

Part I: The Other 23 Catholic Churches and Why They Exist (Nicolas LaBanca)

Over the past several years, people have become more and more aware of how diverse the Western world has become. Talk of “diversity” often pops up in the workplace and elsewhere, especially here in these United States. Diversity applies not only to culture though, but religion too. Catholics could easily mention recent efforts in ecumenism when the subject of diversity comes up. But let’s focus on something else for a moment, something that’s been right under our noses. If you are reading this, chances are that you are a Roman Catholic. Or, to put it more officially, you are a Catholic of the Roman Rite within the Latin Catholic Church. Sounds a little confusing, doesn’t it? Why bother providing such a long description for persons we typically call “Roman Catholic”? That’s because not every Catholic is Latin. At times throughout history, and even still today, people have displayed confusion regarding those that we refer to as “Eastern Catholics”. When people are unfamiliar with something, they tend to look at that particular thing askance. But once we get the real story, and are able to appreciate the beautiful patrimony and treasure of the Eastern Catholic Churches, it’s obvious to see that one doesn’t have to be “Latin” to be Catholic. Let’s now take the opportunity to discover how the Catholic Church is truly one of the most diverse institutions on the face of the Earth.

A Rich Patrimony: I’m thankful that I was brought up with “the best of both worlds”. My father’s side of the family is Latin Catholic, but my cousins on my maternal grandmother’s side of the family are Ukrainian-Greek Catholic. So what exactly are the differences in these traditions? What makes one Catholic “Latin”, and another Catholic “Ukrainian”, “Chaldean”, or something else? Before we answer that, let’s get a bit technical for a moment so as to get our terms right. First, we have the Catholic Church. No prefixes. No other labels. We just have the Catholic Church. Or, if one really wants to, we can refer to the Universal (Catholic) Church. Second, the Catholic Church is comprised of six different liturgical rites, and within those rites, there are twenty-four particular Churches. These twenty-four *sui iuris* (autonomous or self-governing) Churches are all in communion with one another, are all **within** the Catholic Church and all recognize the primacy of the pope. The Latin (or Roman, but we’ll continue to refer to it as “Latin” from now on) Catholic Church is the largest of these twenty-four Churches, and is the only Western Church. The other twenty-three Catholic Churches are all referred to as Eastern Churches and have their own traditions and forms of liturgy, yet retain the same basic liturgical structures and theology as seen in the West. Usually in places like the media, the entire Catholic Church is commonly referred to as the Roman Catholic Church. This term doesn’t show the full universality of the Church, and many popes over the last few hundred years have sought to safeguard the importance of the Eastern Churches. It’s interesting to think about how much time we seem to spend in ecumenism between other non-Catholic Christians, yet we overlook that we have Eastern Catholic brethren with a rich patrimony we should be aware of.

Fully Catholic: In his 1894 apostolic letter, *Orientalium Dignitas*, Pope Leo XIII had this to say: *“The Churches of the East are worthy of the glory and reverence that they hold throughout the whole of Christendom in virtue of those extremely ancient, singular memorials that they have bequeathed to us. For it was in that part of the world that the first actions for the redemption of the human race began, in accord with the all-kind plan of God. They swiftly gave forth their yield: there flowered in first blush the glories of preaching the True Faith to the nations, of martyrdom, and of holiness. They gave us the first joys of the fruits of salvation...”* *OD Introduction* In regards to “the True Faith”, it goes without saying that all twenty-three Eastern Catholic Churches submit to the doctrines and dogmas defined by the Catholic Church. Dogmas cannot be rejected by Catholics, be they Eastern or Western. As the Council Fathers during the Second Vatican Council taught in *Unitatis Redintegratio*: *“All in the Church must preserve unity in essentials. But let all, according to the gifts they have received enjoy a proper freedom, in their various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in their different liturgical rites, and even in their theological elaborations of revealed truth.”*

UR 4 Eastern Catholics may go about their theology in a way that is different from what we see in the Latin Church, but it is equally valid and never strays from the essentials of doctrine. Furthermore, this means that any Catholic of a *sui iuris* Church may receive the sacraments and attend the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass (or Divine Liturgy, Holy Qurbano, etc. as it is called in the East) at any *sui iuris* Church. Each

of the twenty-four Churches are fully Catholic; one can fulfill their obligation for Mass at any one of these Churches whenever they desire.

