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The Eastern Churches

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THE EASTERN CHURCHES

The Second Vatican Council teaches that:

“The Catholic Church holds in high esteem the institutions, liturgical rites, ecclesiastical traditions and the established standards of the Christian life of the Eastern churches, for in them, distinguished as they are for their venerable antiquity, there remains conspicuous the tradition that has been handed down from the Apostles through the Fathers¹ and that forms part of the divinely revealed and undivided heritage of the universal Church.”²

The same Council also teaches us the “special position of the Eastern Churches”³ and urges all Catholics to learn more about the Eastern Churches.

The Christian East includes Churches of several different traditions, and we shall try to say something about each one. There are two important groups of Eastern Churches: those *in full communion with the Catholic Church*, and those who have, as yet, *imperfect communion* with the Catholic Church.

The **Eastern Catholic Churches** are in *full communion* with the Catholic Church.⁴ All Catholic bishops and priests may concelebrate Holy Mass with one another and all Catholic people may receive Holy Communion at the hands of any Catholic bishop or priest, whether that bishop or priest belongs to the Latin Catholic Church or to one of the Eastern Catholic Churches (just as all Catholics may receive Holy Communion from any Catholic bishop or priest, whether the bishop or priest belongs to this or that diocese or monastic order). All Catholics may come to Confession in any Catholic Church, regardless of whether this is a Latin Church or an Eastern Catholic Church. All Catholics recognize the primacy of the Holy Father, the Pope or Bishop of Rome, who is the First Bishop of the entire Catholic Church and the Vicar of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul. In turn, the Holy Father exercises pastoral care for all Catholics, whether they belong to the Latin Church or to the Eastern Catholic Churches.

As yet the **Eastern Orthodox Churches**,⁵ the **Oriental Orthodox Churches**,⁶ and the **Assyrian Apostolic Church of the East** have *imperfect communion* with the Catholic Church, although they all teach the substance of the Catholic Faith.⁷ The relationship of each of these Churches to the Catholic Church differs in degree, but all of them are committed to seeking full unity with the Catholic Church, and the Catholic Church is committed to the same search for full communion with these Churches. The Catholic Church encourages Catholics to pray together with these Eastern Churches, but usually we do not receive Holy Communion or the other Sacraments together with these Christians.⁸

Why “Eastern” Churches?

Jesus Christ was born, preached and taught, died on the Cross and rose again from the dead in Palestine. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit sent the Apostles from Jerusalem with Christ’s command to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”⁹ The Apostles founded Churches in each place they visited. Saint Peter went to *Antioch*, in Syria¹⁰ and preached the Gospel; “it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians”,¹¹ and the Church of Antioch has been important ever since. Saint Peter sent Saint Mark to *Alexandria*, in Egypt; from Alexandria the Faith spread through many parts of Africa. Saint Peter and Saint Paul went to *Rome*, and the Church of Rome became the center, the touchstone of unity for the whole Catholic Church. Saint Thomas went to India; two thousand years later the descendants of his converts are still called “Christians of Saint Thomas”. Saint Andrew is thought to have traveled all around the Black Sea, preaching the Gospel in Byzantium and in Scythia (which is now part of Ukraine). He was martyred in Greece.

The New Testament mentions some important Christian centers in the East: Corinth, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Antioch, Alexandria and, of course, Jerusalem. The Churches in these centers grew and flourished for many centuries, and did active missionary work. When the Muslims conquered many of these Christian lands, the local Churches were much reduced in numbers, but they have survived the persecutions, and they continue to witness to the apostolic teachings they received. During the Communist persecution

of religion in Eastern Europe, the Eastern Churches gave many thousands of martyrs for Christ.

In the twentieth century, hundreds of thousands of Christians left the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and India and have made new lives in the United States, Canada, and Australia. There are substantial communities of all the Eastern Churches in most of the English-speaking countries. Latin Catholics in the English-speaking world are likely to meet both Eastern Catholics, and Christians of those Eastern Churches who have imperfect communion with the Catholic Church. There are parishes, bishops, monasteries and seminaries of the Eastern Churches in the English-speaking countries. Their presence gives us the opportunity to increase our knowledge of the Faith and our appreciation for the truly *Catholic* nature of the Church.

Some Features of the Eastern Churches

Before describing the individual Eastern Churches, we should mention some characteristics that they all have in common:

Liturgical worship: all the Eastern Churches are noted for their love and appreciation for the liturgy, both the Eucharist or Mass (which they usually call the *Divine Liturgy*) and the daily services.¹² Very few Latin Catholic parishes regularly celebrate Vespers (Evening Prayer) or Lauds (Morning Prayer); most Eastern Churches have these services for the congregation at least on Sundays and feast days.

Normally the priest offers Divine Liturgy (that is, the Mass) with a deacon (if one is available), with chanters to lead the whole congregation in singing the responses, with a

reader to read the Epistle, with acolytes, and of course with the people. Concelebration has always been the custom in most Eastern Churches, so there is not usually a need for private Masses. In origin, the priest's vestments for the Divine Liturgy are the same as those used for the Roman Mass, but over the centuries the style and cut have changed, so they appear rather different today.

