
THE MEKHITARIST CONGREGATION
OF SAN LAZZARO AS GUARDIANS
AND PROPAGATORS OF THE LEGACIES
OF SS. GREGORY OF NAREK AND NERSĒS
OF KLAY: AN OUTLINE

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ABSTRACT

The present article is a survey of the contributions made by the Mekhitarist Fathers of San Lazzaro, Venice to the preservation, study and propagation of the legacies of two major Armenian Saints (and arguably greatest Armenian mediaeval writers), Gregory of Narek (c. 945–1005) and Nersēs of Klay (the ‘Gracious’, 1102–1173). This work has been very much in keeping with the principles and aspirations of the Founder of the Congregation, Mxit’ar of Sebaste (1676–1749). I therefore start with an outline of the history of the Mekhitarist Congregation from its inception, with due regard to its strong emphasis on scholarship and on a rich liturgical life (embracing a venerable and unique musical tradition – which I discuss in a separate section), as well as its very special role as a cultural and ecclesiological bridge between East and West. It was therefore natural that much effort was bestowed by the Congregation on the *oeuvres* of those two Saints, who were especially noteworthy for their sacred poetry and music, as well as for their strong Ecumenical inclinations; I argue that both these aspects were very much in harmony with the ideals and aims of the Congregation. I provide succinct introductions to the two Saints individually, and then proceed to discuss the special contributions of the Mekhitarist Fathers in either instance – as scholars, editors, exegetes, translators and publishers, as well as musical and liturgical practitioners of a tradition kept alive to this day, in which the prayers, hymns and odes of the Saints continue to play a vital role.

Keywords

Mekhitarist Congregation; San Lazzaro; St. Gregory of Narek; St. Nersēs the Gracious; Theology; Philology; Musicology

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Situated strategically between East and West, the Mekhitarist Congregation of San Lazzaro (which was founded in Constantinople in 1701 and soon moved to Venice) sought to serve as a cross-cultural and spiritual bridge – reviving, preserving and propagating the best of Armenian heritage, sharing it with an eager European audience and reinvigorating ancient traditions with Western scholarship and art. It also provided a vital connection between the Roman Catholic Church and the Armenian Orthodox Church. San Lazzaro was and remains a unique crucible – an island yet far from insular, sacred yet also humanist, patriotic as well as spiritual, Armenian as well as European. Moreover, due to its unique position in Venice, San Lazzaro was spared ransacking or destruction, boasting an uninterrupted liturgical and musical tradition of over three centuries.

In this contribution, I seek to present an account of the enormous endeavour the Congregation undertook in the preservation, publication and propagation of the legacies of the two greatest Armenian mediaeval poet-musician Saints, namely Gregory of Narek (declared in 2015 as a Doctor of the Universal Church by Pope Francis) and Nersēs ‘the Gracious’ of Klay (who was honoured in December 2023 at the Vatican with a conference and the issue of a special postage stamp, to mark 850 years from the Saint’s passing). Both Saints had precocious ecumenical visions; St. Gregory eschewed Christological controversies, composing his prayers for the whole of Christendom – all nations, men and women of all stations, and for his contemporaries as well as for future generations; and St. Nersēs was unsparing in his efforts to achieve unity between Eastern and Western Christendom, and sought renewal within the Armenian Church. It is thus unsurprising that these Saints were of major importance to the Mekhitarist Fathers and to their own mission. I shall briefly refer to their work in gathering and collating manuscript sources; publishing *editiones principes*, translations and exegeses; keeping the compositions of the Saints vital within their liturgical practice; and preserving to this day melodies of old unattested elsewhere.

Accordingly, the present article is organised as follows. I shall first briefly refer to the inspiration behind and circumstances underlying the foundation and ideological positioning of the Mekhitarist

Congregation.² To do this, I shall have recourse to the great Armenian Church historian and churchman, Abp. Malachia Ormanian, as well as to more modern accounts. I shall then provide a short (and necessarily subjective) assessment of the contribution of the Congregation in general to scholarship and music over the centuries, through the prism of my own research interests. Following brief introductions to SS. Gregory of Narek and Nersēs of Klay (the ‘Gracious’),⁵ I shall indicate some of the ways in which the Congregation helped preserve and disseminate the spiritual, literary and musical legacies associated with the two Saints.⁴

1. The foundation of the Mekhitarist Congregation

The founder and first abbot of the order was Mekhitar of Sebaste (Mxit’ar Sebastac’i, 1676–1749). A youth of remarkable intelligence, diligence, intellectual ambition, and profound spirituality, yet also a gifted and highly practical organiser, he travelled extensively within the Ottoman Empire and beyond, as a young man with a passionate yearning for learning and scholarship, and possessed of a sense of mission to share that knowledge amongst the Armenians of his time, a high proportion of whom were uneducated or even illiterate. Viewed from a modern angle, one could say that he was a sort of enlightened, Christian humanist. Well aware of the intellectual heights achieved by Western scholarship, evident from his contacts with Catholic clergy, he became a Catholic himself. In 1701 in Constantinople, he founded what came to be known as the Mekhitarist Congregation, consisting

² I realise that many readers of this journal will not necessarily be familiar with the Mekhitarist Congregation – which is a unique brotherhood in many ways, and one that has been self-effacingly and quietly performing its work over more than three centuries. I trust this introductory material may thus prove helpful in enabling the reader to position the core of this article in its proper perspective.

⁵ I include this material to render the present article self-sufficient for readers who may not hitherto have had cause to encounter those Saints – whom, after all, many Armenians deem to be their greatest mediaeval Christian writers.

⁴ The musical element is appropriate, not merely because my own research endeavour of the last decade and more has been centred on aspects of it, but also because both Saints are of pivotal importance in this respect: St. Gregory of Narek is the first major composer of sacred odes (a musical genre) in the Armenian tradition, and St. Nersēs the Gracious is the most prolific contributor to the Armenian Hymnal.

of a handful of like-minded young monks. The Congregation was to settle on the island of San Lazzaro in Venice in 1717. An indefatigable teacher, Mekhitar also wrote a number of theological and philological works, including a ground-breaking and monumental dictionary. Subsequent to his passing, a split arose within members of the Congregation, resulting in a group of monks leaving San Lazzaro in 1773,⁵ proceeding initially to Trieste and eventually settling in Vienna in 1810. The two branches of the Congregation – those of Venice and Vienna – were reunited in 2000, but both monasteries remain active; and they remain places of calm, palpable spirituality, scholarship and learning. A case for the beatification of the founder is currently in progress.⁶

