

EASTERN CATHOLICS IN AUSTRALIA



Eastern Catholics in Australia

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The Church as Mystery

In its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council described the nature of the Church and its encompassing mission.¹

Vatican II described the Church as a mystery. It is, as Pope Paul VI said, “a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God”.²

“The mystery of the Church is manifest in her very foundation, for the Lord Jesus inaugurated her by preaching the good news, that is the coming of God’s kingdom”³

“Vatican II situated the mystery of the Church in the mystery of God’s wisdom and goodness which draws the whole human family and indeed the whole of creation into unity with God. To this end God sent into the world Jesus, born of Mary the Virgin, who was raised up on the cross, entered into glory and poured out the Holy Spirit through whom he calls and draws into unity of faith, hope and love the people of the new Covenant which is the Church”.⁴

The Church as Community

“In order to establish his Church in every place until the end of the ages, Christ entrusted to the college of the Twelve to which he chose Peter as head, the office of teaching, sanctifying and governing the Church”.⁵ Vatican II presents the Church as the new People of God, uniting in itself, in all the richness of their diversity, men and women from all nations and all cultures.⁶

“Catholics hold the firm conviction that the one Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church ‘which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him’”.⁷

We “confess that the entirety of revealed truth, of sacraments, and of ministry that Christ gave for the building up of his Church and the carrying out of its mission is found within the Catholic communion of the Church”.⁸

The Church a Communion of Churches

The Universal Catholic Church is as Vatican II taught a communion of Churches”.⁹ It “is made up of the faithful who are organically united in the Holy Spirit by the same faith, the same sacraments and the same governance. They

¹ L.G, n.1

² Pope Paul VI, Opening Allocution to the Second Session of Vatican II, September 29, 1963

³ L.G, n.5

⁴ cf. *Pontificate Council for Promoting Christian Unity Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms of Ecumenism*, n.11, March 25, 1993, Vatican Press p 16.

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ cf. *ibid*

⁷ *ibid.*, n. 17,p 18

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ LG, n23

combine into different groups, which are held together by their hierarchy, and so form individual churches”.¹⁰

The Universal Church traditionally has been divided into “East” and “West”. These terms “have acquired a very precise meaning in ecclesiastical language, in which they are used with reference to the division of the Roman Empire, introduced by Diocletian at the end of the third century and which became definitive at the death of Theodosius.

Ecclesiastically, the Western (and Latin) territories, together with the faithful who reside there, are those which were formally part of the Western Roman Empire and those which received Christianity from these countries. Eastern territories are those which were formally part of the Eastern Roman Empire, and a few others situated beyond the Eastern boundaries of the Empire, together with their faithful and those others who received Christianity from them”.¹¹

There are four original Eastern traditions: Antiochian, Alexandrian, Byzantine, and Armenian.

The four of these can be further subdivided into the following Churches:

Antiochian: West Syrian (Syro-Antiochian, Malankarese and Maronite Churches) and East Syrian (Malabarese and Chaldean Churches);

Alexandrian: Coptic and Ethiopian Churches;

Byzantine: Fifteen Churches originate from this tradition including the Melkite Church and the Ukrainian Church;

Armenian: The Armenian Church.

We have been accustomed to speaking of the Latin (Roman or Western) Rite or the Eastern Rites to designate these different Churches. However, the Church’s contemporary legislation as contained in the Code of Canon Law and the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches makes it clear that we ought to speak not of the Latin or Maronite or Melkite or Ukrainian Rites, but of the Latin Church, the Maronite Church, the Melkite Church and the Ukrainian Church.

Canon 112 of the Code of Canon Law uses the phrase “autonomous ritual Churches” to designate the various Churches.

According to Vatican lithe development of these Churches was part of God’s plan. “It has come about through divine providence that, in the course of time, different Churches set up in various places by the apostles and their successors joined together in a multiplicity of organically united groups which, whilst safeguarding the unity of faith and the unique divine structure of the universal Church, have their own

¹⁰ OE, n.2

¹¹ Miroslav S. Marusyn, *The Oriental Catholic Churches in The Code of Canons of the Oriental Churches*, ed. C. Gallagher Mar Thoma Yogam, Rome, 1991, p. 20

discipline, enjoy their own liturgical usage and inherit a theological and spiritual heritage".¹²

