center of the country. In this sense, the main port of disembarkation of Armenians in Brazil was the port of Santos, in the state of São Paulo, not the one in Rio de Janeiro, which at that time was still the capital of the republic. It did not take long for the Armenian newcomers to create their churches and institutions in São Paulo, trying to somehow recreate the communal institutions and social ties that existed in the Ottoman Empire before 1915. It is undoubtedly true that the majority of the Armenians in São Paulo that would and still profess the Cristianiaty in the city belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church. Nevertheless, it must not, by no means, forgotten the natural bond the Armenian Catholic Church has to the settled in Etchmiadzin, beginning by the fact that the Armenian Catholics connected to the Holy See started as a dissidency of the Armenian Apostolic Church (BOGOSSIAN-PORTO, 2015, p. 165). Therefore, just like the anthropologist Pedro Bogossian-Porto (2015) identifies that

Despite the attempt to demarcate such differences, it is important to remember that Armenian Catholics are also different from other Catholics, since their rites are also Armenian, that is, similar to those practiced in the Armenian Apostolic Church. This means that, if in theological terms the two Churches are irreconcilable, in their most concrete aspect, most visible to the faithful, they are extremely similar: they perform the same sacraments and do it in the same way, they use the same elements in the Masses, they use the same Classical Armenian as a ritual language, among other similarities (BOGOSSIAN-PORTO, 2015, p. 166)¹⁴

Taking that into consideration, it is likely to think that the establishment of an Armenian Catholic Church, although bonded to Rome and its inherent Latin Catholicism precepts, could become a natural space of creation, protection, preservation and solidification of the “Armenity” and its inevitable outcomes (so-

14. Translated by Daniel Scandolara and Heitor Loureiro.

mething we intend to explore further in this chapter).

A chaplaincy of the Armenian Catholic Mission in São Paulo was created in 1934 by Father Vicente Davidian, in response to requests from the Catholics of Marash who resided in the city. According to the *Jornal do Imigrante* published in 1983, Vicente Davidian's visit to São Paulo was the result of a petition led by Serop Kherlakian to the Patriarch of the Armenian Catholic Church Avedis Bedros XIV Arpiarian. The intention of the letter to Bedros XIV was, according to Yeznig Vartanian (2020), to ask for a 'spiritual pastor' for the city of São Paulo (VARTANIAN, 2020, p. 583). In fact, there are not many records of Serop Kherlakian's life, but it is known that he came from Marash, as are most of the Armenian Catholics in São Paulo. Following the records provided by Vartanian (2020), Serop Kherlakian arrived in São Paulo in 1928 and established himself in business. "He was the main supporter of the ecclesiastical organization of the Armenian Catholic community" (586). The sources support Kherlakian's important role in community life, work which was continued by his sons Affonso, Avedis Clemente and Carlos.

Born in Ankara and housed in an orphanage in Constantinople during the genocide, Davidian went to the Pontifical College in Rome in 1920, where he stayed until 1931, when he was assigned to the Armenian Catholic Church in Cairo, before his appointment to São Paulo.¹⁵ Davidian arrived in São Paulo in 1934 with the mission of organizing the Armenian Catholic community in the city composed of around 70 families at that time.¹⁶ It is noteworthy that, as an immediate measure, Davidian obtained the endorsement of the metropolitan archbishop to be based in the Church of São Cristóvão da Luz, located on Tiradentes Avenue, in a prominent building that also allowed for the possibility of educational activities¹⁷. Having a space for the community to meet, Davidian recognized a need for the formation of an administration board, which would remain under his presidency. Therefore, in 1934 itself, this board was composed

15. "Um pouco de sua história", *Jornal do Imigrante*, February 1986, p. 3.

