

OUR CHURCH'S MANY NAMES

In our contemporary culture, it is usual to be precise about names. Businesses have corporate titles, musical and literary compositions have copywrited designations, all of which are protected by law. Legal documents confer specific names on individuals and to change one's name is a matter for the courts.

This is, of course, a fairly recent development in history, chiefly in the Western world. In the Middle East as our Church developed there was a much greater fluidity in the use of names. In addition there is even a difference in the terminology employed in the Middle East today vs. that which we use in this country.

In the Western world today our Church is called **Melkite Greek Catholic** (Grec Melchite Catholique), as is explained below. In the Middle East we are generally known as *Room Katuleek*, literally “Roman Catholic”, just as those whom we call Antiochian or Greek Orthodox here are known as *Room Orthodox* (“Roman Orthodox”) there. However the Rome they are referring to in these titles is not the Rome in Italy, but Constantinople, which the ancients called New Rome. Those whom we call Roman Catholics here are known as *La-teen* (Latins) overseas.

This often causes confusion when immigrants arrive from the Middle East and, with a literal translation, speak of themselves as Roman Catholics when they actually mean *Room Katuleek*. It is also confusing for others who come to our churches and are confronted with the multitude of names our Church uses. It is to help clarify some of this confusion that the following definitions are offered.

MELKITE

This term comes from the Semetic words for king, “*melko*” or “*melek*”. The king in this case was the Byzantine emperor who supported the teachings of the council of Chalcedon, held in 451. The opponents of this council, most of whom were in the Middle East, called its supporters Royalists (*malikiyeen*). So the name, which today refers to the Byzantine Catholics of the Middle East, originally was an insult aimed at all Christians, both Eastern and Western, who supported the Council of Chalcedon.

GREEK (“ROOM” IN ARABIC)

This word refers to the spiritual tradition of the Greek Fathers which our Church follows. At the time of Christ, Greek was the spoken language in the major cities of the Middle East. The New Testament and the writings of the most important Church Fathers were composed in Greek. In contrast, people in the rural areas spoke Aramaic or Syriac, the historic language of the Chaldean, Maronite and Syriac Churches. Only after the Muslim conquest of the Middle East did Arabic become the universal language of this area.

CATHOLIC

This word means universal. When we say that the Church is Catholic we mean that it teaches universally and completely the full Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. In contrast, sects stress one doctrine and exclude another.

Using this word to describe the historic Church is usually credited to St. Ignatius of Antioch who employed it in the second century. Thus the Greek-speaking Christians of the Middle East were the first to be called Catholics.

And so to say that we are *Melkite Greek Catholics* means that we are a Church which:

- Is in the fulness of the Gospel (Catholic);
- Follows the Traditions of the Greek Fathers; and
- Is in harmony with the Chalcedonian teachings.

There are a number of other names associated with our heritage, although they are not part of the official name of our Church. These are:

BYZANTINE

This word refers to the city of “New Rome” mentioned above. Originally known as Byzantium, it is chiefly known in history as Constantinople, the “city of Constantine”. Its present name is Istanbul, the Turkish pronunciation of the Greek words for “in the city”. Our Church follows the ritual of the Great Church of Constantinople for the Divine Liturgy.

ANTIOCHIAN

At the time the Christian Church began, Antioch was the capital of the Roman province of “the East” (Anatolia). It was the principal economic center of the entire Middle East, as it was at the crossroads of trade routes connecting Europe and Asia. For these reasons it quickly became the center of Church life in the area

as well. Although the city was destroyed by an earthquake in the seventh century, the chief hierarchs of Churches in the Middle East still bear the title patriarch of Antioch and all the East.

For the first thousand years of Christian history, the Greek Church in the Middle East employed the Antiochian ritual, which greatly resembles the liturgy of the Syrian or Maronite Churches. The only difference was in language: they prayed in Syriac and we in Greek. During the Middle Ages, especially as a result of the Muslim conquest and the Crusades, the Greek Christians of Antioch were drawn closer and closer to their brethren in Constantinople. For many years the Antiochian patriarchs and bishops actually lived in Constantinople and were influenced by its usages. In time the Byzantine liturgical tradition became the accepted practice among the Antiochian Greeks and it is that worship tradition we follow today.

ORTHODOX

This word literally means “right glorifying”. Like the term Melkite, it was first used to describe those who remained faithful to the true faith in the theological controversies of the early centuries. One of the most ancient and respected ways of describing the Church and its people, it is – along with the word Catholic – the term usually used in our liturgical texts to refer to the Church.

In modern usage, the term is employed as a specific designation by two major groups of Eastern Christians. In the first group are those Byzantines of various ethnic jurisdictions (e.g., Albanian, Bulgarian, Carpatho-Russian, Greek, Middle Eastern, Romanian, Russian,

Serbian) who accept the Council of Chalcedon and are generally referred to as “Eastern Orthodox”. The second group includes those non-Byzantines (e.g., Armenians, Copts, Ethiopians, Syrians) who do not follow Chalcedon and are usually called “Oriental Orthodox”. Since what divides them is precisely the acceptance of the teachings of an ecumenical council, it is evident that these two groups of Churches are not in communion with one another.

EASTERN

Based on Mediterranean geography as seen from a European perspective, those Churches whose heritage sprang from the Eastern Mediterranean area have been called Eastern, while those whose heritage is that of western Europe have been called Western. It is interesting to note that those Churches of Syriac or Assyrian tradition consider Byzantines as Westerners!

UNIATE

Originally used in eastern Europe, this is a derogatory term used to refer to Byzantine (Greek) Catholics. Literally it means those who are living in an “*unia*”, or dependence for favors on the Church of Rome.

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