

## THE EASTERN CHRISTIAN CHURCHES: AN OVERVIEW

**Francis Thonippara<sup>♦</sup>**

*Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bengaluru*

### **Abstract**

An attempt is made to introduce the Eastern Christian Churches,<sup>1</sup> both Catholics and non-Catholics, to readers who find it difficult to understand the differences between different churches. In seven sections the churches which are in communion with Rome and which are not in communion with Rome are introduced in a less complicated way. A basic understanding of the Eastern Churches is needed to have a more comprehensive understanding of the Christian churches spread all over the world. It is not an easy task to give a brief description about these churches as the vicissitudes of the history of each church is different from the other church. However, efforts have been made to present the brief history of each church as much comprehensible as possible.

**Key Words:** Eastern Christian Churches; Eastern Christianity; Filioque; Iconoclasm; Second Vatican Council; Uniatism

### **Introduction**

The term Eastern Christian Churches refers to the Churches that developed in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire along with those communities that were founded in dependence upon them, even

---

<sup>♦</sup>**Francis Thonippara, CMI**, obtained his Licentiate and Doctorate in Church History from Gregorian University, Rome. He also holds a Diploma in Archival Sciences from Vatican. He teaches Church History and allied subjects at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram (DVK), Bengaluru and other Colleges and theological centers. He authored and edited 16 books, published more than 110 scientific articles in journals, edited books, and encyclopaedias, presented many scholarly papers and attended national and international conferences. In 2019 Pope Francis nominated him as a member of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences, Holy See, Vatican, for a period of five years. Email: fthonippara@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup>In this paper I used Eastern Christian Churches or Oriental Churches interchangeably.

though these dependent churches were found outside of the boundaries of the Roman Empire. Emperor Diocletian in 293 divided the Roman Empire into East and West—four Prefectures: Gaul, Italy, Illyricum and Orient. During the time of Emperor Theodosius I (379-395) the above-mentioned division got a definite shape. The centres of civil administration, like Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus, Caesarea of Cappadocia, etc., became leading ecclesiastical centres. In the course of time Constantinople became imperial capital and then evolved a new order in ecclesiastical prominence: Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. On the basis of language, the churches are divided into Latin West, Greek East and Syriac Orient. All the Eastern churches evolved from the Patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and the churches of Persia and Armenia, the last two outside the Roman Empire.

### 1. The Second Vatican Council

The Second Vatican Council developed a new understanding of the Church and different terms are used to indicate the Christian faithful who follow various church traditions. The Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (OE) uses expressions like *Particular Churches* or *Rites* (OE 2), *Individual Churches* or *Rites* (OE 10), *Eastern Churches*, *Churches of the East*, *Eastern Rite*, *Rite*.<sup>2</sup> One of the greatest contributions of the Second Vatican Council is the re-discovery of the communion nature of the Catholic Church. Catholic Church is the communion of 24 churches, 23 Eastern churches and one Latin Church or Roman Church or Western Church. The Decree *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* number 2 speaks of the importance of retaining the traditions of each individual church. Number 3 of OE asserts the equal dignity of all the individual churches and put all churches in equal dignity and all churches with the same rights. The vicissitudes of the Eastern churches are complicated and it is not an easy task to present a comprehensive history of these churches, both Catholics and non-Catholics. These churches had their birth and growth in quite different circumstances. Even though it is not easy to present a perfect and comprehensive history of these churches, it is important to study their history because there are so many Christians still belong to these churches. The study of the history of the Eastern Churches will help to breathe fully with two lungs, one Eastern and one Western, the image used by Pope John Paul II. Pope Pius XI's often expressed wish was that Catholics of the Latin Rite should become more familiar with the history, religious life and present state of the Eastern Church. "The Church of Jesus Christ is neither Latin nor Greek nor Slav but Catholic;

---

<sup>2</sup>Eastern Churches, numbers, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 17, 19, 22, 24, 29, 30; Churches of the East, numbers, 5,6; Eastern Rite, numbers, 6,14; Rite, numbers, 7, 16, 21.

accordingly, she makes no difference between her children, and Greeks, Latins, Slavs, and members of all other nations are equal in the eyes of the Apostolic See," said Pope Benedict XV.