16. "A comunidade armênia católica de São Paulo", *Jornal do Imigrante*, January/February 1983, p. 9

17. VARTANIAN, Yeznig. *A coletividade armênia do Brasil*. São Paulo: 2020, p. 583; "Um pouco de sua história", *Jornal do Imigrante*, February 1986, p. 3.

of six more members: Kevork Aprikian, Kevork Pambukian, Minas Yapudjian, Nazar Baboghlian, Manuel Kodjoian and Hagop Sizvatian.¹⁸

The existence of this group would prove to be important for the coming years of the Armenian Mission in São Paulo, especially for its deliberations about the purchase of land for the construction of an Armenian Catholic church in the city. However, Davidian did not participate in those discussions. In 1949, he was assigned to assist the Catholic Armenians of Rio de Janeiro and left São Paulo. Capital of Brazil at that time, Rio de Janeiro hosted the International Eucharistic Congress of 1955, an occasion that Patriarch Cardinal Krikor Bedros XV Agagianian attended as the Papal Legate, being received by Davidian and hosted by the wealthy Gasparian family.¹⁹

The need to have a church of its own would be a notable community priority for future parish priests and for the entire community. Davidian seems to have taken this sense with him to Rio de Janeiro. As reported by the newspaper *A Cruz*, in a 1956 edition, Davidian had the desire to build an Armenian church in the capital and was raising funds and negotiating the donation of land with city hall.²⁰ The Bulletin of the Ordinariate of Oriental Rites Catholics of Brazil of 1955 confirms this statement bringing the transcription of a speech by Davidian to seminarians of the Central Seminary of São José. When referring to the rites celebrated by the Church, Davidian said, “[...] this is the rite in which, every Sunday of the month, I celebrate Holy Mass for the Armenian Catholic community, in the church of the Lebanese Maronite Mission. We are yet using this church until we build our own church, which, God willing, will soon be a splendid reality”.²¹

Although this chapter is exclusively focused on a brief history of the Armenian Catholics in São Paulo, the Davidian’s statement interestingly allows

18. “Um pouco de sua história”, *Jornal do Imigrante*, February 1986, p. 3.

19. “Um pouco de sua história”, *Jornal do Imigrante*, February 1986, p. 3.

20. “Jubileu Sacerdotal”, *A Cruz*, 15 April 1956, p. 2.

21. Boletim do Ordinariato dos Católicos de Ritos Orientais do Brasil, Número 2, 1955, p. 37. “[...] este é o rito no qual, todos os domingos do mês, eu celebro a Santa Missa para a Coletividade Armênia Católica, na igreja da Missão Libanesa Maronita. Utilizamos-nos desta igreja, porém, enquanto não construímos o nosso próprio templo, o qual, se Deus quiser, será brevemente uma esplêndida realidade”

one to conjecture there was once a mission to also build up an Armenian Catholic chapel in Rio de Janeiro. The fact that the nominated Armenian priests sent to the mission in São Paulo were usually relocated to Rio after their ‘suitable period of service’ (something yet to be discussed throughout chapter) may also be a clue in this direction. Nevertheless, whether there was an Armenian mission to Rio or not remains as an interest to be better investigated by future scholars. What seems undoubtedly noticeable is that the presence of Armenian Catholics in Rio, after the fall of the First Armenian Republic, reveals itself as a fruitful history to be told.

For instance, if we quickly track Davidian’s steps in Rio we can not only state his apparent desire to build up an Armenian Catholic chapel in the city and his presence as a “companion” to the Patriarch during the visit of the latter to Rio in 1955, but also sixteen years of service in the city, where he passed away, in 1965.²² Also, one must not leave behind the details of the above-mentioned visit of the Patriarch Grigor Bedros XV Agagianian for the XXVI International Eucharistic Congress of 1955, held in Rio. Bedros XV arrived along with Archbishop Batanian, who would eventually succeed Bedros XV as Patriarch of the Church. During his stay in Rio, Bedros XV was hosted by Levy Gasparian, a wealthy businessman, who received the Patriarch in his mansion after the latter was picked up at the airport by the official car of the Lebanese Ambassador.²³ Constantly accompanied by Batanian and Davidian, Bedros XV would later celebrate a Holy Mass at an improvised altar inside Gasparian’s house - in such occasion, another mass was celebrated by Batanian and “numerous members from the Lebanese colony took communion”²⁴