Concerning the Eastern Churches Vatican LI said that "attention should everywhere be given to the preservation and growth of each individual Church".¹³

In his Apostolic Letter "Orientale Lumen" of May 2, 1995 Pope John Paul II said that a "conversion ... is required of the Latin Church, that she may respect and fully appreciate the dignity of the Eastern Christians, and accept gratefully the spiritual treasures of which Eastern Catholic Churches are the bearers to the benefit of the entire Catholic communion".¹⁴ The Pope called upon the Latin Church "to show concretely, far more than in the past, how much she esteems and admires the Christian East and how essential she considers its contribution to the full realisation of the Church's universality".¹⁵

Hence it is not merely a question of the preservation of the Eastern Churches just for their sake. The traditions and spiritual riches are not the exclusive possession of the Eastern Churches for they form part of the patrimony of the entire Church of Christ. The sharing of the riches of the faith and traditions of the East nurtures and strengthens the unity in diversity of the Church.

Pope John Paul II indicates how the Eastern Churches can enrich the entire Church. "I listen to the Churches of the East, which I know are living interpreters of the treasure of tradition they preserve. In contemplating it, before my eyes appear elements of great significance for a fuller and more thorough understanding of the Christian experience. These elements are capable of giving a more complete Christian response to the expectations of the men and women of today. Indeed, in comparison to any other culture, the Christian East has a unique and privileged role as the original setting where the Church was born".¹⁶

Eastern Churches Today

"Because of religious persecution, war and civil disorders, the twentieth century has witnessed an unprecedented emigration of Eastern Catholics from the land of their origins. The resulting situation is that the Eastern Churches have become everywhere a minority group struggling to maintain their apostolic faith and traditions. In the land of their origins they are beset with persecution and sometimes engulfed by an ocean of hostile non-believers. The exercise and preservation of their faith is nearly impossible and difficult at best. In the land of the 'diaspora' they are cultural and ecclesial minorities, struggling to maintain their identity".¹⁷

¹² L.G. n. 23

¹³ OE., n. 4

¹⁴ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Orientale Lumen*, May 2, 1995, n. 1, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995, p. 3

¹⁵ *ibid.*, n. 21

¹⁶ *ibid.*, n. 5

¹⁷ B.J. Pospishil & J.D. Fans, *The New Latin Code of Canon Law and Eastern Catholics Diocese of St. Maron*, New York, 1984, p. 8

Eastern Catholics in Australia

The presence of Eastern Catholics in Australia is primarily the result of post-World War II migration from Eastern Europe and the more recent turmoil and upheaval in the Middle East.

The twin obstacles of the lack of their own pastors and the widely scattered nature of the places where they live have often meant that Eastern Catholics have had to endure long periods without the opportunity of celebrating the sacraments according to the liturgical tradition of their own Church. Moreover, Eastern Catholics have had to face the added difficulty of pressure, both direct and indirect, to abandon their own liturgical celebrations and spiritual heritage and become part of the life of the Latin Church.

There are members of almost all the Eastern Churches in Australia today. The Churches with the largest number of members are the Maronite Church, the Melkite Church and the Ukrainian Church.

Among the other Eastern Churches some have only a few members living in Australia and no priests to meet their pastoral needs. Other Churches do have their own priests and these include: the Armenian Church in Sydney and Melbourne, the Chaldean Church in Sydney and Melbourne, the Coptic Church in Sydney and Melbourne, the Russian Church in Melbourne and the Syrian Church in Sydney.

Vatican II said that each Eastern Church should “organise its own parishes and hierarchy where the spiritual good of the people require it”.¹⁸ In speaking of this in his recent Apostolic Letter John Paul II wrote: “a particular thought goes out to the lands of the diaspora where many faithful of the Eastern Churches who have left their countries of origin are living in a mainly Latin environment”.¹⁹ The Pope continued “I particularly urge the Latin Ordinaries in these countries to study attentively, grasp thoroughly and apply faithfully the principle issued by this Holy See concerning ecumenical co-operation and the pastoral care of the faithful of the Eastern Catholic Churches, especially when they lack their own hierarchy”.²⁰

The Eastern Church - Spirituality, Liturgy, Law

It is opportune, in the light of these words of Pope John Paul II, to offer some reflections on the Eastern Churches themselves. As Vatican II taught the autonomous ritual Churches, whether of the East or of the West, are of equal dignity so that none of them is superior to another. Although these Churches differ among themselves in liturgy, law and spiritual heritage this variety in no way harms the unity of the Church but rather manifests it.²¹

