

# Eastern Catholic Churches

**Issue:** What are the Eastern Catholic Churches?

**Response:** Eastern Catholic Churches are “Churches of the East in union with, but not of Roman rite, with their own liturgical, theological, and administrative traditions, such as those of the Byzantine, Alexandrian or Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Maronite, and Chaldean rites. The variety of particular churches with distinctive traditions witnesses to the catholicity of the one Church of Christ, which takes root in distinct cultures” (Glossary, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, second ed.).

**Discussion:** Most Catholics in the United States belong to the Roman, Latin rite of the Catholic Church. They are “Western” Catholics. Unfortunately, many Western Catholics do not know or understand the rich heritage of the Eastern Catholic Churches. These Churches, together with the Western Church, constitute the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church,” which we profess in the Nicene – Constantinopolitan Creed.

While these individual Churches differ somewhat in respect to their liturgy, ecclesiastical discipline, and spiritual heritage, they all profess the same faith and submit themselves to

the authority of the Pope. The Bishops of all the Churches constitute the Apostolic College of Bishops. And, united through bonds of the Holy Spirit, the faithful of all these Churches are properly called “Catholic.”<sup>1</sup>

This diversity within the Church encourages unity. It allows the rich traditions of many peoples to be expressed in an authentic encounter with Christ. These traditions, because they are diverse, witness to the inculturization of the Gospel intended by Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Some Eastern Churches have patriarchs, all of whom are equal in dignity but some of whom retain traditional places of honor in assemblies.

While Western Catholics should cherish their own rite,<sup>3</sup> Pope John Paul II has asked all Catholics, Western and Eastern, “to be familiar with that [Eastern] tradition, so as to be nourished by it” (Apostolic Letter *Oriente Lumen*, May 2, 1995, 1).

## Five Traditions, Twenty-one Churches

Different Eastern Catholic Churches share different traditions of liturgy, ecclesiastical discipline, and spiritual heritage.<sup>1</sup> In many areas, Latin Rite dioceses coexist with Eastern Catholic Churches.

## Alexandrian Tradition

The Alexandrian tradition, which comprises two Eastern Catholic Churches, has its roots in the evangelization of Alexandria by Saint Mark.

The **Coptic Catholic Church**, with 196,248 members (as well as 10,000 in diaspora under the care of Latin bishops), has six eparchies (dioceses) in Egypt. The hierarchy and laity of the Church in Egypt by and large did not accept the dogmatic Christological definitions of the Council of Chalcedon (451); thus the Coptic Orthodox Church developed. In 1442, the Coptic Orthodox Church briefly united with the Holy See. In the seventeenth century, Jesuit, Capuchin, and other Franciscan missionaries became active among the Copts. In 1741, a Coptic bishop in Jerusalem became a Catholic, and Pope Benedict XIV named him Vicar Apostolic of the 2,000 Coptic Catholics in Egypt. In 1824, the Holy See temporarily established a Patriarchate of Alexandria, which Pope Leo XIII reestablished in 1895. The current Patriarch of Alexandria of the Copts is His Beatitude Stephanos II Ghattas (born 1920, elected 1986), who resides in Cairo. The Church’s liturgical languages are Coptic and Arabic.

The **Ethiopian Catholic Church**, with 202,043 members, has two dioceses in Ethiopia and three in Eritrea. Ethiopia was evangelized by Saint Frumentius in the early fourth century. The Church in Ethiopia, like the Church in Egypt, did not accept the definitions of the Council of Chalcedon, and thus the Ethiopian Orthodox Church developed. Catholic missionaries arrived in the fourteenth century. In the early 1500s, the Ethiopian emperor appealed to the Portuguese for help in repelling an Islamic invasion, and Jesuit missionaries accompanied the Portuguese. In 1622, the emperor converted to Catholicism, and four years later the Ethiopian Orthodox Church united with the Holy See. Pope Gregory XV appointed a Portuguese Jesuit as patriarch; his Latinizations of the liturgy, along with the autocratic rule of the emperor, helped contribute to the dissolution of the union in 1636 under the emperor's successor. Catholic missionaries were allowed to return in 1839, and missionary activity expanded when Italy ruled the country from 1935-41. The present ecclesiastical structure was established in 1961. The current head of this Church is Metropolitan Archbishop Berhane-Yesus Demerew Souraphiel (born 1948, appointed 1999) of Addis Ababa. Liturgical languages are Ge'ez and Amharic.

