

The Eastern (Rite) Catholic Church

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As are many Latin Rite Catholics, I am a bit ignorant about the Eastern Catholic Church. What is the difference between the rites? Can Latin Church Catholics fulfill their Sunday obligation by attending an Eastern Catholic Mass? Can Latin Church Catholics receive Holy Communion in an Eastern Church Catholic Mass? Is the Eastern Rite Catholic Church the same as the Orthodox Church?

The Eastern Rite Catholics are part of the Roman Catholic Church, not the Orthodox Church.* While the majority of Roman Catholics belong to the Latin Rite, the Eastern Rites provide a special dimension to our Catholic heritage and spirituality. The Second Vatican Council's Decree on the Catholic Eastern Churches emphasized, "The Catholic Church values highly the institutions of the Eastern Churches, their liturgical rites, Ecclesiastical traditions and their ordering of Christian life. For in those churches, which are distinguished by their venerable antiquity, there is clearly evident the tradition which has come from the Apostles through the Fathers and which is part of the divinely revealed, undivided heritage of the Universal Church" (No. 1).



To appreciate the Eastern Churches and their rites, we must first quickly survey early Church history. At the Ascension, Jesus commanded the apostles, "Full authority has been given to me both in heaven and on earth; go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations. Baptize them in the name 'of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.' Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you. And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world" (Mt 28:18-20). After Pentecost, the apostles, filled with the gifts of Holy Spirit, carried the gospel message throughout the world to unknown lands and foreign peoples. Tradition holds that the different Apostles journeyed as far as Spain in the West and India in the East. From the foundation they laid, the Church continued to spread despite persecution by the Roman Empire.

Keep in mind also that the Roman Empire at that time encompassed most of western Europe, parts of eastern Europe, Asia Minor, Palestine, and northern Africa. While the Romans were severe conquerors, they did respect and tolerate the culture and customs of their subjects to insure peace. To govern this vast expanse more efficiently, Emperor Diocletian (ruling between 285-305 AD) divided the empire in the year 292 into two main portions: Rome and Byzantium, with four prefectures. When Emperor Constantine gained control, he legalized Christianity in 312 with the promulgation of the Edict of Milan, and then in 330 established the city of Constantinople as the capital of the eastern half of the Roman Empire. From this time on, the Empire was really seen as two halves — the West and the East. The eastern half was highly influenced by Hellenistic culture introduced by Alexander

the Great in the fourth century before our Lord. Eventually, Constantine would make Constantinople his home and base of government, and this city would be called, “New Rome.”

Within this framework, the Church grew. Dominant centres of Christianity eventually developed: Jerusalem, the “birthplace” for Christianity; Rome, the Diocese of St. Peter and the “home base” of the Church; Antioch, in Asia Minor where Christians were first called “Christians”; Alexandria, Egypt; and Constantinople, present day Istanbul, Turkey. Each of these communities professed the same belief and was united together as one Church. As the bishops of these dominant centres appointed and ordained other bishops to lead the growing Church, the hierarchy was mindful of the authority of the Holy Father, the Successor of St. Peter.

Especially when comparing the West with East, differences in culture and language impacted upon the expression of the faith even though essential elements remained the same. For example, Baptism always involved the invocation of the Holy Trinity and the



pouring of or immersion in water; yet, other particular prayers or liturgical customs were introduced in different areas. For Mass, the West used unleavened bread while leavened bread became more of the norm for the East. Moreover, Mass was called “The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass” or simply “Mass” in the West and “Divine Liturgy” or simply “Liturgy” in the East. In the West, the faithful genuflected before the Blessed Sacrament, while in the East bowing became customary. In the East, the sacraments of Baptism, Holy Communion, and Confirmation were administered together, whereas in the West, these sacraments eventually were eventually separated and were administered to an individual as

he matured. Another difference in religious culture was the usage of statues in the West as visible reminders to inspire devotion to the Lord, the Blessed Mother, or the saints whereas the veneration of icons evolved in the East. While these different traditions developed and remain to this day, they reflect the beautiful depth of Roman Catholicism.