¹⁸ OE, n. 4

¹⁹ OL, n. 26

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ *cf.* OE, nn. 2-3

Pope John Paul II says that “the Christian tradition of the East implies a way of accepting, understanding and living faith in the Lord Jesus. In this sense it is extremely close to the Christian tradition of the west, which is born of and nourished by the same faith. Yet it is legitimately and admirably distinguished from the latter, since Eastern Christians have their own way of perceiving and understanding, and thus an original way of living their relationship with the Saviour”.²²

It is in this spirit that the following brief observations of the Eastern Catholic experience of faith are offered.

The Trinity in the Life of the Church

*“We have seen the true light. We have received the heavenly Spirit. We have found the true faith. We worship the undivided Trinity for having saved us”*²³

The history of the Church tells us that the early great theological conflicts about the faith took place in the East. The great Ecumenical Councils that struggled with the Mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation were held in the Eastern half of the Roman Empire while the Western half remained relatively untouched. The legacy of this period has left the Eastern Churches with, not only a rich theological tradition, and the writings of many great Church thinkers, but also with a deep sense of the mystery and transcendence of God. As St. John Chrysostom says, God’s “majesty is beyond measure, his wisdom beyond understanding. How then can he himself be comprehensible”²⁴

For Eastern Catholics the words of Chrysostom do not remain at a purely intellectual level but permeate their personal, and collective, spiritual life. However the feelings of religious awe and transcendence felt by even the most casual participant in an Eastern Catholic liturgy, should not be attributed to an agnostic or non-Christian sentiment. The great theologians of the East were also great liturgists and whenever the Liturgy of St. Basil is celebrated the following prayer is made:

*“Who is able to declare your mighty love, or to show your praise in full, and make known your wonders on all occasions? You, Lord, who are without beginning, unseen, incomprehensible, unchanged, Father of the Lord Jesus Christ who is the image of your goodness, the seal of your likeness revealing you, the Father, the Living Word, Life, Sanctification, Power, by whom the Holy Spirit was made manifest, the Spirit of Truth, the Gift of Adoption, the life-giving Power, the Well-Spring of sanctification”*²⁵

²² OL, n. 5

²³ 23 Post-Communion Hymn of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom

²⁴ P.G. 55, 706

²⁵ Anaphora of St Basil

Therefore, while being deeply conscious of the mystery of God, every member of the Eastern Churches, according to his or her capacity, knows they are called, in the words of St. Peter, “to become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). The theological term for this vocation is “Theosis”, literally “becoming God”, and has become familiar in recent times to Western Theologians. For the Eastern Catholic salvation is not only liberation from sin but an invitation into the inner life of God. All Church prayer and action begins and ends within the context of the Most Holy Trinity.

Incarnation

*“At your Baptism in the river Jordan, O Christ, The
worship due to the Holy Trinity was made manifest;
For the voice of the Father bore you witness, Calling you
‘Beloved Son ‘,
And the Holy Spirit, in the form of a Dove,
Confirmed this word as steadfast”.*²⁶

Just as the Eastern Churches have a rich theological and liturgical Trinitarian tradition, they have also inherited an equally rich theology of the Incarnation. Faith in Christ can never be static and the words of St. Athanasius - ‘God became man so that man might become God’ - sum up the faith of the most simple member of the faithful.

At Easter the Byzantine Churches sing:

*“Christ is risen from the dead. He has crushed
death by his death and bestowed life upon those
who lay in the tomb.”*

For the Eastern Churches, Christ is present and active in the sacraments, in His Word, in the person of His ministers and in His Icons. Through all these He is constantly bestowing Divine Life. This Life is always lived in the light of the Trinity, for as the Gospel of John says “... this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (Jn 17.3). Jesus is the Icon/image of the Father and the one who sends the Holy Spirit into creation.