The achievements of the Mekhitarist Congregation are varied and profound. In the sphere of education, they opened around thirty schools all over the world, including Europe, the Middle East and the New World.⁷ They produced the leading scholarly editions of their time, and often the very first editions, of major works by Armenian authors, often translating these to Latin or other European languages, whilst at the same time publishing Armenian (modern or ancient) translations of major Western classics, sacred as well as secular (from Homer onwards).⁸ The aim was thus to introduce Armenian culture to Europe as well as the finest Western literature to Armenians; but also to introduce Armenians to their own culture, and to use it as a powerful unifying force, creating a common consciousness amongst Armenians in the Ottoman realm and dispersed further afield. Important translated and original exegetical works were published, along with dictionaries and textbooks in both language and the natural sciences.⁹ The journals *Bazmavēp* and *Handēs amsōreay* were founded by the Congregation

⁵ For a full treatment of the circumstances and causes, see Sebouh Aslanian, ‘The “Great Schism” of 1773: Venice and the Founding of the Armenian Community in Trieste,’ in *Reflections of Armenian Identity in History and Historiography*, ed. H. Berberian and T. Daryae (UCI Jordan Center for Persian Studies), 85–132.

⁶ I attended a service followed by a ceremony, on Sunday, 8 September 2022 in San Lazzaro, celebrating the successful completion of the diocesan stage of the pertinent process.

⁷ See Baykar Sivazliyan, ‘The Mekhitarist Order: Notes on Their History and Work,’ in *Armenia: Imprints of a Civilization*, eds. Gabriella Uluhogian, Boghos Levon Zekiyian, and Vartan Karapetian (Milan: Skira, 2011), 309–313.

⁸ For an interesting discussion see Sona Haroutyunian, ‘Translations by the Mekhitarists,’ in Gabriella Uluhogian, Boghos Levon Zekiyian, Vartan Karapetian (eds.), *Armenia: Imprints of a Civilization* (Skira: Milan, 2011), 323–333.

⁹ The so-called Three Archimandrites’ Dictionary of ancient Armenian, published in 1836, has not been surpassed to this day, and may now be conveniently referred to online

(in Venice and in Vienna, respectively) in the nineteenth century, and continue to be published today.

2. Ormanian and the Mekhitarists

Abp. Malachia Ormanian (1841–1918), born a Catholic but who converted to Orthodoxy, and became Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople, is a writer critical of Catholicism. Yet he too acknowledged the valuable contributions made by the Congregation, and in view of their importance, in his massive *History of the Armenian Church Azgapatum – Ազգասպատում* (‘National History’)¹⁰ he devoted no fewer than sixteen full-length articles to the Congregation, its founder, its move to Venice, its activities, and the succession to the founder.¹¹

An examination of the narrative found within these articles, which Ormanian carefully interspersed among concurrent events in the Armenian nation and the Armenian Orthodox Church, demonstrates a number of points of interest. First, the account is centred around the person and career of the founder and first abbot, since it was very much his personality and his own vision that was to determine the characteristics of the Brotherhood that bears his name. Accordingly, Ormanian has meticulously recorded the most crucial stages in Mekhitar’s career, starting with early influences and contacts – particularly

on the Nayiri.com website – see <http://www.nayiri.com/imagedDictionaryBrowser.jsp?dictionaryId=26> (accessed on 4 July, 2025).

¹⁰ The edition available to me is the following reprint: Մաղաքիա Արքեպիսկոպոս Օրմանեան, *Ազգասպատում. Հայ Ուղղափառ Եկեղեցւոյ անցքերը սկիզբէն մինչև մեր օրերը յարակից ազգային պարագաներով պատմուած* [*National History: the history of the Armenian Orthodox Church from the beginning to our days narrated with related national circumstances*], Vol. II (Antelias: Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, 2001).

¹¹ The articles are the following (where we have placed English translations following each title in the original Armenian); the first article starts in col. 2677. §1837 Մխիթար Սեբաստացի, Mxit’ar of Sebaste; §1839 Մխիթարի պտոյտները, Mxit’ar’s peregrinations; §1842 Մխիթար ի Կ. Պոլիս, Mxit’ar in Constantinople; §1850 Մխիթար ի Կարին, Mxit’ar in Karin; §1854 Մխիթար ի Կ. Պոլիս, Mxit’ar in Constantinople; §1860 Մխիթարի փախստը, Mxit’ar’s escape; §1892 Մխիթար ի Մեթոն, Mxit’ar in Methone; §1893 Մխիթարի գործերը, Mxit’ar’s labours; §1936 Մխիթար ի Վենետիկ, Mxit’ar in Constantinople; §1937 Սուրբ Դազար վանքը, The San Lazzaro monastery; §1958 Մխիթարի ուղղութիւնը, Mxit’ar’s (adopted) direction; §1987 Մխիթարի ընթացքը – Mxit’ar’s progress; §2011 Անտոնեանք եւ Մխիթարեանք, The Antonians and the Mekhitarists; §2012 Մխիթարի [Անտոնեանց հետ միանալու առաջարկին] մերժումը: Mxit’ar’s refusal [of the offer to join the Antonians]; §2030 Մխիթարի մահը, Mxit’ar’s death; §2031 Մխիթարի յաջորդը, Mxit’ar’s successor.

those with Roman Catholic clergy whom he met or sought out in his travels. However, it also reveals that Ormanian seeks to go beyond the surface and ‘reads between the lines’, adopting a critical view, and in particular seeking to understand the various choices available to Mekhitar’s at various junctures – especially in terms of the confessional positioning of the Mekhitarist Congregation. I have chosen four particular instances of this, and have summarised and paraphrased Ormanian’s treatment below:

- There is a careful discussion of the manner in which the Brotherhood was pressed to move from the ‘Order of St. Anthony’ to a formal acceptance (to which Mekhitar consented) of the Rule of St. Benedict, in September 1712 – which Ormanian considers the formal date of the foundation of the Congregation, although the Brotherhood was already formed, albeit without official recognition, in Constantinople in 1701 (see col. 2764).
- One of many aspects that needed to be negotiated with the Vatican concerned a practical problem. Ormanian points out that Armenian Catholics had no physical churches to attend, as there were no Armenian Catholic churches in existence. Mekhitar succeeded in persuading the Vatican to permit Armenian Catholics to attend Armenian (Orthodox) churches – approved on 12 January 1719 (col. 2833).
- Mekhitar was far from a fanatic. His objective was to explain that the Armenian Church was not ‘foreign’ to the Roman Catholic Church and Catholicism, and indeed was fundamentally identical to it. There were merely various misunderstandings which gave rise to criticism from Rome; addressing those points and effecting the necessary corrections not only did not compromise the essence of Armenian theological doctrine, but on the contrary, would benefit Armenians by dint of securing the mighty protection of the Papacy and the support of European powers. Above all, the abject condition of the Armenian nation would be improved, and the nation revitalised through intellectual development and material prosperity (col. 2907).
- Though Mekhitar’s work did conceivably benefit those who wished to impose Roman Catholic doctrine on Armenians, by spreading amongst Armenians an awareness of aspects of Catholic theology through his publications, yet above all, he was possessed of the desire

to be a reconciler. And such was his desire for learning and scholarship that, impressed by the intellectual achievements of Europe in general and the Catholic Church in particular, he was prepared even to sacrifice something of Armenian doctrine, for the sake of being able to obtain elements of Catholic learning and bestow them on the Armenian nation. One proof of his position is the fact that Mekhitar's Catholicism was sometimes questioned, both by the Roman Church and by Roman-inclined Armenians, and the same cautious attitude was maintained over the Congregation that he founded in the longer term (col. 2970).