The faithful especially love and enjoy the Pontifical Liturgy, when the bishop offers the Eucharist. When the bishop comes to a parish, people willingly travel even some distance for the Pontifical Liturgy (which can last two hours or more). The bishop's first obligation is to lead his people in worship and to preach the Word of God to them. The local bishop is the most important Church leader; the faithful want to know him personally and expect him to give them direct guidance and encouragement in every aspect of the Christian life.

Monasticism: traditional monastic life is always important in the Eastern Churches.¹³ People often seek out monks to hear their confessions; pastors invite monks to preach in parishes. Monasteries are expected to offer the complete round of liturgical worship, and people go on pilgrimage to take part in these services, especially on feast days. One of the largest Catholic pilgrimages in North America takes place every year over Labor Day weekend at Mount Saint Macrina, an Eastern Catholic monastery for women (near Uniontown, Pennsylvania).

Married clergy: the Eastern Churches ordain married men to the rank of deacon and priest; these married deacons and priests continue to live as usual with their families. However, once a man has been ordained deacon (or priest)

he may not get married. This means that *a married man may become a priest, but a priest may not marry!* If the wife of a deacon or priest should die, her husband may not marry again. A married man may not become a bishop; usually a monk or a celibate priest is chosen for the episcopate. In exceptional circumstances, a widower may become a bishop.

Devotion to Our Lady: all Catholics venerate the Holy Mother of God, the Blessed Virgin Mary! In the Christian East, this devotion is immensely popular and highly developed. There are shrines and miraculous icons of Our Lady throughout the Christian East. Eastern Christians use many special titles to honor Our Lady, but most of all the title *Theotókos*.¹⁴ this word means “She who has given birth to God”, and was defined by the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431, and again by the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451. Since this title is defined Catholic doctrine, all Catholics believe it; recently Pope John Paul II has stressed its use. “The Church confesses that Mary is truly ‘Mother of God’ (*Theotókos*).”¹⁵ “Knowledge of the mystery of Christ leads us to bless His Mother, in the form of special veneration for the *Theotókos*.”¹⁶ “I wish to emphasize how profoundly the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and the ancient Churches of the East feel united by love and praise of the *Theotókos*.”¹⁷

During the Marian Year (1987-1988) Pope John Paul II organized celebrations in Rome of Eastern Catholic services in honor of the Blessed Mother of God. On the Holy Father’s personal initiative, the Vatican Press published the complete text of these services, together with detailed studies of Marian teaching in the Eastern Churches. The Pope has said that this magnificent book is one of the richest fruits of the Marian Year.¹⁸ In particular, the Holy Father has rec-

commended that all Catholics should make use of the “Akathistos Hymn” to the Mother of God.¹⁹ This traditional Byzantine devotion consists of two lengthy poetic hymns to Our Lady, chanted by the clergy and the people standing in front of a large icon of the Blessed Mother. On 8 December 2000 Pope John Paul II presided in Rome at a grand celebration of the Akathistos Hymn, to mark the Great Jubilee.

Veneration for the Altar: no custom or tradition of celebrating Mass “facing the people” ever arose in the Eastern Churches; the priest at Mass guides and leads the Church on pilgrimage towards the Kingdom.²⁰ The Holy Table, the Altar of Sacrifice, is an important symbol of Jesus Christ Himself. In most Eastern Churches the altar is freestanding and richly vested with brocade cloths. The altar stands in the eastern apse of the church and is veiled with a curtain, an altar screen, or both. Only the clergy and the servers may enter the sanctuary. Only ordained clergy may touch the Holy Table itself.

Iconography: sacred art portraying the Lord Jesus Christ, Our Lady, the Saints, and the events of salvation history arose in the Christian East from the earliest times of the Church. The Seventh Ecumenical Council teaches that all Catholics must venerate the holy icons. While the art of painting icons probably began in Egypt, and became popular in Syria and Ethiopia, it was in Byzantium and later among the Slavs that it reached its peak. Some Byzantine icons, such as Our Lady of Perpetual Help, are widely venerated all over the Catholic world.

Traditional icons are painted according to strict models, and the arrangement of icons in the church follows a partic-

ular order which assists the worshipper to understand that in the Church's liturgy we share in the worship which the Saints continually offer to God in Heaven. Thus the icons become "windows" to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Most of the Eastern Churches do not make use of statues.

Different languages: the Christian East never had one common language, as the Latin Church²¹ had until recently. From the earliest times the Eastern Churches held the Divine Liturgy and other services in Syriac, in Greek, in Coptic, and gradually, as the Church grew, other languages also came into use. As the Eastern Churches have moved to other parts of the world, one finds services in English,²² Spanish, French, and so forth. The faithful often know surprising amounts of the liturgical texts by heart.

Synodal government: traditionally, an Eastern Church is governed by a synod of bishops headed by the chief bishop or Patriarch. There are six Eastern Catholic Patriarchs, and two "major archbishops," who have the same rank and authority as a patriarch.

Eastern Catholic Cardinals: the rank of Cardinal is closely connected to the Archdiocese of Rome.²³ For this reason, until recently it was rare for Eastern Catholic bishops to become cardinals. Since Vatican II, there have been several Eastern Catholic cardinals, including some of the Eastern Catholic Patriarchs, but there remains some controversy on the matter. His Beatitude Lubomyr Cardinal Husar, Major Archbishop of the Ukrainian Catholics, is at the time of writing the only Eastern Catholic cardinal who is also an American citizen.