The Byzantine hymn for Pentecost says:

*“Blessed are you, Christ our God, who have filled
the fishermen with wisdom by sending down the
Holy Spirit upon them and who, through them,
have united the world. Glory to You, O Lover of
Mankind!”*

²⁶ Hymn for the Baptism of Christ

Holy Spirit

“Heavenly King, Advocate, Spirit of Truth, who are everywhere present, and fills all things; Treasury of Blessings, Bestower of Life, come and dwell within us; cleans us from all that defiles us, and, O Good One, save our souls.”²⁷

Because of the controversy over the divinity of the Holy Spirit at the time of St. Basil (c. 330-379), the Eastern Church is aware of the hidden nature of the Spirit, who reveals Himself only through what He does in the Church.

A Pentecost Hymn describes the work of the Spirit in the following way:

“The Holy Spirit provides every gift. He inspires prophecy, perfects the priesthood, grants wisdom to the illiterate, makes simple fishermen wise theologians, and establishes the perfect organization of the church “.

No public or private prayer can begin without an invocation of the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies and gives life. The faithful of the Eastern Churches are therefore constantly reminded both in their prayer and sacramental life of the power of the Holy Spirit at work within them.

The Church

The Eastern Churches in Australia live out the mystery of Church not only in a theological but also in a social and historical context. The experiences of many members, both laity and clergy, of these churches have highlighted and made real certain aspects of the Sacrament of the Church. Faithful of these Churches have suffered persecution, sometimes over many generations because of their loyalty to the catholicity or universality of Christ’s Church. Consequently, much importance may be given to the idea of the universality of the Catholic Church at the expense of the experience of the local Church.

On the other hand, as most of the members of the Eastern Churches Australia have recent memories of migration, the Church has often become the focus of community life, and a link with the country of origin, and the past. In this way the local Church, with its language and traditions, looms so largely that the idea of the universal nature of the Church is not at all strong. Such tendencies will be found in groups of Latin Catholics that have a similar history and experience.

Nevertheless there are unique theological, liturgical and canonical aspects in the way Eastern Catholics live as the Church. The Central role of the Eastern Patriarchs, and heads of individual Churches, should not be overlooked. As the Pope is

²⁷ Hymn of the Holy Spirit

simultaneously the head of the Latin Church and the Universal Church, it is easy for Latin Catholics to underestimate the importance of the Eastern Patriarchs, as heads of their own individual churches.

The Second Vatican Council took great care to underline the role of the hierarchy of the Eastern Church. "In accordance with the most ancient church tradition, singular honour is to be attached to the patriarchs of Eastern Churches: they preside over their patriarchate as its father and head. The sacred Synod, for this reason, decrees the restoration of their rights and privileges in accordance with the ancient traditions of each Church and the decrees of ecumenical Councils"²⁸

The Mother of God

*"What shall we call YOU, O Woman full of grace?
A heaven for you have given rise to the Sun of
Justice"*²⁹

Once again the tradition of the Church makes itself felt in the life of the faithful in their devotion to the Mother of God. The Blessed Virgin is never seen as separated from her Divine Son and her role in our Salvation. She is always invoked under the title of "Theotokos" - the Mother of God. As St. John of Damascus wrote: "The term 'Theotokos' contains all the history of divine economy in this world, and the whole mystery of the Incarnation".³⁰

The Icon

*"As the tabernacle of the Covenant held the
presence of God, so do Icons show forth the
presence of the One we worship and revere."*³¹

No reflection on the Eastern Churches, especially those of the Byzantine tradition, could remain silent on the Icon. It is now common to see Icons even in the Latin Church, but it must be stressed that they form an integral part, not only of the liturgy, but also of the theology of the Byzantine Church. The historical background and theological debate that surrounded the Icon for over 100 years (725-842), is similar in intensity to the theological reflection that took place in Western Christianity over the sacrament of the Eucharist. The so-called iconoclast (icon destroyer) controversy provided the Eastern Church with a variety of precise theological categories and again helped to refine the language and teaching on the mystery of the Incarnation. Even those who have read very little Eastern theology will know how central the idea of image is to the sacramentology, systematic theology and even the moral theology of Eastern Churches.

²⁸ OE, n. 9

²⁹ Prime

³⁰ 30 De Fide Orth., 111, 12

³¹ Hymn for the First Sunday of Lent

Liturgy

The Second Vatican Council initiated great changes in the Liturgy of the Latin Church. When Latin Catholics attend the liturgy in an Eastern Church, they find the celebrations radically different from their own.