In sum, though a firmly anti-Catholic writer, Ormanian is able to take a nuanced and even sympathetic view, and in his final evaluation, in no way does he under-estimate Mekhitar's achievements.

Interestingly, far more recent scholarship seems very much in harmony with Ormanian's conclusions. In particular, Paolo Lucca states that

Mekhitar's look West, towards the Church of Rome, did not have a primarily confessional connotation: he was firmly convinced that the Armenian Church's doctrine, as passed down by its best doctors, was fully orthodox, and thus its principles of faith overlapped with those of the Catholic Church.¹²

Likewise,

it was this last aspect, that of ecumenism that best describes the concept and mission of the founder, whose intention was to underline the motives of union rather than division, stressing the convergences and skipping over what was not required by the unity of faith. This was a spirit that, at least from a religious point of view, made Mekhitar a figure who was misunderstood: he was obstructed by fellow Armenians against the idea of

¹² See Paolo Lucca, 'The Religious and Humanist Inspiration of Abbot Mekhitar and His School,' in *Armenia: Imprints of a Civilization*, eds. Gabriella Uluhogian, Boghos Levon Zekiyian, and Vartan Karapetian (Milan: Skira, 2011), 317–321, esp. 317. Here Lucca refers to Claudio Gugerotti, 'La figura e l'opera di Mechitar nella cultura armena e nel contesto della cultura europea e cristiana,' in *Gli Armeni a Venezia. Dagli Sceriman a Mechitar: il momento culminante di una consuetudine millenaria*, ed. Boghos L. Zekiyian and Aldo Ferrari (Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze Lettere ed Arti, 2004), 165–175, esp. 171–174.

union, and by ‘Latinophile’ Armenians who accepted the Roman requests for change and liturgical and doctrinal adjustments, as well as by some figures within the Roman Curia.¹⁵

Moreover, ‘This ecumenical impetus within the order lasted beyond Mekhitar’s death.’¹⁴ It is highly significant that early publications from the Mekhitarist Press in San Lazzaro still acknowledged the Armenian Orthodox Catholicos on the title page. The desire of the Mekhitarist Fathers to demonstrate the Catholicity of the Armenian Apostolic Church was given a blow with the creation in 1829 of the Armenian Catholic Primate in Constantinople.¹⁵

In sum, the Mekhitarists are Catholic but at the same time have remained close to the Armenian Orthodox Church. They were formally acknowledged by Rome upon accepting the Rule of St. Benedict in September 1712 (although, as we have seen, the widely accepted date for the foundation of the Congregation is 1701). Mekhitar succeeded in persuading the Vatican to permit Armenian Catholics to attend Armenian (Orthodox) Churches. Mekhitar was a passionate conciliator and one who strove to demonstrate that Armenian doctrine was not incompatible with Catholic doctrine. He therefore became a bridge between the Roman Catholic and Armenian Orthodox Churches – performing a service that the Congregation continues to perform at present.

¹⁵ Lucca, *op. cit.*, p. 317. Lucca in turn refers to Zekiyani, *op. cit.*, 194, and to Gugerotti, *op. cit.*, 172.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 317.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 318.

3. A note on the musical traditions of the Mekhitarist Congregation and its protagonists¹⁶

The Mekhitarists were able to maintain an enviable liturgical tradition, and their splendid musical tradition¹⁷ (with two distinct branches in the case of the latter, corresponding to the San Lazzaro and Vienna monasteries) closely related to their liturgical practice. Their musical endeavours entail published and unpublished transcriptions of various sorts, archival recordings,¹⁸ and, above all, an oral tradition.¹⁹ Relatively unmolested by the cataclysms and catastrophes that caused the large-scale discontinuities in, if not wholesale destruction of, the Armenian monastic tradition in the Modern period, the Mekhitarists were perhaps uniquely able to maintain transmission of liturgical and musical practices from generation to generation. Accordingly, they have been regarded by all Armenians – Orthodox as well as Catholic – as faithful keepers and cultivators of the authentic traditions of Armenian liturgy, sacred music, language and literature. Excellence, creativity as well as meticulousness in the realm of sacred music too were initiated by the founder himself – namely Mekhitar, who composed hymns²⁰ and odes,

¹⁶ The musical traditions of the Mekhitarists are of crucial relevance to the transmission and dissemination of music associated with St. Gregory of Narek, deemed to be the first major composer of Armenian sacred odes, and with St. Nersēs the Gracious – who himself was a prolific composer of odes but who also contributed more than any other known writer to the Armenian Hymnal. The work of the eminent personages I shall introduce has touched upon the *oeuvre* of one or other of those Saints, and very often that of both – given their centrality to the musical and liturgical traditions of the Armenian Church.

¹⁷ For a succinct overview, see Haig Utidjian, ‘Les Pères mékhitaristes vénitiens et la musique sacrée arménienne: les grandes figures et leur héritage,’ in *Jubilé de l’Ordre des Pères mékhitaristes – Tricentenaire de la maison mère, l’Abbaye de Saint-Lazare 1717–2017*, ed. B. Outtier and M. K. Yevadian (Lyon: Sources d’Arménie, 2017), 145–155.

¹⁸ See Utidjian, Haig, ‘In Communion with the Infinite and the Mysterious through Song: Melismatic Hymns from the Recorded Corpus of Recordings by Archimandrite Vrtanes Uluhogian of San Lazzaro, Venice,’ *Proceedings of the Symposium of the International Musicological Society Study Group on the Music of the Christian East and Orient*, ‘Melismatic Chant Repertories,’ 14 June 2020, Thessaloniki/Studies in the Music of the Christian East and Orient (forthcoming).

¹⁹ Recordings of a number of sung services from Holy Week 2022 may be found on my own YouTube channel, on the playlist https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6AkLTr1WSkdPhLTNkhwXZFOEtLMP_hN4&si=5Hw3SM28Yc-XbBPJ (accessed on 8 October, 2024).