## 2. Heritage and Genius of the Eastern Christianity

Christian history of the early centuries centred in the Eastern half of the Roman Empire. The Church was born in the East and for centuries East dominated her life and thought of the Church. The first eight councils were held in the East. The centre of gravity shifted westward by the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century and the Roman centralization reached its zenith with the Gregorian Reformation, from 1073 and continued in a vigorous way till Pope Innocent III in 1216.<sup>3</sup> The Great Schism of 1054 facilitated the popes to speed up the centralization policy.<sup>4</sup> The West borrowed many prayers from the East. The liturgies of various traditions having great Semitic and monastic influence helped the Western Church in the evolution of spirituality. The Oriental style of Catholicism focuses on the local church as the prime reality of church life. The flexibility of the Eastern Church includes an emphasis on local autonomy, the role of the local bishop and the collegial aspect of the hierarchy. While the Western church focusses on territorial jurisdiction, the emphasis of the Eastern Church is for the personal jurisdiction.

For a proper understanding of the Eastern churches, it is good to have some discussion on the following points:

### 2.1. Eastern Spirituality<sup>5</sup>

The decisive character of Eastern spirituality is fidelity to the Scriptural notion of Spirit, with an immediate reference to the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. One of the fundamental traits of Eastern Spirituality is its theological character insofar as the Spirit introduces us to the life of the Holy Trinity. At the same time, Eastern Spirituality has an anthropological character insofar as the Spirit divinizes all human faculties.

### 2.2. Eastern Theology<sup>6</sup>

For the Eastern Fathers, theology is above all contemplation of the Trinity. Eastern Theology is faith celebrated in the liturgy, with special

---

<sup>3</sup>Cf., Karl Bihlmeyer-Herman Tuechle, *Church History, Volume Two*, Westminster: The Newman Press, 1967, 148-200.

<sup>4</sup>Cf., Karl Bihlmeyer-Herman Tuechle, *Church History*, 100-103.

<sup>5</sup>T. Spidlik, *Eastern Spirituality*, in, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Christian East*, Edward G. Farrugia, SJ, ed., Bengaluru: Theological Publications in India, 2018, 1713-1714.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. E.G.Farrugia, *Eastern Theology*, in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Christian East*, Edward G.Farrugia (Editor), Bengaluru: Theological Publications in India, 2018, 1810-1814.

attention to salvation and perfection. Eastern Theology refers to the doctrine of the nature and attributes of God.

### 2.3. Monasticism

The spirituality of the Christian East has been shaped and guided by the monastic experience which has provided for both Eastern and Western churches centres of continuance, endurance and spiritual renewal, through fluctuating political conditions, giving the church innumerable monastic writers and teachers, and many of its greatest missionaries and leaders.

The East has preserved intact an awareness that monastic life is simply an eschatological radicalization of the baptismal promises. The forms of monasticism vary from hermits to small communities of two or three to the groups of small communities which share some liturgical celebrations in a common central Church, to the cenobitic life of a large community under the direction of an archimandrite, equivalent to the Western Abbot. Here it is worth mentioning Mount Athos, a cluster of monasteries in Greece under the direct jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople.<sup>7</sup>

### 2.4. Liturgy

Liturgy means the public and official worship of God's people, an activity in which the Church expresses itself as Church and which thus makes the Church to be what it is. It is the public worship which Christ as head and founder of the Church renders to the Father and the Church to Christ and through him to the Father. The mystery dimension of the Eastern liturgies is noteworthy.

### 2.5. Architecture

The Eastern Church art and architecture is different from that of the Western Church and Eastern Church has borrowed and absorbed many elements from their neighbours.

## 3. Some Expressions

### 3.1. Latinization or Romanization

Latinization refers to the policy of imposing Latin theological ways of thinking, liturgical customs and other Latin practices, piety and discipline, usually at the expense of the traditions of Christians of the Eastern rites. One typical example is the Synod of Udayamperur held in 1599 and St Thomas Christians were brought under the Latin jurisdiction.

---

<sup>7</sup>Cf., E.C. Suttner – G.I. Gargano, *Mount Athos*, in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Christian East*, Edward G. Farrugia, ed., Bengaluru: Theological Publications in India, 2018, 238-242.

### **3.2. Uniatism**

Uniatism is a term used in the past even in documents of the Catholic Church to designate the status of the Eastern Churches which had reunited with the Catholic Church and the way in which these Churches came about. The members of these Churches were called Uniates. The Orthodox employ the term Uniates negatively. Employed in a negative sense, the term Uniates implies proselytism, or the forced conversion from one sister Church to another, or perhaps Latinization.