According to Vatican II “All members of the Eastern Churches should know and rest assured that they are empowered, and obliged, to retain at all times their own lawful liturgical rites and their own discipline. No changes are to be made except as required by their own organic development. The greatest loyalty is required of the members of the Eastern Churches themselves in the maintenance of these practices. They must improve their understanding of them and perfect their performance daily. Should circumstances of time, or the situation of individuals, have made for some undue failure, they must take the necessary steps to return to their ancestral traditions”.³² It is clear from the words of the Council that the vision for the Eastern Churches is very different from that proposed for the West and therefore the success or lack of success should be judged accordingly.

As long as Christians have been able to build their own Churches, the area of the altar has been marked’ out as a special place; sometimes rails have been used, and sometimes steps. In Byzantine Churches the altar is marked off by a screen of icons. This screen developed over many hundreds of years from a simple open screen to a real wall of icons, with doors (also covered with icons) which permit the celebrants to process on and off the altar. To the Latin Catholic it may seem that the Church is trying to hide the altar from the laity, but the idea that something sacred can be “hidden” behind an icon seems very strange to Eastern Catholics. Icons are always the sign of a presence. Where there is an icon of Christ, Christ is truly present. The Icons on the Icon-screen are the household of Heaven made up of Christ, the Mother of God, the Angels and the Saints. Heaven is with us when we celebrate the Liturgy, and in a mystical way, actually celebrates the Liturgy with us. For Byzantine Catholics, with their long history of theology and devotion, the Icon-screen represents a real celebration of the presence of God among us.

Law

The canonical legislation as it pertains to the Eastern Churches which was revised after the Second Vatican Council is contained in the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches which was promulgated by Pope John Paul II on October 18, 1990. In accordance with this universal legislation, each of the Eastern Churches can develop its own particular laws.

There are some aspects of the discipline of the Eastern Churches which are well known to Latin Catholics, for example the different discipline in regard to clerical celibacy.

In the past for some Latin Catholics, married priests were often seen as a cause of “scandal” and as not “real” priests at all! More recently, the existence of married clergy in the East has been used as an argument for making priestly celibacy optional

³² OE, n. 6

in the West. Questions posed by the Latin Church about its own life and discipline can only be answered by that Church from within its own tradition. The Eastern Churches, with their own traditions, cannot serve as models. The fact that some priests are married and some not has never been a question of debate in the East. As Pope Paul VI noted: “If the legislation of the Eastern Church is different in the matter of discipline with regard to clerical celibacy..., this is due to the different historical background of that most noble part of the Church, a situation which the Holy Spirit has providentially and supernaturally influenced”.³³

Vatican II in this matter stated: “While recommending ecclesiastical celibacy this sacred Council does not by any means aim at changing that contrary discipline which is lawfully practised in the Eastern Churches. Rather, this Council affectionately exhorts all those who have received the priesthood in the married state to persevere in their holy vocation and continue to devote their lives fully and generously to the flock entrusted to them”.³⁴

The Eastern Churches have a deep reverence for the celibate state as lived by monks and nuns. The Episcopate, the fullness of the priesthood, is only bestowed on celibate priests.

The Second Vatican Council sought the restoration of the permanent diaconate. The deacon has always had a central role in the liturgical life of many Eastern Churches, but unfortunately, under the influence of the Latin Church, the diaconate came to be seen as a step towards ordination to the priesthood.

The permanent deacon both in the West and the East, is ordained ‘not towards priesthood, but for service’³⁵ nevertheless the deacon is seen as a member of the hierarchy and not a layman. In the liturgy the deacon is at the service of the bishop and through him the entire Church. The deacon also has a role in preaching. As the code of Canons of the Eastern Churches states: “Bishops, priests and deacons, each according to the grade of his sacred order, have as their foremost duty the ministry of the Word of God” (CCEQ can. 608). Deacons, like priests of the Eastern Churches may be either celibate or married men.

The Pastoral Care of Eastern Catholics in Australia

In order to consider the pastoral care of Eastern Catholics in Australia it is necessary to take into account various structures of Eastern Churches, especially the Patriarchate and Major Archiepiscopate.

The Patriarchal Church

This is a Church under the pastoral care of a patriarch. As well as being the diocesan bishop of his own patriarchal diocese, he also exercises special jurisdiction over all

³³ Paul VI On Priestly Celibacy, n. 38

³⁴ PO, n. 16

³⁵ Didascalia II, Lumen Gentium, 29

Metropolitans, Archeparchs (Archbishops), Eparchs (Bishops), Apostolic Exarchs (Vicars Apostolic) and all the faithful of his Church within the geographical area of his Patriarchate. The Patriarch's jurisdiction does not extend outside the traditional territory of his Patriarchate.

