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Between ecclesiastical reform and cultural imperialism. The bull *Reversurus* (1867) and the Armenian-Catholic schism in its transnational effects¹

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The apostolic letter “Reversurus” which was issued in 1867 by the Roman Pope Pius IX, imposed restrictions on Armenian catholic ecclesiastical rights. The papal decision was further strengthened by the First Ecumenical Council of the Vatican in 1869–1870, which led to the opposition of Catholic Armenians, and in 1871 caused a division amongst them until 1881, attracting international public attention.

The main parties in this ecclesiastical controversy were, on the one hand the Antonian monks with their leader, Archbishop Suk‘ias Gazančean, and on the other, the new Armenian Catholic Church Patriarch, Anton Hasun and his supporters. As the dispute between the Hasunians and the anti-Hasunians gradually increased, significant events unfolded in Constantinople. These soon became a matter of speculation for the great powers of Europe, who wanted to maneuver the situation around their geopolitical interests and worked to the advantage of the imperialist policies of France, Austria-Hungary, the German and British Empires, and Tsarist Russia. In this complex political environment, the issue of the Armenian Catholics also attracted the attention of Western anti-ultramontanist Catholic movements that shared their ideas and interests which in turn led to an alliance between Armenian Catholics, German and Swiss old Catholics, and Anglicans.

The purpose of this paper is to present the story of the division in the Armenian Catholic Church through the elucidation and coverage of its various ecclesiastical, political, national and international issues. The materials presented and their analysis provide a new perspective on this historical period of the Armenian Catholic Church, full of contradictions and dramatic events. This survey is an effort to introduce valuable historical evidence that has not previously been discovered or published in the public domain, and therefore many historical arguments related to this subject are presented from an alternative perspective.

In-depth studies of the history of the Armenian Catholic division lead to a number of important conclusions. The first relates to the importance of the rights of the Armenian Catholic Church. This church was created in 1742 during the existence of the Ottoman Empire as a result of a long association and exchange of ideas between the Armenians, the West and the Latin Church. Following its establishment, 1831 saw the Armenian Catholic community recognized as a separate Ottoman “millet”. The independent status of the church was crucial in protecting Catholic Armenians from the political and social pressures that had existed prior to that period.

Separated from the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Catholic Armenians maintained their national character and many ecclesiastical practices, such as the Armenian rite, and a number of administrative and ceremonial traditions and customs, including independent ecclesiastical rights granted by the Roman Catholic Church concerning the election of patriarchs and bishops, administration of church properties, etc. These practices diminished the influence of the Roman Catholic Church on Catholic Armenians. However, the importance of preserving the customs of Eastern Catholic churches united with Rome was reinforced at the Council of Florence in 1439, as well as in a number of papal papers, such as the bull of Eugene IV, *Exultate Deo*,

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published in 1439, and the bull of Benedict XIV, *Allatae sunt*, in 1755. Besides the above-mentioned situation, in the 19th Century the Armenian Catholic Church was faced with another very important reality. Like other nations under the Ottoman Empire, the Armenian people living in their historic homeland were also becoming aware of nationalism and aspiring to undo the Ottoman oppression and restore their lost state. The idea of Armenian unity was also strong amongst the people. In such conditions the peaceful and harmonious relationship between the Armenian Apostolic and Catholic Churches, the inter-ethnic, cultural and inter-church relationships were of paramount importance for the sake of common national interests. In addition, it was important for Catholic Armenians to maintain their union with Rome, as this was the only way in which they could legitimize their religious identity and independence in the Ottoman Empire, as well as receive political support from the Catholic powers in the East, France and the Habsburg Monarchy. And finally, it was vital for the Catholic Armenians to continue to be recognized by their Ottoman state as a religious community, thus ensuring the security of their state.

In parallel, a number of strained relationships were of particular importance to the Catholic Armenians. On the one hand, the confessional barrier between the Roman Catholic Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church continued to exist. On the other hand, there was tension between the Ottoman state and the Roman Catholic Church as a result of a gradually increasing Latin influence on the Ottoman subjects. The tense atmosphere was further aggravated by the policy of interfering with the religious affairs of Christians in the Ottoman Empire, including those of the Catholic Armenians by the great European powers. Under these circumstances, it was imperative for the Catholic Armenians to uphold their rights and to remain as independent as possible from external forces, in order to distance themselves from these tensions and to maintain a harmonious relationship with all parties. Until the publication of the papal bull in 1867, the Armenians were succeeding.

Given these circumstances, we can conclude that the rights of the Armenian Catholic Church were created and applied in accordance within the context of that Armenian historical period and were therefore of historical importance and justification. In addition, they were of great ecclesiastical and political importance. Therefore, the protection of these rights was extremely necessary for Catholic Armenians.