²⁰ The hymns were composed as *prosomoia* or near-contrafacta, modelled on already existing neumatized melodies; for a discussion, see Utidjian, ‘Les Pères mékhitaristes,’ 145–155.

a number of which are still sung today. There followed a veritable chain of exceptionally gifted men who preserved and developed the musical traditions of the Congregation. Their achievements were monumental, involving insight, talent, as well as dedication; and they were motivated by the desire to preserve their vast musical heritage as a vital and living tradition for future generations.²¹ There was an element of conservatism in desiring to preserve the tradition faithfully, but originality and inventiveness were brought to bear in devising appropriate tools in a bid to achieve this.

- Fr. Antōn Iwč'gartašean (1730–1804) was a brilliant polymath. Iwč'gartašean may well have been a pupil of Mekhitar of Sebaste, and he was one of the first to break away from Venice for Trieste. He has left us a brilliant monograph on music, including important and original insights on the ill-understood Armenian neumatic system of notation.²²
- Fr. Minas Bžškean too was a versatile scholar (1777–1861); he has left us with a monograph on music, completed in 1815, as well as some transcriptions in the then novel, Limōnčean system of musical notation, of which he may well have been a co-inventor.
- Pietro Bianchini (1828–1905), a gifted Venetian musician, was enamoured of the chants of the Mekhitarist Fathers and meticulously transcribed numerous old melodies into Western staff notation, arranging and publishing some of them (although a number of important transcriptions remain unpublished), and thereby saving them from oblivion. His surviving letters also reveal much about the aesthetic and theological arguments that were used to persuade the Fathers to permit and employ transcription into Western notation (and the fixity attendant thereon) and harmonisation: essentially, it would behove us to offer up hymns to God according to the most

²¹ For an up-to-date overview see Haig Utidjian, «Թռուցիկ ակնարկ մը Վենետկոյ Մխիթարեան Ս. Հարց երաժշտական վաստակին վրայ [A fleeting glance at the musical legacy of the Mekhitarist Fathers in Venice]», *Bazmavēp – Բազմավայր* [*Journal of the San Lazzaro Academy*] 3–4 (2017): 192–220.

²² See Haig Utidjian, *Treasures of the earliest Christian nation: Spirituality, Art and Music in Mediaeval Armenian Manuscripts / Z pokladu nejstarších Křestanů: spiritualita, umění a hudba v rukopisech středověké Arménie* (Royal Canonry of the Premonstratensians at Strahov in Prague, 2018), 296–298 and 325–326 (footnotes 14–18).

advanced, orderly and perfected form of the musical art available to each generation.²⁵

- The Vienna Abbot and Archbishop Arsēn Aydinian (1825–1902), who is known as a linguist and musical transcriber and arranger of the Divine Liturgy, no less valuably transcribed the melodies of the Divine Liturgy in accordance with the oldest traditions available to him, often notating more than a single variant; this little known but highly valuable work was published in Vienna, in 1877 – coincidentally, the same year in which his Venetian fellows published their own version, transcribed and arranged by Pietro Bianchini, in San Lazzaro.
- Abp. Ignatios Kiwrelean (Abbot General 1876–1920) was a formidable intellect and towering personality. He encouraged Bianchini in his work, and was profoundly interested in the Armenian mediaeval neumes, as is evidenced by his articles and his towering achievement – a combined Breviary-Hymnal-Lectionary volume with meticulous neumations, which sought to emulate as closely as possible various nuances found in manuscript sources, entailing the creation of many new types and constituting a major scholarly as well as typographical achievement.²⁴
- Fr. Movsēs Srapean (1886–1965), based in Vienna, published his own harmonisation of the Divine Liturgy, using melodies that he describes as being Constantinopolitan; in addition, during the second World War he meticulously transcribed in staff notation the greater part of the hymnal as well as many of the Breviary chants, in their versions peculiar to the Vienna monastery.
- The Venetian Fr. Léonce Dayan (1884–1968) published the complete hymnal of the Armenian Church in staff notation²⁵ and has left us

²⁵ See Haig Utidjian, «Պետրոս Պիանչինի եւ Սյիիթարեան Ս. Հարր. սի քանի նկատողութիւններ [Pietro Bianchini and the Mekhitarist Fathers: some observations]», *Erazštakan Hayastan – Երաժշտական Հայաստան* [Journal of the Komitas Conservatoire, Yerevan] 2, no. 61 (2021): 51–59; and the forthcoming monograph, Haig Utidjian, *Pietro Bianchini and an ode for the Patriarch*.

²⁴ The Archbishop had contacts with Lorenzo Perosi and was aware of the musicological activities of the Benedictines of Solesmes, and this may in part explain his desire for precision in the reproduction of neumes. See Utidjian, *Treasures*, 316–317 and 328 (footnotes 33–37).

²⁵ For a thorough discussion that positions this work in the context of the Mekhitarist tradition as well as its sister traditions, see Haig Utidjian, «Ս. Ղազարու եկեղեցական երգեցողութեան աւանդութիւնը եւ Չ. Ղեւոնդ Տայեանի շարակնոցի ձայնագրութիւնը [The San Lazzaro tradition of ecclesiastical chant and Fr. Léonce Dayan's hymnal

with monumental transcriptions of the chants of the Offices and of the Divine Liturgy that remain unpublished.²⁶ He attempted to systematise his transcriptions (which are, thus, also redactions), devising a notational system that incorporated quarter-tones. A small number of extremely interesting recordings have emerged of his own singing, which significantly differ from his own transcriptions and provide valuable clues about aspects of musical performance practice.

- At the instigation of the musicologist Minas Lourian, the Venetian Fr. Vrtanes Uluhogian (1939–2010) recorded under studio conditions the entire Armenian Hymnal, as well as the greater part of the chants of the Offices. His recordings are of great importance – for their inherent artistic value, but also because they present variants that are often subtly different from the Dayan transcriptions, and above all because (especially in the case of melismatic chants) they demonstrate the kind of freedom and almost improvisatory spirit with which the chants ought to be performed. They thus provide an essential complement, or even correction, to what we might have understood were we to rely on the transcriptions alone.
- Fr. Sahak Čemčemean (1939–1996) has left us an outstanding legacy of scholarly articles, tracing the evolution of aspects of the Armenian Euchologion as well as that of the Armenian Hymnal, on the basis of a detailed examination of the codices in San Lazzaro; he also devised a very careful methodology to help establish the authorship of St. Nersēs the Gracious for many items in the Hymnal (in the face of numerous inconsistencies and obscurities in early sources). None of this work has been superseded. He was also the author of several volumes of the Master Catalogue of the Manuscripts of the San Lazzaro Monastery – not least those devoted to Odes, Litanies and Hymns, and has thus produced an exceedingly useful research tool of the highest quality, replete with profound insights and rigorous scholarship.²⁷

transcription]», *Bazmavēp – Fuqufuuł[ıı] [Journal of the San Lazzaro Academy]* 1–2 (2018): 331–371.

