

Narrator: Father Vartan Kassabian

Interviewer: Eric R. Bruder

Date and Place: Interviewed on 10-29-2001, at St. Gregory Armenian Church, 1014 W . Pontoon, in Granite City.

[Begin Tape 1, Side A.]

Eric Bruder: This is Eric Bruder, interviewing Father Vartan Kassabian October 29, 2001. This is tape one side A. Good morning.

Father Vartan Kassabian: Good morning Eric, how are you?

Bruder: I am very good, thank you. Thank you for agreeing to do this interview. I am interested in the role of specifically the Armenian Church as far as the stabilization of immigrants to this area and also the role that the church has played...

Kassabian: Here in southern Illinois and the St. Louis area.

Bruder: Yes.

Kassabian: O.K.

Bruder: Yes, definitely. And specifically I'll be interviewing Arthur Bedian about Lincoln Place. So how did you decide to become a priest?

Kassabian: Well, I became a priest ten years ago in 1992, but as far as a vocation, as far as a calling; I've had that calling to the priesthood throughout my life, frankly from about the age of ten, ten or eleven years old on.

Bruder: What happened?

Kassabian: Well, I always felt pulled to the church even as a child, I would walk even if I couldn't get to my own church I would go to the Armenian Church right up the street from us and even as a child I felt pulled to serve the church. I felt a calling. Of course when you are ten or eleven years old stuff like that is basically nothing more than a romantic allusion, but as time went on I felt a more stronger calling toward being pulled toward the church to serve Jesus Christ. The priesthood, whether it's orthodox, Protestant, catholic or otherwise is something that you have to feel, it's something that you have to be felt. That you have to feel you're called to. It's not something that's tangible, O.K. It's a feeling, it's a want, it's a desire, it's something that pulls you, it's something that calls to you. There is something within you, that inner voice, and that inner voice is Jesus Christ. Many are called, the Lord says, but few are chosen. You have to feel like you want to devote yourself to Jesus Christ. You know, along the way in life; many things pulled me

away. Other jobs, other professions, other vocations, but ultimately I knew deep down in my heart that Christ would win out. Christ was the one who would win out because you have to keep faith and you know, we don't walk with our spiritual eyes says St. Paul. We walk by faith, O.K. Unfortunately in this world that we're living in now everyone wants to have a faith, but it has to be a tangible faith; which is completely contrary to what the scripture teaches us. O.K. Faith is the belief in the things unseen; in the hope of the things unseen. Unfortunately we're living in that kind of a world where if it isn't tangible or if they can't feel it or see it people tend to have an unbelieving attitude. O.K., but the people who don't see it yet believe Christ said blessed are you who do not see yet you believe.

Bruder: Right.

Kassabian: So, I think that this is a devotion; this is a commitment, but above all serving the church which is in and of itself the kingdom of God-the kingship of Jesus Christ at its head O.K. is a labor of love because the Lord says those who will follow me must pick up their cross and follow and if we're not ready to pick up that cross and sacrifice and follow then we are not true servants of Jesus Christ. O.K., St. Paul says we are in the world but we are not of it. We have to live in the world in order to bring those people closer to Jesus Christ, however we can never be part of the world; with all of its deception O.K., with all of its treachery O.K., with the iniquity perpetrated upon mankind by itself because of its inability or because of the lack of the spirit of God within their hearts. So to me I've had this calling since I was a child. Of course as a child you don't realize those things initially, but as time goes on you're pulled and you feel more strongly pulled to Jesus and in the end Jesus did win out, our Lord did win out because as Paul said, "I was the worst of them." He says it in the first chapter in the first book of Timothy. He says, "I give thanks to God who has chosen me in His service although in the past I had persecuted Him because I didn't know what I was doing." And I think that's the, that's the punchline.

Bruder: Cause he didn't know what he was doing?

Kassabian: We didn't know what we were doing even at a young age. You're a teenager you are in your twenties, you're going through life you do crazy things, stupid things. We do things and say things that we're ashamed of as we go on in life we wish we hadn't said them or wish we hadn't done them, but we have that victory over sin; through Jesus Christ. I've said this many many times, the cross and it says it in the scripture, but I've tried to make that my lifeline. The cross is not only that symbol of death and crucifixion, but it was also the sign of victory. It was also the sign of victory. He died for you and I. He paid a debt that He didn't incur because we couldn't pay our own debts, so Christ paid that debt for us. That's awesome, that's an awesome thing. People that are living in this world now, our society especially cause you know we live in a very self centered society. The self is really what's emphasized today. This is the me generation. You know, we're a very disposable society and we use, we kind of use faith and we kind of use God as a convenience.

Bruder: Kind of like a genie?

