

THE EASTERN CATHOLIC CHURCHES



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The Eastern Catholic Churches refer to those Churches that developed in the eastern half of the Roman Empire, including those communities that derived from them, and are in communion with Rome. They are characterized by a rich heritage with Apostolic origin, and are treasured by the universal Church, for the region was the home of **Jesus Christ** our Redeemer! ¹⁻³

HISTORY

Heeding the message of Jesus to "Go therefore and teach all nations" [Matthew 28:19-20], the Apostles travelled to all parts of the known world to spread Christianity. James stayed in Jerusalem, but Peter and Paul first went to Antioch [Galatians 2:11]. Peter then went to Rome, while Paul made three missionary journeys from Antioch [Acts], visiting many places, "as far round as Illyricum" [Romans 15:19], and then ended up imprisoned in Rome [Acts 28:11-31].⁴

Tradition has it that Andrew crossed Asia Minor to Byzantium; Bartholomew and Jude Thaddeus brought the faith to Armenia; and Thomas traveled through Chaldea all the way to India! Mark, who became the Gospel writer, traveled with Paul and Barnabas, and then went to Rome to help Peter; but it was Peter who was especially fond of him, calling Mark his son [1 Peter 5:13]. Mark later founded Christianity in Alexandria. ⁵

Early Christianity, in spite of persecution, flourished primarily in five centers: **Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, Alexandria, and Byzantium**. The five centers became **Patriarchates**, when Constantine recognized Christianity in the Edict of Milan in 313. The Eastern Catholic Churches originate from the three Eastern centers of Antioch, Alexandria, and Byzantium, while the Western Latin rite originates from Rome. ^{5,6}

On 11 May 330 Constantine renamed the Greek city of Byzantium in his honor, and, while Church authority rested with Rome, Constantinople became the seat of the Holy Roman Emperor, and gradually became the dominant Patriarchy for the Eastern Churches.

The five Patriarchates held seven Councils that defined theological beliefs on the Trinity and Jesus Christ, all of which were accepted by Rome and Constantinople. The Council of Ephesus in 432, which defined Mary as the mother of God, was rejected, however, by the Nestorians, a group that became the Assyrian Church of the East. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 declared that Jesus was one Person with two natures, Divine and human. The Armenians, Syrians, Coptics, and Ethiopians, who held the belief that Christ had one Divine nature, became known as the Monophysites, and formed the Oriental Orthodox Churches. ⁵⁻⁷

The gradual evolution of the Latin West and the Greek East culminated in the tragic Schism of the Church in **1054**. Nearly all of the remaining Eastern Churches, except the Maronites and the Italo-Albanians, joined the Byzantine or Greek Orthodox Church of Constantinople. ⁵

Eventually portions of nearly all of the Orthodox and separated Churches of the East returned into union with Rome, and became included in the group that form the Eastern Catholic Churches. These individual Catholic Churches, both Eastern and Western, while they form the universal Church of Jesus Christ, each have a distinctive **rite** or **tradition**, namely in liturgy, in ecclesiastical discipline, and in spiritual tradition. ¹

There are **22** rites in the universal Catholic Church, the 21 rites comprising the Eastern Catholic Churches, and the Latin Western rite. They are outlined in the following chart. A brief study of each one proves to be a fascinating study in Church history!

