

History of the Melkite Catholic Church and its Rites

Introduction

With the emergence of the Christian Church in 313 from the period of persecution, a new era prevailed. In areas where Christianity flourished, patterns of expressing the Christian faith evolved into progressively more mature and complex forms. Local customs and traditions gave each local church a distinct form. In the western part of the Empire, the Latin Rite of the Roman See prevailed. The rite of the Church of Constantinople prevailed in the East, though the rites of the Churches of Antioch and Alexandria also exerted a notable influence. Antioch has been the centre of influence upon all Christendom. It was there that St Peter began his apostolate before going to Rome. The term Christian was first used in Antioch (see Acts 11:26).

Alexandria, the home of monasticism, was the glory of Egypt. At one time the Patriarchate of Alexandria comprised 11 archbishoprics and more than 100 bishoprics. Patriarch Alexander and his successor St Athanasius were among the leading Fathers of the first ecumenical council held in Nicea 325. During the following centuries, successive heresies destroyed this ancient stronghold of the Christian faith.

Schism

A crippling blow to the Christian Church was experienced in 1054. Political motivations dominate this historical date of unanswered questions. At the time of Michael Caerularius, Patriarch of Constantinople, the Church of Jesus Christ suffered a schism (division) that has lasted to the present. Although the separated Eastern Churches (now called Orthodox Churches) retain all the sacraments and doctrine they do not acknowledge the Pope of Rome as the infallible head of the whole Christian Church.

Today millions of Eastern Churches are estranged from the Roman See. Under the leadership of Pope John and Pope Paul, the Vatican council urged all to work and pray to restore full union between the separated Eastern Churches and Catholic Church (Decree on Ecumenism, no14).

Reunion with the Roman See: There have been many attempts at reunion with the Roman See. The major ones were at the Ecumenical Council of Lyons in 1274 and the council of Florence 1439. At the time, they appeared successful. Nevertheless, for various historical reasons they were doomed to failure.

Downfall of Eastern Christendom: Constantinople, the final stronghold and fortress of Eastern Christendom fell to the Turks in 1453. The pendulum of the Church now swung west to the restored imperial court of Rome. Meanwhile Islam swept across Northern Africa, the Holy Land and Spain.

Importance of Rites

Briefly, a rite in the Catholic Church may be defined as the manner of expressing the one and the same teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ approved by the Apostolic See.

The Importance of a rite stems from the fact that it is an expression of individuality and identity, a distinguishing characteristic of a certain country or people. It is a sacred link that joins a people with its ancestors. A rite therefore is the fruit of the spiritual endeavors of the soul of a people. It is the product of many generations who have lived the Christian faith.

Apart from such seemingly secondary causes, there are much more fundamental sources from which a rite derives its sacredness and significance. The purpose of the Church is to perfect and to sanctify people. One of the means that the church must employ in the pursuit of this mission is external form of worship for the celebration of the liturgy and the sacraments, and for religious expression.

Centuries of spiritual values are contained and expressed through a rite. From an artistic point of view, a rite is a priceless treasure. It is a masterpiece of art, drama, poetry and music. It contains beauty of expression in word and in action. The beauty of the church is reflected in the diversity of rites which enhance its catholicity and universality. It is a permanent roof of a living Church for all times and peoples. The Church is indeed universal, catholic and apostolic when it embraces with equal love various peoples, cultures, civilizations and traditions. The Fathers of Vatican II were aware of this when they declared in the Constitution on the Liturgy (no4, see also Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches no3)

Faithfully obedient to tradition, the Council declared that the Church considers that all lawfully acknowledged rites are of equal authority and dignity. The Church wants to preserve these rites in the future, and desires to foster them in every way.

Some differences between Eastern and Western Churches

Though the Eastern and Western Churches believe in "One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all", the manner of expressing this faith varies. Some these differences are:

Unity in diversity: The Catholic faith is one, but it is expressed in varying rites. Different rites express the faith in various ways. This unity in diversity adds to the beauty of the Church, and reflects the Christian faith through many more prisms. Each culture is able to express its worship of God in a particular way, showing forth his glory to all. Today there are more than ten million Catholics practicing their faith according to various rites of the Eastern Church: each of these is full union with the Holy Father in Rome.

More expressive liturgy: The Eastern rites see their liturgy as a major expression and proclamation of their faith. Their church is seen as making heaven present (icons, incense). Gestures are repeated frequently, and often by different individuals at different moments. More ceremonial and singing mark the Eastern liturgical celebrations in contrast to the more restrained Western liturgies. But both East and West express their faith in their worship, and their prayer reveals the Christian faith they hold so firmly.