Pope of the Universal Church: This high praise for the Eastern Catholic Churches was continued in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, specifically in *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, promulgated by Pope St. Paul VI in 1964 (emphases added): ***“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 Fathers...***

“The Holy Catholic Church, which is the Mystical Body of Christ, is made up of the faithful who are organically united in the Holy Spirit by the same faith, the same sacraments and the same government and who, combining together into various groups which are held together by a hierarchy, form separate Churches or Rites. Between these there exists an admirable bond of union, such that the variety within the Church in no way harms its unity; rather it manifests it, for it is the mind of the Catholic Church that each individual Church or Rite should retain its traditions whole and entire and likewise that it should adapt its way of life to the different needs of time and place.”***These individual Churches, whether of the East or the West, although they differ somewhat among themselves in... liturgy, ecclesiastical discipline, and spiritual heritage, are, nevertheless, each as much as the others, entrusted to the pastoral government of the Roman Pontiff, the divinely appointed successor of St. Peter in primacy over the universal Church.”***

OE 1-3 The Six Rites: We see here that the words “rite” and “Church” pop up quite a few times. What are the differences between these terms? The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) put it pretty succinctly in 1999: *“We have been accustomed to speaking of the Latin (Roman or Western) Rite or the Eastern Rites to designate these different Churches. However... we ought to speak, not of rites, but of Churches. Canon 112 of the Code of Canon Law uses the phrase ‘autonomous ritual Churches’ to designate the various Churches.”* Eastern Catholics in the United States, 4 The 1990 Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches clearly defines the difference between “rite” and “church”:

“Canon 27 – A group of Christian faithful united by a hierarchy according to the norm of law which the supreme authority of the Church expressly or tacitly recognizes as sui iuris is called in this Code a Church sui iuris. “Canon 28 – A rite is the liturgical, theological, spiritual and disciplinary patrimony, culture and circumstances of history of a distinct people, by which its own manner of living the faith is manifested in each Church sui iuris.” Below is a list of the six rites of the Catholic Church, followed by which *sui iuris* Churches are contained within them.

Latin Rite

Latin (or Roman) Catholic Church

Alexandrian Rite

Coptic Catholic Church

Eritrean Catholic Church

Ethiopian Catholic Church

West Syrian (or Antiochene) Rite

Maronite Catholic Church

Syriac Catholic Church

Syro-Malankara Catholic Church

Bulgarian Greek Catholic Church

Byzantine Church of Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro

Greek Byzantine Catholic Church

Hungarian Greek Catholic Church

Italo-Albanian Catholic Church

Macedonian Catholic Church

Melkite Greek Catholic Church

Romanian Catholic Church

Russian Catholic Church

Armenian Rite

Armenian Catholic Church

East Syrian (or Chaldean) Rite

Chaldean Catholic Church

Syro-Malabar Catholic Church

Constantinopolitan (or Byzantine) Rite

Albanian Catholic Church

Belarusian Catholic Church

Ruthenian Catholic Church (also known as the Byzantine Catholic Church in America)

Slovak Catholic Church

Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church

Repairing the Great Schism: We can see that each of these Churches come from distinct cultural backgrounds, and from all corners of the earth, yet each of these twenty-four Churches all profess the same Catholic Faith. How wonderful that our holy Catholic Church has such a multitude of traditions (small “t”) while keeping the same unbroken Tradition (big “T”) from apostolic times! After this primer, we will be following up with a series of essays detailing each of the five Eastern liturgical rites and their respective Churches. However, this being an introduction, we would be remiss if we did not briefly mention how the Eastern Catholic Churches relate to the Orthodox Churches. When the Great Schism occurred in 1054, the Church was splintered, but over time parts of these Churches came back into communion with the Catholic Church. Future essays will detail when these reunions happened. While we still await that happy day of full reunion, we can rejoice that relations between East and West today is not as fractured as it was in the eleventh century.

