

The Gentle Armenian

Cardinal Agagianian, Prefect of the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith, is "a strong personality, gently expressed"

By Paul F. Healy

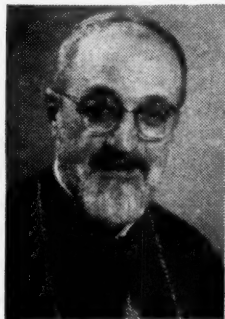
Condensed from "The Sign"*



CHARLES (Chip) Bohlen, serving as U.S. ambassador to the Philippines in August, 1959, was introduced at a reception to one of the most picturesque Churchmen he had ever beheld. He met a heavily bearded cardinal, with penetrating eyes looking through black-rimmed spectacles, who had the disarmingly unsophisticated manner of an early Christian. The prelate fascinated the diplomat by addressing him in Russian.

Bohlen, former ambassador to the Soviet Union, delightedly answered in the same language, "I never expected to be talking to a Catholic cardinal in Russian in Manila."

The visitor laughed merrily; for Gregoire Pierre XV Cardinal Agagianian (pronounced "ah-gah-jahn-yan") is used to having



**Cardinal
Agagianian**

strangers look him up and down. Almost everything about him is a little unusual. He was born in Russia. He speaks seven languages fluently. He is a globe-trotter who travels on a Lebanese passport. He is director of the Church's world-wide missionary activities in his capacity as prefect of the Congregation of

the Propagation of the Faith. And as the patriarch of 200,000 Armenian-rite Catholics, he symbolizes the unity of East and West in the Church.

In 1958 Agagianian was one of four cardinals reported to have the best chance of being elected Pope. Today, at 65, he is still rated at the very top among the *papabili*—those cardinals regarded as likely to succeed Pope John.

Richard Cardinal Cushing of Boston has called Cardinal Agagianian "one of the most brilliant

*Monastery Place, Union City, N. J. October, 1960. © 1960, and reprinted with permission.

Churchmen of modern times, and possessor of one of the greatest minds in the history of the Church." Francis Cardinal Spellman, who spent five years in the seminary with him in Rome, recalls him as a "brilliant, scholarly leader among all the seminarians there."

When the Armenian cardinal visited the U.S. in May, 1960, Cardinal Spellman said he and other American Churchmen were impressed most of all with his affability and his understanding of the American mentality. His knack of making friends quickly has made Agagianian one of the most popular cardinals in Rome.

When I enjoyed a rare private interview with the cardinal in Washington, D.C., I was surprised to find that so intellectual a man could radiate such a charming simplicity. Madison Avenue would call it "the soft sell." One observer who has been a traveling companion of Cardinal Agagianian sums him up as being "a strong personality, gently expressed." He exudes an attractive combination of modesty and wisdom.

He is five feet, nine inches tall, but seems shorter because of his habit of bending graciously toward his visitor. He has a slender frame, but there is a wiry toughness about him. His beard—a characteristic of the bishops of the Eastern rite—is streaked with gray; it looks neater than it does in photographs. When I

asked him about its significance, he laughed and dismissed it as "an accidental thing—of no importance."

The cardinal told me he was born a Russian subject on Sept. 15, 1895, at Akhaltsikhe, a small village in the province of Tiflis in Georgia, near the Turkish border. His mother tongue was Armenian.

"My father, who had been engaged in various small businesses, died when I was five years old, so I never knew him," he said. He has one brother, Peter, a telegraph operator, and a sister, Elizabeth, the widow of an office worker for an oil company. Both live in the Soviet Union.

The boy was baptized Lazarus. He early showed intellectual gifts. At the age of 11, he said that he wanted to be a priest. His pastor, Monsignor Der-Abrahamian, sent him on to the Urban college of the Propagation of the Faith in Rome.

One day Father Fernando Cento, a staff member at the college, was leading a group of new students to a papal audience. Father Cento, who is now apostolic nuncio to Portugal, pointed to the young Armenian boy and told the Holy Father—Pope St. Pius X—he would have to send him home because of his tender age.

