

head is called the “Patriarch of Cilicia.” He lives in Beirut in Syria.

The Monophysites in Egypt who returned to the Church with their own rite formed the Coptic Rite, with their Patriarch bearing the title of Alexandria but resides in Cairo. They use chiefly the Arabic which one hears in that region today.

The Syrian Monophysites who returned to the true Church have the ancient rite in Antioch in the old Syriac language. Their Patriarch has the title of Antioch but lives in Beirut, because the ancient city of Antioch is but a little hamlet today.

The Eastern Schism

We spoke before of the ambition of the bishops of Constantinople to be great Patriarchs. Eventually, they began to abrogate the authority of the Pope himself, finally going so far as to separate the whole Eastern Church from the Pope’s authority in the great schism of 1054. In this schism, Greece, Russia, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, and some Syrians and Egyptians were eventually severed from the Catholic Church.

Since then, however, various holy and learned bishops and priests in these countries saw that to belong to Christ’s Church, it was necessary to be in union with and submission to the Pope. Hence we had reunions of thousands, even millions of these people with the Catholic Church. They, too, retained their ancient rite of Constantinople (Byzantium). It is called Byzantine and is celebrated in the old Slavonic language by the Russians and Slav peoples like the Ukrainians and Bulgars, in ancient Greek by the Greeks, in Rumanian by the Rumanians, in Arabic by the Byzantine Syrians and Egyptian (called Melchites).

Other Catholic Rites

Other Catholic Rites such as the Ethiopians, the Malabar, the Malankara, the Maronite, have too complicated a history to go into here. Suffice it to say that the Ethiopian Rite is a form of Coptic or Egyptian Rite because Alexandria sent the first

Christians missionaries to Ethiopia. The Malankara and Maronite Rites are variants of the Rite of Antioch, while the Malabar is a form of the Chaldean Rite. But the general history of the Eastern Rites is the same. Originally all were Catholics. Then heresy and schism tore large sections of the East away from the truth, just as Protestantism tore large portions away in the West. In the course of time, some members of all the ancient Eastern Rites recognized the error of their position and despite persecution and fierce national prejudices, heroically submitted themselves once more to the rule of the Pope. They are one with us in Catholic faith and life, though retaining their own ancient ceremonies and customs.

All Eastern Catholic Rites, except one still have a corresponding body of non-Catholics following the same liturgy, and usually the non-Catholic body is far more numerous than the Catholic one as in Greece and Russia and Romania. These non-Catholics call themselves “Orthodox.”

The only Eastern Rite that is completely Catholic in the sense of having no non-Catholic counterpart is the Maronite Rite. And its members claim that their ancestors were never in heresy or in schism: that they were always Catholic, therefore, even though they had no communications with Rome for centuries.

The Evangelization Station

Hudson, Florida, USA

E-mail: evangelization@earthlink.net

www.evangelizationstation.com

Pamphlet 535

Origin of the Eastern Catholic Rites

Clement C. Englert, C.S.S.R.

About three percent of Catholics in the world belong to what we call the Oriental or Eastern Rites. That means that their priests say Mass and administer the sacraments with languages and ceremonies different from the Roman-Latin ones, and they are ruled by their own set of Church laws.

Now you will naturally ask: “How is this possible? I always thought that the Church was the same all over the world.” Your question is a perfectly legitimate one and I answer: the Church *is* the same all over the world in faith and morals. All Catholics, no matter what rite they belong, believe the same truths of Faith, receive the same sacraments, and observe the same moral law as we Catholics of the Roman Rite. But the Church is not everywhere the same ceremonially; that is, through all rites have the Mass and sacraments, different ceremonies are used to enhance the beauty of their celebration and administration.

The next question that you will naturally ask will be: “Since these people are such a small minority in comparison with the rest of the Catholics of the world, why don’t they join our own Roman Rite and so yield to the majority?”

Because their rites are just as old and beautiful as our own. Because the Holy See has commanded in the severest manner that Eastern Catholics continue to follow the ancient rites of their ancestors. Because it would be a grave injustice for us to force them to adopt our rite just because our rite had the opportunity of spreading itself over the entire world while theirs did not.

How Many Rites?

How many such Eastern Rites are there?

There are eight Eastern rites in the Catholic Church: The Byzantine, Armenian, Chaldean, Coptic, Ethiopian, Malabar, Maronite and Syrian.

In this sense the word “rite” is considered synonymous with “liturgy.”