The second conclusion of the study reveals the circumstances and causes of the division in the Armenian Catholic Church. Until the 19th Century, the civil and ecclesiastical rights of Catholic Armenians were shaped and operated in line with the internal political requirements and social developments of the Ottoman Empire. From this point of view, the implementation of the reform program called *Tanzimat* began in 1839 resulting from pressure by the great powers. The reform charters, “Hatt-i Şerîf” (1839) and “Hatt-i Hümayûn” (1856), sought to strengthen the Ottoman Empire’s national minorities’ autonomy, as well as to provide for the rights and security of those minorities. In parallel with these developments, the process of secularization began in the Ottoman Empire. During the 1840s, this led to the Armenian Catholic Church becoming reorganized, a result of which the church and secular synods separated. The publication of the national constitution in 1863 is also noteworthy – although addressed to the apostolic Armenians, it also served as an example for the Catholic Armenians. The aforementioned domestic political developments and the separation of secular and spiritual powers further diminished the influence of the Church and therefore the influence of the Roman Catholic Church on the Armenian Catholic population under the Ottoman Empire. The desire of the Armenian population for self-organization and the creation of an independent state was also crucial in weakening the Roman influence.

In these circumstances, the Roman Pope Pius IX considered it necessary to reform the Armenian Catholic Church. In 1848, he began to criticize the growing privileges of Catholic

Armenians, citing them as a violation of the church charter. However, it was clear that the Armenian Catholic Church's independence and expanding influence was unacceptable not only from an ecclesiastical standpoint but also because it was an obstacle to the Pope's centralization policy, which was fundamental in the collapse of the papal state.

"Reversurus" united the two seats in the Armenian Catholic Church – the Patriarchate of Lebanon and the Archbishopric of Constantinople – under the single Patriarchate of Constantinople which made them totally dependent under the See of Rome. Considering the fact that the civil and religious rights of Catholic Armenians were intertwined, and in addition to the fact that the pro-Roman Patriarch Hasun intended taking over and combining the positions of patriarchy and the civic secular state leadership, it became apparent how "Reversurus" had made the Armenian Catholic Church dependent on Rome. These changes were irreconcilable with the developments taking place in the Catholic Armenian political and social spheres. Therefore, the church controversy and division of 1871 occurred as a result of this incompatibility.

The third important revelation concerns the extreme politicization of the Armenian Catholic issue in the 1870s. Relations between the great European powers during this period were complicated. Their most important concern was to maintain the stability of political power in Europe as it was endangered by wars, as well as by a number of political and economic rivalries. In addition, it was also important to save the Ottoman Empire, which had become increasingly diminished by the Balkan wars and economic troubles. Finally, the question of the correlation with the See of Rome became equally important for the great powers, complicated by the collapse of the papal state and the upheaval of scientific and ideological achievements, together with their conflicts with the Roman Catholic Church. In such a political context, events were taking place in the Roman Catholic Church and in the Ottoman Empire that had the potential to influence the situation. The Pope's attempt to expand influence over the Ottoman Empire through "Reversurus" provided new opportunities for the See of Rome to develop a relationship with the great powers, by achieving political significance. Besides this, the process of the establishment of the papal bull led to the activation of the Pope's diplomatic relations and therefore increasing its political importance. This was because the great powers quickly noticed the political significance of "Reversurus", as they could use it to raise their influence in the Ottoman Empire.

Finally, in the 1870s, there was a tense situation between the great European powers and Tsarist Russia. The latter was active in the East, which went against the interests of the great Western powers. In this situation the Ottoman Empire was a place where the great powers were looking for solutions to their problems, helped by the Ottoman Empire bankruptcy, and its debts to the great powers, the uprisings of the Balkan peoples, and the Russian-Turkish War of 1877–1878. The Ottoman state became dependent on the great powers, who in turn interfered in Ottoman domestic policy and in Catholic Armenian issues.

Given the aforementioned political context, this paper proves that some political forces played a crucial role in the catholic Armenian situation during the division. The victory of the anti-Hasunians in the first half of the 1870s was firstly connected with the decline of the diplomatic importance of the See of Rome, as well as the influence of its protector, France in the Ottoman Empire (following the victory of Germany in the 1870–1871 war). In addition, in 1871, the influence of the Roman Catholic Church began to diminish in Germany following the "culture wars", when the German authorities supported the anti-Hasunians against papal and French interests. However, Pope Leo XIII improved international relations during his reign in the second half of the 1870s, and the "culture wars" slowly declined around 1878. The papal protectors in the Ottoman Empire, France and Austro-Hungary then took a new route in defending the interests of the Hasunians. During the Balkan crisis, Great Britain joined, and the

German embassy retreated. As a result, at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, France was recognized as the sole protector of the Catholic Churches of the Ottoman Empire, which opened the doors to the Ottoman Empire before the See of Rome. Under the influence of these developments, up until 1881, the problem of the Catholic Armenians was resolved in favour of the See of Rome and the Hasunians. Such a marked politicization of the church issue proves that the Armenian Catholic division, though initially associated with the church issue, gained political significance in the 1870s. Its course was steered by developing relations between the great powers, the Ottoman state and the Roman Catholic Church.

