

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 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.

Used with permission.

### **The Evangelization Station**

P.O. Box 267

Angels Camp, California, 95222, USA

Telephone: 209-728-5598

E-mail: [evangelization@earthlink.net](mailto:evangelization@earthlink.net)

[www.evangelizationstation.com](http://www.evangelizationstation.com)

Pamphlet 336

## **The Eastern Rite Church**

Fr. William P. Saunders, PhD

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) 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 centers 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 were united together as one Church. As the bishops of these dominant centers 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, to reflect the beautiful depth of Roman Catholicism.

### **The Patriarch**

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 honor. 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 honor. 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