THE UNIVERSAL CATHOLIC CHURCH

JESUS CHRIST

THE APOSTLES

JAMES

PETER & PAUL

MATTHEW
THOMAS

ANDREW

JUDE THADDEUS
BARTHOLOMEW

MARK

JERUSALEM

ALEXANDRIA

ROME

ANTIOCH

BYZANTIUM

COPTIC
ETHIOPIAN

LATIN

MARONITE

SYRIAN
CHALDEAN
MALABAR
MALANKAR

BELARUSAN
BULGARIAN
GREEK
HUNGARIAN
ITALO-ALBANIAN
KRIZEVCI
MELKITE
ROMANIAN
RUSSIAN
RUSYN (RUTHENIAN)
SLOVAK
UKRAINIAN

ARMENIAN
GEORGIAN



THE INDIVIDUAL EASTERN CHURCHES

The Eastern Catholic Maronite Church

Lebanon

is a country with a rich Biblical heritage. The Cedars of Lebanon were the source of wood for the Temple of Solomon (I Kings 5:5-7), and the Cedars themselves are mentioned throughout the Old Testament. Lebanon figured in the origins of Christianity, for **Jesus Christ** visited Tyre and performed a miracle for the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter, as noted in Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30. He then went by way of Sidon on to the Sea of Galilee (Mark 7:31). Lebanon is the home of the Eastern Catholic **Maronite Church**.

Maron, a contemporary and friend of St. John Chrysostom, was a monk in the fourth century who left Antioch for the Orontes River to lead an ascetic life, following the traditions of St. Anthony of the Desert and St. Pachomius of Egypt. He soon had many followers that adopted his monastic life. Following the death of **St. Maron** in 410, his disciples built a monastery in his memory and formed the nucleus of the Maronite Church.⁸

The Maronites

held fast to the beliefs of the Council of Chalcedon in 451. When 350 monks were slain by the Monophysites of Antioch, the Maronites sought refuge in the mountains of Lebanon. Correspondence concerning the event brought papal recognition of the Maronites by Pope Hormisdas on February 10, 518.⁹

The martyrdom of the Patriarch of Antioch in 602 left the Maronites without a leader, and led them to elect their first Maronite Patriarch, **St. John Maron**, in 685.

Little was heard from the Maronites for 400 years, as they quietly escaped the Muslim invasions in the mountains of Lebanon, until the Crusader Raymond of Toulouse discovered the Maronites in the mountains near Tripoli, Lebanon on his way to conquer Jerusalem. The Maronites again confirmed their loyalty to the Pope in 1181. The Maronite Patriarch Jeremiah attended the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, and the Maronite College in Rome was inaugurated in 1584. The Maronites have always remained true to Rome.^{5, 8, 9, 10}

The Maronites, because of their monastic origin, were able to withstand intense pressure and even persecution to preserve their Church, not just by the Muslims, but also by separated brethren such as the Orthodox and Churches of the East, as well as efforts at Latinization from Rome. Lebanon is the only country in Asia with a Christian culture, primarily because of the Maronites. Even today, the words at the Consecration of the Mass are said in **Aramaic**, the language of Jesus.

The Maronites in Lebanon to this day allow **clerical marriage**. They accept the gift of human sexuality given by God, who said, "It is not good for man to be alone" [Genesis 2:18]. St. Peter, our first Pope, was married, as we learn of the healing of his mother-in-law in the Gospels [Matthew 8:14-15, Mark 1:29-31, Luke 4:38-39]. The last Pope to be married was Pope Adrian II in the ninth century.¹¹

The Maronites have especially flourished since the Second Vatican Council, and are now the third largest Eastern Catholic Church, numbering about 3,100,000 faithful in Lebanon and throughout the world, including parishes in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Cyprus, Mexico, and the United States. We are blessed to have Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Seminary in Washington, D. C., established in 1961.^{5, 8}

The Syrian Catholic Church

It was in **Antioch**
that the followers of Jesus Christ converted by Paul and Barnabas were first called Christians [Acts 11:26]. The Syrian Churches have a rich tradition originating with St. **Ignatius** of Antioch, who established the Church order of bishop, priest, and deacon. The Syriac language was the source of the **West Syriac**
liturgy, and the poems and hymns of one of the Doctors of the Church, the theologian **St.**

Ephrem

(306-373). The Schools of Antioch and Alexandria were key sources of theological thought.¹²

The Syrian Churches were divided by the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The Monophysites became powerful in Syria, and became known as Jacobites, named after a Monophysite Bishop. A group of Jacobites reunited with Rome as the Syrian Catholic Church in 1830. As they suffered horrific persecution at the hands of the Turks in World War I, they are few in number.

