

SIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN MELKITE HISTORY



he Melkite story goes back a long way: to the very dawn of Christian history. The Melkites, or Byzantine (Greek) Catholics of Middle Eastern origin, are descendants of the early Christians of Antioch (Syria).

Today the term Melkite is used to refer to those Catholics whose ancestry is Middle Eastern and who follow the Byzantine Tradition in worship, theology, and spirituality. As Rome was the most powerful city in early Western Europe and spread her manner of worship throughout the supponing area, so too the Greek capital, Constantinople (originally called Byzantium), spread her traditions and customs to the countries closest to her.

MAJOR HISTORICAL EVENTS



hroughout the almost 2000 year history of Christianity in the Middle East there have been a number of events which have contributed to the making of the Melkite Church as it exists today. Among the most important are the following:

C. 33 AD –

The Christian Church is founded by Jesus Christ as is recorded in the Gospel of Saint Matthew: *“...upon this rock I will build My Church”* (Matthew 16:18).

Fifty days after Christ's resurrection from the dead and ten days after His ascension, the apostles and disciples were gathered together in Jerusalem as mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles. *“And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind ... And there appeared to them tongues as of fire... And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.”* After this time began the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Saint Peter established the Church in Antioch (Syria), Saint Mark in Alexandria (Egypt) and Saint James in Jerusalem. Our Church dates back to these foundations. It was also in Antioch that the followers of Jesus were first called Christians (cf. Acts 11:26).

110 AD –

This marks the first recorded use of the words **Catholic Church**, employed by Saint Ignatius of Antioch to distinguish the Christians who adhered to the Church founded by Jesus Christ from those who joined the churches of sectarians.

325 AD –

A meeting of bishops is held in Nicaea. Here the groundwork is prepared for what eventually evolved into an order of precedence among the five major Churches of early Christendom: Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem.

451 AD –

A dispute about who Jesus was is settled by a meeting of bishops held at Chalcedon. The Byzantine Emperor and the assembled bishops agreed that Jesus was both “true God and true man”. Those who followed the decision of this council were called Melkites or “King's Men” because they accepted the correct understanding of Jesus Christ which was shared by the Emperor.

622 AD –

Muslim conquests in the Middle East put Christians in a secondary position and begin a gradual erosion of their numbers and strength.

1054 AD –

Rome and Constantinople separate for a variety of reasons, political and cultural as well as doctrinal. This separation from Rome gradually takes hold throughout the other Eastern Churches.

During this period the Byzantine Emperors slowly extended their domination and influence. Byzantine models in ritual and administration become the norm for all Melkites.

1071 AD –

The Seljuk Turks crush the Byzantine army and drive the Greek Christians from the Middle East.

12–13TH CENTURIES AD –

Latin Crusaders invade the East to re-capture the holy places from Muslim control. Roman Catholic bishops are imposed upon Antioch and Jerusalem.

13TH CENTURY AD –

Mongolian invasions of the Latin West and the Byzantine East drain the resources of Christendom. Muslims reassert their dominance in the Levant.

1453 AD –

Constantinople falls to the Ottoman Turks. Their expansion throughout the East continues.

At a later date, by decree of the Ottoman Sultan, all Greeks in the Middle East are made subject to the Patriarch of Constantinople. Byzantine bishops take control at Antioch and Jerusalem.

1724 AD –

Patriarch Cyril VI of Antioch, due to the efforts of Archbishop Eftimios (Saifi) of Saida and Tyre, affirms the union with Rome which had existed between East and West during the first thousand years of Christianity.

From this time the Melkite Church of Antioch is formally divided between Greek Orthodox (those not in union with Rome) and Greek Catholics (those in union with Rome). The term Melkite begins to be associated exclusively with the Catholics.

1772 AD –

The Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch of Antioch, Theodosius VI, extends his jurisdiction over Melkite Catholics in the Churches of Alexandria and Jerusalem.

19TH CENTURY AD –

Melkite Greek Catholics begin to emigrate to North and South America, Australia and Africa.

1966 AD –

An exarchate for Melkites in the United States is established with Bishop Justin (Najmy) as the first exarch. A similar jurisdiction is set up in Brazil under Bishop Elias (Cueter).

1977 AD –

The American exarchate becomes a full eparchy (diocese) under Archbishop Joseph (Tawil). In the next few years bishops of various ranks are appointed for Canada, Argentina, Australia and Western Europe.

WHY ARE THERE EASTERN CATHOLIC CHURCHES IN AMERICA?

It was natural for the first Eastern Catholic immigrants to want to worship in the fashion of their homelands. And so their Churches followed them to the shores of America. In those early days, Roman Catholics noticed many unfamiliar features about these new arrivals. Their customs and languages were different, their churches unusual, their ceremonies unfamiliar. Accustomed as American Roman Catholics had been to standing alone amid the widespread Protestant rejection of Catholicism, they were unable to see anything Catholic in what was not Roman as well. Today with better education, Roman Catholics understand their Eastern Catholic brethren better and often find their ways of life and approaches to God meaningful and helpful.

MISSION FOR TODAY

Any Church exists to bring its people to the Lord. There are many for whom the style of Christian living practiced in our Church is more compatible than contemporary Western forms. For these people the Melkite Church can serve a very important function: it can be their way to God.

Our presence is also a witness to the universality of Christ's Church. In us Roman Catholics can see others, as Catholic as themselves, expressing the faith in different forms, with different traditions and understandings. They come to realize that the Catholic Church includes far more than the one tradition in which they were raised.

To the extent that we are true to ourselves, we can exist as a living example that one can be faithful to a different heritage and yet be in communion with Rome. To the degree that we feel the need to adapt our ways to Roman practices, we show that such fidelity and communion with Rome are incompatible. In either case we exist as an example, for good or bad, of what other Churches can expect if they were to achieve union with the Church of Rome.

The fruit of our long history of joy and suffering must be a passion for unity and love for all mankind. We stand today as Christians seeking to bring ourselves and others closer to God in the faith given to us by the apostles. As Catholics of the Byzantine tradition we stand as landmarks in the journey of the Churches toward full communion. We have a special responsibility given by God to show our faithfulness to the historic Catholic faith as expressed in our own unique heritage so that we might in this way contribute to the healing of our fragmented world and the reunion of the fractured Body of Christ, the divided Christian Church.

“One prime source of spiritual assimilation for Eastern Catholics has been the phenomenon known as ‘latinization,’ the copying by Eastern Catholics of the theology, spiritual practices and liturgical customs of the Latin Church. Latinization implies either the superiority of the Roman rite — the position denounced by Vatican II — or the desirability of the assimilation process, an opinion with which we cannot agree. Not only is it unnecessary to adopt the customs of the Latin rite to manifest one’s Catholicism, it is an offense against the unity of the Church. As we have said above, to do this would be to betray our ecumenical mission and, in a real sense, to betray the Catholic Church ...

To be open to others, to be able to take our rightful place on the American Church scene, we must start by being fully ourselves. It is only in our distinctiveness that we make any kind of contribution to the larger society. It is only by being what we are that we retain a reason for existence at all.”

Archbishop Joseph Tawil
The Courage to be Ourselves

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