²⁶ I have been graciously asked by the Mekhitarist Fathers to edit this material and prepare it for publication.

²⁷ St. Gregory of Narek is the first acknowledged writer of odes, and St. Nersēs the Gracious contributed to all three genres extensively.

- The Viennese Mekhitarist, Fr. Augustine Szekula (1921–2014), in the early 1970s, recorded on audio cassette tapes the hymns for the greater part of the liturgical year, thereby preserving a valuable oral testimony for the sacred musical tradition of the Vienna monastery.

Both branches of the Congregation were involved in the study of Armenian sacred music and its ancient (and still undeciphered) notational system of mediaeval neumes. Fr. Antōn Iwč‘gartašean in Trieste and Abp. Ignatios Kivrelean in Venice were the most notable figures in this. It is also noteworthy that the respective musical variants of the two Mekhitarist monasteries do differ from each other, although there are also common points, bespeaking their common origins.

In the sections below discussing the contributions of the Mekhitarists concerning the respective *oeuvres* of the SS. Gregory of Narek and Nersēs the Gracious, we shall have cause to refer to some specific examples of their musical legacy associated with their works.

4. Introduction to St. Gregory of Narek

International interest in the Saint has developed particularly since his declaration by Pope Francis as a Doctor of the Universal Church, on 12 April 2015, and his Feast is on 27 February (following early Armenian manuscript Synaxaria). Within the Armenian Orthodox Church, he is, in addition, remembered in early October, together with the Holy Translators of the Church. The Saint composed a Commentary on the Song of Songs, a number of encomia and litanies, and he is the first acknowledged Armenian writer and composer of odes. However, his *magnum opus* is the *Book of Lamentation* – a very extensive penitential prayer book; and this work has served somewhat to overshadow his other writings.²⁸

The *Book of Lamentation* does indeed include lamentations, but its sombre mood ought not to be mistaken for one of despondency. The author sheds tears of regret and thereby hopes to assist the reader in doing the same. The Saint assumes upon himself almost every imaginable sin, often identifying himself with an array of sinners from the

²⁸ Salient characteristics of the Saint's *oeuvre* are discussed in Utidjian, *Treasures*, 56–59. A contextual introductory discussion of the Saint's life and works is given in Abraham Terian, 'Gregory of Narek,' in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Patristics*, ed. K. Parry (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 278–292.

Old Testament – indeed, the book is full of latent and explicit Biblical allusions. He is thus able to reach out to any reader, however deep the reader’s despair.²⁹ The author is profoundly aware of the tragedy of the human condition: man has allowed the beautiful divine gifts to be spoiled by sin – an idea particularly reminiscent of, for instance, passages by St. Gregory of Nyssa (cf. *De virginitate*, 12). And God is omniscient and a just judge. However, He is also infinitely merciful. Tears of genuine contrition and repentance are thus exceedingly potent: through them not only are sins washed away, but the sinner can even attain to a vision of God Himself. Penitential prayer is a ladder that raises us up to God. The aim is thus nothing less than unification with God – indeed, divinisation. For, as he writes in his Commentary to the Song of Songs, ‘just as he who approaches fragrance becomes fragrant himself, so too he who approaches God becomes God himself.’³⁰ There is thus a constant tension between grief and hope, and addressing God, the Saint says: ‘If we founder and sink into the lowermost depths of the abyss, you point to heaven.’³¹

The author displays a rich armoury of rhetorical devices, sliding almost imperceptibly from verse into prose, and deploying all manner of techniques. He is acutely aware of rhythm, and also of alliteration, onomatopoeia and phonaesthesia. He delights in long lists and deploys an almost Homeric wealth of epithets and synonyms. A further point of interest is the highly original and at times even witty manner in which the author achieves a balance between apophaticism and revealed theology. Thus, the Armenian *an-* (the equivalent to the Greek ‘privative alpha’) can be used to negate, but here and there there are words that start similarly but do not negate – or else, it is not God’s attributes that are negated; (an example is when he refers to God’s ‘un-misty knowledge’ or wisdom – անշամանդալ գիտութիւն (5a).³²

The Saint wished (as he notes in the *Book of Lamentation* itself) his work to serve the whole of Christendom, both in his own time and

²⁹ It is thus hardly surprising that the book has even been used to help with the rehabilitation of drug addicts.

³⁰ Զի որպէս որ յանուշահոտ մերձենայ, անուշահոտի, նոյնպէս էւ որ առ Աստուած մերձենայ, աստուածանայ (section 6, p. 506 the Millennial Edition).

³¹ Եթէ յանդունդս ներքինս սուգեալ գլորիցիմք / Յերկիհս ցուցանես (51b).

³² See the discussion in Utidjian, *Treasures*, 160–186, esp. 171–173; also Haig Utidjian, ‘Stručný přehled zdrojů apofatismu v arménské patrologii [A Brief Overview of Apophaticism in Armenian Patrology],’ *Parrésia* 12 (2018): 171–189, esp. 182–185.

for future generations, old and young, and men and women from all stations in life. Perhaps to make it suitable for other nations, he seems carefully to eschew any Christological controversy. This fact, together with the author's explicit wish to write a work that would be universal, serving believers from all nations, reaching out to them and inducing in them cleansing tears of sincere repentance, may justifiably be deemed precociously to bespeak ecumenism in its aspiration. Increasing international interest in his writings has stimulated translations into a growing number of languages, thereby bringing the author's desire to serve the whole of Christendom substantially closer to its fulfilment.⁵³

His odes are a counter-weight to the rather sombre and penitential *Book of Lamentation*, being jubilant and ecstatic sacred songs; they thus display a rather different aspect of the author's personality.⁵⁴ However, in common with the *Book of Lamentation*, these miniatures are permeated with a peculiar sort of mysticism through their poetry. They too deploy metaphor, analogy, allegory, and imagery replete with multivalent symbolism; and we find a dazzlingly rich and diverse array of context and meaning in all his writings.⁵⁵ His juxtapositions are often rather striking, verging on the surreal, and there is an astonishing sense of modernity about them. The author seeks to harness the reader's (or listener's) own imagination and spirituality. Moreover, in my

⁵³ The finest complete English translation of the *Book of Lamentation* was published recently: Abraham Terian, *From the Depths of the Heart: Annotated Translation of the Prayers of St. Gregory of Narek* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021); for a detailed review, see Haig Utidjian, 'Abraham Terian – *From the Depths of the Heart: Annotated Translation of the Prayers of St. Gregory of Narek*,' *Ecclesia orans* XL, no. 2 (2023): 406–411.