### Antiochene Tradition

The origin and development of the Antiochene tradition, which comprises three Eastern Catholic Churches, is recorded in the New Testament and involved Saints Peter and Paul (Acts 6:5, 11:19-26, 15:22-32, Gal 2:11). The Antiochene liturgy was strongly influenced by the Liturgy of Saint James in Jerusalem.

The **Syro-Malankara Catholic Church**, with 326,654 members, has four dioceses in India, which traces its evangelization to Saint Thomas the Apostle. Christians in India were in communion with the Assyrian Church of the East, which broke off from communion with the Holy See after the dogmatic

Christological definitions of the Council of Ephesus (431). Portuguese colonialization brought the forced Latinization of this Church, which most "Thomas Christians" rejected. Thus in 1653 the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, which rejected the authority of the Roman Pontiff, was formed. In the following century, four attempts to reunite this Church with the Holy See failed. In 1930, two bishops, one priest, one deacon, and one layman of this Church were received into the Catholic Church, and the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church was formed. By 1950, membership in the Church had grown to over 65,000. There are seventeen Syro-Malankara Catholic communities in the United States, Canada, and Germany. The current head of the Church is Metropolitan Archbishop Cyril Mar Basileos Malancharuvil (born 1935, appointed 1986) of Trivandrum, Kerala State, India. The liturgical language is Malayalam.

The **Maronite Catholic Church**, with 3,221,939 members, has ten dioceses in Lebanon, three in Syria, two in the United States, and one each in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Cyprus, Egypt, and Mexico, as well as exarchates in Jerusalem and Jordan. The Church traces its origin to the establishment of a monastery in Lebanon by Saint Maron (c. 400). The Maronite Catholic Church has always been in communion with the Holy See. The Church's current patriarch is His Beatitude Nasrallah Cardinal Sfeir (born 1920, elected 1986), who resides in Bkerke, Lebanon. The liturgical language is Arabic.

The **Syrian Catholic Church**, with 128,931 members, has four dioceses in Syria, two in Iraq, and one each in Egypt, Lebanon, and North America, as well as patriarchal exarchates in Iraq/Kuwait and Turkey. After many Christians in Syria did not accept the definitions of the Council of Chalcedon (451), the Syrian Orthodox Church developed. In 1444, this Church briefly reunited with the Holy See. In 1626, Capuchin and Jesuit missionaries began to work among the Syrian Orthodox.

So many became Catholic that Syrian Catholics had their own patriarch from 1662-1702. During the 1700s, the Ottoman Turkish government persecuted Syrian Catholics harshly, and the Church was driven underground. In 1783, the newly elected Syrian Orthodox patriarch became a Catholic and fled to Lebanon. The Church's current patriarch is His Beatitude Ignatius Moussa I Daoud (born 1930, elected 1998), who resides in Beirut. The liturgical languages are Syriac/Aramaic and Arabic.

### Armenian Tradition

The Armenian tradition embraces one Eastern Catholic Church and traces its origin to the missionary activity of Saint Gregory the Illuminator, the Apostle of Armenia (c. 257-c. 337).

The **Armenian Catholic Church**, with 343,198 members, has two dioceses in Syria and one each in Argentina, Egypt, France, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, and the Ukraine, as well as an apostolic exarchate for the United States and ordinariates in Eastern Europe (Armenia), Greece, and Romania. In 506, the Armenian bishops formally rejected the Christological definitions of the Council of Chalcedon (451), and thus the Armenian Apostolic Church was born. Armenians in Cilicia reunited with the Holy See from 1198-1375, and the entire Church reunited briefly with the Holy See in 1439. Subsequent Catholic missionary activity was successful, and the increasing number of Catholics led Pope Benedict XIV in 1742 to name a former Armenian Apostolic bishop as patriarch. A large number of Armenian Catholics lost their lives in the Turkish genocide of their nation (1915-6). The current patriarch is His Beatitude Jean Pierre XVIII Kasparian, who resides in Beirut. The liturgical language is classical Armenian.