Specific Eastern Churches

1. The Alexandrian Tradition: the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Coptic Catholic Church, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Catholic Church

Saint Mark the Evangelist founded the Church of Alexandria. Even before Christ, Alexandria was an important center for the Jews; the Old Testament was translated into Greek in Alexandria.²⁴ Many Jews and pagans in Egypt gladly became Christians. The Church flourished in Egypt; monastic life first developed in the Egyptian desert, led by Saint Antony the Great. Some of these ancient monasteries in the Egyptian desert are still flourishing today. Theologians such as Saint Athanasius and Saint Cyril came from Alexandria and were leaders during the early Ecumenical Councils.

From Egypt, missionaries brought the Faith to Ethiopia, where the emperors soon became Christians. The Church in Egypt and the Church in Ethiopia are closely linked. They share the same Alexandrian liturgical tradition; the Egyptians celebrate the Divine Liturgy in their ancient Coptic language, with modern Arabic as well, while the Ethiopians use their ancient Ge'ez language.

The large majority of the Copts (about nine million) belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church; there are about one hundred thousand faithful in the Coptic Catholic Church. Most of the Ethiopians (about twenty million) belong to the

Ethiopian Orthodox Church, nearly a hundred thousand faithful belong to the Ethiopian Catholic Church.

The Coptic Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church have never accepted the fourth ecumenical council, the Council of Chalcedon, which condemned Monophysite Christology. The strict Monophysites taught that there is only one, divine nature in Jesus Christ, while the Catholic Church teaches that in the One Person of Jesus Christ, Who is true God and true Man, there always remain both His human nature and His divine nature.

2. The Antiochian Traditions

Antioch has given rise to several distinct liturgical traditions. All of them share the rich patristic heritage of Christian Antioch, which gave the Universal Church some of her greatest saints. Antioch as a city was destroyed during the Crusades; the Christian Churches moved to Damascus. Today Lebanon has a Christian majority, while Syria, Jordan, and Palestine have substantial Christian minorities. All the Antiochian Churches originally used Syriac as their liturgical language, though with alternative use of Arabic or other languages. But we must consider the various Antiochian Churches individually.

a) The Syriac Orthodox Church and the Syrian Catholic Church

The “Syrians” are found not merely in Syria, but throughout the Middle East. They retain the original liturgical tradition of the Antiochian Church. Persecution and wars have sadly diminished their number; today there are perhaps three hundred thousand Syriac Orthodox²⁵ and the

same number of Syrian Catholics. However there are well over a million Christians in India who follow the same liturgical tradition.

**b) The Assyrian Church of the East
and the Chaldean²⁶ Catholic Church**

Today this community is reduced to a Christian remnant in Iraq and other parts of the Middle East, with refugees all over the world; there are perhaps half a million members of the Assyrian Apostolic Church of the East,²⁷ and rather more members of the Chaldean Catholic Church. Yet seven centuries ago this Church had more faithful than all the other Christian Churches combined! Cut off early from the rest of the Christian world by conflicts between the Roman Empire and the Persian Empire, the “Church of the East” organized successful missionary work in China, in India, and in many other countries. The Tartars, the Mongols, and the Muslims nearly exterminated these Christians, but the few that remain are very conscious of their splendid history. Since the fall of Communism, isolated groups of these Christians are appearing again in the former Soviet republics of central Asia and the Far East.

Students of liturgy find the Assyrian or Chaldean liturgical tradition of special interest; it seems to be the oldest of all the Christian liturgies. The largest community which uses this liturgy is the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, in India. In March 2001, Pope John Paul II appointed a bishop to guide the Syro-Malabar Catholics in the United States and Canada.

c) The Maronite Catholic Church

This Church is probably the only Christian Church in the world which was originally a monastic community! During the Muslim invasions the monks of the monastery of Saint Maron, near Antioch, and their followers took refuge on Mount Lebanon. Military and political developments cut them off from the rest of the Christian world, so they eventually elected their superior to be Patriarch of Antioch and provided themselves with bishops. Several centuries later they came back in regular contact with Rome. All the Maronites (about three million faithful) are Catholics.

The Maronite liturgical tradition was originally simply the liturgical tradition of Antioch, but ever since the Crusades it has been heavily overlaid with elements borrowed from the Latin Church. Since the Second Vatican Council, with the strong encouragement of the Holy Father, the Maronites have been returning to the authentic Antiochian liturgical tradition.

As one might expect from a Church founded in a monastery, the Maronites have always had a strong monastic life, and still do.

We have mentioned three distinct variations of the Antiochian tradition. The Armenian Church, the Byzantine Churches, and the Indian Churches each developed from the Antiochian tradition, but they must be considered separately.

d) The Armenian Orthodox Church and the Armenian Catholic Church

In one way, this is simplicity itself: virtually all Armenians belong either to the Armenian Orthodox

Church or the Armenian Catholic Church, and almost nobody else belongs to either of the Armenian Churches. The Armenian forms of liturgy and monasticism are closely derived from the Antiochian tradition. But because the Armenian Church is very old, and was isolated for a long time, the Armenian tradition developed in its own ways and became distinct. During the Middle Ages, the Armenians came into contact with the West and adopted some Western liturgical customs: they are the only Eastern Church which normally uses unleavened bread for the Eucharist, as the Latin Church does.