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The Chaldean Catholic Church

The Assyrian Church of the East was the Church of ancient Mesopotamia, formed by missionaries from Antioch. The liturgy is of the **East Syrian** or Chaldean rite. Their centers of learning were in Edessa and Nisibis, and their theology was influenced by **St. Ephrem** and the Persian sage **Aphrahat**. When the Antiochene Bishop Nestorius was driven from the Roman Empire for opposing the Council of Ephesus concerning Mary as Mother of God, he sought refuge in Persia, often at war with Rome. The Assyrian Church of the East adopted Nestorian beliefs.

Multiple attempts at reunion with the West failed until July 5, 1830, when Pope Pius VIII confirmed Metropolitan Jean Hormizdas as head of the Chaldean Catholics. Dialogue between the Chaldean Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East has improved since Pope John Paul II signed a Christological agreement with the Assyrian Patriarch in Rome in 1994.^{5,8}

The Syro-Malabar Catholic Church of India

The Syro-Malabar refer to themselves as *St. Thomas Christians*, as they trace their origin to the Apostle Thomas. They were in communion with the Assyrian Church of Persia, and followed the **East Syrian** (Chaldean) form of liturgy.

The Portuguese who colonized Goa latinized the Church with Portuguese Bishops and Latin rites in the sixteenth century, which led to rebellion in 1653 (see below). Communion with Rome was delayed until 1923 when Pope Pius XI established the Syro-Malabar Catholic hierarchy. The restoration of the Oriental rite has made considerable progress since Vatican II. Pope John Paul II elevated the Church to Major ArchEpiscopal status on December 16, 1992.

The Syro-Malabar Catholic Church has rapidly expanded until it is now the second largest Eastern Catholic Church with 3.9 million faithful in communities throughout India, the United States and Canada.^{5,8,13}

The Syro-Malankara Catholic Church of India

The Syro-Malankara Churches of Kerala, India also trace their origin to the Apostle St. Thomas, who arrived at a port city in Kerala in 52 AD. They are distinguished from the Syro-Malabar Church by the use of the **West Syrian** (Antiochene) form of liturgy.

Latinization by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century produced widespread discontent, and by the Coonan Cross Oath of 1653, the community joined with the Jacobite Patriarchate of Antioch, Syria.

Following an appeal by Malankaran Archbishop Mar Ivanios in 1930, Pope Pius XI established the Malankara Catholic Hierarchy. Pope John Paul II assisted greatly in the ecumenical movement with a Papal visit on February 8, 1986.^{5, 8, 13}

The Coptic Catholic Church in Egypt

The Coptic Catholic Church in Egypt traces their origin to St. Mark the Evangelist, who brought the faith to **Alexandria**. The Copts (derived from the Greek word for Egyptian) consider themselves part of the Holy Land, as the Holy Family sought refuge in Egypt during the time of Herod [Matthew 2:13-18]. Monasticism began in Egypt with St. Anthony of the Desert and St. Pachomius. Alexandria was one of the original five Patriarchates and served as a major theological center, home to Clement of Alexandria, Origen, St. Cyril of Alexandria, and St. Athanasius, who was the first to list the final Canon of the New Testament in 367 AD.

The majority of Christians in Egypt are Coptic Orthodox, as the majority of the Copts rejected the Council of Chalcedon's teaching in 451, and formed the Coptic Oriental Orthodox Church. It was not until November 26, 1895 that the Catholic Patriarchate was re-established by Pope Leo XIII. The Coptic Catholic Church has slowly developed.

All Christians in Egypt have recently suffered persecution at the hands of Muslim fundamentalists. But both Coptic Catholic and Orthodox have been encouraged by the recent apparitions of Mary at Zeitoun (1968-1971) and Assiut, Egypt (2000).^{5, 14}

The Coptic Catholic Church in Ethiopia and Eritrea

The Ethiopian (and Eritrean) Catholic Church follows the ancient Coptic rite of Alexandria and is under the jurisdiction of the Coptic Catholic Patriarch of Alexandria. St. Frumentius brought Christianity into Ethiopia in the fourth century and the faith took on uniquely African

characteristics. Their liturgical language is Ghe'ez, the native Ethiopian tongue. The Ethiopian Church also separated from Rome following the Council of Chalcedon and formed the Ethiopian Oriental Orthodox Church.