### **3.3. Sister Churches**

Sister Churches is an expression that applies to the relationship between local Churches (in the Orthodox diction) or between particular Churches (in the Catholic). The proper use of the term is particular (local) Churches.

### **4. Causes of Multiplicity of Churches in the East**

When the Christian religion spread over so many lands and amid such diverse peoples, after four centuries of growth there had developed within the framework of the one Church of Christ widely differing sets of customs, especially where cults and rituals were concerned. Specifically, these sets of customs grew up around the four major centres of the Christian Church, Antioch in Syria, Alexandria in Egypt, Rome in Italy and Byzantium (Constantinople) in Asia Minor. These Rites are called Antiochene, Alexandrian, Roman and Byzantine. The Persian Church and Armenian Church developed their liturgical traditions outside the Roman Empire.

In the beginning of the fifth century, there were three main ecclesiastical centres in the East: Constantinople, Antioch and Alexandria. Later, Jerusalem was also added to them. The central position of Alexandria is evident in the Council of Nicaea and acknowledged the importance of Antioch also. In the first Council of Constantinople there was the mention of the New Rome and the consequent importance of Constantinople can be noticed. After Rome came Constantinople, which was equal in privilege to the former but second in rank: then Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. The last did not influence much in the formation of churches. It is the Church of Constantinople which played the greatest part in the formation of filial churches.

If the hallmark of the Church in the first centuries was 'unity in diversity' in the whole of the Christian world, the hallmark from the fifth century was different in the East and in the West. In the East it

could be named *autocephalia* and division, whereas in the West it was unity and uniformity. The unity that existed between the four patriarchates in the Eastern Roman Empire was gradually shattered because of three major reasons: i. The existence of different ecclesiastical and theological centres in the East; ii. heresies and schisms; and iii. the emergence of the nationalistic spirit and political rivalries.

#### **4.1. Ecclesiastical and Theological Centres**

The two very important theological centres that played a major role in the multiplication of and divisions in the churches of the East were the Schools of Alexandria and Antioch. While the School of Alexandria stressed the divinity of Christ and the unity of the Persons in Christ, the School of Antioch stressed the humanity of Christ and the distinction of Natures in Christ. These diverse approaches coupled with the different philosophical systems they employed created confusion and heresies in the Church. The existence of such two Schools of thought was one of the most important reasons for the first two important Christological heresies, i.e., Nestorianism and Monophysitism. Other important theological centres were the School of Edessa-Nisibis of the Syrian Church and the School of Caesarea in Asia Minor.

#### **4.2. Heresies and Schisms**

The heresies in the early Church caused divisions in the Church. Refusal to accept the teachings of the Council of Ephesus and the condemnation of Nestorius resulted in the Nestorian Church or Assyrian Church of the East. Those who embraced the Catholic Church are called Chaldeans. Twenty years later, there was an even worse division that took place. The Patriarch of Alexandria, Dioscoros, supported the false doctrine of a monk called Eutyches, who taught that in Jesus Christ there is only one nature, His humanity being completely absorbed in and identified with His divinity and His body not of one substance with ours, which means that He was not really a man at all and His earthly life only an appearance. Eutychianism was condemned by the Council of Chalcedon and the teachings of the Council of Ephesus were re-confirmed. Those who do not accept the Council of Chalcedon are called Jacobites or Oriental Orthodox Churches which include the Coptic Church in Egypt, the Syrian Jacobites, the Armenians, the Ethiopians and indirectly the Jacobite and Orthodox Churches in India. Minorities from all of these churches have since come back to Catholic unity.

#### **4.3. Nationalistic Spirit and Political Rivalries**

Greek language and culture dominated the cities of the Eastern Roman Empire in the first four centuries. From the fifth century

onwards the dominance of local language and nationalistic spirit increased in different regions of the Eastern Roman Empire which resulted in churches on the basis of local languages and culture. Again, political rivalries between the Roman Empire and Persian Empire resulted in the independence of the Persian Church. The nationalistic spirit was the cause of the independence of the Armenian Church.