Early in the twentieth century the Armenians suffered mass genocide in Turkey; their communities in exile spread all over the world, but the massacres drastically reduced their numbers. Today there are about three million Armenian Orthodox, and just over one hundred thousand Armenian Catholics.

e) The Byzantine Churches

This is by far the largest group of the Eastern Churches. The Byzantine²⁸ tradition developed in and around the city of Constantinople, the capital of the Roman Empire of the East. Because of this and because of the eclectic nature of that Empire, the Byzantine tradition has a unique characteristic: alone among the Christian liturgical traditions the Byzantine Liturgy is not bound to any particular culture. The Byzantines were not at all nationalistic; they had an inclusive approach to different cultures and they readily assimilated elements of Roman, Semitic and Hellenic origin. The liturgy which the Byzantines elaborated began in Antioch, flourished in Constantinople and in Thessalonica, and borrowed its cycle of daily and festal services from

Jerusalem (where an elaborate pattern of worship grew because of pilgrims coming to the Holy Places). A similar process eventually produced a highly developed monastic life at the Studion in Constantinople and on the Holy Mountain of Athos,²⁹ in northern Greece.

The result is an amazing, rich liturgical and spiritual tradition, simultaneously strong and flexible, which has proved capable of “inculturating” itself in otherwise highly diverse nations and continues to attract people the world over. Albanians, Arabs, Belarusians, Bulgarians, Croats, Greeks, Hungarians, Italians,³⁰ Romanians, Russians, Serbs, Ukrainians, and more besides, are themselves “at home” with the Byzantine tradition; foreign missions have been successful among native Alaskans, Chinese, Japanese, Ugandans and other communities where one would not expect to find any connection with Constantinople.

Though Byzantines were not nationalists, their successors are just the opposite. Nationalism has been the weakness of the Byzantine Churches for the past two centuries, to the point that often the faithful of one Byzantine Church honestly do not realize that they have anything in common with a neighboring Byzantine Church of another nationality.

It is hard to provide accurate numbers, because most of the Byzantine Churches are in places where census figures cannot be trusted.³¹ But there are probably rather more than two hundred million faithful of the Byzantine Orthodox Churches, and about twelve million faithful of the Byzantine Catholic Churches.³²

It would be hard to count the number of liturgical languages regularly used for the Byzantine Liturgy: most of the texts were originally written in Greek, but only about eight

or ten million people attend churches where Greek is currently in use. Until recently most of the Slavs used Church-Slavonic but now there is an increasing tendency to use vernacular Slav languages. Romanians and Hungarians use their national languages; the Arabs use Arabic. In mission churches, the local languages are used. In the emigration, there is often friction between parishioners who wish to continue using the language of their country of origin and others who wish to adopt the language of their country of residence. Thus in America and Canada, one may find quite a variety of languages in use in different parishes.

Each national group eventually developed its own liturgical music, so that the Byzantine Liturgy (which is always sung) has a wealth of music available, both for unison chanting (often sung by the whole congregation) and for choral singing. In almost all churches the liturgical singing is without any musical instruments.³³

f) The Indian Churches

The Saint Thomas Christians (as they prefer to call themselves) of India are a special case. Saint Thomas the Apostle preached in India and had great success. The Church took strong root in the south, in the area of Malabar. This Church had a close relationship with the “Church of the East” in Mesopotamia,³⁴ and cooperated with that Church in missionary work in the Himalayas and in China. Because the monastic centers were in Mesopotamia, the bishops for India usually came from there.

In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese arrived. At first, the Saint Thomas Christians welcomed the Portuguese with open arms as brother Christians and Catholics; the Patriarch of the “Church of the East” in Mesopotamia was

in full communion with the Pope of Rome, and therefore so were the Saint Thomas Christians. But the Portuguese were completely unprepared to understand Eastern Catholics, and saw “heresy” everywhere. They imprisoned the bishops and forced the priests and parishes to adopt a great many Latin usages, even burning priceless liturgical books, manuscripts, and records of the Saint Thomas Christians.

The result was a tragic schism. Many of the Saint Thomas Christians repudiated any connection with the Portuguese, and with the Catholic Church (which the Portuguese claimed to represent). The Church in Mesopotamia was unable to help them, so they sent to Damascus, to the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch, who provided them with bishops. Eventually these Indian Orthodox Christians of Saint Thomas adopted the Syriac-Antiochian liturgical tradition. They have rather more than one million faithful in India.

Others of the Saint Thomas Christians remained Catholic despite all the difficulty. For nearly three hundred years they were denied bishops of their own. In 1896 Pope Leo XIII restored the hierarchy of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, which has increasingly flourished in the twentieth century and now has about four million faithful. There has been important progress in restoring the authentic Chaldean-Antiochian liturgical tradition. This Syro-Malabar Catholic Church has also restored its proud *missionary* tradition, and is bringing the Catholic Faith to many parts of India and even beyond. Pope John Paul II takes an active personal interest in the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church.