Attempts at reunion with Rome failed until World War II during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, when Catholic missionary activity resumed. Stability slowly developed, until Rome established a metropolitan see in Addis Ababa in 1961.^{5,14}



The Italo-Albanian Byzantine Catholic Church

The Great Schism of 1054 left the Roman Catholic West divided from the Byzantine or Greek Orthodox East. There are primarily twelve Eastern Catholic communities that trace their heritage to the Patriarchate of Constantinople and preserve the Byzantine tradition in their liturgy - the Italo-Albanian Eastern Catholic Church, and eleven Greek Orthodox communities that have had part of their faithful reunite with Rome to form the Byzantine Eastern Catholics.

The Greek or Byzantine liturgy is based on the tradition of St. Basil and the subsequent reform

of St. John Chrysostom. Of interest, the doxology following the Our Father, "For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory," was found in the New Testament Codex used by St. John Chrysostom. The Byzantine Rite also has its own cycle of liturgical feasts and saints, ethnic traditions, and Church law. For example, the Byzantines make the Sign of the Cross from right to left. ^{14, 15}

Illyricum (now Albania), Greece, Sicily, and Italy early on had a large Greek-speaking population. Even though the area was within the Latin Patriarchate, the Italo-Albanian (also called the Italo-Greek) Church followed and has preserved the Byzantine rite to the present day.

Multiple attempts at Latinization were finally stopped by Pope Benedict XIV with his bull *Etsi Pastoralis* in 1742. Pope Leo XIII in *Orientalium Dignitas* in 1894 recognized the equality and dignity of the Italo-Albanian Church. ^{5, 16}

The Italo-Albanian Byzantine Catholic Church, as the Maronites, have always remained faithful to Rome and have no Orthodox counterpart. There is also an Albanian Catholic Church which has been almost completely absorbed by the Latin rite, as well as an Albanian Orthodox Church. All three Christian Churches have faced persecution under the Albanian communist government, and are few in number. ⁵

The Belarusan Byzantine Catholic Community

Byelorussia, east of Poland, became Belarus with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The Belarusan Catholics originated from the Union of Brest in 1595. They have suffered persecution throughout history. While they do not have an official hierarchy approved by Rome, their communities, which celebrate the Byzantine liturgy, are beginning to thrive with the end of Communist oppression. ^{5, 14}

The Bulgarian Byzantine Catholic Church

The Bulgarian Church adopted the Byzantine rite in the ninth century, and proved a source of controversy between Rome and Constantinople. The Bulgarian Eastern Catholic Church was recognized by Pope Pius IX in 1861, but suffered terribly during the Balkan Wars. The Apostolic Delegate Archbishop Angelo Roncalli, our beloved Pope John XXIII, who served in Bulgaria from 1925-1934, arranged a new Apostolic Exarchate in Sofia in 1926. ¹⁷

The Byzantine Catholic Church of Greece

Missionary work among the Greek Orthodox actually began in Constantinople in 1856 by Father John Marangos. Pope Pius X on June 11, 1911 created an Ordinariate for the Greek Catholics. The entire Byzantine Catholic community was moved to Greece in a general exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey in the 1920s, and an Apostolic Exarchate was established in 1923 in Athens.