As the Church hierarchy became more stable, the position of Patriarch was recognized. A Patriarch had the highest ecclesiastical dignity after the Pope and had jurisdiction over a particular territory. The term Patriarch comes from the Greek word for the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel. Strictly speaking, "by the term 'Eastern Patriarch' is meant the bishop who has jurisdiction over all the bishops, metropolitans (archbishops) not excepted, clergy and people of his own territory or rite, according to the rules of canon law and without prejudice to the primacy of the Roman Pontiff" ("Decree on the Eastern Churches," No. 7). Therefore, the patriarch is the father and head of his patriarchate.

The oldest version of Canon Law in the Church identified three patriarchs: The bishops of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch. Each patriarch governed a territory of the Church: The patriarch of Rome governed the whole Church in the West; the patriarch of Alexandria, the area of Egypt and Palestine; and the Patriarch of Antioch, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece and the remainder of the Church in the East. These three patriarchates were recognized as having a supreme place among the bishops by the Council of Nicea in 325.

With the rise of pilgrims to the Holy Land, the bishop of Jerusalem received greater honour. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 took the area of Palestine and Arabia from Antioch and formed the Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

Since Constantine had made Constantinople the capital of the Roman Empire in the East and called it "New Rome," the Council of Chalcedon (451) eventually elevated it as a patriarchate with jurisdiction over the territories of Asia Minor and Thrace. The New Order of the Patriarchs then became in descending order Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. Keep in mind that the patriarchs are considered equal in rank even though they may have a precedence of honour. Moreover, just to underscore an important point, even though the bishop of Rome is a patriarch, as pope he has supreme authority and governance over the whole Church.

Given this history, the differences in culture, language and liturgical practices, and the established hierarchy under patriarchs, the clear presence of defined "rites" arose. Rites basically refer to groups of the faithful who share the same manner of performing services for the worship of God and the sanctification of the faithful. The spiritual head of the rite was the patriarch, who in turn would be under the jurisdiction of the pope.



During the fifth century, the barbarian invasions crippled the Western Roman Empire. Rome itself declined in stature. Even though the pope was still the bishop of Rome, the great early Church councils were all convoked in cities of the east - Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon. A rivalry over power, authority, and prestige developed between the pope, bishop of Rome, and the patriarch of Constantinople. In the mind of the patriarch, since Rome had declined in stature and since Constantinople was now the viable capital of the Roman Empire (or what was left of it), he thought he should be recognized as the head of the Church - in a sense, "New Rome" should be the home of the pope. From the pope's perspective, he was the successor of St. Peter, bishop of Rome, who held the keys of the Kingdom. Theological issues also became subject to debate, especially the adding of the *filioque* clause to the Creed, i.e. that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.

To make a long story short, the mounting tensions finally exploded in 1054 when both the patriarch and the pope issued bulls of excommunication against each other.

The Eastern Church was now in formal schism with the Western Church. Although they acknowledged the pope as the successor of St. Peter, they rejected his binding authority over the whole Church and considered him simply as "the first among equals." Spurning any affiliation with Rome, these Churches identified themselves as the Orthodox. The patriarch of Constantinople was recognized as the spiritual head of the Orthodox Churches, but he did not have any juridic authority over them, except those of his own patriarchate. (Please note that the Maronite Rite Catholic Church whose patriarch resides in Lebanon never severed its ties with Rome.) As time continued, the Roman Catholic Church was identified with the Latin Mass and allegiance to the Holy Father, and the Orthodox Churches with the Eastern Rites and particular ethnic communities, for example the Greek Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church.



Attempts were made to reunite these Orthodox Churches with the Roman Catholic Church. At the Council of Florence (1438-45) which both Emperor John VIII and Patriarch Joseph II of Constantinople attended, the theological questions were debated. The Eastern Orthodox Churches agreed to accept the teaching that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, even though they were not required to add this phrase to the Creed. While the agreement was signed and the Churches officially reunited, a large segment of the regular clergy disdained this action. Moreover, when the Moslems conquered Constantinople in 1453, Sultan Mohammed II appointed Gennadios II as patriarch of Constantinople, who in turn repudiated the decrees of the Council of Florence. Once again, the two Churches were officially in schism. The domination of Islam over the territory of the East made future reunification virtually impossible.