In Australia there are two Eparchies of Patriarchal Churches:

The Eparchy of St. Maroun of Sydney for the Maronite Catholics;

The Eparchy of St. Michael of Sydney for the Melkite Catholics.

As these two Eparchies are outside the geographical territory of their Patriarchates, the Patriarchs do not have jurisdiction over them and hence they are immediately subject to the Pope as the successor of Peter and Chief Pastor of the universal Catholic Church.

Major Archiepiscopal Church

A major archbishop is, in almost all respects, identical with a Patriarch and has similar rights and privileges.

In Australia there is one Eparchy of a major archiepiscopal Church:

The Eparchy of Ss. Peter and Paul of Melbourne for Ukrainians of the Byzantine tradition.

As these three Eastern Churches have established an Eparchy in Australia the pastoral care of Christ's faithful who belong to these three Churches is exclusively the right and duty of their own Eparchs (bishops). Consequently the members of these Churches are entirely excluded from the jurisdiction of the Bishops of the Latin Church.

The other Eastern Churches for a variety of reasons have not yet established an Eparchy or an Apostolic Exarchate in Australia. Some of these Churches - the Armenian, Chaldean, Coptic, Russian and Syrian - do have one or more priests here in Australia. However there are other Eastern Catholics who do not have any priests of their own Church in Australia.

The importance the Church gives to the preservation and fostering of the individual Churches obliges the members of these Churches to fully live out the life of faith in accordance with their own liturgical tradition. Eastern Catholics who have their own priest in Australia are supported in the challenge to live within their own tradition.

However, members of Eastern Churches who do not have any contact with their own pastors ought to be helped as far as possible to observe their own tradition and customs.

Pope John Paul II expressed a special concern for these Catholics in his Apostolic Letter: “Where in the West there are no Eastern priests to look after the faithful of the Eastern Churches, Latin Ordinaries and their co-workers should see that those faithful grow in the awareness and knowledge of their own tradition and they should be invited to co-operate actively in the growth of the Christian community by making their own particular contribution”.³⁶

Catholics of those Eastern Churches that do not have Bishops or dioceses of their own Church in Australia are subject to the jurisdiction of the Bishop of the Latin Church in the area in which they live.

Sacramental Interecclesial Legislation

When the Code of Canon Law uses the phrase “autonomous ritual church” to designate the Latin Church and the twenty one Eastern Churches, it is evident that laws concerned with the relations between these churches should no longer be called “inter-ritual” but more appropriately “inter-ecclesial”.

In the day to day life of the Church, it is usually a question relating to the celebration of the Sacraments of Christian Initiation and Marriage for Eastern Catholics which require a clear understanding on the part of the minister of the Latin Church.

Membership of Autonomous Ritual Churches

It is not possible to simply be a “catholic” - a member “at large” of the Universal Catholic Church. A person is always a member of a specific autonomous ritual church and only as such is a person a member of the Catholic Church.³⁷

In baptism a person is incorporated in an autonomous ritual Church and the Church to which that person belongs is determined by church law. A person, no matter by whom or where or in what liturgical ceremony s/he is baptised, belongs to the autonomous ritual church to which s/he should belong in accordance with the norms of law. Canons 29-30 of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches establish the canonical legislation for Eastern Catholics.

From time to time it may become necessary, when it is a question of membership of a Church by reason of baptism, to clarify to which Church a Catholic belongs. In such cases the following principles apply:³⁸

(1) Baptism of children under the age of fourteen:

By virtue of baptism a child is enrolled in the Church of the Catholic father or the Church of the mother if only the mother is Catholic or if both parents by agreement freely request it, with due regard for particular laws established by the

³⁶ OL, n.26

³⁷ cf Pospishil & Fans, op.cit., p. 20

³⁸ 29-30, Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches

Apostolic See; these principles also apply in the case of an adoptive father and mother;

- (i) If only one parent is a Catholic, the child belongs to the Church of that parent;
- (ii) If born of an unmarried mother, the child belongs to her Church;
- (iii) If born of unknown parents, the child belongs to the Church of the legal guardians;
- (iv) If born of non-baptised parents, the child is to be a member of the Church of the person undertaking the responsibility to educate the child in the Catholic faith.