The Byzantine Catholics have faced great hostility from the Greek Orthodox, who consider the Church a creation of Rome in their own territory. Most Greek Catholic immigrants to America converted to Greek Orthodoxy, because their married priests faced such hostility from American Bishops. As such, the Greek Catholic Church is the smallest Eastern Catholic Church with less than 3000 members. ¹⁸

The Hungarian Byzantine Catholic Church

Byzantine Catholicism has been present in Hungary ever since the Middle Ages, and has grown over time through conversion of both Orthodox and Protestants. Pope Leo XIII approved a petition from Hungarian Byzantine Catholics to have their own Diocese on June 18, 1912. The Hungarian Church has grown, as both Byzantine and Ruthenian Catholics in Hungary began to celebrate the liturgy in Hungarian. ⁵

The Krizevci Catholic Church of Croatia and Yugoslavia

The Greek Catholic Church in Croatia was organized by Christians who had fled their homes from Bosnia, Dalmatia, and Slovenia during the Turkish invasions. Pope Paul VI gave the Balkan Christians their own diocesan bishop on June 17, 1777, with the seat in Krizevci, Croatia. The Diocese of Krizevci was extended to embrace all of the Greek Catholics in Yugoslavia, including Macedonia. ⁵

The Melkite Greek Catholic Church

Melkites are descended from the ancient followers of Christ in the Holy Land who adhered to the Council of Chalcedon, and follow the Byzantine rite of worship. The word "Melkite" derives from the same Phoenician and Hebrew root and means "king" or "kingly." The Melkites trace their origin to Antioch, but adopted the Byzantine liturgy following the Crusades.

The Melkites re-entered into communion with Rome as "equal-with-equal" in 1724, and are the most tenacious in preserving their Byzantine identity within the Catholic Church. The Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV played a major role at the Second Vatican Council (see later discussion).

The Melkites have about 1.5 million members, including an Eparchy in the United States in Newton, Massachusetts. ^{14, 19}

The Romanian Catholic Church

The Romanian Byzantine Catholic Church has undergone intense persecution, as Romania is predominantly an Orthodox country and fell under Communist rule. Aware of Protestant inroads, the Orthodox Metropolitan of Transylvania sought and achieved union with Rome on September 4, 1700, establishing the Romanian Byzantine Catholic Church. The Romanian Church went underground during Communist rule, and was re-established by Pope John Paul II on March 14, 1990. The Romanian Greek Catholic Church has since flourished with over 1 million members. ¹⁹

The Russian Byzantine Catholic Community

The Communist Revolution and the Russian Orthodox Church have kept the Russian Byzantine Catholic communities suppressed. There is no hierarchy, and three tiny communities exist in Harbin, China, the United States, and Canada. ⁵

The Rusyn Byzantine Catholic Church

The Rusyns, also known as **Ruthenians**, have a noble history and an indomitable spirit, having suffered persecution in their homeland of Carpatho-Rus and elsewhere. They trace their origin to **Saints Cyril and Methodius**, sent from Constantinople to the land of Carpatho-Rus, or Moravia. The two were successful in bringing conversion to the people, for they created an alphabet primarily of Greek letters to complement the native tongue of this Slavic nation. The liturgy of St. John Chrysostom was translated into the Cyrillic alphabet and Byzantine Catholicism prevailed. The Union of Uzhorod in 1646 reunited them to Rome after the Schism.

The Rusyns have preserved the Byzantine liturgy, allow married priests, and are firm believers in the principle of collegiality (see later discussion). They have firm jurisdiction in the Ukraine, Czech Republic, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. ¹¹

The Greek Catholic Church of Slovakia

The religious history of the Greek Catholics in Slovakia is closely related to the Rusyns, as both

were reunited to Rome following the Great Schism by the Union of Uzhorod in 1646, and both Slovak and Rusyn Byzantine Catholics were included in the territory of Czechoslovakia after World War I. Most have returned to their Greek Catholic roots following Communist suppression, and Pope John Paul II has supported the Church by creating an Apostolic Exarchate of Slovakia in 1997. ⁵

The Ukrainian Byzantine Catholic Church

Ukraine received their Christian heritage from the Byzantine Church. Following the Great Schism, the Ukraine (with the Belarusians) rejoined Rome in the Union of Brest in 1595. In spite of overwhelming persecution by Russian Orthodox and Communist rule, the Ukrainian Catholic Church recovered, and is now the largest Eastern Catholic Church with about 4.2 million faithful! The Ukrainian people have a special devotion to the Blessed Mother, and her reported appearances at Hrushiv and Seredne encouraged the faith of these devout people. ²¹