⁵⁴ For fully annotated Czech translations of particular odes and discussions, see Haig Utidjian and Evžen Kindler, 'Ukázky z díla sv. Řehoře z Nareku [Samples from the Writings of St. Gregory of Narek],' *Parrésia* 4 (2010): 255–273; Haig Utidjian, Martina Pičmanová, and Luděk Liška, 'Písní podivuhodná [Wondrous Song],' *Plav* no. 4 (2015): 21–25; and Haig Utidjian and Martina Pičmanová, 'Óda na sv. Bohorodičku Řehoře z Nareku [The Ode for the Holy Mother-of-God by St. Gregory of Narek],' *Parrésia* 8 (2014): 523–530. The complete odes have recently been translated into English, with rich annotations and commentary, together with other festal works by the Saint: Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek: Annotated Translations of the Odes, Litanies, and Encomia* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2016); for a review, see Haig Utidjian, 'Abraham Terian – *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek: Annotated Translation of the Odes, Litanies, and Encomia*,' *Ecclesia orans* XXXIV, no. 1 (2017): 298–301.

⁵⁵ See the discussion in Haig Utidjian and Evžen Kindler, 'Svatý Řehoř z Nareku. Teologie, motivy a obrazy v díle [St. Gregory of Narek: Theology, Motifs and Imagery in His Work],' *Parrésia* 4 (2010): 135–182.

experience, it is particularly helpful to take the corpus of his works as a whole, as different elements of it serve to elucidate and shed light on each other.

5. St. Gregory of Narek and the Mekhitarists

The Mekhitarists have a particularly distinguished record of publication, of both scholarly editions of the Saint's *oeuvre* and exegetical works seeking to elucidate it. A brief outline will suffice here.⁵⁶

Although the first complete edition of the *Book of Lamentation* is a Constantinopolitan publication (1701–1702),⁵⁷ the Mekhitarists' *Atōt'amatoyc' patkerazardeal* – Աղօթամատոյց զսասկերսագարդևայ [Illustrated prayer book] published in 1804 may be regarded as the *editio princeps* for the Saint's odes, including as it does some eight of them. The Mekhitarist editions of the Saint's collected works of 1827 and of 1840 were increasingly complete – both in terms of a greater number of odes and larger numbers of stanzas included therein. The latter publication continued to be the basis for modern editions such as the Millennial Edition edited by Abp. Zareh Aznaworean of blessed memory (Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, Antelias, 2003).

In the course of my own research, I have collated codices acquired by the Congregation at different times (the year of acquisition is generally given in Fr. Sahak Čmčėmean's Master Catalogue) and the texts in their various publications. It is noticeable that the publications do not always take account of fuller variants extant in manuscripts already in their possession.⁵⁸ And, even more intriguingly, in the published editions we find readings not attested in any of the manuscripts in the Congregation's possession. A sheet of paper tucked inside a bound codex (V638) exemplifies the *modus operandi* of the editors of the Congregation and may provide an explanation.⁵⁹ The Fathers sent members of

⁵⁶ For fuller descriptions, bibliographical details and reproductions of specimen pages, see Haig Utidjian, *The Art of the Armenian Book through the Ages / Armėnské knižní umění v průběhu staletí* (Mervart, 2016), 107–117.

⁵⁷ We are obliged to discount an abortive attempt made in Marseille in 1673, consisting of merely forty-eight pages.

⁵⁸ In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the Fathers were gaining access to manuscripts at an unprecedented rate, many of which were mixed anthologies; and not every source could be taken into account in preparing their editions.

⁵⁹ For particulars, see Haig Utidjian, «Դէպի Ս. Գրիգոր Նարեկացոյ տաղից նոր հրատարակութիւն [Towards a new edition of the odes of St. Gregory of Narek],»

the Congregation, or sometimes agents, to various parishes and monasteries in historical Armenia. Whenever it was impossible to acquire an important source (through purchase or as a gift), relevant folios were evidently copied by hand, and the copies sent to San Lazzaro. In this way, the editors had access to material attested in manuscripts that have since perished. This accentuates the value of these publications, embodying as they do textual variants that would not have otherwise survived.⁴⁰ However, the manuscripts kept at the San Lazzaro scriptorium still have much valuable information, with potential for new discoveries. I was able to publish hitherto unknown stanzas of the Ode of the Little Cart by St. Gregory of Narek⁴¹ by dint of availing myself of the recensions found in San Lazzaro manuscripts V159 (C15–16), V234 (C16–17) and V1330 (*anno* 1563).

Commentaries by Fr. Gabriël Awetik'ean proved no less influential:⁴² a fine edition of the *Book of Lamentation* with extensive explanatory footnotes and points of textual criticism at the end of each chapter, was first published in 1801, with a fuller second version appearing in 1827; and a second volume, devoted to the encomia and litanies was also published in 1827.

The Mekhitarists have also preserved a unique melody for the Saint's ode *Hawun*, in the *acem aşiran* makam; such a melody was referred to by the Mekhitarist Fr. Minas Bžškean in his 1815 monograph on music, but was assumed lost; I was fortunate to discover

Banber Matenadarani Fwłpłr Uuwnkńuqurpułłh [*Bulletin of the Matenadaran Institute*] no. 24 (2018): 30–82, esp. 34–36.

⁴⁰ See Haig Utidjian, '*Sweet in Melody and Voice*': *Words, Neumes and Music in the Odes of St. Gregory of Narek*, Armenian Texts and Studies series (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming). Naturally, some apparent textual variations may also be due to editorial interventions *ope ingenii* (I am indebted to one of my anonymous reviewers for a reminder of this possibility); yet there is little doubt that they enjoyed indirect access to sources that have since perished.

⁴¹ See Haig Utidjian, 'On the Printed Sources of the "Ode of the Little Cart"', *Parrésia* 7 (2013): 185–203; Haig Utidjian, 'On the Early Venetian Manuscripts of the "Ode of the Little Cart"', *Parrésia* 7 (2013): 205–228; and Haig Utidjian, 'Textual observations on St. Gregory of Narek's "Ode of the Little Cart"', *Banber Matenadarani Fwłpłr Uuwnkńuqurpułłh* [*Bulletin of the Matenadaran Institute*] no. 21 (2014): 487–502.