There were always strong desires among the Indian Orthodox to regain *full communion* with the Catholic Church, and several efforts were made to accomplish this, but without success until 1930 when Bishop Ivanios and Bishop Theophilos became Catholics. Pope Pius XI decreed that they and their followers should retain their Syrian-Antiochian tradition and thus constitute a distinct Syro-Malankara Catholic Church in India. This Syro-Malankara³⁵ Catholic Church is the youngest of the Eastern Catholic Churches, and has grown rapidly. There are now about three hundred thousand faithful.

Both the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church and the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church are especially blessed with abundant *vocations* to the Holy Priesthood and the religious life; these Catholic Churches generously supply many Latin Catholic dioceses and religious orders with vitally needed personnel.

Finally, in India there is a small diocese which belongs to the Assyrian Apostolic Church of the East, with about fifteen thousand faithful. Their bishop is very active in the work of Christian unity.

The Divine Liturgy

Space does not permit a description of the celebration of the Eucharist in each of the various liturgical traditions, so we shall describe the Byzantine Divine Liturgy, which is the most widely used.

As in all Catholic liturgies, *bread and wine* are needed for the Eucharist. Like most of the Eastern Churches, the Byzantine Liturgy uses *leavened* bread, baked in one or

more loaves.³⁶ Both the bread and the wine must be of suitable quality and free from additives.

The priest and deacon come to church about 30 minutes before the announced time of the Liturgy. They pray before the altar screen, put on the sacred vestments, wash their hands, and then at a side table in the sanctuary they *prepare* the bread and the wine, and cover the chalice and paten, which will remain on this side table during the first public part of the Liturgy. The deacon censens the altar and the whole church.

When the faithful have assembled at the appointed time, the priest begins the Liturgy with the words “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” The deacon offers a Litany; the faithful frequently respond “Kyrie, eleison”. The faithful chant two psalms,³⁷ a dogmatic hymn in honor of the Incarnation, and the Beatitudes, while the deacon and priest solemnly carry in the Gospel Book. When the Gospel Book has been enthroned on the Altar, the clergy and faithful sing the *Trisagion*: “Holy God, Holy Strong One, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us.” In the Latin Church the congregation sings this same Trisagion during the service on Good Friday.

A reader (usually a layman) chants the Epistle, the deacon chants the Gospel, and the priest gives a sermon. After another litany and the dismissal of the catechumens, the faithful sing the “Cherubic Hymn”, to remind us that in the Church’s Liturgy we worship together with the angels. During this hymn, the priest and deacon bring the chalice and paten to the Altar in the solemn “Great Entrance” procession.

After the Kiss of Peace³⁸ and the Creed, the Preface and the Eucharistic Prayer follow. After the consecration and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, there is a hymn to Our Lady the Holy *Theotókos* and a solemn prayer for the diocesan bishop. Following the conclusion of the Eucharistic Prayer and another litany, all the faithful sing or recite the Lord's Prayer.

The priest elevates the Body of Our Lord and solemnly announces: "Holy Things to the Holy!", reminding everyone of the absolute, unique Sanctity of the Blessed Sacrament which we receive in Holy Communion. The priest and deacon receive Holy Communion at the Altar; then the deacon immerses the Body of Christ in the Precious Blood and brings the chalice through the doors of the altar screen so that the faithful may approach for Holy Communion, given under both species with a silver spoon used only for this purpose.

After Holy Communion the priest blesses the assembly with the Holy Sacrament and then returns the chalice to the side-table in the sanctuary, where the deacon consumes the Blessed Sacrament and purifies the chalice.³⁹ The priest offers a final prayer of thanksgiving and dismisses the assembly; in most places the faithful come to kiss the cross and receive a blessing.

On an ordinary Sunday the Divine Liturgy takes about an hour. It can take longer if there is elaborate music, or if there is more than one sermon. On an ordinary week-day the Divine Liturgy will last about half an hour. On great feast days the services tend to be longer.

Besides the feast days of the liturgical year, the faithful like to celebrate the *patronal feast* of the parish church with

special services, a procession, the blessing of Holy Water, and usually a parish dinner.

Special Occasions

If you are invited to an Eastern Church for a particular celebration, here is what you might expect:

Baptism: the Eastern Churches confer the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation in the same service, and usually give the newly-baptized Holy Communion as well. Normally in the case of children Baptism is administered by immersion. Confirmation is administered with Holy Chrism consecrated by the patriarch or the bishop and given to the priests for this purpose. Baptisms are a festive occasion; the priest will wear white vestments, all the candles will be lit, and there will be a solemn blessing of the water for the Sacrament.

The faithful take the obligations of *godparents* quite seriously, and the godparents will try to maintain a lifelong relationship with their godchild.

Matrimony: most Eastern Churches still have a distinct “betrothal” or engagement blessing, which nowadays is usually done right before the wedding ceremony. At the wedding itself, the bride and groom come into the church together; the bride does not walk down the aisle with her father and no one “gives the bride away”. In most Eastern Churches, the bride and groom do not exchange vows during the marriage ceremony.