Getting back to the line of events in São Paulo, the young priest Gabriel

22. “Faleceu o Vigário dos Armênios”, *A Cruz*, 4 April 1965, p. 1. It is worth mentioning that according to the newspaper “A Cruz”, published on 15 April (page 02), Father Davidian was really well-liked by the Armenian community in Rio and by the ‘carioca’ community itself (‘carioca’ is a person who was born in the state of Rio de Janeiro). The occasion for such a statement was the celebration of Davidian’s twenty five years of services to the Church. For more, please consult “Jubileu Sacerdotal”, *A Cruz*, 15 April 1956, p. 2.

23. “Patriarca dos Armênios: A paz só pode subsistir ao lado da fé”, *Correio da Manhã*, July 1955, p. 8.

24. “Patriarca dos Armênios: A paz só pode subsistir ao lado da fé”, *Correio da Manhã*, July 1955, p. 8.

Chadarevian, born in Marash in 1910, was appointed head of the Catholic Armenian Mission in São Paulo to replace Davidian. Coming from Aleppo, Syria, Chadarevian²⁵ landed in Santos on September 17, 1950, “festively received by a large part of the Catholic Armenian Community of São Paulo”.²⁶ In an effusive tone, a 1986 edition of *Jornal do Imigrante* states that “Fr. Gabriel took the road to São Paulo, followed by a long line of cars that formed the caravan that came to receive him”.²⁷

Under Chadarevian’s command, the statutes of the Armenian Catholic Mission in São Paulo were prepared – the mission was made official on August 14, 1954²⁸ – and the search for its own space began. However, the fundraising campaign to purchase land was the initiative of Bishop Cirilo Juan Zohrabian, appointed by the Patriarch Cardinal Krikor Bedros XV Agagianian as Patriarchal Visitor of Latin America²⁹. On a visit to São Paulo in March 1954, Zohrabian called a meeting of the Board of the Armenian Catholic Community and outlined that it should prepare to receive individual contributions, starting with himself, who opened the list with a donation of one thousand US dollars³⁰.

The acquisition of the land would not, however, be achieved quickly and without setbacks. The first attempt took place by the board with the purchase of a property on Tiradentes Avenue itself, which soon had to be resold as it was “irregular and difficult to adapt to the construction of a church and parish house”.³¹ From the value of that sale, the board allocated a portion for the purchase of another property also located on the avenue. However, the new location was considered too small by Patriarch Cardinal Krikor Bedros XV Agagianian, who visited the mission at the end of July 1955. This led the board to initiate a new search led by Knight Commander Manuel Kherlakian, who was considered to

25. *Jornal do Imigrante* (1986, nº 96) attributes that Serop was the uncle of Gabriel Chadarevian, Davidian’s successor, but this information could not be confirmed, since the Kherlakian family does not corroborate this statement.

26. “Um pouco de sua história”, *Jornal do Imigrante*, February 1986, p. 3.

27. “Um pouco de sua história”, *Jornal do Imigrante*, February 1986, p. 3.

28. “Um pouco de sua história”, *Jornal do Imigrante*, February 1986, p. 4.

29. “Um pouco de sua história”, *Jornal do Imigrante*, February 1986, p. 5.

30. “Um pouco de sua história”, *Jornal do Imigrante*, February 1986, p. 5.