Kassabian: Right. When we want Him we're right there we're on our knees and we're crying to Him and praying to Him and begging Him to help us; but the rest of the time, it's like well you know I got what I wanted. But Galatians chapter 6- the last book of the Galatians says, "do not be misled, do not be fooled you cannot ignore God and get away with it everyone will reap what they sow." Very simple. We either are or we're not. As I said so many times before, Christ was not a fence straddler. He told it like it was. He wasn't worried about being politically correct. He sat down with the poor people. He sat down with the people that society had basically disenfranchised. He sat with the prostitutes and the tax collectors and the poor people and the blind and the sick and the lame, and all of the people that society had basically and virtually decided to throw away. Even the Pharisees made reference to that when they said, "look at this man, he sits with the sinners." And Jesus said, "well I have come to heal the sick, not those who are well." What did He do? How forgiving was Jesus and how unforgiving are we? What did he say to the prostitute? He says, "Your sins are forgiven for your charity has covered your sins." And St. Paul says it, charity covers our sin. Charity covers many sins. There is only one sin that [bangs on desk top] our Lord didn't forgive and that was blasphemy against the Holy Trinity, the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit. This was a sin that was unforgivable even as far as our Lord was concerned. When we blasphemy God, when we blasphemy the Holy Spirit this is a sin that's unforgivable. And He took that blasphemy against Himself and accepted it. He accepted it very willingly because He died on the cross. There's no question about it. Was Jesus afraid of dying? Yes he was my son he most certainly was because He said, "May it be that this cup passes from me oh Lord, but if it doesn't, thy will be done." Are we any less than Jesus? Are we more than Jesus? No we were not. But even He had the fear of death because of the way it was coming. Paul said, "In order for me to live I must die." That's what Paul the apostle said. In order for me to live I must die. He wasn't talking about physical death. He was talking about dying of this world because this life, as Christians we believe that death is not an end. It's a beginning. And if there's anything that we should fear in this life, it's not death but, it's our sinful selves. We're afraid of death because we don't know what's in store afterwards. Because if we knew we were at our death bed and haven't repented after we've died, are we going to be able to repent? We must do it while we are here. So that when that time does come, we may be found blameless, like the prayer in the church says that we may have a Christian ending, a Christian and peaceful ending to our lives-let us pray to the Lord. That we may not be found unworthy before the awesome judgment seat of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ-let us pray to the Lord, Lord have mercy. Why do we pray this so many times during the service or during the mattons? Because we are asking the Lord to help us. To save us. To forgive us. To have mercy on us. Because we can't do it ourselves and as I've said so many times before, some people consider having to turn to Christ to be a weakness or having to pray or go to church to be a weakness. If that's the case then I'm the weakest of them all. I consider myself weak. Even as a layman, if I didn't go to church on Sunday I felt so empty. I felt like I had not ...I was so unfulfilled the rest of the week. Even when I had to work some Sundays, it would drive me crazy. Because I felt like God was calling me, I had to be there. And with all the good gifts God has given me in this life I had to give and

I thought this was my way of giving myself back to God for giving what he has given me. I felt that the least I could do was to give my life to Him, because He gave my life to me. There are so many things that the Lord has done for me that I'm not worthy of, but it's not my place to ask Him. I accept those gifts. And has God given us things in life to show us? Yes, He has. Do we have difficulties in life to show us the way? Yes, we do. And we know that the Lord gives them to us because He loves us, not in a way that we might understand from an earthly standpoint; but in a spiritual state.

Bruder: You spoke of the iniquity that man treats their fellow man with. As Armenians immigrated to the United States I'm sure that during the week it was tough for them because most of them didn't come here to high paying jobs in the steel factory.

Kassabian: No. Most of the Armenians, you have to understand something about Armenian history. Going back to the beginnings of the Armenian we're a people that's well over 5000 years old. You have to think about with you know around the Anatolian plateau when the Armenians first emerged as a race You know we were known as the Hittites and then we were known as the kingdom of Urartu. Now from that time because of the location of Armenia its always been a buffer zone between the East and the West, because it was situated between the Black and the Caspian Sea, and its always been a buffer zone for warring factions. Armenia has always been caught in the crossfire. Armenians, just like the rest of the civilized world was either pagan or Zoroas...we were pagans or we were fire worshipers until we accepted Christianity. There were apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew were in Armenia.

Bruder: First century?

Kassabian: First century around 35 to 37 after the birth of Christ. In 33 A.D. and before that there were the apo..., but Christianity was an underground faith in Armenia for a couple of hundred years up until 301 AD. There may be some historians that will refute the 301 and they'll say 287 to 289. Which could also be possible because St. Gregory the Illuminator was ordained the priest, was ordained a priest in that area in that span of time, in a place called Cesarea Phillipi. Yesasarea by the Greek orthodox patriarch of Cesarea. He went from Capodocia first went through Capodocia in Sanpastia and then went to what we call present day Armenia and through his vision built the mother church of the Armenian Church which has been standing now for some 1700 years. We are probably the oldest church building in the world. Ever since Armenia accepted Christianity in 301, let's say for historic history sake. Ever since that 301, we have been subjected to persecution; because the countries surrounding us have been hostile, because of its location in Asia Minor. The only two Christian sects that were in there were the Greeks and the Armenians because the Russians didn't accept Christianity until almost the year 980. So, Armenia had Christianity even before its official acceptance by the emperor Constantine in 313. So, we have never... to have accepted the Word and we didn't have a written language when we accepted it either. We were using Greek, Syriac, or Aramaic.