#### **4.4. Autocephalia** (auto=self; cephalia=head; autocephalia=self-governing)

Autocephalia is a key term in the understanding of the origin and multiplication of churches in the East. *Autocephalia* means the declaration of independence by filial churches from their mother church or chief church. Usually, it is a movement from below due to the interaction of their nationalistic spirit and various other factors. It is a system of ecclesiastical administration mainly proper to Orthodox Churches. It guarantees each national Church full internal administrative autonomy.

#### **4.5. Great Schism of 1054**

Through mutual excommunication split between Western Church and Greek Byzantine Church took place on July 16, 1054. Definite break between these churches happened in 1204 after the sacking of Constantinople by the Westerners. The Second Council of Lyons in 1274 and The Council of Florence in 1439 made serious efforts for reunion but were not successful.

#### **4.6. Differences between East and West**

##### **4.6.1. Difference in the Character of the People**

The Roman world and Roman people were for clear ideas and were more practical and realistic. In the Greek World, there is a concentration on theory and contemplation of the Divine. They love speculation, and for them, the concrete world is the manifestation of the Divine. But for the Latins, the world is the effect of the action of God.

##### **4.6.2. Diversity in Liturgy**

The diversity between East and West is manifested above all in the formation of the liturgy. The substance is same in all the churches, but the mystery dimension of the liturgy is more in the East.

##### **4.6.3. The Structure of Hierarchy**

In the East, the prominent centres of the Church developed a Patriarchal structure. In the West Rome was the only centre. In the

West, there was the centralization of power, and in the East the trend was that of decentralization. Rome, in the course of time, became the symbol of orthodox faith. In the East there was the Imperial Church and in the West, there was the Papal Church.

In the Eastern Catholic Church, there are six Patriarchs: The Eastern Church Patriarch of Alexandria who holds jurisdiction over all Coptic Rite Catholics; The Patriarch of Antioch in Syria has jurisdiction over all Syriac Rite Catholics; The Patriarch of Antioch in Syria enjoys jurisdiction over all Maronite Rite Catholics; The Patriarch of Antioch in Syria holds jurisdiction over all Melkite Rite Catholics; The Patriarch of Babylon in Chaldea has jurisdiction over all Chaldean Rite Catholics; The Patriarch of Cilicia in Armenia holds jurisdiction over Armenian Rite Catholics.

The Pope is no longer using the title Patriarch of the West or Patriarch of Rome. In the Western Church, however, there are titular Patriarchs whose origin was due to various historical reasons. They are the Patriarch of Venice, the Patriarch of Lisbon, the Patriarch of East Indies, Goa, and the Patriarch of Jerusalem.

#### 4.6.4. Filioque

A phrase added by the Westerners to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Symbol which discusses the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and from the Son. The Easterners hold that the Holy Spirit proceeds through the Son. The Western addition 'and' led to a series of disputes.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4.6.5. Iconoclasm

This term designates the doctrine which condemns the veneration of sacred images. An iconoclast is one who professes opposition to the cult of sacred images, but especially one who actively promotes their destruction to prevent devotion to them.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4.6.6. Titles

**4.6.6.1. Catholicos,**<sup>10</sup> the title for the supreme authority in several Eastern Churches, equivalent to patriarch. Texts from the 4<sup>th</sup> century and later speak of the Catholicos as a financial administrator in the

---

<sup>8</sup>Edward G. Farrugia, *Filioque*, in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Christian East*, Edward G. Farrugia, SJ, (Editor), Bengaluru: Theological Publications in India, 2018, 796-802.

<sup>9</sup>C. Capizzi, *Iconoclasm*, in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Christian East*, Edward G. Farrugia, SJ (Editor), Bengaluru: Theological Publications in India, 2018, 968-970

<sup>10</sup>Cf., V. Poggi, in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Christian East*, Edward G. Farrugia (Editor), Bengaluru: Theological Publications in India, 2018, 386.



imperial dioceses. Later the term passed into Church parlance to designate the supreme head of a *sui juris* Church.

