

Welcome to the Maronite Church

The Catholic Church

As Christians went forth from Jerusalem they encountered different traditions, cultures, customs and languages, soon the Church became a communion of Churches united in love with each other, looking to the See of Peter in Rome as the first among them all. The Gospel of Christ has reached the four corners of the world.

Jesus prayed for their unity, “that they all may be one” (John 17:21). For Catholics united with the Pope in Rome, there is already an amazing unity even within the reality of cultural diversity. The Catholic Church, comprised of **twenty-one** Eastern Churches and **one** Western Church, is a communion of Churches, with the Pope as the visible head, “gathered in the one spirit, breathing as though with two lungs - of the east and of the west - and burning with the love of Christ in one heart - having two ventricles” (*Sacri Canones*; Pope John Paul II).

One of the Eastern Catholic Churches is the Maronite Church. She has Her own hierarchy composed of a Patriarch who is Her father and head, and over forty Bishops who shepherd the many Eparchies (Dioceses) in Lebanon, the Middle East and throughout the world. The Patriarch governs the Church in a synodal manner with his body of bishops as is customary in the Eastern Churches.

Eastern Catholic Churches

There are six major traditions of the Catholic Church:

1. Alexandrian
2. Antiochene
3. Armenian
4. Chaldean
5. Constantinopolitan (Byzantine)
6. Latin (Roman)

Each Catholic Church practices a common faith according to one of the six major traditions. The Maronite Church follows the Antiochene Tradition.

All Churches within the communion of Catholic Churches share the same:

- ◆ Dogmatic Faith
- ◆ Seven Mysteries (Sacraments)
- ◆ Moral Teachings
- ◆ Unity with the Pope of Rome

All Catholics believe the same truths of the faith yet worship differently. One could say they share the same *essence* of faith, but have a different *expression* of that faith. Each Church embraces its own culture and tradition to express Her faith in Jesus the Risen Lord.

Each of the Catholic Churches:

- Encompasses a unique liturgy, theology, spirituality and discipline;
- Is characterized by Her own cultural and linguistic tradition;
- Is guided by a Patriarch, Major Archbishop, Metropolitan or other Hierarch, who along with their Synod of Bishops are in full communion with the Pope, the Successor of Saint Peter in Rome.

The Maronite Church

The Maronite Church dates back to the early Christians of Antioch where “they were called Christians for the first time” (Acts 11:26). She still uses as Her liturgical language, Syriac, a dialect of the Aramaic that Jesus Himself spoke, and takes Her name from the hermit-priest, Saint Maron, who died in 410 AD.

Within a few years after Saint Maron’s death, over 800 monks adopted his way of life and became known as the Maronites. Later, the Muslim invasions (7th -10th Centuries), coupled with conflicts from within the Byzantine Empire, caused the Maronites to flee the plains of Syria and their churches and monasteries to the natural protection of the mountains of Lebanon where they first lived in caves and grottos, and then later built small churches and monasteries. By 687, Maronites organized themselves around Saint John Maron, whom they elected Patriarch of the vacant See of Antioch, and thus developed as a distinct Church within the Catholic Church.

The Maronite Church has been enriched by three centers of learning and culture:

- Antioch:** A city in West Syria (now Turkey) that served as a center of commerce and education and was known for its Greek and Syriac culture. Antioch gave the Maronite Church much of her unique liturgical life.
- Edessa:** A prominent city in ancient Mesopotamia, which had a Semitic culture and influenced the prayers and hymns of the Maronite Church. It was also the home of Saint Ephrem, Doctor of the Church, who gave the Maronite Church much of Her poetry and prayer.
- Lebanon:** The land that provided a safe haven to establish a stable monastic and parish life, as well as schools to educate the children of the close knit and devout Maronite families. Maronites have been a positive force for the development of Lebanon as a country of peaceful coexistence for all peoples. Maronites now live in many cultures, their Mother Church is in Lebanon and daughter communities exist throughout the world.

Five Distinguishing Marks Of The Maronite Church

The Maronite Patriarchal Assembly (2003-2004), made up of over 500 Maronite participants – clergy, religious and laity - from throughout the world, described the identity of the Maronite Church by five distinguishing marks:

- ◆ First and foremost Maronites are **Antiochene** – where Christ’s followers “were called Christians for the first time” (Acts 11:26). Maronites share an historical, liturgical and spiritual heritage with all the other Catholic and Orthodox Antiochene Churches. Maronites are also heirs of Syriac cultural and religious heritage, whose language, poetry, and hymnody were the means used to express the mystery that God is beyond all descriptions yet has come close to us in Christ.
- ◆ Second, Maronites are **Chalcedonian**, meaning they were staunch supporters of the Council of Chalcedon, convened in 451 A.D., which taught that Jesus was *true God and true man*. In this formula,

Maronites found a balance and way of life that placed them forever in the communion of the universal Church.