Bruder: Is that St. Mesrob?

Kassabian: St. Mesrob.

Bruder: Mesrob[corrected pronunciation-Mes robe]

Kassabian: Mesrob was a vartabip, was a monk who was the secretary of the royal palace at the time; who went to work for the Catholicos of the time who was the head of the church St. Sahad Barteve, who was I believe the last of the descendants or the last of the lineage of St. Gregory the Illuminator. From St. Gregory the Illuminator, for approximately 110 years from St. Gregory the Illuminator to Catholicos Nersess it was lineage. St. Gregory the Illuminator passed the throne of the church from himself, to his son, to another son, to the grandson, to the nephews and it was all in the lineage of the Bahhalauni family; which was the family or lineage of St. Gregory the Illuminator. And he, the last of those who were in the lineage of St. Gregory the Illuminator was the Catholicos St. Sahag who died in 451 A.D. or 452. In 451 we, St. Sahag and Mesrob thought it was very important for us to have a written language so we could convey the me... And the reason for translating the gospel, so it would be accessible to the Armenians in a language that they understood and for no other reason because we evangelized other places. We evangelized part of Northern Ireland -Ancient Ireland. We evangelized Georgia. We evangelized the Albanians. We evangelized what we call the Alkan, which would be called really now parts of Azerbaijan. We evangelized parts of Ethiopia. Because St. Sahag thought it was important that the Word of Christ the Word of God and St. Sahag not only translated our—got our alphabet going, but he also gave the Georgians their alphabet and he also gave the Ethiopians part of their alphabet. To make a long story short, ever since the acceptance of Christianity Armenians have remained steadfast to their faith at a great price. We have dropped a lot of our blood for the sake of Our Lord. We have always been—we are, we are, we were the first nation to accept Christianity; even before the emperor Constantine did in 300. We accepted it almost 15 years, if not more, maybe 20 years if you listen to the contention of some historians; it might have been 287 or 289. So you're talking 25, maybe 30 years before the emperor Constantine did and slowly but surely the entire area became Christian. We've never wavered from that. Now, we also of course because of the Byzantine and Roman influence we felt that in order for us to survive as a nation we had to have our own independent church as well. And that's what we did. We cut off from Byzantium, we cut off from the Greeks and everybody else and we are orthodox but, we have our own independent church cause at that time it was a matter of survival. We were part of the universal church, but we wanted to be governed independently because we -- because the leaders of our church realized. Was it a smart move? I don't know. But, the leadership of our church realized at that point that in order for us to survive, with our culture and our language and our traditions we had to be an independent entity. Which is the case with all of the Oriental Orthodox Churches.

Bruder: Has that identity been...

Kassabian: There's no question about it.

Bruder: Come here?

Kassabian: Oh, there's no—listen. There's one thing that an Armenian looks for 9 times out of 10. When he moves to a new place, the first thing he does is he opens up the telephone book and he looks for the Armenian Church or the Armenian community center.

Bruder: It's that strong?

Kassabian: Traditionally, Armenians have rallied around their church. I don't care what Armenian community you go to. I don't care if there's 20 or 30 families, in most cases you're going to find some kind of a drawing point in that community. Whether it's a community center or a church; in some communities they may use the church and the community center as one building. They'll split half the room, make a church and on the other side the community center. I don't care if there's 30 families or 40 families. North Carolina, we have a handful of Armenians; now we've got tons of them there and they are going to build a church because they know that the church is going to be the magnetizing force, not only for their faith in Jesus Christ and for their hope but also as a rallying point for the community. Armenians have traditional, I don't care where you go—now you can go to Los Angeles we have 30 churches within an hour of each other. There's over a million Armenians in L.A. Alone. In a city that had maybe 4 or 5 Armenian Churches at one point has over 30 of them now. No matter where you go, because the church has not only been the church. When we didn't have a government the church was our rulers. Our alphabet came from our church. The 'Golden Age' of our literature came from our church. The 'queen' of all biblical translations, the one that was translated in Amsterdam was translated into Armenian; they call it 'Takouhie Tarkmanoutuun', the 'queen' of all translations; even more beautiful, more succinct than the Greek translation. So, there's always been that bond. The church ran the schools. In the ancient towns of Armenia, in eastern and western Armenia every church had a school attached to it; 9 out of 10 churches there was the church and the school. The church and the school. If you go to Los Angeles today, the Armenians who have come over from overseas have done the same thing. There's been a rejuvenation of sorts in places like California. They have 20 Armenian day schools, 20 of them and they've got enrollment lists waiting for years for kids to get in. They just don't have the room for them because of the superior education. Because of the place, the role the school has played within Armenian life and the role the church has played because the church was the dominating force in the community. It still is to a certain extent, but of course the ancillary organizations have come about, cultural organizations, educational unions, and stuff like that that now support the schools. In many cases the diocese and the church are responsible for the operation of the day schools. We felt it important even as a Diaspora to educate our children in the tradition, the language, and the faith of our forefathers. So the church, yes-- especially in a place like Granite City, Illinois. Here we are in an isolated town in southern Illinois. This is a handful of people and what they've done here is absolutely nothing less than a miracle. That building across the way there is the community center. That's been there. Do you know what an accomplishment that is for a community with maybe 150 families in it?