31. “Um pouco de sua história”, *Jornal do Imigrante*, February 1986, p. 6.

have good relations with the Metropolitan Archdiocese.³²

The idea was that the Archdiocese would make it possible to purchase part of the land of Mosteiro da Luz, also located on Tiradentes Avenue. For this, however, the abbess of the monastery, Mother Lucia, would need to accept the proposal. This negotiation lasted for seven years, alternating from a moment of acceptance by the abbess to a rejection of the agreement “to safeguard [...] the enclosure and isolation of the convent”³³. The effects of this difficulty were felt internally: in 1961, the sixth year of negotiations, the mission’s president Artin Kalaydjian, who had been newly awarded the Medal of the Order of Saint Sylvester, went into litigation with other members of the board, believing that the purchase of the monastery land was a lost cause. Kabardian submitted his resignation on June 26, forcing the community General Assembly to elect a new board. Armênio Gasparian, who had also been awarded the same honor given to Kalaydjian, took over as chairman of a recomposed committee and determined to secure the purchase of the monastery’s land. Failing in his goal, Gasparian resigned about four years later, mostly because he lost support within the Board. Directly linked to this lack of support is the factor that, in 1960, the Board of Directors had acquired a small plot of land on Tiradentes Avenue as a measure of financial security, and, after some time, the purchase was perceived as a *fait accompli*. Gasparian’s resignation forced the formation of a new board, chaired by Avedis Clemente Kherlakian, whose composition had been pre-nominated by Father Chadarevian. Once again, the Kherlakian family assumed a leading role in the direction of community life for Armenian Catholics in São Paulo.

In the end, part of the monastery’s land was in fact acquired in 1967, increasing the construction area of the church. Chadarevian, however, would not remain to witness this development, having been transferred a year earlier, like his predecessor, to Rio de Janeiro. In December 1966, Clemente Krikor Maldjian, also from Aleppo, took over as the priest responsible for the community and focused on carrying out the construction of the church and parish house.³⁴ Even be-

32. “Um pouco de sua história”, *Jornal do Imigrante*, February 1986, p. 6

33. “Um pouco de sua história”, *Jornal do Imigrante*, February 1986, p. 6

34. “Um pouco de sua história”, *Jornal do Imigrante*, February 1986, p. 7

fore the completion of the building, Maldjian managed to change the formal designation of the community, because services were already being held on the land under construction³⁵. On February 13, 1969, Cardinal Jaime Câmara, Ordinary of Eastern Rite Catholics in Brazil, decreed that the former Chaplaincy of the Catholic Armenian Mission of São Paulo would henceforth be the Armenian Parish of São Gregório Iluminador (St. Gregory the Illuminator), which gave it new rights and allowed the creation of a new statute. This would be an essential step for the parish to become truly autonomous in the 1970s.

Construction was completed in 1971, and the parish was consecrated in 1976 by the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Carmine Rocco.³⁶ With the beginning of the 1980s, the fiftieth anniversary of the mission approached, the parish had managed to establish itself well after so many years of efforts. The symbolic date would be marked by the singular prominence given to the parish through the newly-created Apostolic Exarchate for Latin America. On July 18, 1981, the Holy See created the Armenian Exarchate of Latin America and named as first titular the Salesian priest Waldir Boghossian, who would add for himself, after his episcopal consecration, the name of Vartan³⁷. Before his consecration in December 1981, Boghossian was ordained a priest in 1966 in Rome, and spent more than ten years carrying out different functions within what was then the still-single Brazilian state of Mato Grosso (now divided between Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul).³⁸ Upon his appointment as exarch, the Armenian Catholic Church of São Paulo was elevated to the level of Cathedral of the Armenian Apostolic Exarchate of Latin America in Brazil, a decisive factor that transformed not only its then-pastor, Nichan Karakehayan, into Episcopal Vicar of Brazil, but, above all, positioned the Church of São Gregório Iluminador as the home of the Armenian Catholic community throughout South America and Latin America.³⁹

35. “A comunidade armênia católica de São Paulo”, *Jornal do Imigrante*, January/February 1983, p. 9

36. “Um pouco de sua história”, *Jornal do Imigrante*, February 1986, p. 5

37. “Um pouco de sua história”, *Jornal do Imigrante*, February 1986, p. 5

38. “Padre Waldir Boghossian volta ao Brasil”, *Revista Armênia*, July 1968, p. 10

39. “A comunidade armênia católica de São Paulo”, *Jornal do Imigrante*, January/February 1983, p. 9.