At the end of the audience, the saintly Pope motioned the priest aside, and said, "Tell the cardinal in charge of the college to keep the Armenian boy, for he will ren-

der great service to the Church." Later, it is said, the Pope told the young Armenian student that he would become "a priest, a bishop, and a patriarch."

Agagianian is reluctant to discuss such incidents; he told me there was no truth at all in some legendary anecdotes which have been printed. They relate to his return to Georgia in 1919. He had been ordained in Rome two years earlier, after winning degrees in philosophy, sacred theology, and canon law, and had served as faculty member of the Pontifical seminary.

Back in Russia, Agagianian took over as pastor of the Armenian Catholics in Tiflis. He found the province torn by the Bolshevik revolution. Legend has it that he was introduced to an elderly Georgian woman who told him sadly, "My son, too, once studied for the priesthood." She was supposedly the mother of Joseph Vissarinovich Dzhugashvili, who became better known as Stalin.

It is true that Stalin was born in the same region and attended an Orthodox seminary. But the cardinal says that to his knowledge he never met the mother of Stalin or (as narrated in another apochryphal story) Stalin himself. However, he did study closely the career of his infamous fellow Georgian, and has become one of the best informed members of the hierarchy on that subject.

In February, 1921, the Bolshe-

vik army began a six months' occupation of Tiflis. When I asked if the Reds "confined" him, he smilingly replied with a wave of his hand, "No, they had many other things to do."

He was recalled to Rome and named assistant rector of the Armenian Pontifical college in late 1921, and eventually became its rector. He became proficient in Latin and Hebrew. His Italian acquired a Roman accent that is the delight of the congregations who listen to his erudite, graceful sermons in Rome. He also speaks French, besides Russian, English, and Armenian. His English is excellent, touched with an unidentifiable accent that probably owes something to all his other languages. He has a reading knowledge of Arabic.

During a 14-year stretch in Rome, he rendered useful service as an authority on Oriental canon law. He taught scores of seminarians from the U.S. at the College of the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith. Seventeen of his former American students have since become bishops.

When he began teaching at the college, he feared that he might not command sufficient respect because of his youthful appearance. To cultivate a mature look, he "nursed along every hair" on his fast-growing black beard.

It has been said (by Americans) that his mingling with a

constant stream of young students from the U.S. developed in him an American sense of humor. A serious person on a serious mission, he nonetheless has a light approach to life. There is no sting in his humor, but sometimes it has a gentle slyness. When he became a cardinal, he was asked how it felt to exchange "His Beatitude," the form of address for a patriarch, for "His Eminence."

"Well," he replied with a twinkle, "It is better to be blessed than to be eminent."

The cardinal's manner is both dignified and animated. Whenever I referred during my interview to some wildly inaccurate statement written about him, he looked momentarily dismayed, then threw up his hands, shook his head, and slapped his knee in chuckling disbelief.

He was made a bishop in 1935 and took up residence in Syria, which later gave him its highest award of merit. He was elected Patriarch of Cilicia of the Armenians at Beirut in 1937. The Armenian group is one of nine Eastern churches which differ in Liturgy but not in doctrine from Latin-rite Catholics. The new patriarch took the name of Gregoire Pierre: Gregory for St. Gregory the Illuminator, apostle of Armenia; and Pierre (Peter) in honor of the first Pope.

He received a red hat in 1946. As a cardinal, he continued to administer the affairs of the Armen-

ians, shuttling between Rome and his residence at Beirut. In June, 1958, another shift caused him to give up, at least while traveling, the fez-like stovepipe headgear of the Oriental patriarch in favor of a simple biretta. Pope Pius XII appointed him pro-prefect—in effect, executive head—of the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith. The late Cardinal Stritch of Chicago had been appointed to the post but had died in Rome before he could take over. Pope John named him prefect to succeed Pietro Cardinal Fumasoni-Biondi, who died July 12, 1960.

The Congregation is a ministry of the Holy See which was set up in 1622 to meet the growing needs of an expanding Church. As overseer of all Catholic missions, its jurisdiction includes 31 million Catholics and 3 million catechumens in 78 archdioceses, 197 apostolic vicariates, 114 prefectures, six independent abbeys, and three independent missions.