Bruder: I saw that when I pulled up, it's a huge building.

Kassabian: ...This community did that long before I got here. Just the things that this community did in building that building and maintaining a community center where not only has it supported and it is responsible for this building. All the income that's been generated from that community center, all the affairs and everything else that we've had in there are the source of income that has built this most beautiful church edifice. I mean there are bigger communities than ours that envy this. This was done with a handful of people and it was done because the people in this community felt like we need a church. You know the church here wasn't built till 1954. They bought that church from the Bulgarian community.

Bruder: You're talking about Lincoln Place.

Kassabian: Lincoln Place. That place was the oldest Bulgarian Church in the United States. And it is still a church, through the charity of this community, we gave that church to a mission, to a Protestant mission or to a Pentecostal mission; because we felt we wanted it to stay a church. We didn't want to sell it and because God was so good to us our community felt like we should give something back. Granted the building was old and needed work, but they turned that church into a paradise. It's a beautiful building and we felt a sense of satisfaction in having given something back to God because of the gifts that God has given us. We needed to do something faith centered and they did that. So, the church has always fulfilled the role not only of church, but as a gathering place for her children. You can't go to an Armenian community where in most cases you won't find a church, even in a place like this in a little little community like this. This beautiful edifice stands as witness to one thing, no matter what we Armenians have remained steadfast to what's been passed down to us. We remained steadfast to Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we've never wavered from that. We've never wavered from our Christian faith, even with all of the things; even with all of the massacre and persecution, and death, and destruction, and the loss of our country, and our homeland. We have never wavered once from our faith in God and Jesus Christ. You'll go nowhere and not find an Armenian Church because the church has been the organizing force, the magnetizing force for the entire nation. As I eluded to you previously in the interview, its given us our literature, our schools, our scholars, our political leaders, even the people who aren't involved in the church have gone to the seminaries, the colleges, the seminaries and the institutions that were governed by the church to get their education. We still have them in Beirut, Lebanon. We have them in Armenia. We have them in Jerusalem. We have a very small school in Constantinople, Turkey; a place where there were hundreds of thousands of Armenians prior to the genocide. I think the turning point for the Armenians was the genocide.

Bruder: At the hands of the Turkish?

Kassabian: At the Turkish government, a government which today still denies the fact that it even visited this crime upon these people. For whatever reason, Turkey will never

recover until it comes to grips with its past. And now even some Turkish scholars are realizing that this did happen and they are petitioning their government to recognize this crime against humanity. See, the difference between the Jewish holocaust and the Armenian holocaust is that the Germans, the Nazi Germans, because it wasn't the entire German population just as it wasn't the entire Turkish population; is paying 85 million dollars a year to the Israeli government in reparations. Whereas we Armenians have not even received an apology for a dastardly crime, which was the precursor to the holocaust. Because if the world had recognized the severity of the Armenian genocide perpetrated by the Turkish government, then the Jewish holocaust, and successive crimes after that. Pol Pot Cambodia, Korea, Rwanda, Sudan the things that are happening in northern Africa, the things that go on in the Middle East and everything else. These things would have not been going on had the world paid attention. And under the support of our own government, the Turkish government continues to visit crimes on its own population. Amnesty International has documented all these things. Even to this day, the Turkish government is using their lobby in Washington, D.C. to try and suppress any recognition by the American government. Every other government in the world including the Pope of the Catholic Church has recognized that the Turkish government visited this crime, but because of the relationship between our government and the Turkish government, and because of the location of air bases in a place called Anasutli, Turkey our government is hesitant to recognize this. However, our government didn't have a bit of problem pushing the recognition of the holocaust of the Jews by the U.S. Government.

Bruder: Right. Excuse me while I switch the tape over.[pause] You were saying.

Kassabian: There isn't an Armenian that you will not meet that has not been affected in some way or the other by the after effects of this crime against humanity. I mean my father told me, my father slept in an apple box, a wooden apple box in an orphanage in Syria for over 10 years as a child. So, there isn't anyone who hasn't, even if they weren't there at the time; their family or their loved ones were not affected. Most of them, everybody that came here at the turn of the and before even those who came before the turn of the century in the 1890's and early 1900's came here to work in the steel factory to collect money so they could go back and give their family some money. To make their family more comfortable. It wasn't anyone's intention to stay in another country.

Bruder: Right.

Kassabian: But after the massacre, the Armenians were driven out of their country.