### Byzantine Tradition

The Byzantine tradition comprises thirteen Eastern Catholic Churches. It began with the con-

struction of Constantinople as the second capital of the Roman Empire in 330.

The **Albanian Church**, with 2,164 members, has one apostolic administration in Albania. In the fourth century, Roman soldiers and traders brought the Gospel to Albania. The Great Schism of 1054 led to the development of the Albanian Orthodox Church. In 1628 and 1900, small groups of Albanian Orthodox became Catholic. The head of the Albanian Church, appointed in 1996, is Bishop Hil Kabashi. The Church has no other priests and no parishes, and the liturgical language is Albanian.

The **Belarussian (Byelorussian, White Russian) Church** has no hierarchy. A 1992 Belarussian State University survey estimated that 100,000 Belarussians are Eastern Catholics; there are 5,000 Belarussian Catholics in diaspora. Modern day Belarus was once part of Kievan Rus', which received the Catholic faith when Saint Vladimir, Grand Duke of Kiev, was baptized in 988. The Great Schism of 1054 led to separation of the Orthodox in Belarus from the Holy See. Most Orthodox Christians in Belarus became Catholic as a result of the Union of Brest (1595-6). The liturgical language is Belarusan.

The **Bulgarian Catholic Church**, with 15,000 members, has one apostolic exarchate. While there was a bishops' synod in 343 in what is now Bulgarian territory, the beginnings of the evangelization of Bulgaria are usually dated to the baptism of King Boris I by a Byzantine Rite bishop in 865. The Great Schism of 1054 led to the development of the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria. In 1861, when a group of Bulgarian Orthodox approached Pope Pius IX to become Catholic, he named one of them an archbishop. The current head of the Church is Bishop Christo Proykov (born 1946, appointed 1995), who resides in Sofia. The liturgical language is Old Slavonic.

The **Eparchy of Krizevci**, with 48,920 members, has one diocese in Croatia with jurisdiction over all of the former Yugoslavia. Pope Saint

Martin I sent John of Ravenna to evangelize the Croats in the middle of the seventh century, and the evangelization of the Serbs dates from this period as well. In 1219, the Church in Serbia broke from communion with the Holy See, and thus the Orthodox Church of Serbia developed. In the early seventeenth century, some Serbs in Croatia sought union with the Holy See, and in 1611 they were granted a bishop. The current head of the Church is Bishop Slavomir Mikloš (born 1934, appointed 1983), who resides in Zagreb, Croatia. Liturgical languages are Croatian and Old Slavonic.

The **Greek Catholic Church**, with 2,345 members, has apostolic exarchates in Greece and Turkey. The New Testament records the evangelization of Greece. The Orthodox Church of Greece developed after the Great Schism of 1054. In 1829, the Ottoman sultan removed restrictions against the formation of an Eastern Catholic community in Greece. Catholic missionary activity began in 1856, and Pope Saint Pius X appointed a bishop for the Church in 1911. The current head of the Church is Bishop Anarghyros Printesis (born 1937, appointed 1975), who resides in Athens. The liturgical language is Greek.

The **Hungarian Catholic Church**, with 281,998 members, has one diocese and one apostolic exarchate in Hungary. Saint Adalbert came to Hungary in 985 to evangelize, and Saint Stephen, who died as a Latin Rite Catholic, became king in 997. Turkish invasions throughout Europe caused many Carpatho-Russian and Romanian Orthodox to emigrate to Hungary, and most of them became Catholic in the 1600s. In 1924, these Catholics, who had been under the care of non-Hungarian Eastern Catholic bishops, were constituted into the Hungarian Catholic Church. The current head of the Church is Bishop Szilárd Keresztes (born 1932, appointed 1988), Bishop of Hajdúdorog and Apostolic Administrator of Miskolc, who resides in Nyiregyháza, Hungary. The liturgical language is Hungarian.