Thus, when Patriarch Hovhannes Bedros XVIII Kasparian visited Brazil on November 23, 1983, at the invitation of Bishop Vartan himself, he went directly to the Parish of São Paulo. In a period of five days, Kasparian performed public events, such as a meeting with the governor of São Paulo Franco Montoro and a visit to the memorial monument to Armenian Martyrs, located on Armenia Square, near the Ponte Pequena subway station. On the Exarchate's own initiative, the station would be re-named Armênia a short time later.⁴⁰

Even in the 1980s, the separation of the Armenian Catholic Church in Argentina from the others meant that the Exarchate was left without its own headquarters until in 2015 the Armenian Catholic Church of São Gregório Iluminador in São Paulo was officially named by the Holy See as the seat of the Exarchate. Buenos Aires remained as an Eparchy (diocese) since 1989, when it was established independently from the Exarchate in 1989, although Bishop Boghossian was in charge of both. In 2018, Bishop Vartan Waldir Boghossian presented his resignation to Pope Francis due to the age limit of 75 years and Bishop Paulo León Hakimian took over as bishop of the Armenian Apostolic Exarchate of Latin America and of the St. Gregory of Narek Eparchy of Catholic Armenians of Argentina (ARQUIDIOCESE DE SÃO PAULO, 2018).

Conclusion

For the anthropologist Pedro Bogossian-Porto (2015), the creation of institutions such as schools and churches aims to serve immigrants as places of experience of “cultural intimacy”, protected from the eyes of the receiving society and serving as socializing spaces and reaffirmation of belonging to the community (BOGOSSIAN-PORTO, 2015, p. 158-9)⁴¹. Bogossian-Porto is certain that the religious institutions are among these kinds of spheres. Theoretically speaking, the scholar stresses out the level of importance of such spaces, since it is inside those the diasporic communities find the ‘most favorable environments for their

40. “Um pouco de sua história”, *Jornal do Imigrante*, February 1986, p. 9; 11.

41. It is possible to notice that ‘hidden’ inside this sort of action there is also a sense of self-protection of the community of physical menaces which may arise. “Prejudiced looks” coming from the ‘welcoming society’ are not out of question.

integration and for the renovation of this collective memory⁴². Furthermore, such importance is directly connected to the level of physical interaction of the temple's devotees⁴³; in other words, the religious institution demands a periodic and almost mandatory meeting of all its members, who are also the components of the community, and therefore the integration and renovation above-mentioned become natural outcomes: the pieces of cultural practices and traditions, as well individual memories turned out to be shared to each other⁴⁴.

In the case of Armenians, for instance, the role of the church and, specially the celebrations, is pivotal to this discussion. Those ceremonies are imbued by a sense of 'legitimacy': therefore, to participate in those celebrations or ceremonies help the individual to better place his thoughts and experiences in order to understand what truly means to be an Armenian⁴⁵. In other words, those ceremonies demonstrate to the person 'which are the important elements to value in their identity, which are the habits and customs that must be maintained, which aspects of the collective memory need to be preserved'⁴⁶.

As in other centers of the Armenian Diaspora, the Armenian Catholic Church in Brazil does not receive the greatest number of devotees. Many more attend masses and social events at the Armenian Apostolic Church of São Jorge, a few meters away, on the other side of Tiradentes Avenue (technically on Santos Dumont Avenue). Still, many Armenians in São Paulo who attend churches – whether Apostolic, Catholic or Protestant – prefer to do so in houses of worship closer to their homes, not having to travel from their neighborhoods to poorly-maintained downtown districts of a major metropolitan area.

The Armenian Catholic Church of São Gregório Iluminador, in turn, also receives non-Armenian believers, residents of the region in which the church is located – between the neighborhoods of Luz and Bom Retiro – a district occupied by poor workers in the 19th century which received Armenian, Jewish and Greek

42. Ibid., p. 159.

43. The word 'temple' here is used in a broader sense to indicate religious institutions and spaces of diverse naturality (churches, chapelries, cathedrals, etc).