Bruder: Nineteen what, thirteen?

Kassabian: 1915 to 1920. Let me tell you they call that western Turkey, but that's, they call that eastern Turkey, but that's western Armenia and it was Armenia for a 1000 years before the barbarian Turks Celgics came in and wiped out that area. They came in they took in 1453 they ransacked Constantinople. Constantinople was the city of the emperor Constantine. That never belonged to the Turks. You know, the city of Constantinople was

founded by a Greek navigator in 657 B.C. The Greek navigator's name was Byzas, henceforth the name Byzantium. The original name of Constantinople before it was the city of the emperor Constantine was called Byzantium because it was founded or was navigated by a Greek navigator in 657 by the name of Byzas. And then of course, the Turks took that over. They ransacked the Hagia Sophia. Turned it from an orthodox Christian cathedral into a mosque. The biggest mosque in all of Turkey was once a Christian church and that's what they've done with all the ancient Armenian churches and monuments in western Armenia. They use them for target practices and target storage, I mean ammunition storage dumps. They bomb them. They destroy them. So, there isn't one trace of the Armenians left from that area, but the Armenians know and they know and the world knows. You know, many years ago a British historian went to Armenia, to western Armenia to the barren lands through Decragnyer, through Arzarrum, through Vaand, and Buch and all those areas and he asked a Turkish border soldier, 'Why aren't you people building up these, why isn't anything built on these lands?' He says, 'These lands are haunted because we know that the owners the Armenians are coming back.' He says, 'Nothing has grown on these lands, nothing has come up because the true owners, the true possessors of this land have been driven away. So, in the Diaspora the church has been the magnetizing force. Especially in a place like this because this small core group of people, this is where they gather. This is where they organized. This is the lifeblood, at least here in southern Illinois. Our church, our edifice, our community center, the people and we've got a very dedicated, very hard-working group of people here. All of their time is volunteer, you know. Nobody gets paid to do anything here. These people all do this because they care about preserving our faith, our culture, our tradition through our faith. So that the children who will come before us will have a place to call their own. So that our children won't be lost in the shuffle, so they'll have a place to come to to perpetuate the faith that's been passed down to them. So as you can see, the church has always been like the magnetizing force; the organizing hand, kind of the sweeper that brings everybody out into her bosom. And why does she do that? Because the head of the church is Jesus Christ. He is not the center of the church, he is the church.

Bruder: And you spoke earlier about conducting services in Armenian as opposed to English.

Kassabian: Well we do, we do them in 2 languages. We go back and forth. Because you know, in some churches where there's a lot of immigrants they still do it in Armenian; but here, especially in the Midwest we have a lot of converts, people who aren't you know, spouses, husbands or wives that aren't Armenian and they work for the church. They devoted themselves to the church and in order to accommodate them and in order to make them feel a part of the church, to make them feel like they're wanted, to make them feel like they are actually a part of the faith. We have to do it in a language, as Jesus told us we must speak in a language that is accessible to all the people and that goes no less for our own church. We have to do that too. In order to preach the gospel, Paul says that you have to speak in the language of the people and we do that. So, we use the English too and that's gonna, English is going even those who lead our church will contend well yes, but I think they realize at some point there's going to be more and more and more English

and were going to be in a situation where we're going to be using English more and more and more. Although our ancient language is beautiful; the chanting, the singing, the incense and all that's beautiful. None of that has to change, but the character of the divine liturgy or the mass doesn't have to change, but the way you bring the message of Christ Jesus to the people that's what has to change. Cause you have to speak in a language that's accessible so the people will understand what's being preached. Cause if it is truly the good news, then you want to share that good news of Jesus Christ with those around you and in order to do that; you have to do it in the language that's accessible to the people.

Bruder: So, you're attempting to strike a balance. I was kind of getting at the importance of maintaining the Armenian language--

Kassabian: Absolutely.

Bruder: and also the balance of, yes making it accessible to people who aren't Armenian, but so many times immigrants come here and their native languages are dissolved into the American culture--

Kassabian: Right.

Bruder: And into the English speaking society

Kassabian: We do that too. You know, it's only a matter of time.

Bruder: You think that it will eventually completely be English.

Kassabian: I don't know if, Yes it might be... You know the chanting parts and maybe that, the music may not be, but I think that over time the force of assimilation will take its toll because you cannot survive. I mean we have to be realistic, you can't survive in a multicultural society and not preach in a language that's accessible to those who are coming to your church.

Bruder: But, yet you want to hold on to your roots.

Kassabian: You want to hold on to the traditions, which you can do because the character of our liturgy isn't going to change. You're merely doing it in a language that people understand.

Bruder: Do you think that draws them to church, as well as hearing the gospel; but also hearing their native tongue?