The **Italo-Albanian Catholic Church**, with 63,956 members, has two dioceses and one territorial abbey in Italy. In the fourth century, Roman soldiers and traders brought the Gospel to Albania. The Great Schism of 1054 led to the development of the Albanian Orthodox Church. In the 1400s, the Turkish conquest of their nation caused many Albanians to flee their country for southern Italy. The Albanian Orthodox who eventually became Catholic were granted their own Byzantine Rite bishop by the Holy See in 1595. Because the Church's two dioceses are of equal rank, the Church does not have a single head.

The **Melkite Greek Catholic Church**, with 1,189,557 members, has seven dioceses in Lebanon, five in Syria, and one each in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Israel, Jordan, Mexico, and the United States, as well as exarchates in Iraq, Kuwait, and Venezuela. The origin and development of the Church of Antioch is recorded in the New Testament and involved Saints Peter and Paul (Acts 6:5, 11:19-26, 15:22-32, Gal 2:11). After the Great Schism of 1054, the Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch developed. In the mid-1600s, Capuchins, Carmelites, and Jesuits began missionary activity among these Orthodox. In 1724, two men were elected Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, and one of them became Catholic. The current Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, of Alexandria and of Jerusalem is His Beatitude Maximos V Hakkim (born 1908, elected 1967), who resides in Damascus. Liturgical languages are Greek and Arabic.

The **Romanian Greek Catholic Church**, with 1,118,823 members, has five dioceses in Romania and one in the United States. In the third century, missionaries evangelized Romanian, and the Great Schism of 1054 led to the development of the Orthodox Church of Romania. In 1698, the Orthodox Metropolitan of Transylvania sought communion with the Holy See, and the reunion was made formal in 1700. The head of the Church is Metropolitan Lucian

Murean (born 1931, appointed 1994), Archbishop of Făgăraș and Alba Iulia, who resides in Blaj. The liturgical language is Romanian.

The **Russian Church**, with 3,500 members in diaspora, has no hierarchy. The evangelization of Russia followed from the baptism of Saint Olga (950s) and Saint Vladimir (988), and the Great Schism of 1054 led to the development of the Orthodox Church of Russia. Eastern Catholic Churches were illegal in Russia until 1905. After Czar Nicholas II's edict of toleration that year, a few small Eastern Catholic communities formed. Apostolic exarchates were then established in Russia in 1917 and China in 1928 (for Russian emigrants); these have not been reconstituted since the fall of Communism. Today, there are two Russian Catholic parishes in the United States, one in Australia, and one in Canada.

The **Ruthenian Catholic Church**, with 533,000 members, has one diocese in the Ukraine and four in the United States, as well as an apostolic exarchate in the Czech Republic. The motherland of this Church is Transcarpathia, which is located in what is now the western part of Ukraine. The Carpathians (Rusines, Rusyns) who lived there were evangelized by Saints Cyril and Methodius in the 860s. After the Great Schism of 1054, Christians in this area were Orthodox and no longer in communion with the Holy See. The Ruthenian Catholic Church dates from the Union of Uzhorod in 1646, when 63 Orthodox priests were received into the Catholic Church. The current head of the Church is Bishop Ivan Semedi (born 1921, appointed 1991), Bishop of Mukačevo of the Byzantines, who resides in Uzhorod, Ukraine. In the United States, Ruthenian of Pittsburgh is an autonomous, metropolitan Church with its own hierarchical structure. The see is currently vacant. Liturgical languages are Old Slavonic and English.

The **Slovak Catholic Church**, with 221,757 members, has one diocese in Slovakia, one diocese in Canada, and one apostolic exarchate

in Canada. Saints Cyril and Methodius evangelized the Moravians from 863-67. Like the Ruthenian Catholic Church, the Slovak Catholic Church dates from the Union of Uzhorod in 1646. The current head of the Church is Bishop Ján Hirka (born 1923, appointed 1989), Bishop of Prešov (Slovakia) of Catholics of the Byzantine Rite. Liturgical languages are Old Slavonic and Slovak.

