

The Catholic Church has Eastern and Western Rites

The Church seeks *unity* rather than *uniformity* among her Christian peoples

"Ummmm...What's a *Byzantine Catholic*?" "I don't want to seem ignorant, but what's the difference between Byzantine Catholics and Catholics?" "And where do the Orthodox come in?"

"Isn't the Catholic Church the same everywhere?" People invariably expect a reply in the affirmative and are really quite shocked to hear otherwise.

The Catholic Church *is*, most assuredly, one—in her beliefs and in her doctrines. But she manifests a marvelous diversity in her rituals, her ceremonies, her customs, her language; in short, her *rites* are *not* the same, but many.

With Jerusalem as the point of origin, Christianity spread east to Antioch, south to Alexandria, west to Rome, and north to Byzantium, which would become Constantinople. These centers became the 'launch pads' for the evangelization of neighboring regions reaching far beyond the Roman Empire.

Constantinople became the origin of Slavic Christianity, including Poland, Czechoslovakia, Rumania, Bulgaria, the former Yugoslavia, parts of Bavaria, Slavonia, Carinthia, Hungary, and eastern Germany (including Prussia and East Prussia).

Antioch spread its message toward what is now Iraq, Iran, and as far as India and China.

Jerusalem evangelized the 'Phoenician world' and Arabia.

Rome evangelized Western Europe and Iberia.

Alexandria had North Africa and the East Coast of Africa.

There are essentially two basic divisions in Christianity. Eastern Christianity and Western Christianity. Western Christianity consists of Latin Catholics (750 million)—some of whom are Roman Catholics—and Protestants. Eastern Christianity consists of Catholics of various Eastern Rites (200 million), and Orthodox (300 million).

The history of how the geographical divisions occurred begins with the elevation of the Emperor Diocletian (284-305) to the Imperial throne. Diocletian moved the seat of the Empire to a more central location, Byzantium, which he called 'New Rome' and which eventually came to be known as Constantinople, currently Istanbul. He reorganized the Empire for purposes of effective and efficient government. That division still survives today—a line drawn from roughly Copenhagen straight down to a point a little east of Trieste is the east/west division.

At the very beginning of the Christian era, there was no question of rites. You were a Christian, or you were not. Only following the schism of 1054 did the categories fall into the present-day mold. The Orthodox churches split from the Catholic Church over the issue of papal authority.

The two basic divisions of Eastern Rites and Western Rites, each further subdivided and fifteen or more variations that have grown up throughout the course of history are what make up the Catholic Church.

The Eastern Rites have three basic major subdivisions, based largely on origins: Alexandrian, Antiochene and Byzantine. Each of those will hold under its sway one or more of the following: Armenian, Chaldaean, Coptic, Georgian, Greek, Melkite, Maronite, Bulgarian, Serbian, Rumanian, Russian, Ruthenian, Malabar, Malankaran, West Syrian, Ethiopian, Ukrainian, Hungarian, East Syrian, and (possibly) American.

The Western Rites have under that heading the Latin Rites (Roman, Ambrosian, Gallican) and Western non-Latin (Mozarabic and Italo-Greek). The Mozarabic rite exists almost exclusively in Spain and uses Arabic as its liturgical language, and the Italo-Greek uses the Liturgies of the Byzantine Rite, but celebrates them in Latin or Italian, according to the time-honored custom of the Eastern Church's tendency to use the vernacular wherever possible. The Italo-Greek is classified as non-Latin, though it uses Latin, because its liturgy is essentially Byzantine in nature.

Most of the groups have counterparts among the Orthodox. These usually are larger than the Catholic segments.

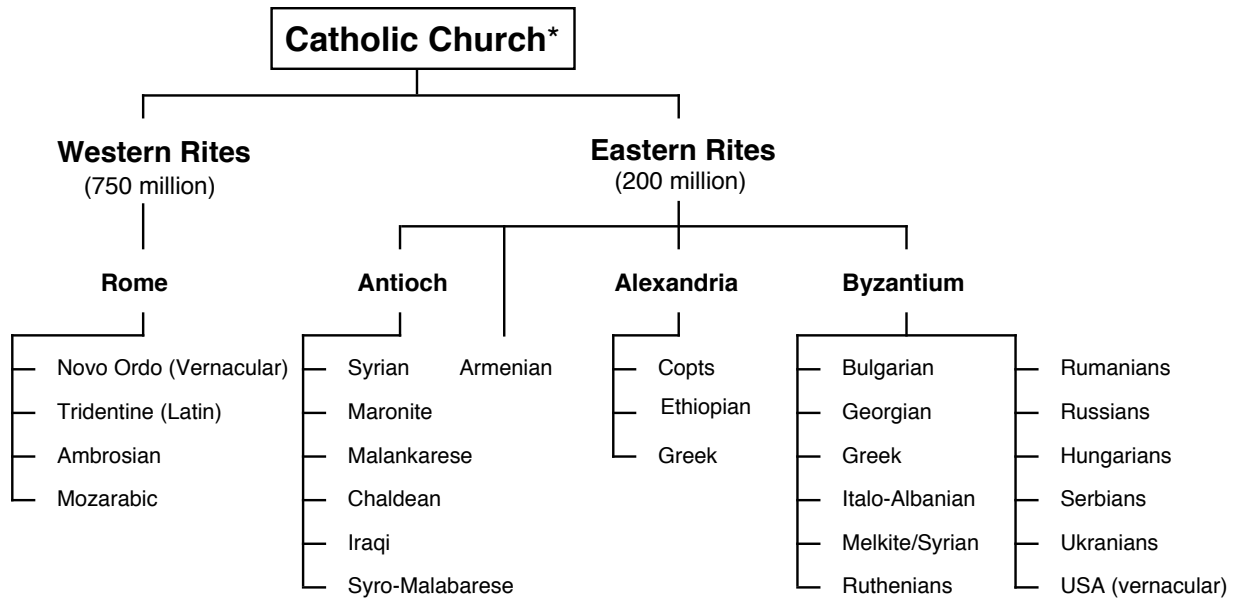
In the Catholic Church are such diverse and disparate groups as Armenian Catholics, Byzantine Catholics, Melkites, none of whom have *ever* used Latin in their liturgies. It is an irony of history that Pope John XXIII won the election to the Papacy by a small margin over the Armenian Patriarch, Cardinal Gregory Peter Agajanian. We nearly had an Eastern Catholic Pope in the 1960s.

Not only does the Church *permit* the existence of these rites, she *insists* that each has a *right* to exist, in the family of Catholicism, and that *all* of these are her rites. The Decree on the Eastern Churches from Vatican II speaks out loudly: "All Eastern rite members should know and be convinced that they can and should always preserve their lawful liturgical rites and their established way of life."

Listen again to the Second Vatican Council: "The Catholic Church holds in high esteem the institutions of the Eastern Churches, their liturgical rites, ecclesiastical traditions, and Christian Way of Life...."

So, it should be clear that *unity* rather than *uniformity* is what the Church seeks among her Christian peoples.

Deacon Lee Hunt, 1997



* There are 300 million Orthodox members who have not been in Communion with the Catholic Church since the schism of 1054; they do not believe in papal infallibility.