**4.6.6.2. Chorbishop:** In the East, a Chorbishop presided over a rural or suburban area and was qualified to administer the ordination of priests, deacons, and lectors upon receiving the written license to do so from the urban bishop. We come across the mention of Chorbishop for the first time in the Synod of Ancyra in 314. In the West, a Chorbishop did not have the character of a rural or suburban bishop, but that of an auxiliary bishop of a diocesan bishop. From the 10<sup>th</sup> century the role of the Chorbishop declines in the West, virtually disappearing as a title or ecclesiastical honour. In the East, however, the institution remains alive.<sup>11</sup>

**4.6.6.3. Archimandrite**<sup>12</sup> was the generic name for designating the superior of a monastery. It was reserved for the superiors, founders, and legislators of major monasteries. Gradually, the office of archimandrite became an ecclesiastical dignity distinct from the superior of a monastery. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, it has been an honorific title, conferred especially in Greece on well-educated, unmarried priests. In the Russian Church since 1823, it has also been accorded to monks of particular merit. Archimandrite is the equivalent of the Western Abbot.

## 5. Classification of the Eastern Catholic Churches

The Eastern churches are classified under five fundamental heads: Alexandrian, Antiochene, Armenian, Persian or Chaldean, and Byzantine. Now let me focus on the Eastern Catholic churches.

The Catholic Church is a communion of 24 autonomous churches (*ecclesiae sui juris*) which enjoy a status of relative independent self-governance vis-a-vis the Roman Pontiff with whom they are in full communion and in whose person universal communion is realized. Only one of these churches observe the Latin Rite; the other 23 autonomous churches observe a specific rite derived from one of the five major Oriental Traditions: Alexandrian, Antiochian, Armenian, Chaldean and Byzantine. The term Rite designates the specific form of the tradition as it is observed by an autonomous church. A Rite is the specific manner of living the faith which includes the liturgical, theological, spiritual and disciplinary heritage (patrimony) of a community. An autonomous church is a group of Christian faithful united under a hierarchy according to the norm of law and is recognized as *ecclesia sui juris*.

---

<sup>11</sup>Cf., D. Ceccarelli Moroli, *Chorbishop*, 412-414.

<sup>12</sup>Cf., V. Poggi, *Archimandrite*, 138.

## 6. Juridical Status

According to the power of self-governance enjoyed by these churches, they are classified as Patriarchal, Major Archiepiscopal, Metropolitan and other *sui juris* churches.

**6.1. Patriarchal Churches** are Chaldean, Armenian, Coptic, Syrian, Maronite and Melkite. Each Eastern Catholic Patriarchal Church has the right to choose its own Patriarch. He is elected by the Synod of Bishops and is immediately proclaimed and enthroned. He subsequently requests ecclesiastical communion from the Pope. The synods of patriarchal churches also elect bishops for dioceses within the patriarchal territory from a list of candidates that have been approved by the Holy See.

**6.2. Major Archiepiscopal Churches** are Ukrainian, Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankara and Romanian. A Major Archbishop is elected in the same way as a Patriarch, but his election must be confirmed by the Holy See before he can be enthroned.

**6.3. Metropolitan Churches** are Ethiopian, Asmara Eritrean, Ruthenian. Metropolitans are named by the Pope.

**6.4. Other Churches, *sui juris*** are either Eparchial or Exarchial. There are six Ordinariates for the faithful of the Oriental Catholic churches under the supervision of the hierarchy of the proper *sui juris* churches. They are in Argentina (Buenos Aires), Austria (Vienna), Brazil (Rio de Janeiro), France (Paris), Poland (Warszawa) and Spain (Madrid). The total strength is about 1,51,670.

## 7. Eastern Christian Communions<sup>13</sup>

There are four distinct and separate Eastern Christian communions and for a better understanding, we divide them into: **1.** The Assyrian Church of the East, which is not in communion with any other Church; **2.** The seven Oriental Orthodox churches, which, even though each is independent, are in full communion with one another; **3.** The Orthodox Church, which is a communion of national or regional churches, all of which recognize the Patriarch of Constantinople as a point of unity enjoying certain rights and privileges; and, **4.** The Eastern Catholic churches, all of which are in communion with the Church of Rome and its bishop.

### 7.1. The Assyrian Church of the East

The Assyrian Church was the result of the Council of Ephesus in 431, which condemned Nestorius as a heretic and later history shows

---

<sup>13</sup>Ronald Roberson, *The Eastern Christian Churches*, Bengaluru: Theological Publications in India, 2004. In writing this article, this book was of much use and practically I followed the division of churches as Ronald Roberson did.

that it was a one-sided condemnation. Those who do not accept the teachings of the Council of Ephesus are known as Assyrians or the Persian Church of the East.

## **7.2. The Oriental Orthodox Churches**

The Oriental Orthodox Churches or popularly known as the Jacobites are those who rejected the teachings of the Council of Chalcedon or Monophysites.