The **Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church**, with 5,181,759 members, has one archepiscopal exarchate and six dioceses in the Ukraine, five dioceses in Canada, four dioceses in the United States, two dioceses in Poland, and one each in Argentina, Australia, and Brazil, as well as apostolic exarchates in France, Germany, and Great Britain. Kievan Rus' received the Catholic faith when Saint Vladimir, Grand Duke of Kiev, was baptized in 988. The Great Schism of 1054 led to separation of the Orthodox in the Ukraine from the Holy See. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was formed in 1595-96, when the Orthodox bishops of the Metropolitan Province of Kiev sought reunion with the Holy See at the Union of Brest. The current head of the Ukrainian Catholic Church is Cardinal Archbishop Lubomyr Husar of Lviv. The liturgical languages are Old Slavonic and Ukrainian.

### Chaldean (East Syrian) Tradition

The Chaldean (East Syrian) tradition, which comprises two Eastern Catholic Churches, traces its roots to the evangelization of Meso-

potamia (Persia) by the mid-second century.

The **Chaldean Catholic Church**, with 303,096 members, has ten dioceses in Iraq, three in Iran, and one each in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, and the United States. The Church in Persia did not accept the dogmatic Christological definitions of the Council of Ephesus (431), and thus the Assyrian Church of the East developed. In 1552, a group of Assyrian bishops sought union with the Holy See, and thus in 1553 the Chaldean Catholic Church was formed. The current Patriarch of Babylon of the Chaldeans is His Beatitude Raphael I Bidawid (born 1922, elected 1989), who resides in Baghdad, Iraq. The liturgical languages are Syriac and Arabic.

The **Syro-Malabar Catholic Church**, with 3,885,388 members, has 22 dioceses in India. The Church in India traces its origins to the evangelization of India by Saint Thomas. In 1498, when Portuguese colonizers encountered these "Thomas Christians," who were in communion with the Assyrian Church of the East, the "Thomas Christians" declared their allegiance to the Roman Pontiff. In 1923, Pope Pius XI established a full hierarchy for the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church. The current head of the Church is Archbishop Varkey Vithayathil (born 1927, appointed 1999), Major Archbishop of Ernakulam-Angamaly, India. The liturgical language is Malayalam.

The varied liturgical traditions, disciplines, and structures of government of the Eastern Catholic Churches express the diversity of the Catholic Church. From this diversity comes the unity of the one, holy,

For more information about the Eastern Catholic Churches, please see the following official websites:

- Maronite Catholic Church [www.bkerke.org.lb](http://www.bkerke.org.lb)
- Ruthenian Catholic Church [www.byzcath.org](http://www.byzcath.org)
- Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church [www.ugcc.org.ua/eng](http://www.ugcc.org.ua/eng)
- Catholic Near East Welfare Assoc. [www.cnewa.org](http://www.cnewa.org)

catholic, and apostolic Church. Because of this unity, the Church encourages the faithful to acquaint themselves with the various traditions found within the Church, and recognizes the right of the faithful to receive the sacraments within any rite of the Catholic Church.

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<sup>1</sup> Decree on the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, November 21, 1964, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Decree on the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, November 21, 1964, 3; c.f. Mark 16:15.

<sup>3</sup> The principal rite of the Latin liturgical tradition is the Roman Rite. Others include the Ambrosian Rite, the Mozarabic Rite, and the rites of certain religious orders. Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1203.

<sup>4</sup> Information on the various traditions and Churches is taken from *Our Sunday Visitor's Catholic Almanac 2000* (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 1999), 354 ff.; the Catholic Near East Welfare Association's website ([www.cnewa.org](http://www.cnewa.org)); and Victor J. Pospishil, *Eastern Catholic Church Law: Revised and Augmented Edition* (Staten Island, N.Y.: Saint Maron Publications, 1996), 15 ff.

## RECOMMENDED READING

*Holy Bible* (Catholic edition)

*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (paperback and hardback available)

Vatican II documents

*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite

*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter on the Eastern Churches

*The Eastern Christian Churches* (sixth ed.), Rev. Ronald G. Roberson, C.S.P.

*Our Sunday Visitor's Catholic Almanac 2000*, Ed. Greg Erlandson  
*Eastern Catholic Church Law: Revised and Augmented Edition*, Victor J. Pospishil

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