Kassabian: Oh, yes. The mystery, you know, the beauty and the sanctity of the holy liturgy being in you know the chanting when you do, of course when you chant in Armenian it sounds more prolific and more beautiful, but it doesn't sound any less beautiful when it's done in English too, you know. If you, for instance if you say again in

peace let us pray to the Lord, I mean. You can sing it in the same, in the same tune or same tone. If you do it in Armenian [Armenian chant] it sounds beautiful in both languages because Christ doesn't say don't speak Armenian or don't speak English or Italian, or Latin, or Greek, or anything else. But he also says that you have to speak in the language that's accessible to the people. And that's what we did. We went to those different places that our church evangelized like the Greeks did. When the Greeks went into Africa and all those other places and in Russia, in Bulgaria. St. Cudinum Methodi created a language for the Bulgarians when he went into Bulgaria. St. Mesrob created the Armenian alphabet. The Greeks had their own alphabet and the Russians created their own alphabet which is a derivative of Greek. Prince Boris sent emissaries to Constantinople to see what faith they would accept; the Islamic faith or the Christian faith and when Prince Boris's emissaries went into [pause] Prince Vladimir, I'm sorry, went into the Agio Sophia he didn't know whether he was on heaven or on earth. He ran back and said, we must accept this Christian faith. He said that while I was there praying, I did not know whether I was in heaven or on earth. Now, there is, there is that very fine line because again we cannot survive in the West ... This setting, especially in the Midwest where everybody is English speaking. You cannot survive in the West and continue to have a closed door on your church. You have to open the doors wide for the entrance of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit should lead you, should lead you to do things that are acceptable to Christ. And one of the things that's acceptable to Christ is accepting His children into the faith. We are many faiths says St. Paul, we are all of a different tribe yet, we preach the same God. We preach the same Jesus Christ yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Let all proclaim to the glory of the Father that Jesus Christ is Lord. So, yes. You have to have, you want to maintain your ethnicity and your ethnic traditions and your national traditions, but they should not; and I repeat they should not take precedent over preaching the gospel. Because although the church was the magnetizing force, the church never put the schools, the education, the politics, above preaching the gospel. We can't do that. That's not why Christ called us. Christ called us to be a church in the context of our national identity, like He did with the Greeks, and the Bulgarians, and the Russians, and the Serbs, and the Macedonians, and the Croatians, and the Italians, and the French, and the English, and the Germans, and everybody else. But he did not call us to use the church as a foothold for nationalistic propaganda. He called us to be a church so that we could bring our people closer to Him in a language that our people would understand. In the West, we're in a different setting. You have to open the doors wide to bring people into the faith. You are called to be a church and the first obligation of every church is to remind everyone that it is nothing less than the kingdom of God. Jesus is not the center, He is the church. Without Christ there is no church. Because the church is not a building. The Greek definition of the church is called the Ecclesia, means the gathering of the community of God's believers. And in Armenian we say uuretsi, which is a derivative of the Greek word ecclesia. It means the same thing, a gathering place for those who proclaim the lordship and divinity of Christ Jesus. That's where it all starts. All these other things that we do all turn back and back up to Jesus Christ whether we want to admit that or not, whether we want to stress it or not, that's where it begins, that's where it ends. The Book of Revelation said first chapter, I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. The one who was, the one who is, and the one who is to come. So there is no, there is no moot point here. Jesus is very

succinct about that. So, yes we are an Armenian Church. We are the church of Armenia, but we're the church of Armenia, the church which was located in Armenia. The Apostolic Church of Armenia, the church founded by the apostles with apostolic succession in Armenia. We were not the Armenian apostolic, we are the Apostolic Church of Armenia founded by the apostles, preached as Christ did. Preached and came down and preached and dwelt among the saints. So, there is no moot point about where the Armenian Church stands as far as their calling. The calling of the Armenian Church, just like every other Christian church in the world; being the first Christian church in the world. The first gathering of Christ's people, who accepted Christ unconditionally. The Armenian people, 1700 years we...our last celebration is next Sunday, which is November the fourth. We've been celebrating the 1700th anniversary . 1700 years continuously, we have preached the Word of Christ. We have taken the Word of Christ seriously. We've remained. Through all the vicissitudes of history we still remain faithful to our Lord because that's where we realize that that is the beginning and the end. As He said in the Book of Revelations, I am the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega, the one who is, the one who is to come, and the one that was always there.

Bruder: Now, let me switch the tape.

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

Kassabian: You cannot and it's impossible to picture Armenians without a church. Because the church and the people have always been inseparable. Christianity and Armenians are inseparable.

Bruder: Tell me about the years that you actually served in the church that, who did you give it to, the Pentecostals?

Kassabian: Right.

Bruder: Down off of Niedringhaus and Maple.

Kassabian: I only served there from 1992 to 1997.

Bruder: What were your experiences there?

Kassabian: Well, that was see, the difference in the two churches is first of all there is two different buildings. That was a non-traditional non-Armenian building. This is an Armenian architecturally, architectural built in the Armenian architectural tradition. That was a more neighborhood type church. Non-Armenians would come in to visit me and talk to me it was more a one on one. It was a more, right now, Lincoln Place is a pretty deprived area. That section is not what, I mean the area is not what it used to be. It's a fairly deprived as you can see, you've been through it.