(2) Baptism of children over the age of fourteen:

A person of 14 years of age or older, who requests Baptism, is free to choose any Church.

The Sacraments of Christian Initiation

Baptism

A minister of the Latin Church may not baptise a child of Eastern Catholic parents, unless a priest of the parents' Church cannot perform this sacrament. The following circumstances constitute unavailability of the priest of the Eastern Church, and in such cases a Latin Church minister may baptise the child.

- (i) The child is in danger of death.
- (ii) The priest of the Eastern Church is too far away to bring the child to him.
- (iii) The priest of the Eastern Church cannot come to baptise the child.

If in these circumstances, the minister of the Latin Church baptises the child he must:

- (i) state to which Eastern Church the child belongs in his own baptismal register;
- (ii) send notifications of the baptism to the priest of the Eastern Church;
- (iii) if there is no priest of the child's Eastern Church in Australia, the registration of the baptism is made only in the parochial register of the Latin Church, but the Eastern Church to which the child belongs must be noted.

Chrismation

In the Eastern Catholic Churches, Chrismation is always received at the time of baptism. (When there is danger of death, it may be administered later). If in the exceptional circumstances as mentioned above, a Latin priest were to baptise a child belonging to an Eastern Church, unless such a priest has the faculties to administer the Sacrament of Confirmation, he should not chrismate the child. The child should be chrismated by a priest of his or her own Church as soon as possible after baptism.

As many Eastern Catholic children attend Catholic schools under the control of the Latin Church, it often happens that they are involved in sacramental preparation programmes. It is at these times that the question of Chrismation arises. As the Sacrament of Chrismation cannot be repeated any attempt to do is strictly prohibited.

If at the time of confirmation for the class or group of children in the sacramental programme, it is found that a child belonging to an Eastern Church has not yet received the sacrament of Chrismation, the child cannot be chrismated by a bishop of the Latin Church but must be presented for the sacrament to a member of the clergy of his or her own Church.

The Eucharist

It is the normal practice of the Church that Catholics celebrate the Lord's day by participating in the celebration of the Eucharist in a community of their own Church. Nevertheless, where there is a diversity of Churches in the one place, the faithful worthily celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus, by attending the Eucharist in any of the autonomous ritual Churches.

Holy Communion may be received in any Church. Since sacramental initiation in the mystery of salvation is perfected in the reception of the Divine Eucharist, children of Eastern Churches should receive their first Holy Communion in their own Church.

Sacrament of Penance

Catholics may receive absolution from any priest belonging to either the Latin or the Eastern Churches provided he has the faculty to administer the sacrament of penance. However, priests of the Latin Church hearing the confession of members of Eastern Churches should exercise particular care, as the perception of failing towards God and one's neighbour is deeply formed, and expressed, in terms drawn from one's own liturgical and religious experience.

Priests of the Latin Church need to be aware that the automatic penalties in the law of the Latin Church are not found in that of the Eastern Churches. On the other hand, the practice of "reserved sins" [that is those serious sins for which absolution is reserved to the Pope or Eparchial bishop] is still retained in the Eastern Churches.

The Sacrament of Marriage

It is at the time of an impending marriage that members of Eastern Churches often come into contact with pastors of the Latin Church.

It is the canonical tradition of the Eastern Churches that marriage is to be celebrated before the pastor of the groom unless particular law determines otherwise or a just cause excuses. Unlike the Latin Church, in the Eastern Churches a deacon cannot assist at a marriage.

In Australia, a priest of the Latin Church cannot, without special delegation from the Eparch of the Eastern Church, validly bless the following marriages even if celebrated in his parish:

- (1) two Eastern Catholics both of whom belong to the Maronite, Melkite or Ukrainian Churches;
- (2) an Eastern Catholic belonging to the Maronite, Melkite or Ukrainian churches marrying a baptised person who is not a member of the Catholic Church or an unbaptised person; a bishop of the Latin Church has no authority to permit such a marriage or grant a dispensation for it.

In Australia, a priest of the Latin Church with the faculty to assist at marriages may validly bless the following marriages involving Eastern Catholics:

- (1) two Eastern Catholics neither of whom belongs to the Maronite, Melkite or Ukrainian Churches;
- (2) an Eastern Catholic who does not belong to the Maronite, Melkite or Ukrainian Churches marrying a baptised person who is not a member of the Catholic Church or an unbaptised person.