In 1596, the first successful reunion occurred between the Ruthenian Orthodox and Roman Catholic Church in Poland with the Union of Brest. Other reunifications then followed. The most recent reunion involved the Church of Malankar, which traces its origins to St. Thomas the Apostle; in 1930, Bishop Ivanios, two other bishops, a priest, a deacon, and a laymen reunited with the Catholic Church and the Malankar Rite of the Catholic Church was born. These reunited Eastern Rites of the Catholic Church, except the Maronite Rite, all have counterparts remaining in the Orthodox Churches.

Vatican Council II recognized in its "Decree on the Catholic Eastern Churches," "The holy Catholic Church, which is the Mystical Body of Christ, is made up of the faithful who are organically united in the Holy Spirit by the same faith, the same sacraments and the same government. They combine into different groups, which are held together by their hierarchy,

and so form particular churches or rites. Between those churches there is such a wonderful bond of union that this variety in the Universal Church, so far from diminishing its unity, rather serves to emphasize it. For the Catholic Church wishes the traditions of each particular Church or Rite to remain whole and entire, and it likewise wishes to adapt its own way of life to the needs of different times and places" (No. 2). Although these Eastern Rites differ from the Western or Latin Rite in "rite" and liturgy, ecclesiastical discipline and Canon Law and spiritual traditions, they are fully part of the Roman Catholic Church under the leadership and pastoral care of the pope, the successor of St. Peter.

Today, the various Eastern Rites are organized under the four eastern patriarchates. (The following information was gleaned from the *Catholic Almanac*.)

The **Alexandrian Rite** is officially called the Liturgy of St. Mark. (St. Mark is traditionally considered the first bishop of Alexandria.) Their present liturgy contains elements of the Byzantine Rite of St. Basil and the liturgies of Sts. Mark, Cyril, and Gregory Nazianzen. This parent rite includes the Coptic Rite and the Ge'ez Rite. The Coptic Rite, which is situated primarily in Egypt, reunited with Rome in 1741 and uses the Coptic and Arabic languages in its liturgies. The Ge'ez Rite, based primarily in Ethiopia, Jerusalem, and Somalia, reunited with Rome in 1846 and uses the Ge'ez language in their liturgies.



The **Antiochene Rite** is the Liturgy of St. James of Jerusalem. This parent rite includes the following rites: The Malankar Rite is located in India, reunited with Rome in 1930, and uses the Syriac and Malayalam languages in its liturgies.

The Maronite Rite, located primarily in Lebanon, Cyprus, Egypt, and Syria but with large populations of the faithful also in the United States, Argentina, Brazil, Australia, and Canada, has remained united with Rome since the time of its founder St. Maron, and uses the Syriac and Arabic languages in its liturgies.

The Syrian Rite is located primarily in Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt and Syria, with healthy communities in Asia, Africa, Australia, and North and South America, reunited with Rome in 1781, and uses the Syriac and Arabic languages in its liturgies.

The **Armenian Rite**, technically a distinct rite, derived from the Antiochene Rite and is an older form of the Byzantine Rite. Although it uses a different language, this rite is technically called the Greek Liturgy of St. Basil. This rite has jurisdictions primarily in Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Ukraine, France, Greece, Romania, Armenia, Argentina and the

United States. The Armenians reunited with Rome during the Crusades, and the ritual liturgical language is Classical Armenian.

The **Chaldean Rite**, also technically a distinct rite, also originated from the Antiochene Rite. This rite is also divided into two rites: The Chaldean Rite, located primarily in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Turkey and the United States, reunited with Rome in 1692, and uses the Syriac and Arabic languages in the liturgy. The Syro-Malabar Rite, located in India, claims to have originated with St. Thomas the Apostle, and uses the Syriac and Malayalam languages in the liturgy. Although the Syro-Malabar Rite was never in formal schism, for centuries no communication occurred between them and Rome until the time of the missionaries in the 1500s.