The high point of the wedding ceremony is the “coronation”; the priest crowns the bride and groom, either with elaborate metal crowns or with floral wreaths. The bride and

groom share a cup of wine, and process three times around the table where the Gospel Book is enthroned.

Usually there is no Mass at a wedding.

Ordinations: the ordination⁴⁰ of a deacon or priest is very joyful; many guests may be expected. The bishop always celebrates the Pontifical Divine Liturgy, which will last about two hours. A deacon is ordained *after* the Eucharistic Prayer, since the deacon does not take part in the consecration; a priest is ordained *before* the Eucharistic Prayer, just after the chalice and paten are brought to the altar, because the new priest must concelebrate with the bishop. It is impossible to ordain the same candidate deacon and priest on one occasion.

For the ordination, the bishop is seated a little to the right of the altar. The deacons bring the candidate through the main doors of the altar screen; he bows to the bishop and is then led three times around the altar, kissing the four corners of the altar each time, while the clergy and the people sing hymns honoring the Martyrs, because the deacon and the priest must be witnesses, “martyrs” to Jesus Christ with their lives. Then the candidate kneels and bows his head onto the altar; the bishop rises, lays his hand on the candidate’s head, and solemnly intones: “The Divine Grace, which always heals what is infirm and supplies what is lacking, raises the most devout deacon *name* to be a priest! Therefore let us all pray for him, that the grace of the Holy Spirit may come upon him, and let us all say:” The clergy and people respond, singing *Kyrie eleison*, many times while the bishop quietly reads the two ordination prayers and a deacon sings a litany.

Then the new priest (or the new deacon) is raised up, and the bishop solemnly gives him, one by one, the vestments and insignia of his new Holy Order. Each time, the bishop announces “Axios!” in Greek; this word means “He is worthy!” This is a moment everyone has been waiting for; all the clergy and all the people will sing “Axios!” with great enthusiasm, to express their agreement, and their gratitude that God has given the Church a new priest or deacon.

Sometimes the bishop comes to the candidate’s home parish for the ordination, so that family and friends can take part. A new priest will offer his first Solemn Divine Liturgy in his home parish as well; this is always a festive occasion. Parishes normally arrange a common meal for all the guests who come for an ordination or the first Divine Liturgy of the new priest.

Funerals: practices vary, but in general the night before the actual funeral one may expect a service of about 45 minutes (traditionally this wake service was done in the home); the funeral service takes place in the morning (sometimes with the Divine Liturgy), and lasts rather more than an hour. Cremation is not generally practiced. Usually the mourners are invited to return to the parish hall or another location immediately after the burial for a memorial luncheon. Just as other Catholics do, Eastern Catholics have the custom of asking the priests to offer the Divine Liturgy for the dead, and sending “Mass cards” to inform the family.

On the fortieth day after the death, the family and friends will gather for the Divine Liturgy⁴¹ and a special service, and again have a meal as well. Every year, there is usually a Divine Liturgy on the anniversary of death.

The Byzantine calendar has five “All Souls Saturdays” every year, when the Divine Liturgy is offered for the dead; families will give the priest the list of all their deceased relations and friends, and these names are read aloud during a special litany and prayer for the dead.

Conclusion

The whole Catholic Church desires the Eastern Catholic Churches to flourish with apostolic vigor, and seeks the restoration of full communion with the Eastern Churches not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church. All of us can do our part to support these goals, and can enrich our own faith and our own knowledge of the Catholic Church at the same time.

We can see to it, for example, that in accordance with the instructions of the Popes there should be an “Eastern Churches Day” every year in our parishes, our Catholic organizations, and our Catholic schools. On these occasions, we invite the clergy of the Eastern Churches to visit us, to lead us in a service, to speak about their particular Church and their concerns, and to share some time with us.

We can cultivate ongoing relationships between Latin Catholic parishes and parishes of the Eastern Churches. Sometimes this can be local, when neighboring parishes work together and pray together, and sometimes this can even be at great distances, when parishes in America have “sister parishes” in Eastern Europe or the Middle East.

We can make use of particular forms of devotion which come from the Eastern Churches. Byzantine icons, for example, are becoming increasingly popular. When there is a feast

or celebration in honor of Our Lady, we may use part of the Akathistos Hymn, as Pope John Paul II urges us to do.

We can see to it that books and periodicals about the Eastern Churches are in our parish libraries, the libraries of our Catholic schools, and local public libraries.

Above all, *we can pray!* The wars in the Middle East, the Communists in Eastern Europe, and large-scale emigration all mean that the Eastern Churches need the help of God, and the work of Christian Unity needs the help of God and the intercessions of the Saints. We must pray regularly, frequently and fervently, that God will bless and strengthen the Eastern Churches, and that those Eastern Churches not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church will achieve this goal.

Some Questions

1) *Who are “Orthodox”?*

The term “Orthodox Christians” means Christians who believe the correct Faith and worship God correctly. In the strict sense, all Catholics are Orthodox, and the Catholic Church often uses the word “Orthodox” in liturgical texts, dogmatic definitions, and other church documents, as well as in popular writings (such as G. K. Chesterton’s well-known book *Orthodoxy*). Most Eastern Churches, both those who already are in *full communion* with the Catholic Church and those who as yet have *imperfect communion* with the Catholic Church, are attached to the term “Orthodox” and like to use it.