Catholic and Orthodox: The term Catholic refers to a person or Church in union with the Holy See, Orthodox means a person or Church holding the full Christian faith and celebrating all the sacraments, but not in full union with the pope. In the past decade, Pope Paul and the Greek Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras have began some symbolic gestures of friendship and brotherhood as first step toward the unity desired by Christ among all his followers. Just before the Second Vatican Council ended in 1965 Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras cancelled out the ancient anathemas (made at the time of the schism of 1054) as a symbolic gesture of reconciliation.

Calendars

When Christianity was founded, the Roman Empire was following the Julian calendar, which was organized by Julius Caesar. Over the centuries, this calendar was found to be somewhat inaccurate, so that by the sixteenth century, it was some two weeks behind. Pope Gregory XIII introduced our present calendar in 1582, and this is known as the Gregorian calendar. Since this reform took place after the schism of 1054, Orthodox Christians continued to follow the Julian calendar. During the twentieth century, however, some Orthodox Churches have begun to follow the new calendar of Gregory XIII.

Church of Constantinople

Numerically, the Byzantine Rite of Constantinople (Byzantium) is the largest in the Eastern Churches. Constantinople, home of the Imperial Court, granted special honors to the Patriarch of that city. He ranked second to the Pope of Rome, or even held at times, an apparent first. To this very day, the liturgical pomp and pageantry are colorfully displayed in the hierarchical vestments, noted particularly at pontifical celebrations. The tradition of Byzantium is reflected in architecture, art, sacred, and theological writings.

Different Eastern Rites

Alexandrian Rite:

- 1- Coptic rite (indigenous Christians of Egypt)
- 2- Ethiopian rite (Ethiopians)

Antiochian Rite:

- 1-East Syrian
 - a) Syro-Chaldean (Chaldean Catholics)
 - b) Syro-Malabar (Syro-Malabarese Catholics In India)

2-West Syrian

- a) Syro-Antiochean (Syrian Catholics)
- b) Syro-Malankarese (Malankarese Catholics in India)
- c) Syro-Maronite (Maronite Catholics in Lebanon)

Armenian Rite (Armenians)

Byzantine Rite:

- 1-Greek-Byzantine (Greeks)
- 2-Melkite-Byzantine (Melkites)
- 3-Byzantine-Slavonic:
 - a. Bulgarian (Bulgarians)
 - b. Ukrainian (Ukrainians)
 - c. Ruthenian
 - d. Russian old (Raskolniks)
 - e. Russian Reformed (Russians, Serbs)
 - f. Hungarian
 - g. Slovaks
- 4-Rumano-Byzantine: (Rumanians)
- 5-Italo-Byzantine:
 - a. Rite of Monastery at Grottaferrate (near Rome)
 - b. Italo-Albanese (Italians of Greek and Albanian origin)
- 6-Georgian-Byzantine (Georgians)
- 7-Roman-Byzantine (presented in the liturgical book Euchologion, published by order of Pope Benedict XIV, 1754, but never put into practice.

Rite of the Western Church:

- 1- Romans or Latin
- 2- Ambrosian (centered in Milan)
- 3- Mozarabic or Spanish
- 4- Celtic and Gallican (no longer exist).

*This information is taken from the Byzantine Ukrainian Rite
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National Library. Ottawa, Canada.*

Chapter 2

Origins of the Melkite Catholics

The doctrines of the Catholic Church were established in the first seven Ecumenical Councils. These councils were Nicea (325 AD), Constantinople I (381 AD), Ephesus (431 AD), Chalcedon (451 AD), Constantinople II (553 AD), Constantinople (680 AD) and Nicea II (787 AD). Many churches denominations were formed over these years because not all Christians agreed on points of doctrine, theology and church structure.

Those Christians who accepted the teaching of the council of Chalcedon (451 AD) – that Jesus was both human and divine in nature –were called Melkites. The name Melkite is derived from the Syriac word melek, which means king. Marcian, the Byzantine Emperor of the new Roman Empire at the time, also accepted the teachings at Chalcedon. Those who claimed that Jesus had one nature, the Monophysites, rejected the teaching at Chalcedon. The Monophysites first used the name Melkites to refer to those Christians who shared the same Christian beliefs as the Byzantine Emperor. Eventually, however, the name Melkites became less derogatory and was finally adopted by those loyal to the teachings of Chalcedon as their own name.

