

Eastern Catholic Churches

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What are they?

Eastern Catholic Churches are those Catholic Churches whose cultural and historical origins are in the lands that were once part of the Eastern Roman Empire and who together with the Latin Church constitute the Catholic Church in the world.

These Churches retain their own traditions without in anyway opposing the primacy of the Bishop of Rome (LG 13). The decree *Orientalium ecclesiarum* is devoted to encouraging these Churches to deepen their hold on their particular traditions and to strip away elements which have come from the Latin Church. This is a task which is still ongoing.

Among the Eastern Catholic Churches is included the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Maronite Church, Chaldean Catholic Church and the Melkite Greek Catholic Church. There are twenty Churches in all. All of them, apart from the Maronite Church, have an Orthodox sister Church. Their spiritual tradition, style of worship, doctrinal emphasis and governance is that of the Orthodox Churches.



The one significant liturgical difference that can be noted between these Catholic Churches and their Orthodox sister Church is that the Catholics include the pope in the *anaphora* or Eucharistic prayer but the others do not. A Ukrainian Orthodox Christian or a Ukrainian Greek Catholic Christian (in fact any of the others too) would share identical liturgies, spirituality, and doctrinal emphasis and have a similar style of governance, with the exception that the Catholics acknowledge the primacy of the pope.

Catholic Churches not rites

These Churches are true Catholic Churches and not merely rites of the Roman Catholic Church. They are equal in dignity to the Latin Church of the Catholic communion. They elect their own patriarch; the Bishop of Rome is not their patriarch. They elect and ordain their own bishops (eparchs) and have a permanent synod of bishops to govern the Church and regulate their affairs according to their own traditions of Church law, doctrine and practices.



Eastern Catholics have practices which are very different from Latin or Western Catholics. Diocesan deacons and priests may be chosen from married or single men but ordained men may not later marry. In the Latin Church deacons only are chosen from among married and single men whereas presbyters (priests) are only chosen from among single men. Bishops are always celibate men. Most of these Churches use leavened bread and not unleavened wafers for Eucharist. Communion is always received in the form of bread and wine.

Like the Latin Church, families baptise their babies at a fairly early stage of life. Unlike Latin Catholics all Eastern babies will receive Chrismation (equivalent to confirmation) and some also Holy Communion. Holy Communion is normally administered on the Sunday after Baptism to infants. Parents will then make their own decision about the age at which their children will be encouraged to receive communion after this first communion. There are many other significant differences between Eastern Catholics and Latin's.

There are also significant differences among the Eastern Catholic Churches. Coptic and Armenian Catholics have a very different liturgy to that of the Byzantine style liturgies of the Melkites and Ukrainians as well as many other differences. Although there is a common code of Eastern Canon Law for all these Catholic Churches each one had to develop a supplement which reflected the canonical, theological and spiritual traditions which were unique to a particular Church. This is necessary because these differences among them, which may hardly be noticed by Latin Catholics, may represent significant aspect of the culture and practice of the Church concerned.



Relationship to the Orthodox Churches

Eastern Catholic Churches are the bearers of the “Orthodox” tradition within the Catholic Church. In this sense Orthodox means the Eastern traditions of Christianity. John Paul II spoke of the necessity of the Church to breath with both lungs, the Latin/Western Church and the Eastern/Orthodox Churches. Recognising and celebrating our unity in diversity within the Catholic Church is important not only for Catholics but as a sign to our sisters and brothers in the Orthodox Churches.



Catholics and Orthodox regard each other as sister churches. It is fair to say that at the moment these sisters relate to each other better than we have since the time previous to 1965 but there are still signs of strain and estrangement from one another in the one family of Christ. For Orthodox Christians one point of contention is the existence of the Eastern Catholic Churches which they claim are Orthodox Churches in an irregular canonical situation. They sometimes refer to these Catholic Churches as ‘uniates’, a term which Eastern Catholics find offensive. It is because their very existence is such a sensitive point that Catholics should do all that we can to allow the unique traditions and spirituality of these Churches to shine and for them to be fully respected.

Unity in diversity

If we can do this we may be able to show that full visible communion of Churches among themselves and with the Bishop of Rome does not mean uniformity but unity in diversity.

All Catholics need to come to a better understanding of the diversity of our Church and for Latin Catholics the task is a greater one because so few of us really know the Eastern Catholic Churches.