However, it has become conventional in many places to use this term “Orthodox” as part of the *title* of a Church

when that Church is not in *full communion* with the Catholic Church. So, as a rule, a church whose notice-board announces “Orthodox Church” belongs to one of the Eastern Churches which is *not* in full communion with the Catholic Church. This does not in the least prevent Catholic clergy from using such expressions as “our Orthodox Faith” in sermons and so on.

All of the Eastern Churches use the Nicene Creed and profess belief in the One, Holy, *Catholic*, and Apostolic Church. The word “Catholic” occurs in any number of places in the liturgical texts of the Eastern Churches, and one will also find the word “Catholic” in sermons, devotional writings, and catechisms.

Thus these words “Catholic” and “Orthodox” remind us that our divisions are contrary to the Holy Will of God, and encourage us to work and pray for the healing of the estrangement which divides the majority of the Eastern Churches from the Universal Catholic Church. In this work the Eastern Catholics have special responsibility,⁴² but *all* Catholics must take part.⁴³ To this end, the Holy Father urges and exhorts all Catholics to become increasingly better acquainted with the liturgical, spiritual, and theological importance of the Eastern Churches, and thus enjoy the fullness of our common Catholic heritage.⁴⁴

2) Can Latin Catholics attend Eastern Liturgies?

Of course Latin Catholics may attend Eastern Liturgies, and the Catholic Church encourages this practice. Pope Pius XI and the popes since then have exhorted all Latin Catholic schools, seminaries, and religious houses to have a special day every year devoted to learning more

about the Eastern Churches. The program of this day usually involves a celebration of the Divine Liturgy in one of the Eastern traditions. A Latin Catholic who attends the Divine Liturgy on Sunday fulfills the obligation of attending Sunday Mass.

If a Latin Catholic attends an Eastern *Catholic* Divine Liturgy, he or she may receive Holy Communion without any further permission. Simply come forward with the rest of the faithful at the appropriate moment. The Eastern Catholic Churches do not give Holy Communion into the hands of the faithful; the priest gives the Blessed Sacrament directly into the mouth of the communicant.

If a Catholic attends the Divine Liturgy in an Eastern Church not in *full communion* with the Catholic Church, the Catholic may not normally receive Holy Communion. However, the Catholic Church recognizes that the Eucharist of these Eastern Churches is true and valid.⁴⁵ Catholics who are present must adore the Blessed Sacrament and otherwise behave in a manner appropriate for one who attends Mass without receiving Holy Communion.

In the English-speaking countries, parishes of the Eastern Churches tend to be relatively small. They are usually friendly and happy to have visitors. Often there is only one celebration of the Divine Liturgy on Sunday, with a coffee hour at which guests are welcome. If a Latin Catholic group wishes to attend the Divine Liturgy in a body, the Eastern parish will probably be very pleased, but it is well to arrange this with the priest in advance. Usually the priest will provide booklets for the visitors to follow the service, and will be happy to answer questions.⁴⁶

3) How does a Latin Catholic marry an Eastern Catholic?

Catholics of course marry one another in the Catholic Church. When one party is a Latin Catholic and the other party is an Eastern Catholic, the wedding usually takes place in the *groom's* parish, and the children should usually be baptized in their father's parish. If the wife wishes to join her husband's parish, the Catholic Church permits her to do so. A Latin Catholic husband may join his wife's Eastern Catholic parish if he wishes, and in that event the children are baptized in the Eastern Catholic parish.

ENDNOTES

¹ Leo XIII, Litt. Ap. *Orientalium Dignitas*, 30 Nov. 1894, in *Leonis XIII Acta*, vol. XIV, pp. 201-202.

² Vatican II, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, Decree on the Eastern Churches, signed by Pope Paul VI on 21 November 1964.

³ Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, Decree on Ecumenism, signed by Pope Paul VI on 30 November 1964.

⁴ In other words, the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church is a *communion of Churches*: the Latin Catholic Church and the Eastern Catholic Churches.

⁵ Such as the Greek Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

⁶ Such as the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and the Syrian Orthodox Church.

⁷ There are some relatively small Latin Churches which are *not* in full communion with the Catholic Church. The Polish National Catholic Church in the USA and Canada is such a body.

⁸ Except, of course, Matrimony in the event of a mixed marriage.

⁹ Matthew 28: 19-20a.

¹⁰ Today Antioch is in south-eastern Turkey; the city is largely in ruins.

¹¹ Acts 11:26.

¹² *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 15.

¹³ On monastic life in the Eastern Churches see John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Oriente Lumen*.

¹⁴ In Latin, sometimes the word "*Theotókos*" is retained (as in the hymn "*Ave, O Theotókos, Ave O Mater Dei, Ave Maria*") but more often the translated form *Dei Genetrix* is used. Many Eastern Catholics prefer to retain the word "*Theotókos*" in English.

¹⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 495; Pope John Paul II *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 4;

¹⁶ Pope John Paul II *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 27.

¹⁷ Pope John Paul II *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 31.

¹⁸ *Liturgie dell'Oriente Cristiano*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1990.

¹⁹ English texts are available with a variety of musical settings.

