

“What Do You Mean You Are a ‘Maronite Catholic’?”

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Art Credit: *Paul Saad*



I was raised as a Latin Rite Catholic. I did not hear that there was such a thing as the “Eastern Rite” until I was about 20 years of age. I was attending Christian Brothers College (now Christian Brothers University) in Memphis, Tennessee, and I took a concentration of courses in Religion and Culture (one short of a minor). My father, who was not Catholic, and I were talking about religion one day when he mentioned the Eastern Rite.

Like many Catholics I have met since then, I asked what is often the question when someone mentions Eastern Rite churches: “You mean Orthodox?” My mother, who had been a Catholic since she turned 11 years of age, echoed my question.

“No,” my father corrected us. “I mean Roman Catholic, Eastern Rite.”

Fast-forward thirty-three years, to 2011. I am 53 years of age. I am attending a Latin Rite parish in Austin, Texas. I am not happy there. I did not have any kind of an issue with a priest, or congregant, I just simply was not happy. And I began to consider my options. My father’s mention of the Eastern Rite came back to me. I talked to a friend who told me she had attended a Maronite parish when she lived in Boston.

I got online immediately and I found Our Lady’s Maronite Catholic Church in Austin. The following Sunday, which happened to be the Sunday before Memorial Day, 2011, I attended my first Divine Liturgy at a Maronite Church.

My friends, I was absolutely enraptured. The church is beautiful, filled with icons of Our Lord Jesus Christ, of our Mother Mary, of St. Maron (from where we get the term “Maronite”), and of one particular saint I had never heard of before but who was to become my favorite in a very short period of time – Saint Sharbel. Incense was used during the Liturgy (I really like that). When I heard the pastor, Msgr. Donald Sawyer, pronounce the words of consecration in Aramaic, the language that Jesus spoke, I felt much closer to the Lord. Perhaps the Aramaic of today is not pronounced exactly like it was in Jesus’ time (I wouldn’t know), but I knew that what was being said was much, much, MUCH closer to what Our Lord would have said than English, or even Latin or Greek.

I asked Msgr. Don to accept me as a Maronite a short time later. And I would like to take this opportunity to share a few things about the Maronite Church (our Catholic Church is made up not of “rites” actually but separate churches which are in communion with Rome).

- The Maronite Church comes from the Antiochene Christian tradition. It was in Antioch that the word “Christian” was first used. St. Peter founded the Church of Antioch and the founding of this church is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles.
- St. James (the Lesser), the first bishop of Jerusalem, wrote the liturgy on which the Maronite liturgy is based. It came from him. Directly. Himself. In person (can you tell I’m impressed by this?). It retains more Jewish aspects than other liturgies in the Catholic Church. We Maronites use about 12 Anaphora (Eucharistic prayers) and the stress in our Eucharistic prayers is always on God’s mercy and love.

•Some Eastern Churches were not always in communion with Rome. Some were formed by schism and later came back to full communion with Rome. This is NOT the case for the Maronite Church. We Maronites have always been in communion with Rome.

•The word “Maronite”, again, comes from St. Maron, who lived as a Syriac Christian monk in the 5th century. St. Maron was known for his missionary work, healing and miracles, and his teachings.

So what's different?

Our liturgy, for one. As I mentioned earlier, parts of the liturgy are in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke.

Second, we do not kneel during the Divine Liturgy. Why? Because in the east, the way respect was shown to a person of importance was to stand, not kneel. And so we stand before Our Lord.

We do not give communion in the hand. The Maronite Catholic Church gives communion by intinction, which is dipping the host into the precious blood and then giving the communicant communion on the tongue.

Our liturgical cycle is somewhat different. For example, we Maronites have six (6) weeks of Advent, not four (4). We begin our liturgical year with the Consecration and Renewal of the Church, and then head into Advent, which we call the Season of Announcement, and in which each Sunday commemorates a particular happening in the season of Our Lord's birth: The Announcement to Zechariah; the Announcement (Annunciation) to the Virgin Mary; the Visitation to Elizabeth; Birth of John the Baptizer; Revelation to Joseph; Genealogy Sunday; and then the Glorious Birth of Our Lord.

We also have Holy Days which are not mandatory in other churches. For instance, we have the Feast of St. Maron, our founder, as a holy day of obligation. This falls on February 9.

We also don't normally move holy days which fall during the week to the next Sunday. Ascension Thursday is celebrated on Ascension Thursday; the Feast of the Dormition (Assumption of Mary) is celebrated on August 15 whenever that falls.

I would recommend to any and all – if you have never attended an Eastern Rite liturgy you should. It is a wonderful experience.

Let me end this blog entry with what I think is a slightly humorous anecdotal story. It illustrates how many still do not know about the Eastern Churches and their place in the Catholic Communion.

I serve as a Greeter at Our Lady's here in Austin. The job of a Greeter is, of course, to greet people who come to the church for Divine Liturgy, but also to help them with any questions they may have. Due to the location of Our Lady's in Austin, we get a lot of visitors who happen to be in town and are staying at a nearby hotel. We are often the closest Catholic Church.

One Sunday a very nice lady came to Divine Liturgy. A Latin Rite Catholic, she had a number of questions about the Maronite Church. I took a lot of time before and after the liturgy trying to help answer her questions. I showed her around the church, and pointed out to her the pictures of our Patriarch, Beshara Peter Rai, who is a cardinal of the Catholic Church and is in Lebanon; our Bishop of our Eparchy (diocese), A. Elias Zaidan, and next to them was hung on the wall a picture of the Holy Father, Pope Francis.

I walked out with her to the parking lot, continuing to answer questions. When we said our goodbyes, after all of this, she turned to me again and asked, “So, this really is a Catholic Church?”

It is indeed!