⁴² Even so, occasional controversies did arise, with some Armenian Orthodox suspecting Mekhitarist Fathers of interpreting texts in a tendentious manner to provide support for aspects of Catholic doctrine not accepted by the Armenian Orthodox Church. For an example, see Haig Utidjian, 'Poezie a hudba sv. Řehoře z Nareku jako zrcadlo arménskė historie v druhém tisíciletí [The Poetry and Music of St. Gregory of Narek as Mirroring Armenian History over the Second Millennium]', *Parrésia* 8 (2014): 331–370.

a manuscript transcription in Western staff notation in San Lazzaro that precisely corresponds to Fr. Minas' description.⁴³

6. Introduction to St. Nersēs the Gracious

St. Nersēs of Klay (1102–1173), known as *Šnorhali* (the 'Gracious'), and in office as Catholicos 1166–1173, was a theologian, poet, composer, great revitaliser of tradition, and passionate and sincere ecumenist. He sought unity within the Armenian Church, and with the Catholic as well as Greek Orthodox Churches – an ecumenist *par excellence*.⁴⁴ In 1141, he attended the Council of Antioch of the Roman Catholic Church as an observer (it has to be remembered that there were very close contacts with the Catholic Church in the Cilician period, due to the Crusades, as well as much intermarriage, especially at the levels of nobility and royalty). He is recognised as a Saint by the Roman Catholic Church⁴⁵ as well as the Armenian Orthodox Church. He also conducted an ecumenical dialogue with the Byzantine Emperor Manuel Comnenus and with the Greek Orthodox Church – impressing the Emperor's representative by his Christological explanations, which demonstrated that the Armenian church was not 'Monophysite' (a more accurate term, in current use, is 'Miaphysite'). Though the passing of the Emperor resulted in a less favourable atmosphere, and the Saint

⁴³ Haig Utidjian, «Անոյշ եղանակաւ եւ ձայնիւ՝ Ս. Գրիգոր Նարեկացոյ տաղերը եւ խօսք, խազ ու երաժշտութիւն դարերու ընթացքէն [Sweet in melody and voice': The odes of St. Gregory of Narek through the centuries], *Banber Matenadaran – Բանբեր Մատենադարանի* [*Bulletin of the Matenadaran Institute*] 30 (2020): 109–126, esp. 119–120.

⁴⁴ The reader is referred to Boghos Levon Zekian, 'St Nersēs Šnorhali en dialogue avec les Grecs: un prophète de l'œcumenisme au XIIe siècle,' in *Armenian Studies/Études arméniennes in Memoriam Haïg Berbérian*, ed. Dickran Kouymjian (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1986), 861–883; Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia, *Saint Nersēs the Gracious and Church Unity: Armeno-Greek Church Relations (1165–1173)* (Antelias, 2010); Abp. Anushavan Tanielian, 'Saint Nersēs's Theology and His Ecumenical Endeavour,' *Հասկ Հայագիտական Տարեգիրք [Hask Armenological Annual]*, Նոր Շրջան, ԺԳ. տարի (2024): 151–158; and Michael Papazian, 'The Ecumenism of St. Nersēs Shnorhali's Letter on the Profession of Faith,' *St. Nersēs Theological Review* 1, no. 15 (2024): 25–42.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, Istituto Giovanni XXIII nella Pontificia Università Lateranense, Rome, 1961, under the entry 'Narsete' (cols. 742–746), authored by Fr. Paolo Ananian; for a more recent authoritative entry, see 'Nersēs IV Šnorhali,' in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. XI, fascs. 72–73, cols. 134–150, authored by Fr. Levon Boghos Zekian. Another Catholic source is Catholic Online, 'Saints and Angels,' 'St. Nersēs Glaietsi,' https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=4822 (accessed 10 July 2025).

was almost certainly well ahead of his time, nonetheless, his writings can serve as a useful guide for inter-denominational dialogue today. Moreover, in a most encouraging example of ecumenical endeavour, in late 2023 a joint committee consisting of representatives of the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Armenian Catholic Church and the Vatican organised celebrations at the highest level, marking 850 years since the Saint's passing. These would have culminated in an ecumenical service in the presence of Pope Francis and the Armenian Catholicos and a concert at the Sistine Chapel (the music for both of which the present writer was invited to organise and conduct).⁴⁶

Yet no less important were his endeavours at home to revitalise the faith of his flock and devoutness of the clergy entrusted with their care. An important part of his reform entailed composing memorable hymns and odes, employing simple rhymes, endowed with new melodies or recycling already popular tunes, yet beneath the surface rich with theological meaning.⁴⁷

7. St. Nersēs the Gracious and the Mekhitarists

Now the *editiones principes* of the Saint's most popular works had already appeared well before the foundation of the Mekhitarist Congregation. Thus, for instance, his condensed Biblical narrative known as *Yisus ordi* – 'Jesus, the Son' was already published (albeit in Venice) in 1643. However, again the Mekhitarist Fathers excelled in scholarship on the Saint. As far as the Saint's hymns were concerned, Fr. Gabriēl Awetik'ean's *Bac'atrut'iwn Šarakanac' – Բացատրութիւն Շարականաց* [*Explanation of Hymns*] (Venice, 1814), a magisterial commentary on the Armenian canonical hymnal (of which a sizeable proportion may be attributed to the Saint), remains unsurpassed to this day – for both its theological and textual analytic insights. Fr. Łewond Ališan

⁴⁶ The rationale behind these plans is discussed in Haig Utidjian, 'Some Personal Reflections on the Musical Legacy of St. Nersēs the Gracious and on Its Relevance in Our Time,' *St. Nersēs Theological Review* 1, no. 15 (2024): 125–136. In the event, the ethnic cleansing of Artsakh (Karabagh) resulted in the indefinite postponement of these plans; nevertheless, a conference did take place in Rome at the Pontifical Institute.

⁴⁷ See the discussion in Utidjian, 'Some Personal Reflections'. For a musicological treatment of his legacy in various genres, see Haig Utidjian, «Սուրբ Ներսէս Շնորհալոյ ժառանգի հետ առնչուած երաժշտական հարցեր [Musical Questions Associated with the Legacy of St. Nersēs the Gracious]», *Հասկ Հայագիտական Տարեգիրք [Hask Armenological Annual]*, Լոր Շրջան, ԺԳ. տարի (2024): 221–264.