The Armenian Eastern Catholic Church

The Armenian Catholics trace their heritage to the Apostles Bartholomew and Jude Thaddeus. Ancient Armenia was the first nation to adopt Christianity as its state religion under King Tiridates III in 301. In 506 the Church of Armenia rejected the Council of Chalcedon and became Oriental Orthodox; the Armenian Orthodox are noted for safeguarding the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem until the present day. The Crusaders reunited the Armenians of Cilicia with Rome in 1198. The Armenian Catholic Church was later placed under Constantinople, but the Patriarchate was moved to Beirut, Lebanon following the Turkish decimation of World War I. The Armenian community also suffered persecution under the Communists in their homeland, so that Armenian Catholics are now mostly found in Beirut, Lebanon and Aleppo, Syria. ⁵

The Georgian Armenian Catholic Community

Of the Latin, Byzantine, and Armenian communities that have settled in Georgia, only the Armenian Catholic community, even without a hierarchy, survived communist rule to resume a normal ecclesial life after Georgian independence in 1991.



THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL AND THE EASTERN CATHOLIC CHURCHES

The surprise announcement of Pope John XXIII for a Second Vatican Council on January 25, 1959 was welcomed with open arms by the Christian Churches of the East, for the Pope called not only for "an intense spiritual cultivation" of the modern world, but also for a "renewed invitation to the faithful of separated communities." ²⁰

His opening speech convening the Second Vatican Council on October 11, 1962 signaled a turning point for improved relations between East and West. He stated that "the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity." He continued, "That being so, the Catholic Church, raising the torch of religious truth by means of this Ecumenical Council, desires to show herself to be the loving mother of all, benign, patient, full of mercy and goodness toward the brethren who are separated from her." ²¹

Pope John XXIII then referred to Jesus in the Gospel of John [17:21]: "The Catholic Church, therefore, considers it her duty to work actively so that there may be fulfilled the great mystery of that unity, which Jesus Christ invoked with fervent prayer from His heavenly Father on the eve of His sacrifice." ²¹

The Pope then stressed the need for Unity

in three areas: namely, the unity of Catholics among themselves (among Rome and the Eastern Catholic Churches); the unity with those Christians separated from this Apostolic See, and unity in dignity for those who follow non-Christian religions.²¹

The historical background of each Eastern Catholic Church should help one appreciate the tremendous hope engendered by the calling of the Second Vatican Council, for the Eastern Churches had significant issues to bring before the Council.

First, to offer comment on the composition of both the Council leadership and the Commission on Oriental Churches, in spite of the overwhelming majority of Latin Bishops (reflecting the composition of the entire Church), the Eastern Catholics were fairly represented. The Presidency of the Council was composed of ten cardinals, one of whom was Ignace Cardinal Tappouni, the Syrian rite Patriarch of Antioch.²²

The Commission for the Oriental Churches, which composed *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* [OE], the Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches, included the five remaining Patriarchs of the Eastern Churches, as well as many Archbishops and Bishops representative of the Eastern Churches²²

The Issues

The issues brought before the Commission and the Council included emphasis on the collegiality of the bishops, the unfair latinization of the Eastern Catholic Churches, respect and receptivity of the West to Eastern Christian traditions, and a call for Christian unity between East and West.

The Eastern Catholics were especially vocal concerning the **collegiality of the bishops**. They find Scriptural support in the election of Matthias to fill the place of Judas Iscariot in the Acts of the Apostles [Acts 1:15-26]. Peter "stood up among the brethren" and presided over the group of about 120. The Apostles and disciples "put forward" two, Joseph and Matthias.

