

Editorial

EASTERN CATHOLIC CHURCHES: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

The Eastern Catholic Churches, with their rich theological heritage and diverse liturgical traditions, occupy a unique space within the universal Catholic Church. As communities in full communion with Rome yet rooted in Eastern Christian spirituality, they embody the Church's catholicity—its call to unity in diversity. However, this distinctive position also presents significant challenges. There have been attempts to rediscover the unique value and contributions of the East, and Vatican II gave a new momentum to those attempts. The Council declared that it “values highly the institutions of the Eastern Churches, their liturgical rites, ecclesiastical traditions and their ordering of Christian life” (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 1). This has been received with enthusiasm by the Eastern Churches as well as by the Roman/Latin Church, though with tensions and conflicts. The reception of the Council has been visible in the restoration and reform of liturgies and in the relationship with the Latin Rite, especially in jurisdiction, and the extension of the jurisdiction outside the proper territories of the Oriental Churches. Moreover, Eastern Catholic Churches also face the challenge of ‘reading the signs of the times’ and moving forward. Those challenges include ecclesiastical, theological, liturgical, pastoral, socio-cultural challenges and many more.

Keeping the identity and liturgical integrity, finding an equilibrium between tradition and assimilation is a major challenge that the Eastern Churches face. The Eastern Catholic Churches—including the Byzantine, Syriac, and Armenian traditions—developed also in association with Rome. While these connections affirmed doctrinal unity, they often led to unintended consequences: the gradual adoption of Latin liturgical practices, theological frameworks, and disciplinary norms, a process termed “Latinization.” For example, the

introduction of Roman devotions like the Rosary, the imposition of clerical celibacy (contrary to Eastern traditions of married priesthood), and the adoption of Latin vestments diluted the distinctiveness of Eastern rites. This confusion of identity accelerated under pastoral pressures in diaspora communities, where Eastern Catholics often found themselves minorities within predominantly Latin Catholic environments.

The Second Vatican Council marked a turning point. In *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (1964), the Council affirmed the equal dignity of Eastern traditions and urged a return to authentic practices: “These Churches should instead be strengthened... and return to their ancestral traditions” (§6). Subsequent documents, such as Pope John Paul II’s 1995 encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* and the 1996 Instruction on Applying the Liturgical Prescriptions of the Code of Canons, reinforced this vision. Yet implementation remains uneven. In Ukraine, the largest Eastern Catholic community (the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church) has spearheaded liturgical renewal, reviving the Byzantine Divine Liturgy and traditional iconography. Conversely, the Syro-Malabar Church in India, face internal divisions over liturgical language and rubrics, reflecting broader struggles to balance tradition with modernization.

Moreover, Eastern Catholicism’s “middle way” between Rome and Orthodoxy positions it as a model of unity-in-diversity. By preserving their unique voice, these Churches challenge the Latin majority to embrace a more pluralistic ecclesiology, as envisioned in Pope Francis’ emphasis on a “polyhedron of cultures” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §236). Their witness is particularly vital in regions like the Middle East and India, where Maronite, Chaldean, Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Catholics contribute to interreligious coexistence while maintaining ancient liturgies.

The Eastern Catholic Churches stand at a crossroads. Their dual commitment to communion with Rome and fidelity to Eastern traditions invites both challenges and opportunities. By reclaiming liturgical authenticity, they counter assimilationist pressures and enrich global Catholicism. As bridges to Orthodoxy, they offer hope for healing centuries-old divisions. Their future hinges on the broader Church’s willingness to embrace diversity as a gift rather than an obstacle—a vision articulated in Vatican II’s *Lumen Gentium* (§23). In nurturing these “living stones” of tradition and dialogue, the Eastern Catholic Churches illuminate a path toward a more united and vibrant Christian witness.

In his article, “The Church’s Forgotten ‘Third Lung,’” Sebastian Brock advocates recognizing the Syriac Orient as the Church’s “third lung,” complementing the Latin West and Greek East. Historically marginalized due to non-Chalcedonian stances and Eurocentric narratives, these indigenous West Asian Churches, now centred in Kerala amid diaspora-driven decline in their homelands, preserve distinct traditions: Semitic linguistic roots, poetic theology (for example, Ephrem’s symbolic paradoxes), early ascetic *bnay qyama* communities, therapeutic penance, diverse Christological traditions, and non-Western Christian identity. Brock’s advice may be pertinent in the present crisis: “...the authorities of the Syriac Churches in Kerala need to attend to the long-term preservation and fostering of the tradition of the Syriac Orient, rather than to look just the immediate issues of the day.”