(1820–1901) published a major study on the Saint, his life and times and his work: *Šnorhali ew paragay iwr – Շնորհալի եւ պարագայ իւր*, [*Šnorhali and his circumstances*] in 1873, whilst Vol. XIV of the Mekhitarists' series *Sop'erk' Haykakank' – Սովերք Հայկականք* [*Armenian writings*], published in Venice in 1854, included an anonymous biography of the Saint.⁴⁸ Both sources remain useful to this day, and are frequently referred to. More recently, Fr. Sahak Čemčemean published a pair of highly insightful articles, presenting an innovative methodology to divide hymns commonly attributed to the Saint into two categories: those that may reliably be attributed to his pen on the strength of evidence accruing from manuscript witnesses, and those whose authenticity cannot be established on such grounds.⁴⁹

Perhaps the most celebrated is a set of twenty-four prayers known as *Hawatov xostovanim* – 'Fide Confiteor' in Latin, usually translated as 'I confess with faith'. It was intended to be used by all Armenians, with the possibility of one prayer being used for each hour of the day.⁵⁰ Until recently, all Diasporan Armenians memorised it, or at the very least several of the prayers, from early childhood. Naturally, the Mekhitarists sought to translate this well-loved work into a number of European and world languages. Editions were published in 1810, 1811, 1812, 1815, 1818, 1823, 1837, 1862, 1872, 1882, 2012, in growing numbers of languages (reaching thirty-six). In 2023, a new edition appeared, with now almost fifty languages, and for the first time including Czech (translated by the late Prof. Evžen Kindler at my request).

Finally, credit is due to the Mekhitarist Fathers for the preservation and transmission of a very rich legacy of melodies associated with the Saint's hymns and for a number of his odes – often markedly different from other extant versions (and, in the case of one of the odes, the only melody now available to us).⁵¹

⁴⁸ No editor is specified but it is believed that Fr. Lewond assumed that role anonymously.

⁴⁹ Fr. Sahak Čemčemean, «Շնորհալի շարականներու հարազատութեան հարցը ձեռագիրներու լոյսին տակ [The Question of the Authenticity of Hymns by Šnorhali in the Light of Manuscript Witnesses]», Part I, *Bazmavēp – Բազմավէպ* [*Journal of the San Lazzaro Academy*] 3–4 (1973): 362–393; Part II, 1–2 (1974): 86–105.

⁵⁰ For a discussion and English and Czech translations of the Saint's own preface to the prayers, see Utidjian, *Treasures*, 86–92.

⁵¹ For a discussion of the latter, see Haig Utidjian, «Ս. Ներսէս Շնորհալու երեք սաղերու եղանակներն՝ ըստ Ս. Ղազարու Աստղութեան [The melodies for three of the odes of St. Nersēs the Gracious according to the tradition of San Lazzaro]», *Bazmavēp – Բազմավէպ* [*Journal of the San Lazzaro Academy*] (accepted for publication).

8. A note on other art forms

Paoletti's paintings of the two Saints – which were later made into mosaics to prevent water damage – continue to grace the interior of the Church of San Lazzaro as if they were gazing upon the Fathers and all the faithful attending services from either end of the church. They have both been reproduced in many places, indeed acquiring a truly 'iconic' status. These, as well as other visual representations, were commissioned by the Fathers by other artists also, and will have been familiar to many Armenians – including schoolchildren – from their reproductions in various books and other educational literature, published by the Mekhitarists but also by others throughout the Armenian diaspora over the decades. And the Fathers themselves have inspired art at the highest level. A famous instance is a magnificent painting (on permanent display at the National Gallery of the Republic of Armenia) in which the painter Ivan Aivazovsky portrayed a re-imagining of Lord Byron's first arrival on the island of San Lazzaro. A number of eminent Italian painters were also commissioned to prepare paintings of eminent Mekhitarists, producing work of striking quality.

Epilogue

In this paper, we have stressed the scholarly and musical attainments of the Mekhitarist Fathers. It is however worth stressing that the Fathers, though situated on an island, were far from insular in their mentality, and their sense of mission embraced a very strong pastoral element. Thus, in addition to scholarly and authoritative reference volumes, they published works by St. Gregory of Narek, St. Nersēs the Gracious (as well as others) in convenient, attractive and affordable pocket editions (without commentary). I myself am in possession of such volumes, acquired from the San Lazzaro monastery bookshop over the years – most importantly of the *Book of Lamentation* by St. Gregory of Narek (1926), and of the works in verse – *Bank' ĉ'ap'aw* – by St. Nersēs the Gracious (1928), both of which have remained in print over the span of almost a century.

Allied to their sense of mission and service, the Fathers also possessed a strong sense of humility, though being by far the best educated and most formidable Armenian theologians and philologists of their time. It is highly characteristic that Fr. Gabriël Awetikean, in the preface

to his monumental Commentary to the *Book of Lamentation* reminded the reader as well as himself and his fellows: ‘... the height as well as depth of this admirable artistic volume ever exceed the length of cord of any seeking to measure it.’

Finally, and perhaps almost uniquely, the Fathers pursued their scholarly activities in a devout environment where a very rich liturgical life endued their endeavours with meaning. In his General Encyclical of 1166, which St. Nersēs issued shortly upon assuming office as Catholicos, he had urged his readers: ‘Let not the mysterious words of prayer that you offer mindlessly pass as water through a pipe – be they psalmodies, a reading of Holy Scripture... but in a highly mindful manner, and if possible in tears and great fear – as if you make them newly flow from your heart and mind’. The Mekhitarist Congregation, whether on the island of San Lazzaro or in their veritable oasis in the centre of Vienna, appear to have succeeded in heeding St. Nersēs’ advice to this day, through their unhurried services of great beauty – in which the works of both Saints are deployed with sincere devoutness, decorum and piety.⁵²

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⁵² For a description and discussion on the deployment of prayers from the *Book of Lamentation* in the Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church, see Utidjian, *Treasures*, 244–255 and Haig Utidjian, “‘Imploring the Spirit with tearful sighs from the depths of our souls’: a confluence of music, theology and iconography within the Armenian Divine Liturgy,” in *Art and Liturgy*, ed. Grant White and Rossitza Schroeder (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, forthcoming). For the deployment of prayers from the *Book of Lamentation* at Compline, see Haig Utidjian, «Դէպի Ս. Գրիգոր Նարեկացոյ տաղից նոր հրատարակութիւն [Towards a new edition of the odes of St. Gregory of Narek]», *Banber Matenadarani – Բանբեր Մատենադարանի [Bulletin of the Matenadaran Insititute]* 24 (2018): 30–82, esp. 38–39 (footnote 30), where I have also discussed the (para-)liturgical use of odes in the Armenian Church (applicable to examples by either Saint).

and in Vienna and their Prior Nareg Dadourian, and to Dr Tigran Zargaryan and the National Library of Armenia. I am also profoundly indebted to Prof. Abraham Terian, the Rev. Dr George A. Leylegian and Dr Martina Pičmanová, for their valuable advice.

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