7.2.1. The Armenian Apostolic Church

7.2.2. The Coptic Orthodox Church

7.2.3. The Ethiopian Church

7.2.4. The Syrian Orthodox Church

7.2.5. The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church

7.2.6. The Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church

7.2.7. The Eritrean Church

## **7.3. The Orthodox Church**

The Greek Orthodox Church or the Byzantines or the Orthodox Church stand for those churches which got separated from the Catholic communion after the schism of 1054. They are known as Orthodox because they recognize all the first seven Councils of the Church.

### **7.3.1. The Autocephalous Churches**

7.3.1.1. The Patriarchate of Constantinople (Ecumenical Patriarch)

7.3.1.2. The Patriarchate of Alexandria

7.3. 1.3. The Patriarchate of Antioch

7.3.1.4. The Patriarchate of Jerusalem

7.3.1.5. The Orthodox Church of Russia

7.3.1.6. The Orthodox Church of Serbia

7.3.1.7. The Orthodox Church of Romania

7.3.1.8. The Orthodox Church of Bulgaria

7.3.1.9. The Orthodox Church of Georgia

7.3.1.10. The Orthodox Church of Cyprus

7.3.1.11. The Orthodox Church of Greece

7.3.1.12. The Orthodox Church of Poland

7.3.1.13. The Orthodox Church of Albania

7.3.1.14. The Orthodox Church in Czech and Slovak Republic

7.3.1.15. The Orthodox Church in America

### 7.3.2. *The Autonomous Churches*

7.3.2. 1. The Orthodox Church of Mount Sinai

7.3.2.2. The Orthodox Church of Finland

7.3.2.3. The Orthodox Church of Japan

7.3.2.4. The Orthodox Church of China

7.3.2.5. The Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church

### 7.3.3. *Canonical Churches under Constantinople*

7.3.3.1. The American Carpatho - Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church

7.3.3.2. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the USA and Diaspora

7.3.3.3. The Russian Orthodox Archdiocese in Western Europe

7.3.3.4. The Albanian Orthodox Diocese of America

7.3.3.5. The Belarusan Council of Orthodox Churches in North America

7.3.3.6. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada

### 7.3.4. *Churches of Irregular Nature*

The following churches are not in full communion with the Orthodox Church. All of them are of Orthodox origin, but today the Orthodox Church views them as at least uncanonical, if not fully schismatic.

7.3.4.1. The Old Believers

7.3.4.2. The Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia

7.3.4.3. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Kiev Patriarchate and Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church

7.3.4.4. The Belarusan Autocephalous Orthodox Church

7.3.4.5. The Macedonian Orthodox Church

7.3.4.6. The Old Calendar Orthodox Church

## 7.4. *Eastern Catholic Churches (sui juris churches)*<sup>14</sup>

Traditions	Churches	Juridical Status
I. Alexandrian	Coptic	Patriarchal
	Ethiopian	Metropolitan
	Asmara Eritrean	Metropolitan
II. Armenian	Armenian	Patriarchal

<sup>14</sup>Cf., *Annuario Pontificio*, 2021, Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2021, 1102-1105.

III. Antiochian	Syro-Malankara	Major Archiepiscopal
	Maronite	Patriarchal
	Syrian	Patriarchal
IV. Chaldean	Chaldean	Patriarchal
	Syro-Malabar	Major Archiepiscopal
V. Byzantine	Bulgarian	Exarchial
	Belarusan	Exarchial
	Greek	Exarchial
	Hungarian	Eparchial
	Italo-Albanian	Eparchial
	Melkite	Patriarchal
	Romanian	Major Archiepiscopal
	Ruthenian	Metropolitan
	Ukrainian	Major Archiepiscopal
	Krizevci (Croatia-Serbs)	Eparchial
	Macedonian	Exarchial
	Russian	Exarchial
	Slovak	Eparchial
	Albanian	Exarchial

#### **7.4. 1. Churches with no Counterpart**

##### **7.4.1.1. The Maronite Catholic Church**

The Maronites of Lebanon trace their origin back to the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, when a group of disciples gathered around the charismatic figure of St Maron. Maronites came into contact with the Latin Church in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and there is a strong tradition among them that they never lacked communion with the Holy See. Maronite liturgy is West Syrian but influenced by East Syrian and Latin traditions. It is a patriarchal church having a membership of 32,22,000.