²⁰ Cf. "Prayer facing the east", *Instruction for Applying the Liturgical Prescriptions of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, Congregation for the Eastern Churches, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1996, pp. 86-87.

²¹ The Eastern Churches are usually identified by their original *location*; the Latin Church is identified by its *language*.

²² A few Eastern Churches in the USA were holding services in English in the eighteen-seventies, but liturgical use of English did not become widespread until the nineteen-fifties. In 1955 Bishop Fulton J. Sheen celebrated a solemn Divine Liturgy in English during the Uniontown pilgrimage.

²³ A Cardinal, regardless of where in the world he actually lives, is nominally either a suffragan bishop of the Archdiocese of Rome (these seven Cardinals are called Cardinal Bishops), or a parish priest of one of the churches in Rome (these Cardinals are called Cardinal priests), or a deacon of one of the churches in Rome (these Cardinals are called Cardinal deacons).

²⁴ This Greek translation of the Old Testament is called the *Septuagint*. The Catholic Church respects this Greek version highly, because it is much older than the oldest extant Hebrew manuscripts. When the famous Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, they were found to have Hebrew texts of portions of the Old Testament which are much closer to the Septuagint Greek than to the present Hebrew versions. The Byzantine Church particularly considers the Septuagint to be an inspired translation.

²⁵ Like the Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches, the Syriac Orthodox Church has never accepted the fourth ecumenical council, the Council of Chalcedon.

²⁶ The terms *Assyrian* and *Chaldean* are confusing; the Christians in question are neither “Assyrians” nor “Chaldeans” and no such ethnic groups exist. They always called their Church “the Church of the East” because it was the Church which took root in the Persian Empire, *east* of the Roman Empire. In modern times the Anglicans took to calling them “Assyrians”, and the Catholics took to calling them “Chaldeans”; these names have stuck.

²⁷ The Assyrian Church of the East did not accept the third ecumenical council, the Council of Ephesus, which condemned the Christology attributed to Nestorius (the teaching that Jesus Christ is actually two persons, the Divine Son of God and the human son of the Virgin Mary, who therefore should not be called “Mother of God,” *Theotókos*). The Catholic Church teaches that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is but One Person in two natures, and that the Virgin Mary has given birth to God in the flesh and is therefore correctly titled *Theotókos*, Mother of God). But recently Pope John Paul II and the Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East have signed a historic Joint Statement in which the Assyrian Church of the East recognizes and accepts the Catholic teaching on these points.

²⁸ The adjective “Byzantine” comes from the name of Byzas, the Greek fisherman who originally founded the village which was first called Byzantium and later became Constantinople.

²⁹ Mount Athos is the world’s only monastic republic; the Greek government handles foreign affairs but otherwise the Holy Mountain is independent, governed by the council representing the twenty monasteries. The Patriarch of Constantinople is the highest Superior.

³⁰ Even though Italy is the native home of the Latin Church, there are two flourishing Greek Catholic dioceses in southern Italy, and the historic Monastery of Our Lady in Grottaferrata, just outside Rome.

³¹ If such figures exist at all. The Communist countries did not keep data on religion.

³² In the United States, the large Byzantine-Ruthenian Catholic metropolitan province usually calls its parishes “Byzantine Catholic Church”. Outside of the USA, very few of these people actually call themselves “Byzantine”, and many of them find the term offensive. There is no agreed nomenclature; raising the question is an easy way to start an argument.

³³ This rule is quite strict, but there is a general exception in favor of church bells; elaborate styles and melodies of bell-ringing have developed.

³⁴ Present-day Iraq, more or less.

³⁵ “Malankara” and “Malabar” are two different forms of the same place-name. They serve to distinguish these two Catholic communities from one another. The Syro-Malabar Catholic Church follows the Chaldean liturgical tradition; the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church follows the Syrian-Antiochian liturgical tradition.

³⁶ The priest himself may bake the bread for the Eucharist, or the Sisters may bake the bread as part of their apostolate. In many parishes, pious lay people bake the altar bread; this is considered a special privilege and honor. If the priest is married, often his wife bakes the bread for the Eucharist.

³⁷ Often abbreviated.

³⁸ Which is exchanged among the clergy; the faithful of the Byzantine Churches exchange the kiss of peace only on Easter.

³⁹ In Byzantine Churches the Blessed Sacrament is always reserved, usually in a small tabernacle on the Altar. Rarely one may find the ancient form of a small tabernacle suspended over the Altar.

⁴⁰ Here we describe the Byzantine ordination service. The Antiochian, Alexandrian, and Armenian traditions have different ordination rites.

⁴¹ This is similar to the “month’s mind Mass” which many Latin Catholics practice, but the Eastern Churches have this observance on the fortieth day rather than on the thirtieth.

⁴² Vatican II, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, n. 24.

⁴³ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint*.

⁴⁴ Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Oriente Lumen*.

⁴⁵ The Second Vatican Council teaches that “through the celebration of the Eucharist of the Lord in each of these Churches, the Church of God is built up and grows in stature.” *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 15.

⁴⁶ Again, please make arrangements with the priest ahead of time. Most of the Eastern Churches have a shortage of priests, so on Sunday morning the priest is apt to have a tight schedule.