“Eight!” you exclaim in amazement. “How did that come about?”

After the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles, the Apostles separated to preach the Gospel in many different lands. Everywhere they preached the truths of faith and morals such as they heard them from our Lord. They administered all the seven sacraments instituted by Him. For the Mass they all adhered to the essential points of offering and consecrating bread and wine, and receiving them in Holy Communion. But the manner in which they administered the sacraments and celebrated Mass, that is, the prayers they said and the ceremonies they used differed according to the place in which they were. The language they used was the language of the people of that region.

And for each city or region, the Apostles consecrated bishops to carry on their work of preaching, instructing, celebrating Mass and administering the sacraments. There was a great deal of freedom regarding the manner of doing this. A pious and eloquent bishop would pray long and eloquently. A pious but not so eloquent bishop would pray earnestly but very simply and shortly, and so on.

But each would bless and offer bread and wine; each would say the words of consecration; each would receive and distribute Holy Communion. So, too, each would use the water and say the words our Lord commanded for the administration of Baptism, but each would follow his own ability in saying other prayers and performing other extra ceremonies to impress upon his people the meaning and majesty of the sacred rite he was performing. Hence many different rites arose.

The Influence of the Patriarchs

In the earliest ages of the Church, several different sees (bishops’ residential cities) became very much more important than others. These were the great metropolises of Antioch in Syria, of

Alexandria in Egypt, of Rome in Italy. These were the great centers of culture and learning, immense centers of trade and commerce. To them converged all the great roads of the region. Hence it was from them that the early bishops sent out missionary bishops to the outlying districts to convert the people and care for them. Naturally these missionary bishops carried with them the remembrance of how things were done in the mother Church, and so molded their own conduct on that of the city they left. As the Church grew in numbers and influence, so did the prestige of the mother churches in the big cities, so that after awhile it was possible for the great central churches to impose their liturgy on all the surrounding and dependent local churches. Only those who were cut off from easy communication with the original church developed their own peculiar liturgical form or “rite.” Such as isolated groups were the East Syrians at Edessa, who politically and geographically were far away from Antioch.

At a very early age the bishops in the great cities of Rome, Alexandria and Antioch were called patriarchs. When discipline and church law as well as liturgy (the form of worship) became consolidated and fixed, the Patriarchs received the power to watch over all the churches in their district or “patriarchate.”

When the bishops of some of the other large cities saw what honor and power and prestige accrued to the Patriarchs, they, too, wanted to become patriarchs and rule a territory. Such was Bishop Juvenal of Jerusalem, who felt that because Christ had died and founded the Church there, he ought to be a patriarch. Finally the other bishops agreed to this. And when the Christian Emperor Constantine moved his capital from Rome to Byzantium or Constantinople (now Istanbul in Turkey), the bishops of that city decided that they also should be known as patriarchs and have a territory to rule. Of course all acknowledged that the Pope was the supreme head of the Church and

gave eloquent testimony of this in the General Councils.

“But,” you will say, “although that sounds clear enough, still I don’t see why we should have eight Eastern rites today. From your description of the evolution of the patriarchates, I can only count five of them, namely, Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem and Constantinople. And of those five, only the last four are Eastern ones!”

The Nestorians and the Monophysites

In the course of time heresies arose to harass and distress the Church. Two of the more significant ones were the Nestorians, who claimed that there were two persons in Christ as well as two natures, and the Monophysites (the one-nature-men) who went too far and so emphasized the fact that there is one Person in Christ and that Person divine, that they considered the human nature of Christ as practically swallowed up in the divine and so began to teach that there was only one nature in Christ — the divine nature.

The general Council of Ephesus in the year 431 condemned the Nestorian heresy and the Council of Chalcedon in 452 condemned the Monophysite doctrine.

Many of the Nestorians and Monophysites refused to submit and separated from the Church. In the Middle Ages, thousands of Nestorians returned to the Catholic fold. These people are known as the Catholics of the Chaldean Rite, and their Patriarch is called the Patriarch of Babylon.

Monophysitism was very widespread in the East. Its many followers in Armenia, Syria and Egypt were separated from the Church and started their own sects. From each of these sects, groups returned eventually to the Catholic Church. They acknowledged the supremacy of the Pope, professed the correct doctrine and became Catholics, but of Eastern Rite, as they retained the ancient rite they had before separation. Hence we have the Armenian Catholics, whose liturgy is celebrated in the ancient Armenian language. Their