7.4.1.2. The Italo-Albanian Catholic Church is the result of the Byzantine influence, in Southern Italy. It is a small diaspora community of 64,000 followers. The large groups of 15<sup>th</sup> century Albanian immigrants strengthened the Byzantine tradition.

#### **7.4.2. From the Assyrian Church of the East**

The followers of the Assyrian Church do not accept the Council of Ephesus, who were earlier called Nestorians, a term which they never liked.

##### **7.4.2.1. The Chaldean Catholic Church**

Patriarch Yuhannan Sulqa embraced the Catholic faith in 1553 and thus originated the Chaldean Catholic Church. It is a Patriarchal

Church, and the head is known as the Patriarch of Babylon of the Chaldeans, Baghdad, Iraq, with a membership of 3,83,000.

#### 7.4.2.2. The Syro-Malabar Catholic Church

This Church traces its origin back to Apostle Thomas and is a Major Archiepiscopal Church, with around 50,00,000 followers. Although the Western missionaries and historians argue that these Christians were Nestorians and the Synod of Udayamperur brought them back to the Catholic faith, there are documentary evidences to prove that these Christians were in communion with Rome. The Church follows the East-Syrian or Chaldean liturgical tradition.

#### 7.4.3. *From the Oriental Orthodox Churches*

Oriental Orthodox churches are those churches which do not accept the teachings of the Council of Chalcedon.

##### 7.4.3.1. The Armenian Catholic Church

Thanks to the efforts of the Western missionaries, the Council of Florence in 1439 published a decree of reunion, which provided the doctrinal basis for the establishment of an Armenian Catholic Church much later. It is a Patriarchal Church with the title Patriarch of Cilicia of the Armenians and the strength of the Church is 3,44,000.

##### 7.4.3.2. The Coptic Catholic Church

The modern history of the Coptic Catholic Church began with the re-establishment of the patriarchate in 1895, and in 1899 Pope Leo XIII appointed Bishop Cyril Makarios as Patriarch Cyril II “of Alexandria of the Copts.” The Church has 2,43,000 followers.

##### 7.4.3.3. The Ethiopian Catholic Church

Although the Catholic missionaries arrived in Ethiopia in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the missionary activity was very much limited due to various reasons, including political unrest. The missionary activities of Jesuits, Capuchins and Lazarists are praiseworthy. The present ecclesiastical structure of the Ethiopian Catholic Church dates from 1961, when a metropolitan see was established at Addis Ababa with suffragan dioceses in Asmara and Adigrat. The Metropolitan title is Archbishop of Addis Ababa of the Ethiopians and the membership is 1, 97,000.

##### 7.4.3.4. The Syrian Catholic Church

In various moments of history during the Crusades and after, through the efforts of missionaries, many embraced the Catholic faith. After 1782, there has been an unbroken succession of Syrian Catholic Patriarchs. In the early 1920s, the Patriarchal residence was moved to

Beirut. The title is the Patriarch of Antioch of the Syrians, and the membership is 1,29,000.

#### 7.4.3.5. The Syro-Malankara Catholic Church

The Church is a Major Archiepiscopal Church which reunited with the Catholic Church in 1930. The membership is 3,85,000.

#### 7.4.3.6. The Asmara Eritrean Church

This Church is a Metropolitan Church, branched from the Ethiopian Catholic Church in 2015. The residence of the Metropolitan is in Asmara, Eritrea, and it has 1,67,722 followers.

### 7.4.4. *From the Orthodox Church*

A major split in the Catholic communion happened with the schism of 1054. As mentioned earlier, the Orthodox Church is the largest church and in the course of time a small group from many churches reunited with the Catholic Church through the efforts of the missionaries.

#### 7.4.4.1. The Melkite Catholic Church

The word *Melkite* comes from the Syriac and Arabic words for 'king' and was originally used to refer to those within the Patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem who accepted the Christological faith professed by the Byzantine Emperor after the Council of Chalcedon. The reunion took place through the missionary efforts of the Jesuits, Carmelites and Capuchins.

The title is Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, of Alexandria and Jerusalem, and the residence is in Damascus, Syria, and the membership is 11,90,000.