44. Ibid., p. 159.

45. Ibid., p. 178.

46. Ibid.

immigrants throughout the first decades of the 20th century. In the last decades of that same century, the region received immigrants from Korea, China and from several countries in South America, in addition to countless Brazilian families from the northeast of the country. It is not uncommon to find non-Armenians in the masses of the Armenian Catholic Church of São Gregório Iluminador, despite the rite being conducted in Armenian and the existence of other Catholic churches in the vicinity whose masses are celebrated in Portuguese. Maybe those are the “challenges” to the continuity of a solid sense of “Armenity”. The same diagnosis seems to have been gotten by Bogossian-Porto

The four Churches play different roles, as they occupy different niches in the religious landscape of São Paulo: while the Armenian Apostolic Church serves almost exclusively the Armenian community, the Armenian Catholic Church also receives non-Armenian Catholics, generally attracted by pragmatic reasons, such as the physical proximity to your home. This is an interesting phenomenon, because, although the Catholic Church is doctrinally linked to the papacy, the cult is carried out entirely in the Armenian language and according to the Armenian tradition, which must cause, in addition to the difficulty of understanding, a certain estrangement among the community ‘outside’ visitors of the church. In turn, the Evangelical Churches, both the Presbyterian and the Armenian Brothers, reach a more restricted audience, although more active than the one that attends the other two; both have the reputation of being “more closed”, restricting the participation of those who are not part of the religious community, while the Apostolic and Catholic Churches would be more favorable to the participation of “outsiders” (BOGOSSIAN-PORTO, 2015, p. 160)⁴⁷

The Festas Juninas (Johannine Festivals) create an annual moment of convergence of the Armenians of São Paulo towards the Armenian Catholic Church. A long-standing tradition in Brazil on the winter solstice (around June 20) in honor of the saints Anthony, John the Baptist, Peter and Paul, this occasion is marked at the annual feast of the church’s patron saint, Saint Gregory the Illuminator. For the Armenians of São Paulo, the Festa Junina of the Armenian Catholic Church is reputed to be one of the best such festivals in the city, as it

47. Translated by Daniel Scandolaro and Heitor Loureiro.

mixes music and food from the interior of Brazil – where the tradition of these festivities is very present - with Armenian gastronomy and music.

Another moment of integration of the clergy and faithful of the Armenian Catholic Church with the other Armenian churches in the city is on April 24, when the faithful of the four Armenian churches in São Paulo – Apostolic, Catholic, Presbyterian and of the Armenian Brothers – congregate at the monument to the Armenian martyrs on Armenia Square, which is located on the same avenue, and conduct an open-air requiem (*hokehankisd*).

In short, the Catholicism of the Armenians Catholics in Brazil gave them a unique identity trait both in relation to the predominantly Catholic host society and in relation to their fellow Armenians of the Armenian Apostolic Church. In this sense, even though the Armenian Catholic community in Brazil is low in number, the weight of Armenian Catholics in Brazilian society is considerable, both for community leaders who managed to achieve political positions in Brazil, and for the role of the Armenian Catholic clergy in prominent positions in the hierarchy of the Church in the largest Catholic country in the world. Although the issues of the contemporary world and the dynamics of living in a city the size of São Paulo pose challenges to Catholic Armenians to maintain the faith, traditions and community experiences, their marks in the history of Armenians in Brazil and Brazilian Catholicism are undeniable. On the one hand, the Armenian priest Etienne Brasil was the first to publicize the Armenian cause in Brazil and denounce in the national press the massacre of Ottoman Christians. On the other hand, the arrival of countless Armenians in São Paulo from the 1920s onwards led to a community dynamic that began to exist in this city, with its lay and religious entities. Thus, the figure of Armenian Catholicism gained more than one exponent, and a community managed to build its parish and record its existence in the center of the largest city in the southern hemisphere.

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