Cardinal Agagianian and his 27-man staff occupy a block-long, remodeled Renaissance palace in the famous Piazza-de-Spagna section of Rome. It is a half-hour walk from the Vatican, but enjoys the same extraterritoriality. The cardinal is unusually accessible in the one-time throne room which is his office. He devotes the morning to talking with missionaries and other visitors, then works on his reports and correspondence

while the Romans are taking their siestas in the afternoon.

He is deeply impressed with the reports from faraway outposts which flow across his desk daily.

"These messages are most edifying," he says. "And when I am out in the field visiting the missionaries, I am terribly impressed not just with their dedication to their work but with their joyfulness. They never seem downhearted."

Few cardinals have seen as much of the world as Agagianian. In 1954 he became the first Prince of the Church to visit Iran. Early in 1959 he became the first man in his post to visit the Far Eastern missions. At his first stop on this 11,000-mile journey, he presided over South Vietnam's first Marian congress in Saigon. The 1,150,000 South Vietnam Catholics are a minority but are the best-organized religious group in a country dominated by strife-torn Buddhists.

As he moved coolly through the burning heat in his scarlet robes, the bearded cardinal was a symbol for the entire nation. Thousands of non-Catholics lined the flag-bedecked streets as he passed, and thousands of Catholics gathered around the city's churches every night to show their support of his mission. When the cardinal celebrated Mass one morning at the cathedral in Saigon, the surrounding streets were jammed with onlookers, some of

whom had slept all night on the pavement.

To kindle morale along the tense, smoldering Chinese border, the cardinal tirelessly inspected Catholic schools, hospitals, refugee camps, convents, seminaries, and nurseries. One Vietnam priest said, "He has strengthened our determination to free our enslaved brothers in the North. Above all, we are now secure in our knowledge that Rome thinks of us, no matter how small or unimportant we are."

Cardinal Agagianian then visited Thailand, Formosa, Hong Kong, Korea, and Japan. In Seoul, Korea, 3,000 Catholics thronged the cathedral for a pontifical Mass sung by the cardinal while hundreds more stood outside the church in a driving rain. Referring to the Catholics in Red China, Agagianian told the congregation, "My mind turns with much pain to our brethren who, not so far from here, are persecuted by the enemies of God."

In Japan he traveled to the Catholic sees in seven cities. In Nagasaki he examined the atom-bombed church of Urakami then being constructed. He thanked the Japanese for the "courteous respect and honor paid to the humble representative of His Holiness, Pope John XXIII."

In August, 1959, he flew to the Philippines and then participated in the centenary celebrations of the Brisbane diocese in Australia.

He returned by way of Indonesia, where he plunged deep into the island of Java to get a personal look at the missions there.

He has made three visits to the U.S. In 1951-52 he toured the communities of Armenian Catholics in nine large cities. In October, 1954, he presided at the national Marian congress of the Eastern rites in Philadelphia. At that time, he said that the facts of Catholic life as he had seen them in the U.S. refuted the charge that America is a country of materialists.

"The extraordinary number of vocations to the contemplative life is an obvious answer to the charge," he said. "Beyond this

we must point to the countless American missionaries who have left all material comforts and sought out in the desolate and difficult parts of the world new areas for the salvation of souls."

Last year the cardinal visited seminaries and convents while traveling to Washington, D.C., Chicago, Dubuque, South Bend, Philadelphia, Boston, and New York.

He held many press conferences here, but smilingly refused to be drawn into a discussion of political questions. Nonetheless, he did make one significant point relating to his own work. "Wherever the Church is free, the missions are prospering," he said.

In Our Parish

In our parish. I and my ten-year-old son Andre were attending Mass last fall when he noticed some strange nuns seated in the front pew. Andre is an avid baseball enthusiast, so he whispered, "Dad, there are some new ones here. Some of the nuns must have been traded."

Charles C. Barbera.

In our parish. 1st grade, Sister was explaining that "God loves us all." The class nodded happily, all except one girl who broke into tears instead.

"Why, Mary, what's the matter?" Sister asked.

"He doesn't love me," the little girl sobbed. "I tried Him on a daisy."

Mrs. J. F.