#### 7.4.4.2. The Ukrainian Catholic Church

The Union of Brest of 1596 resulted in the birth of the Ukrainian Catholic Church. This Church is a Major Archiepiscopal Church, and the title is Major Archbishop of Lviv of the Ukrainians, Lviv. Membership is 51,82,000 and is the most numerous among the Eastern Catholic churches.

#### 7.4.4.3. The Ruthenian Catholic Church

The motherland of the Ruthenian Catholic Church is now in extreme western Ukraine, southwest of the Carpathian mountains. The history of the present Ruthenian Catholic Church goes back to 1646, with 63 Ruthenian priests embracing the Catholic faith. Although their further history was not so smooth with a large number of migrants. This Church has Metropolitan status with a membership of 5,98,000.

#### 7.4.4.4. The Romanian Catholic Church

With the efforts of the Hapsburg Austrian Emperor Leopold I, who drove the Turks away from Transylvania and annexed it to his empire, encouraged the Orthodox to Greek Catholics. With the efforts of Jesuits union with Rome took place in 1698, which was formally concluded in 1700. It is a Major Archiepiscopal Church with 11,19,000 followers.

#### 7.4.4.5. The Greek Catholic Church

It is an Exarchial Church with 2345 followers. The formation of a Catholic community of the Byzantine rite in the Ottoman Empire became possible only after 1829, when Ottoman Sultan Mohammed II removed previous restrictions.

#### 7.4.4.6. Greek Catholics in former Yugoslavia

Byzantine Church of the Eparchy of Krizevci is an Eparchial Church with 77,000 followers.

#### 7.4.4.7. The Bulgarian Catholic Church

This Church enjoys the status of Exarchate for Catholics of the Byzantine - Slav Rite in Bulgaria, Sofia, Bulgaria and the membership is 15,000.

#### 7.4.4.8. The Slovak Catholic Church

This Church consists of Catholics of the Byzantine Rite with Eparchial status and the membership is 2,26,000.

#### 7.4.4.9. The Hungarian Catholic Church

This Church is an Eparchial Church with a membership of 2,82,000.

#### 7.4.4.10. Eastern Catholic Communities without Hierarchies

7.4.4.10.1. The Russian Byzantine Catholic Church is an Exarchial Church with 6100 followers, mainly living in the diaspora.

7.4.4.10.2. The Belarusan Greek Catholic Church had its origin in the Union of Brest. The strength of the Church is 100, 000 and the head is an Apostolic Visitor.

7.4.4.10.3. The Albanian Byzantine Catholic Church had a history from the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but with various historical vicissitudes there are not many Byzantine Catholic faithful today.

7.4.4.10.4. The Georgians. Although Catholic presence was in Georgia from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic Church was able to function more freely, and a significant Armenian Catholic community was able to



resume a normal ecclesial life after Georgia became independent again in 1991.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

The story of the Eastern Churches is different from the story of Western Christianity. The number of heresies led to various denominations and added to that the spread of Islam further deteriorated the living conditions of the Christians in the East. The major setback to the relationship between the East and West was the schism of 1054. Although efforts have been made to achieve the reunion of the Greek Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church, both parties have to travel miles to reach the destination. However, one should appreciate the cordial relationship that exists between the Greek Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. The teachings of the Second Vatican Council, especially the Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*) and the Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*) are landmarks in the history of ecumenism. Active ecumenical dialogues are in progress. In the changing political and socio-religious scenario of the world, ecumenism has a great role to play to bring together all the church denominations to give an effective witnessing to Christ. Great interest is shown by the Westerners to go deep into the rich spiritual, liturgical and monastic traditions of the Eastern churches and to enrich the Western Christian living.

To promote the Oriental identity and to regain the lost Oriental ethos, Pope Benedict XV in 1917 established the Congregation for the Oriental Churches. In the same year, the Pontifical Oriental Institute was established aiming to foster ecumenism and serious studies on Oriental Churches. As part of the promotion of ecumenism many non-Catholic students are being admitted into the Institute and among the alumni is Patriarch Bartholomew I, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. The Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches was promulgated on October 18, 1990 and became force of law on October 1, 1991. With the publication of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches greater administrative freedom was given to the Eastern Catholic Churches and many of the juridical anomalies have been rectified. As mentioned above four Churches have been raised to the Major Archiepiscopal status and churches such as Syro-Malabar and Ukrainian could be raised to the patriarchal status.

---

<sup>15</sup>Ronald Roberson, *The Eastern Christian Churches*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2004, 216-217.