Bruder: Yes.

Kassabian: I don't know if that's what you would call it, but it looks deprived now. I mean it's not the neighborhood it once was. I didn't live there or I didn't grow up there so I would be ill-informed to give you any history of that part of Granite City cause I don't know anything about Granite City historically. I know what's happened here, me being the priest here for the last ten years. Here in our community, we've built a new church, the church has come back, we've had more people come back. We've had like a revival, not a revival, but we've rejuvenated. And that's thanks to the people who work so hard to maintain this place. Let's face it, without them you can be the best priest in the world, but without the people behind you, without their devotion and dedication and their generosity, you wouldn't have much of anything. I mean as I told you previously and I alluded to in the beginning of the tape, what they've accomplished here, for this group of people who survived so long as a little community isolated from the rest of the country. I mean the next Armenian community is five hours away from here. So, this has kind of been their little piece of Armenia in southern Illinois.

Bruder: So the same people that go to this church may have lived in Lincoln Place and actually...

Kassabian: Absolutely. Most of them that come here lived in Lincoln Place, they all grew up in Lincoln Place .

Bruder: And so this remains the focal point of their own heritage here in southern Illinois.

Kassabian: Right, right.

Bruder: The church hasn't moved, the building has changed.

Kassabian: The building has changed. When I was in Lincoln Place, it felt more neighborly because the location was different. I was right in the middle of an enclave there of people, you know there were neighbors and they'd say good morning Father. There was just that one on one. People would visit. I would take my son, he was just a little kid then. He'd go across the street and play on the bicycles with his friends across the street. He liked it, you know he—There isn't a time we don't go through Lincoln Place that he will say Dad can you go by the church again, because as a child he was taken in by that. He was a little kid riding his bike around the church you know, I'd take the bike and put it back in the car and bring it home. Or he'd go across the street, he made friends very easily went across the street and played with his friends. Everybody has moved away now. I would leave the door open in the front of the church in the good weather. People would come in and say good morning how are you. People, you know, street people would come in and ask for money and we'd help them the best we could. We collect food, we collect food for places like Phoenix House and places like that that need it. You know, we send quite a substantial amount of money to the orphan kids in Armenia who don't have anybody. You know so, with what little resources we had we tried to do what's best as a

Christian church to help those around us and we thought by giving the church to another church we could give back something that God gave us by giving us all these beautiful people and this community and the church and the community center and the whole bit. Lincoln Place as I see it now is a pretty run down area, it doesn't seem like it's going anywhere, I mean. Granite City is an old place, let's face it. Just like anywhere else, just like any old city or steel town or whatever, it's got its good sections and bad sections. Even the best cities in the U.S. have good sections and bad sections. So, it doesn't mean it's a bad place or anything. I was only there 5 years and I kind of felt more connected at that building because of the neighborhood. I mean I love this, but this doesn't have the people power that the other church had as far as people stopping in. We're right of the main highway here you can see the church for miles alright. You couldn't see that church, it was just secluded in between homes and stuff, but there was more of a neighborly taste to it. There was more of a neighborly connection to it you know. People on the other side, they'd come and visit and talk and have a cup of coffee and you know, it was a real small church. It was half this, we only held 80 or 90 people. We only had like 10 pews in it, but there was something about that old church that mesmerized you, that grabbed you, that connected you and the point I'm trying to make is that bigger is not necessarily always better. In this case, I love this building, of course it was built during my tenure as pastor so I feel more connected to it. Every time I go by it, I get goosebumps; thinking you know we have the most beautiful building here in Granite City. This is the most beautiful building in this town, I mean there ain't no question about it. I mean there is no if ands or buts about it, but a yes I felt more...The only differences, it's more neighborhood oriented there because I was surrounded by everyday people. Poor people, working people, people who had, people who didn't have, people who had grown up that didn't want to move. So, you had a combination of all. You had a collage of different people so to speak quote end quote, living around the area and then slowly but surely I could see that the neighborhood was starting to empty out and people would go. And it started to get bad as far as other things happening in the community. People were afraid to go out at night because of some of the kids and stuff like that, but that was the only difference. I mean this is beautiful.

Bruder: So you have there sons and daughters coming here?

Kassabian: A lot of them don't live here anymore. They live in Edwardsville, Glen Carbon

Bruder: But, they still come back here.

Kassabian: Oh, absolutely. You know Edwardsville, Glen Carbon, Collinsville, Belleville, Fairview Heights, and on the Missouri side Manchester, South County, West County, we're spread out. I mean this is a spread out parish.

Bruder: You have Mr. Bedian, who lives off Tesson Ferry.