The Melkites originally formed the Patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. They spoke Greek because this was the main language of the Middle East at the time. The Melkites has strong ties with Rome and Constantinople and for almost 200 years used the Antiochian rite of worship. Eventually, the Copts formed the Patriarchate of Alexandria. The Patriarchate of Jerusalem remained Melkite.

From the seventh century onwards Antioch suffered at the hands of Islamic oppression and persecution. The Melkites were targeted because of their Christian faith and their loyalty to the Byzantine Emperor. These events forced many Melkites to live in exile. For many years the Patriarchate of Antioch was battered, but not lost. However due to the Melkites' presence in Constantinople (which used the Byzantine rite of worship) and because of repeated attempts made by the Patriarchate of Constantinople during 960 and 1085 AD to Byzantinise Antioch, the Melkites eventually adopted the Byzantine rite in their Liturgy.

The persecution, oppression and massacring of the Melkites continued throughout the Mameluke regime (1250 to 1516) and for many years during Ottoman rule (1516-1918). The language and culture of Melkites also become Arabic. During the Ottoman conquest the Sultan ruled over all the Middle East. The Melkites had no political role nor did they have any legal rights. All Christians were subjected to the authority of their patriarch. The Ottomans, however didn't consider the Melkites to be members of the Patriarch of Antioch and made them subject to the Patriarch of Constantinople. Also during the Ottoman period, the Melkites became more involved in Medicine and other Professions. Many also translated into Arabic volumes of philosophical, medical and scientific works of ancient Greece.

In 1501, there was a split between Patriarchates of Rome and Constantinople. The Melkites, however, did not follow the Patriarchate of Constantinople into Schism with Rome. The Melkites maintained contact with Rome, although this was made difficult with Antioch's ties with Constantinople and with the oppressive Islamic occupation in the Middle East.

The Movement for Union

The relationship between Antioch and Rome was heightened from the seventeenth century onward. In 1625 Latin missionaries entered the Middle East. They came in under the patronage of the French consulates. Eftimios Al Saifi, the Melkite Archbishop of Tyre and Sidon from 1682 to 1723, and his followers favored unity with Rome. Al Saifi, with the help of his followers and the Latin missionaries managed to form a Melkite community. They followed the rule of St Basil who founded eastern monasticism and established the Monastery of the Holy Saviour, which housed many Basilian Salvatorian monks- the largest Melkite community at the time. Other Melkite monks who also favored union with Rome established the Monastery of St John the Baptist. In the eighteenth century, the Melkites were divided. In 1724, The Patriarch of Antioch, Athanasius III, had passed away. He recommended that his former deacon, a 28 year-old Greek monk named Sylvester, succeed him. Some of the clergy and people of Antioch were not pleased with recommendation and elected Al Saifi's nephew, Seraphim Tanas, a Patriarch Kirilos VI. However, the Turks upheld the decision of the Greek Patriarch

of Constantinople for Sylvester to be the new Patriarch of Antioch. Kirilos VI, however a Melkite Catholic who studied in Rome, maintained ties with the pope in Rome. Since then there have been two branches of Melkites: The Melkite Greek Catholics and the Orthodox Melkites.

For many years the Melkite Greek Catholics were in conflict with the Turks and the Orthodox Melkites. In 1848, the Patriarch Maximos III Mazloum led the Melkite Greek Catholic to independence. In that year, the Sultan granted the Melkite Catholic Church civil and ecclesiastical rights and identity of their Patriarchate.

Other pioneers in the Melkite Greek Catholic Church include Gregorias II Youssef and Maximos IV Sayegh. With the help and guidance of God, they shepherded our church with wisdom and care. They permitted the fulfillment of its mission and its aims, especially that of understanding between East and West.

Today the Melkite Church has many bishops, priests, monks, nuns and deacons around the world. It is estimated that there are 3.5 millions Melkite Catholics worldwide. These include Lebanese, Syrians, Jordanians, Palestinians, Iraqis, Sudanese and other Middle Eastern and non-Middle Eastern origins.

Tradition of the Melkite Catholic Church

Over the course of almost 2000 years a variety of traditions have developed throughout Christendom. As Eastern Christians and as Melkite Catholics we profess, among other beliefs:

A belief in our call to be divinized

Our most important belief is that we are called to become partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), not just to be saved from sin. We see ourselves as invited to live the very life of God, to become intimately related to God, to be physically united to Christ and to have the Holy Spirit dwell in us. The church Fathers saw this as the reason for Christ's coming: "God became man so that man might become God" (St Athanasius).