The **Byzantine Rite**, the largest Eastern Rite, is based on the Rite of St. James of Jerusalem with the later reforms of St. Basil and St. John Chrysostom. These rites employ the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom. This parent rite comprises many rites, which are themselves highly ethnic oriented. The Albanian Rite, centered in Albania, reunited with Rome in 1628 and uses Albanian as its liturgical language. The Belarussian (formerly titled Byelorussian) Rite, centered in Belarussia with large populations in Europe, North and South America, and Australia, reunited with Rome in the 1600s and uses Old Slavonic as their liturgical language. The Bulgarian Rite, centered in Bulgaria, reunited with Rome in 1861 and uses the Old Slavonic language in the liturgy. The Croatian Rite, based primarily in Croatia with a significant population in the United States, reunited with Rome in 1611 and employs Old Slavonic as a liturgical language.

The Greek Rite, which is centered in Greece and Turkey with congregations also in Asia Minor and Europe, reunited with Rome in 1829 and uses the Greek language in the liturgy. The Hungarian Rite, situated in Hungary with significant populations throughout Europe and North and South America, reunited with Rome in 1646 and uses Greek, Hungarian, and English in their liturgies. The Italo-Albanian Rite, mainly in Italy with congregations in North and South America, never separated from Rome and uses the Greek and Italo-Albanian languages in the liturgy. The Romanian Rite, centered in Romania with a significant population in the United States, reunited with Rome in 1697 and use Modern Romanian in their liturgy; in 1948, they were forced to join the Romanian Orthodox Church in Romania, but since the fall of communism, the Catholic Romanian Rite has regained independence.

The Russian Rite, located mainly in Russia and China with congregations in Europe, Australia, and North and South America, reunited with Rome in 1905 and use Old Slavonic as a liturgical language. The Georgian Rite, based in the former Soviet Republic of Georgia, reunited with Rome in 1329, severed ties in 1507, then in 1917 broke with the Russian

Orthodox Church and again reunited with Rome as the Georgian Byzantine Rite, and has struggled for survival ever since, especially during Communist oppression; the Georgian language is used in their liturgy. The Slovak Rite is based in Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Canada, and uses Old Slavonic in its liturgy.

The three largest of the Byzantine Rites are the Melkite, Ruthenian and Ukrainian. The Melkite Rite has strong congregations in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, United States, Brazil, Venezuela, Canada, Australia, and Mexico. The Melkites reunited with Rome during the Crusades but due to impediments caused by the Moslem occupations more officially reunited in the early 1700s and use Greek, Arabic, English, Portuguese, and Spanish in the liturgy.

The Ruthenian or Carpatho-Russian Rite is based in the Ukraine and the United States with strong congregations in Ukraine, United States, Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Australia, and North and South America. The Ruthenians reunited with Rome in the Union of Brest-Litovsk in 1596 and the Union of Uzhorod in 1646. They employ Old Slavonic and English in the liturgy.



Finally, the Ukrainian Rite has large populations in the Ukraine, Poland, the United States, Canada, England, Australia, Germany, France, Brazil and Argentina. The Ukrainians reunited with Rome about 1595. However, Stalin forced the Ukrainian Rite Catholics to enter the Russian Orthodox Church in 1943, but since the independence of the Ukraine, they have reunited with Rome. This rite uses Old Slavonic and Ukrainian.

In the Diocese of Arlington, we have three Eastern Rite Catholic Churches: Epiphany of our Lord Byzantine-Ruthenian Rite in Annandale under the jurisdiction of the Eparchy of Passaic, N.J.; Holy Transfiguration Melkite Rite in McLean of the Melkite Eparchy of Newton, Mass.; and Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Byzantine Ukrainian Rite in Manassas of the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia, Pa. Also, at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, the Byzantine Rite communities in the United States funded a chapel which is adorned with beautiful icons. All Roman Catholics are welcome to attend the Divine Liturgy at these Eastern Rite Churches (which does indeed fulfill the Sunday obligation) and may receive Holy Communion. Particulars of Canon Law, however, do regulate marriages between a Latin Rite and an Eastern Rite Catholic. In all, these rites remind us of the universality of our Roman Catholic Church and the rich liturgical traditions we share as Catholics.

* Although the author uses the term 'rite' this only refers to the ritual aspect of what are in fact Churches. That is, there are twenty one Churches that constitute the communion of Churches that is called the Catholic Church and some of these share the same rite. NAD Ed.



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