- ◆ Third, the Maronite Church is **Patriarchal** and **Monastic**. Saint Maron was a hermit-priest. The first Maronites were monks, priests and laity associated with the monasteries of Saint Maron in the 5th - 8th centuries. Her first Patriarch, Saint John Maron, was chosen from among the monks. Maronites have a cherished history known for an ascetical life of sacrifice and devotion.
- ◆ Fourth, the Maronite Church is known for Her love and devotion to the See of Peter in **Rome**. This relationship has allowed Maronites to fully express the Catholic faith held from the beginning, and at the same time be part of the balance between East and West.
- ◆ Fifth, the Maronite Church is tied to **Lebanon**, Her spiritual homeland and the land of Her Patriarch and people.

The Maronite Church At A Glance

The command of Jesus continues to find partial fulfillment in the missionary work of the Maronite Church: “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature” (Mk 16:15). Today there are millions of Maronite Catholics throughout the world. The Patriarch, in communion with the Pope of Rome, resides in *Bkerke*, Lebanon, with a summer residence in *Dimane*.

Patriarchal See: *Bkerke*, Lebanon

Eparchies: Argentina
Australia
Brazil
Canada
Cyprus
Egypt and Sudan
Holy Land and Jordan
Lebanon (13)
Mexico and Venezuela
Syria (3)
United States (2)

Parishes Without Maronite Eparchies:

Europe: Belgium, England, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland

Africa: South Africa, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Togo, Nigeria

Latin America: Uruguay, Santo Domingo, Colombia

Arab Countries: United Arab Emirates, Kuwait

Seminaries:

Ain Saade, *Ghazir* and *Karm Sadde* in Lebanon;
Washington, D.C., in the United States;

Maronite religious orders and communities have houses of formation in Rome and in Lebanon. The Maronite College in Rome houses student priests who seek advance degrees.

The United States is home to two Maronite Eparchies with over eighty (80) parishes and missions, along with a Seminary, Monastery, Convent and Shrine to Our Lady of Lebanon.

Monks, Religious and Consecrated Life

Religious life, in all its forms, was and still is an important part of the Maronite Church. Hermetic and communal monastic life accompanied the birth of the Maronite Church from the beginning, thus linking the history of the Church to the monks of the Monastery of Saint Maron.

Toward the end of the seventeenth century, religious life became more organized, new orders were founded and their mission expanded. Monks, nuns and religious priests and brothers serve in schools, universities, hospitals, parishes, missions, orphanages, and nursing homes in Lebanon, the Middle East, and in many places throughout the world.

Today there are several religious orders and congregations for men and women numbering hundreds of religious. Some are of Pontifical right, some Patriarchal and some are Eparchial, which means they are dependent upon the Pope, Patriarch or Eparchial Bishop respectively. Each order and congregation has its own rule of life and focuses on living the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience according to the *charisma* of their founders.

Theology, Spirituality and Liturgy

A monastic spirit permeates Maronite prayer and liturgical life making asceticism and sacrifice an important part of the relationship with God. The effects of this spirituality are seen in the Maronite family, the first school of love where each finds his or her own vocation to love God and serve others.

Since all language about God is limited by finite human nature, poetry is a natural means for the Maronite Church to express the proper awe and humble reverence due to God in worship.

In the Maronite Church, the celebration of the Eucharist is known by several names: *Qurbono* (Syriac), *Quddas* (Arabic), Sacrifice of the Mass, Divine Liturgy, and the Service of the Holy Mysteries.

In this celebration, Christ is offered to the Father for our salvation and we also offer ourselves, with Him, as a spiritual sacrifice. By the actions and Words of Institution of the priest and the Invocation of the Holy Spirit, bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, the sacrifice at the altar is made holy, and so are we.

Before the Holy Mysteries are celebrated, the priest and people prepare themselves. The priest, deacon or subdeacon prepares the bread and wine on a side altar. The Divine Liturgy begins, first with the *Service of the Word* and then the *Service of the Eucharist (Anaphora)*.

Service of the Word

The Service of the Word stems from the ancient Jewish Synagogue service. It is composed of hymns,

psalms, the burning of incense, Scripture readings and a homily.

A unique feature of the Service of the Word in the Maronite Church is the *Hoosoyo* or Prayer of Forgiveness. During this time the priest or deacon incenses the altar, cross and all present, as a prayer is recited or chanted, recalling God's mercy to sinful man in times past, and asking His mercy again for today. The *Trisagion* (*Qadishat*) is then chanted in Syriac, followed by three verses of poetry referring to the feast. Then a passage from the New Testament is read and the Gospel is proclaimed.

The structure of the Service of the Word remains the same for every Divine Liturgy but the prayers themselves change to reflect the feast. These prayers serve as great catechetical texts.

Service of the Eucharist

After the Profession of Faith, the Eucharistic prayer or *Anaphora* begins. The bread and wine are processed to the main altar where the priest prepares to offer the sacrifice. He prays for God's pardon for himself and all the faithful. He offers the gifts, prays for the needs of the people and then extends to them a sign of peace from the altar. Peace is exchanged from the altar without words by a simple gesture of hands open to receive and hands joined to give. It takes place before the sacrifice is offered in keeping with Jesus' warning recorded in the Gospel of Matthew: "Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift." (Mt 5:23-24)

Then, a prayer of praise to the Holy Trinity is offered and the Eucharistic narrative of the Last Supper is chanted in Syriac. During this time, by the word of the priest and the invocation of the Holy Spirit which follows, the bread and wine are transformed into Sacred Mysteries: the Body and Blood of Christ. The people sing *Kyrie Eleison* (Lord have mercy), and the consecratory part of the *Anaphora* is complete.