Mutually Complementary Theology: But as was mentioned above, many of the Eastern Catholic Churches have traditions (small “t”) that differ from the Latin Catholic Church. Of course, all the Eastern Catholic Churches recognize the timeless Tradition (big “T”) of the Catholic Church, such as the seven sacraments, the primacy of the pope, and the doctrine and dogmas defined by the Magisterium of the Catholic Church. Still, the Eastern Catholic Churches are exhorted to retain their own theological understandings of doctrine (e.g., Mary’s Assumption) and to express it in the way they have received from their bishops and teachers of blessed memory. In *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the Council Fathers noted the following: *“What has just been said about the lawful variety that can exist in the Church must also be taken to apply to the differences in theological expression of doctrine. In the study of revelation East and West have followed different methods, and have developed differently their understanding and confession of God’s truth. It is hardly surprising, then, if from time to time one tradition has come nearer to a full appreciation of some aspects of a mystery of revelation than the other, or has expressed it to better advantage. In such cases, these various theological expressions are to be considered often as mutually complementary rather than conflicting”*

UR 17 Valid Gifts and Traditions: Just what are some of these traditions? Briefly, as we’ll go into more detail later, these traditions include a married priesthood, or the use of leavened bread at the celebration of the Eucharist. Some of these Churches that use leavened bread (mostly in the Byzantine Rite) and even some that use unleavened bread as Latin Catholics do (i.e., the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church), distribute Holy Communion through intinction. Through intinction, the consecrated Host is placed in the chalice and is given together with the Precious Blood directly into the communicant’s mouth, often with a small, liturgical spoon. Other traditions include sacramentals such as prayer ropes or *chotki*, and different devotional prayers like the Jesus Prayer. These are all things that might seem a bit foreign to many Latin Catholics. However, as seen by the words of various popes, these liturgical traditions are all as equally valid, and to the faithful’s benefit, as are traditional Latin devotions. Pope St. John Paul II said it best, that “the Church must breathe with her two lungs” (*Ut Unum Sint* 54). The East and West are part of the same Body. Therefore, the entire Church should appreciate and respect the valid gifts and traditions that are breathed from both traditions.

The Church’s Universality: St. John Paul elaborated further in his 1995 apostolic letter Orientale Lumen (emphasis added): *“Since, in fact, we believe that the venerable and ancient tradition of the Eastern Churches is an integral part of the heritage of Christ’s Church, the first need for Catholics is to be familiar with that tradition, so as to be nourished by it and to encourage the process of unity in the best way possible for each. “Our Eastern Catholic brothers and sisters are very conscious of being the living bearers of this tradition, together with our Orthodox brothers and sisters. The members of the Catholic Church of the Latin tradition must also be fully acquainted with this treasure and thus feel, with the Pope, a passionate longing that the full manifestation of the Church’s catholicity be restored to the Church and to the world, expressed not by a single tradition, and still less by one community in opposition to the other; and that we too may be granted a full taste of the divinely revealed and undivided heritage of the universal Church which is preserved and grows in the life of the Churches of the East as in those of the West...”*

OL 1-2 *"It has been stressed several times that the full union of the Catholic Eastern Churches with the Church of Rome which has already been achieved must not imply a diminished awareness of their own authenticity and originality. Wherever this occurred, the Second Vatican Council has urged them to rediscover their full identity, because they have 'the right and the duty to govern themselves according to their own special disciplines. "...[C]onversion is... required of the Latin Church, that she may respect and fully appreciate the dignity of Eastern Christians, and accept gratefully the spiritual treasures of which the Eastern Catholic Churches are the bearers, to the benefit of the entire Catholic communion; that she may show concretely, far more than in the past, how much she esteems and admires the Christian East and how essential she considers its contribution to the full realization of the Church's universality."*

OL 21 Stay Tuned: Throughout this series, we will explore much more in-depth what "spiritual treasures" these Eastern Catholic Churches gift to the universal Catholic Church. The Church is One, but the diversity that we find within it is truly something to be celebrated and cherished by all Catholics.