Francis Thonippara’s article, “The Eastern Christian Churches: An Overview,” introduces Eastern Christian Churches, detailing their origins in the Roman Empire’s division, theological diversity (e.g., Chalcedonian disputes, *Filioque*), and unique liturgy. It outlines Vatican II’s affirmation of their equal dignity, categorizes churches into Assyrian, Oriental Orthodox, Orthodox, and Eastern Catholic communions, and addresses challenges like Latinization.

In the article, “Synodality and Ministry in the Eastern Churches,” Pauly Maniyattu explores synodality as the Church’s communal essence, rooted in Trinitarian communion and Eucharist-centred unity. Eastern Churches preserved synodal governance through councils, balancing primacy (*primus inter pares*) and collegiality. The St Thomas Christians exemplify synodal structures (Archdeacon, Yogam assemblies). He urges Eastern Churches to reclaim their tradition and inspire Western renewal for ecclesial vitality.

Varghese Palathingal in his article, “First Vatican Ecumenical Council: Canonical Implications for the Eastern Churches: A Retrospect,” analyzes the First Vatican Council (1869–1870), convened to counter rationalism and assert papal primacy/infalibility via *Pastor Aeternus* and *Dei Filius*. Interrupted by war, it left Eastern Churches’ self-governance unresolved. Vatican II (1962–1965) shifted to unity-in-diversity, recognizing Eastern autonomy. Post-conciliar reforms (1983 CIC, 1990 CCEO) codified *sui iuris* Churches’ rights, restoring their traditions. The article traces theological evolution from centralization to Trinitarian communion ecclesiology, affirming Eastern Churches’ global revitalization.

In the article, “Ecclesial Identity of the Syro Malabar Church: A Re-Reading in the Context of Her all India and Global Presence,” Dominic Vechoor examines the Syro Malabar Church’s ecclesial identity (*Mar Thoma Margam*), rooted in St Thomas’s apostolic legacy, East Syriac liturgy, ascetic practices, and Indian inculturation. Highlighting its global expansion post-Vatican II, he emphasizes preserving traditions (fasts, *Margamkali* dance) while adapting to diverse cultures. Advocates mutual enrichment between Eastern and Western traditions, balancing heritage with pastoral innovation for a unified yet diverse Catholic communion.

George Thomas Kuzhippallil in his article titled “Guiding Principles for Living Mar Thoma Margam in the Syro-Malabar Migrant Communities” argues that *Mar Thoma Margam*, the Syro-Malabar heritage combining apostolic faith, Eastern liturgy, and Indian culture, faces challenges in migrant communities due to Western influences and cultural dislocation. He highlights, core elements (faith, spirituality, communal identity) must be preserved, while adaptable practices (local rituals, feasts) can evolve.

In the article, “The Communion Ecclesiology of *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* and Its Difficult Reception in India,” Jose Maripurath Devassy speaks about the Vatican II decree *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* which advocates communion ecclesiology, emphasizing equality among Eastern Catholic Churches. In India, its reception faced resistance, particularly between the Syro-Malabar Church and the Latin Church over jurisdictional rights and missionary expansion. Even though the pope helped set up structures between the churches, tensions still exist because of Latin dominance and problems within Syro-Malabar.

The final article by Lijo Velliyamkandathil & Dixon Peter C. examines the Diocese of Kalyan’s Eparchial Assemblies (2006, 2015) exemplified by Pope Francis’ Synod on Synodality themes—Mission, Participation, Communion—through inclusive governance. Structured discussions fostered initiatives for youth, families, parishes, and social action. Established in 1988, the diverse Syro-Malabar diocese integrates clergy, religious, and laity to address contemporary challenges, ensuring ecclesial renewal and collaborative mission alignment.

Shaji George Kochuthara
Editor in Chief