Kassabian: Yes, yes this parish is way spread out. Spread way out and it's as far as ministering to it, it's difficult as well; because when you go somewhere, you're gonna drive

at least 40 minutes to get there. You're talking 80 miles worth of driving to go make a visitation. Whereas, here in Granite if I go to visit somebody, takes me 5 minutes to get there, 5 or 6 minutes if that. But, if I've got to go out to the county, you're talking 40 miles each way. I mean I have hospitals like St. John's Mercy, and St. Luke's. St. Luke's is 38 miles each way. You're talking 80 miles to go back and forth to the hospital, which could take you all day. Driving, going, sitting, coming back, driving back, going back, I mean if you have to do that more than once it's a lot of traveling. But here in town, everybody is within 3, 10, 5 minutes of each other you can be there in a minute. Somebody's dying, you have to be there of course you're a priest. That's what you're called to do. I don't know how anybody can say to somebody well you're going to have to wait. I've heard of horror stories of priests telling people you'll have to wait till I get there. Wait a minute, you don't have that luxury, if you've been called to serve Jesus Christ then that's one of your sacrifices. You go out and you help people and you comfort people, like Christ comforted the people. That's what you're called to do. And you can do that easier here cause everybody's 5 minutes, but if I got to go to the county it's a 40 minute ride. In some cases, I've been to Columbia, Missouri; it's a 150 miles each way, 138, 148 miles each way. So, yes in Granite you have that good thing about the convenience about having everybody within the town. And when there were more Armenians here it was much easier. Everybody's become more upwardly mobile. Again, a result of better jobs, careers, both people are working now, whereas it was unheard of, where one person was the bread winner and brought all the money in. You can't do that anymore. If husband and wife don't work, in most cases today; because everything is so sky high homes, cars and then of course we're never satisfied. We have to have more and more and more, so people have become upwardly mobile and as they get more and more affluent, they move away from the traditional enclaves where their parents and grandparents grew up. And they go out to places like Edwardsville, Collinsville, Glen Carbon, South County, West County, Fairview Heights, you know Allerton whatever, I mean not Allerton, but other places St. Louis, West County, South County, North County, Manchester, Town and Country. They all go to these big lush you know, because they figure they've got the ability to do it and why not. They want to give their children a better life than what they had; which is understandable. So, you have the affluent factor also. People become more affluent and they move away from the traditional enclaves and they go other places.

Bruder: And they come back on Sunday.

Kassabian: Yes, they do. Yes, they do.

Bruder: Is there anything that you want to comment on that I haven't asked you about?

Kassabian: No, I just want to stress to you the importance that the church has played, not just today, but throughout the 17 centuries that she has been in existence. I mean she has been in existence since 33 A.D. She has been preaching the truth since 33 A.D., but as an official entity I wanted to stress to you that the Armenians have always possessed an affinity to their church, to their faith. They've clung to it because that's what's kept them

not only Christian and following Christ, but it's also been our salvation as far as our language, our literature, our writings, our schools, our education and our nation. The church and the people have been interlocked and...if you go to Armenia, I just got back from Armenia in August. If you go to Armenia, you'll see hundreds of thousands of stone crosses all over the countryside. We have one city in Armenia, it's called Anie, it has 1001 churches; literally, physically 1001 churches and it has stone crosses all over the landscape. Ancient, some hundreds of years old, some thousands of years old. People would...and the artisans would carve the stones anywhere they could find a stone or a place to pronounce their faith in Jesus Christ, to exceedingly show their joy and their commitment to the Christian faith. All over that cathedral you'll see ancient Armenian writings, and manuscripts, and pictures. I mean, they all tell a story. You go to Jerusalem, you see the beauty and the magnificence of the Armenian cathedral of what the people sacrificed to imbue their cathedrals and their churches with beautiful ceramics and altars and marble and everything else, because that follows what Paul said, we must give our best back to God. Now we took that literally. Just like we took, turn the other cheek and pray for your enemies by taking the massacres and the persecutions that we did over the centuries. We took everything that Christ preached to us literally. I wanted to stress that. When I was talking earlier, I had that thought in the back of my mind. But, if you go to Armenia you'll see them all over the place. You'll see ancient monasteries, some that are a thousand plus years old, maybe 7 or 800 years old. I went to a lot of them. I went to the monastery of the Psalms, 900 years old. I went to the cathedral, I went to the monastery of Kabvart, it's carved out of the side of the mountain. The monks carved it there so they'd have a fortress. There's water in there that people drink when they're sick or they're ailing they drink that water. There's the pit where St. Gregory the Illuminator went down and stayed for 14 years. He was eaten by worms and bugs and rodents, but after 14 years he came out of the pit unscathed and he turned the entire Armenian nation into Christianity. Those monasteries are still standing today, why? Because of human hands; because of one thing Jesus Christ, because of faith in Jesus Christ. The faith in the things unseen nobody knows, but I know and you know. That those monasteries are still standing and those churches and those stone crosses are still standing because of one thing [knocks on desk] his name is Jesus Christ. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow as Paul said, let all proclaim to glory of the Father, Jesus Christ is Lord.

Bruder: Thank you, Father.

Kassabian: Thank you.