*And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias;
and he was enrolled with the eleven apostles.
Acts 1:26*

Perhaps the central issue for Christian unity between East and West centers on the hierarchy of the Church. Historically this has always been an issue, but the declaration of the infallibility of the Pope at Vatican I called by Pius IX in 1846 has become the major stumbling block to reunification, and was made without representation from the East.^{23, 24}

Rome, citing Matthew 16:18-19, when Jesus gave Peter the keys to the Kingdom, and John 21:15-17, the three calls to Peter to "feed my lambs," sees the Pope as having supreme authority over all of Christianity. The Eastern Orthodox see the Pope, the Bishop of Rome and representative of Peter, as "presiding with love, as a first among equals."²³

It is the hope that Eastern Catholics can provide a bridge between the two!^{1,3}

The Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV, in the Second Session of the Council, was especially eloquent on collegiality of the bishops, and struck a chord that generally concerned the Bishops at Vatican II. He stated that papal primacy and Vatican I were not the problem, but it was "the subsequent excesses of interpretation and concrete practices." He urged the council to clarify and complete that doctrine in the light of the "unquestioned rights of the episcopate." The Patriarch pointed out that, unlike the West, the appointment of bishops in the East is done by synods of bishops and then simply confirmed by the Pope.²⁵

Orientalium Ecclesiarum, The Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches

In spite of rhetoric, the Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches passed on November 21, 1964 with a vote of 2110 to 39, and promulgated by Pope Paul VI the same day. The Decree was a step in the right direction for the Latin Churches to offset the abuses of the past, for it insisted on the equality of rites, avoidance of latinization, and the restoration of the heritage of each Eastern Church.

Important concessions were the recognition of each group of Eastern Catholics as Churches with a particular rite or tradition [OE 2-Orientalium Ecclesiarum, Article 2], and that these Churches are of equal rank [OE 3]. Eastern hierarchies should be established where needed [OE 4], and the Churches of the East like those of the West have the right and duty to govern themselves according to their own discipline...and tradition [OE 5].

Articles 7-11 address the rights of Patriarchs, "that their rights and privileges be restored in accordance with the ancient traditions of each church and the decrees of the ecumenical councils" [OE 9].

Articles 12-18 address the particular issues of sacramental discipline, especially those involving mixed marriages and the reception of sacraments. Articles 19-23 concern Divine Worship, for example, the faithful should follow the liturgical dates - including Easter - of their own particular tradition [OE 19-21].

Articles 24-30 define the special role of Eastern Catholics in promoting the unity of all Christians, especially with the Eastern Orthodox, "first by prayer, then by the example of their own lives, by their fidelity to the ancient traditions of the East, and by working together and a brotherly attitude" [OE 24], so that all Christians may be one [OE 30].

The Impact

The Second Vatican Council and *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* have had a dramatic impact on the viability of the Eastern Catholic Churches. This is evidenced by their worldwide growth, particularly the Maronites, Ukrainian Byzantine Catholics, and the Syro-Malabar Eastern Churches. In the US, for example, Eparchies exist for the Maronites (Brooklyn and Los Angeles); the Ukrainian Catholics (Philadelphia); the Melkites (Newton, Massachusetts); the Syro-Malabars (St. Thomas in Chicago); the Ruthenian Byzantines (Philadelphia); the Romanians (Canton, Ohio); the Chaldeans (Southfield, Michigan); and the Armenian Catholics in New York.¹⁴

Father Giles Dimock of the Dominican Institute of Washington D. C. has pointed out that one should adopt the faith of his heritage (personal communication). Article 6 of the Decree confirms that members should "strive to return to their ancestral traditions." The statistics on Eastern Catholics are clearly underestimated, for there are Eastern Catholics worldwide that do not have their Eastern Church available in their region.

Early objections to the Decree have vanished in the face of the tremendous commitment Pope John Paul II has made for the protection and survival of the Eastern Churches, and not just for those in his homeland of Eastern Europe, but world-wide. His lifelong dedication to the Second Vatican Council is particularly evident in his efforts on behalf of the Eastern Catholic Churches.

The gift of the Holy Spirit to the Catholic Church through the Second Vatican Council is apparent in the renewed commitment to Christian unity, in the unity of Catholics among themselves, and especially in the spiritual renewal of Eastern Catholics.

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JESUS
MARY