The study's fourth important achievement is the discovery of the development of inter-church relations during these aforementioned events. The centralization policy of the See of Rome led to the formation of an alliance between the anti-Hasunians and other Western anti-ultramontanist Catholic movements during the Armenian Catholic division. A friendly relationship existed between the anti-Hasunians, Suk'ias Gazančean and Malak'ia Ōrmanean, together with Germany's old Catholics, Ignaz von Döllinger and his followers Franz Wülffing, Johann Friedrich von Schulte, Franz Heinrich Reusch, Franz Peter Knoodt, Joseph Hubert Reinkens, and Heinrich Stephan Alvarez von Liaño, and included the old Catholics of Switzerland, Hyacinthe Loyson, Jules Paul Deramey and Pierre Fischer, as well as Eugène Michaud from France. The anti-Hasunians and the old Catholics kept each other informed about their current situations, shared interests and goals, justified their ideology of struggle, and inspired each other with strength and motivation through correspondence. In addition, the old Catholics of Germany and Switzerland periodically presented the events surrounding the division in the Armenian Catholic Church to the European community and criticized the papal centralization policy as well as the interference of the great powers in the Armenian Church's affairs in old Catholic magazines.

Despite the common goals and ideology of the western old Catholics and anti-Hasunians, there were issues which divided them. Whereas the old Catholics' struggle was mainly against the dogma of the papal infallibility adopted during the First Vatican Council, the anti-Hasunian movement was aimed at counteracting the Pope's episcopal power with the rejection of "Reversurus". In addition, the German old Catholics wanted their bishop to be ordained by the Armenian Catholic bishops, and the Swiss old Catholics wanted priests to be likewise ordained. However, part of the anti-Hasunian movement did not want to deepen the disagreement with Rome by supporting the old Catholics. For this reason, a ritual union was not established between the Armenian Catholics and the Western old Catholics, although a union of faith and friendship was born, which endured for many years, even after the end of the Armenian Catholic division.

British Anglicans also shared the interests of the old Catholics. Following the announcement of the decisions of the First Vatican Council, various prominent British figures expressed their dissatisfaction. Both the Canterbury Upper Chamber in 1871, and the Lambeth Conference in 1878 responded critically: they rejected the Council's modifications. At the same time during the 1870s, friendly relations developed between the Anglicans and the old Catholics of Germany and Switzerland. In order to expand this inter-ecclesiastical circle, they also tried to include the Eastern Churches in their movement. Anglican newspapers made it clear that Anglicans also viewed the anti-Hasunians as supporters of the movement. However, it is clear that they were not really interested in the conflict between the Hasunians and the anti-Hasunians. The main reason was that they were particularly interested in protecting Armenian Christians in the Ottoman Empire from marginalization. In addition, the anti-Hasunians, by not attending the old Catholics' inter-church conferences, to which they were invited, missed the opportunity of developing an alliance with the Anglicans there.

It can therefore be summarized that the movement of the Armenian Catholics in the 1870s

against the bull “Reversurus” was perceived as one of the anti-ultramontanist movements of the 19th Century against the centralization policy of the See of Rome. It is also clear that during this movement, inter-church relationships were formed between Armenian Catholics, old Catholics, and Anglicans.

In conclusion, it is worth noting the final point of this study, which is an analysis of the historical significance of the policies pursued by various forces during the Armenian Catholic division and the events under their influence. In the second half of the 19th Century, the Roman Catholic Church’s policy toward the Catholic Armenians was clearly disguised in the need to reform the Armenian Catholic Church. The policy was also intended to elevate the position of the Roman Catholic Church to that of a universally dominant Church, which led to the Armenian Catholic division. Attempts by the Roman Catholic Church, on the one hand, and the Catholic Armenians on the other, to settle the matter on a church-legal basis, were unsuccessful. Instead, the position of the political forces and the diplomatic processes around the issue were crucial.

Many important sources indicate the fact that the fate of the solution to the problem of the Catholic Armenians depended on the unequal force of the alliances that existed between the great European powers and the Ottoman Empire. The attempts of the Ottoman Empire to break free from foreign influence failed. In this context, therefore, it was crucial to determine which goals the great powers would pursue in the Ottoman Empire, in relation to the issue of Armenian Catholicism and what role the Roman Catholic Church played in achieving their goals.

Summarizing the results of the analysis of the history of the Armenian Catholic division also leads to the conclusion that in the process of resolving the issue, the Armenian Catholics were given little opportunity to make free decisions on their own church’s rights. On the contrary, forceful political conditions were created which restricted the free orientation of Catholic Armenians. Instead, the informal imperialism applied by the great powers to the Ottoman Empire and the Roman Catholic Church’s centralization policy were crucial during almost the entire duration of the split.

The initiatives, which put an end to the Armenian Catholic division, led to transformation in the Armenian Catholic Church traditions. The rights of the Armenian Catholic Church have been changed several times under political pressure. In addition, the unacceptable strategy to end the division led to the alienation of some Catholic Armenians from their own church. For this reason, the Armenian Catholic Church lost many followers (some of whom joined the Armenian Apostolic Church, such as the later Armenian Apostolic Catholicos Malak’ia Ōrmanean). Another manifestation of marginalization was the complete eradication of the Antonian order, which made an important contribution to the Armenian nation. These events, which meant nothing less than a cultural loss for Catholic Armenians, had all the characteristics of cultural imperialism.