The intercessions for the intentions of the Church and world are then offered. This is followed by the Breaking of the Body of Christ, the Signing of the Chalice, and the Elevation of both species as the congregation stands.

The "Our Father" is prayed with hands extended. A prayer of forgiveness follows as all bow their heads before the Sacred Mysteries. The faithful are then invited to communion with the words: "Holy gifts for the holy". The Sacred Mysteries are then offered to the faithful who receive the Body and Blood of Christ on the tongue by intinction.

After Communion, prayers of thanksgiving are then followed by the last blessing. The final prayer of the *Anaphora* is one of farewell to the altar. The priest prays silently, "*Remain in Peace Holy Altar of God, I hope to return to you in peace...I know not whether I will return to you again to offer sacrifice...*" This special prayer reminds the priest of his own mortality and just how sacred divine communion actually is.

The Liturgical Year

During the year, the different seasons celebrate the moments of the saving plan of Christ, following every aspect of His life and ministry. The Liturgical Year begins the first Sunday of November with a consecration and rededication of the Church.

The Seasons are:

- ◆ Glorious Birth
- ◆ Epiphany
- ◆ Lent

- ◆ Holy Week
- ◆ Resurrection
- ◆ Pentecost
- ◆ Holy Cross

Special rituals accompany each of the feasts. The faithful are invited during each liturgical celebration to conform their lives to that of Christ and His Church.

Music and Art

The core of the present day Divine Liturgy dates back to before the 5th century. The monastic spirit of asceticism and simplicity penetrates the entire Divine Liturgy - its prayers, gestures, music, art and architecture.

The purpose of Maronite art, music and ritual is worship of the Trinity and repentance from a life of self-centeredness to a life centered on God. In the words of the 10th century Syriac monk Rabban Isho, when told of the beautiful ceremonies and music of other churches, he said: “unless it brings one to repentance, what good is it?”

Music animates the words of the prayers and serves as a teaching tool and memory aid. Saint Ephrem, James of Serugh and others greatly influenced the ancient simple chant still used today.

Syriac art, the oldest source being the *Rabbula* Gospel Book (560 AD), portrays human figures, and manifests them with divine mystery. The great churches of ancient Syria were beautifully adorned. Today, however, they are in ruins. The small chapels and monasteries of the mountains of Lebanon, with their arches, ceilings, walls of hand-cut stone, and their modest wall paintings, became the heirs of this artistic tradition.

Rituals

Earthly things take on a spiritual significance during special feasts and rituals throughout the liturgical year. Water, for instance, is blessed in various ways to give it a spiritual dimension.

At Epiphany water is blessed with **a lighted coal** to signify the fire of the Spirit who entered the Jordan River at Christ’s baptism.

At Pentecost water is blessed with **the priest’s breath** to signify the Divine Breath over the waters at creation and at the first Pentecost.

At the Holy Cross water is blessed with **a hand cross** to signify the divine power that flows from the saving cross.

Funeral Ritual

Prayers of the funeral liturgy (*Ginnaz*) take place in the home or the funeral parlor, the Church and finally the cemetery. These prayers are chanted in Syriac, Arabic and English to enable the faithful, the deceased and all in the ‘communion of saints’, to enter into a dialogue with God. The departed are remembered as they make their way home.

Death, the end of our earthly pilgrimage, is the beginning of a passage from life in this world to life in the

next. The Mother of God, our Patroness, in both worlds, is beseeched to offer safe passage for the departed as they begin their journey to paradise.

Mary

The Maronite Church has always been a Marian Church. From the beginning, Maronites have claimed a special devotion to the Mother of God. In the small villages, homes, mountains, hills and streets of Lebanon are found shrines of all types to Our Lady. Hymns, feast days and the liturgical life of the Maronite Church clearly express this great devotion to the Blessed Mother.

The common weekday Divine Liturgy for Wednesdays honors Mary:

*“O radiant Lily and fragrant Rose,
The aroma of your holiness fills the whole universe.
Pray for us, O Mother of God, that we may be the sweet perfume of Christ,
Reaching throughout the whole world....”*

Our Lady of Lebanon, pray for us, and enable your Maronite Church to be an everlasting gift for the universal Church and for the world.

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For more information on the Maronite Church in the United States please write the Eparchy of Saint Maron at 109 Remsen Street, Brooklyn, NY 11201; www.stmaron.org; or the Eparchy of Our Lady of Lebanon, Pastoral Center, 1021 South 10th Street, St. Louis, MO 63104; www.usamaronite.org For information on the Maronite Church worldwide please logon to the official website of the Maronite Patriarch: www.bkerke.org.lb

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