Union with God through the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments)

This relationship comes about when we receive in faith the Holy Mysteries (or the Sacraments, as they are known in the West). In Baptism we are made one with Christ as we re-enact His burial and resurrection. This reliving takes place when we are buried (immersed) into water and are raised from it. In Chrismation (confirmation) we immediately receive the gift of the Holy Spirit "the first of God's gifts" (Romans 8:23). In receiving the Eucharist, we recognize that our mortal bodies are united to the body of Christ as a token of the life to come, when we shall be united to Him in glory forever. Thus we see these Mysteries, not merely as pious devotions, but as encounters with God, actually producing the effects they symbolize.

A Public life of worship, fellowship and service

As members of God's family, we belong to one another, and so we live an active community life as church. Most important, we join one another in worship. Our style of worship in the Eastern churches reflects the presence of the risen Christ among us in glory and joy. All the senses take part in our worship to express this glory. We see icons, vestments and candles, we hear continual singing, we taste blessed foods and use physical gestures such as bowing, prostrating and crossing ourselves to express our wonder at the glory of God. Another important aspect of our community life is our joy in each other's company, expressed in the frequent meals and social times we share. Finally we open ourselves to support one another in the trials of daily life. In this way the unity we celebrate at the Eucharist is lived out day by day.

A secret life of prayer, fasting and sharing

Besides a public Christian life, we also stress a personal spiritual life "in secret, so that your Father, who sees all in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:6). Chief of these is personal prayer in the silence of our own hearts, where we can speak honestly with God. Thus one of the most popular prayers in the Christian East is the Jesus Prayer which sums up our need for God's love: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner". In addition we are called to fast and to share our goods in secret as Jesus commended (Matthew 6:1-8). By refusing to gratify ourselves endlessly, we recall our need to continue our conversion day by day.

A need for Spiritual encounter

Though we were called to be divinized, we realize that this process is long: "the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life" (Matthew 7:14) the most difficult obstacle to our growth is the weakness of our personalities. This is why we are called to engage in a spiritual encounter in the arena of our hearts, learning to subject our weakness to the divinizing power of the Holy Spirit working within us. We are urged to conduct this "warfare" with the help of a spiritual guide.

All of these beliefs and customs date from the earliest days of Christianity in the Holy Land. By continuing to observe them, we maintain a living connection with the early Church. We cherish our tradition as a continuous stream flowing from the first Christians to us under the guidance of the Holy Spirit: truly "the old-time religion" in a new land.

How holy is Tradition?

Not everything is helpful for salvation is written in the Bible. John said he could have written a lot more about Jesus (John 21:25). Surely other accounts about Jesus and His teachings would be helpful and life giving but the fullness of His teachings was never written recorded in the Gospel (Acts 20:35) and it was surely not the only one.

We believe by faith, that the Church is the temple of God, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, who guides the Church to all truth (John 16:12-13). Authentic Tradition reflects the guidance of the Holy Spirit by its coherence and continuity. It does not contradict Scripture and is consistent with what has been upheld by the Church from the beginning.

Tradition is the voice of the Spirit in the life of the Church. To reject Tradition is to reject a most vital work of the Spirit. And so we should be careful not to accept the biblical interpretations of those who cut themselves off from the treasures of Holy Tradition. Scripture and the other form of Holy Tradition are one. God continues to dwell in His people and shape them. He does not contradict Himself, and neither does He limit Himself as to the means by which He shapes us.

Why Eastern Churches here in Australia

Many Catholics, nominally of an Eastern Church, today question the sense of maintaining Eastern Churches here in Australia. An "Eastern Rite, or Oriental Church" they may say, is for the old timers who have never become "Australianised" for those who like things with an oriental flavour. As for them, they have no trouble fitting into the Australian Church.

These people miss the point as far as understanding the presence of Eastern Catholic Churches in Australia. These Churches, at least those of the Byzantine Rite, are not "national" churches tied to the language or tradition of any one foreign country. The Byzantine Rite is international and has been used for centuries with local variations in countries as different as Greece, Russia and the Ukraine. In fact the Byzantine Rite been Greek in origin, does not even point to our near East ancestry at all!! But it does witness to the universality of the Church.

It was natural for the first Eastern Catholic immigrants to want to worship in the "fashion" of their homeland. And so their churches followed them to the shores of Australia. In those early days, Roman Catholics noticed many unfamiliar features about the new arrivals. Their customs and languages were different, their churches unusual, their ceremonies unfamiliar, so they were unable to see anything Catholic in what was not Roman. Today with better education, Roman Catholics understand their Eastern Catholic Brethren better and often find their ways of life and approaches to God meaningful and helpful.