The marriage between a Latin Catholic and an Eastern Catholic should take place in the Church of the man. A Latin priest or deacon can validly assist at a marriage between a man belonging to the Latin Church and a woman belonging to an Eastern Church.

In the case where the groom is a member of the Maronite, Melkite or Ukrainian Churches and the bride is a Latin Catholic, the Eastern Eparch may grant a dispensation so that the marriage may be lawfully celebrated.

When dealing with the faithful of the Eastern Churches, Latin pastors must be aware of the differences in the legislation of the Latin Church and that of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches in regard to marriage. For example the impediment of affinity extends in the collateral line to the second degree, that is prohibiting marriage with one's sister/brother-in-law. The impediment of spiritual relationship is retained in the Eastern Churches so a marriage between a sponsor and the baptised person and the parents of the same is invalid.

Eastern legislation regards the blessing of a marriage by the priest as essential for validity, and as the present ritual of marriage in the Latin Church contains several such blessings, any such blessing bestowed is sufficient for validity. However, a deacon of the Latin Church may not validly bless the marriage of two Eastern Catholics under any circumstances. He may however bless a marriage between a Latin Catholic and an Eastern Catholic under the same conditions in which a Latin priest may bless such a union.

The Power to Dispense

The members of the Maronite, Melkite or Ukrainian Churches can only be dispensed by their own Eparch. Any dispensation granted by a Latin bishop to the faithful of these Churches is invalid.

Those Eastern Catholics who do not have their own Eparchy established in Australia are placed under the jurisdiction of the local Latin bishop and may be validly dispensed by him. In the case of a marriage between Catholics of two different Churches, it is the groom's bishop who dispenses.

Transfer from One Church to Another

In very exceptional circumstances the Church permits the faithful to transfer their membership from one autonomous ritual Church to another. This is never undertaken lightly and touches upon the deepest relationship between the individual member of the Body of Christ, its other members and the bonds that link us to Our Saviour. Formerly the power to authorise such a transfer was reserved to the Apostolic See alone. For Eastern Catholics in Australia who belong to the Maronite, Melkite or Ukrainian Churches such a transfer may take place on the agreement of the respective Bishops.

Marriage also provides an opportunity for a person to transfer from one Church to another. An Eastern Catholic wife may transfer to the Church of her husband. A Latin Catholic husband or wife may transfer to the Church of their Eastern spouse at the time of marriage or during the marriage.

Full Communion with the Catholic Church

It can be noted here that for those members of Eastern Orthodox Churches who wish to enter into full communion with the Catholic Church, the Church has never wished to impose any extra burdens. For this reason, where possible such a person entering into full communion from a non-Catholic Eastern Church should, as Vatican II taught "retain his or her original rite".³⁹ This leads us to a consideration of ecumenism.

Ecumenism

On May 25, 1995 Pope John Paul II published his Encyclical Letter "Ut unum sint" in which he said "the call for Christian unity made by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council with such impassioned commitment is finding an ever greater echo in the hearts of believers, especially as the Year 2000 approaches".⁴⁰

³⁹ OE, n. 4

⁴⁰ Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint*, May 25, 1995, n. 1, St. Paul Publications Homebush, 1995, p. 3

For many Latin Catholics the mention of Eastern or Oriental Churches is understood as a reference to “the Orthodox Churches”, to those Churches of the East which are not in full communion with the Catholic Church governed by the successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with him.

For many centuries the Churches of the East and the West lived out their faith in Christ with little contact with one another but with communion of faith and sacraments. “Human folly and human sinfulness however have at times opposed the unifying purpose of the Holy Spirit and weakened the power of love which overcomes the inherent tensions in ecclesial life. From the beginning of the Church certain rifts came into being. Then more serious dissensions appeared and the Churches in the East found themselves no longer in full communion with the See of Rome or with the Church of the West. Later in the West more profound divisions caused other ecclesial Communities to come into being. These ruptures had to do with doctrinal or disciplinary questions and even the nature of the Church itself”.⁴¹ Vatican II acknowledged that “some dissensions have come about ‘for which often enough men on both sides were to blame’”.⁴²

Gradually, groups and sometimes whole Churches from the East re-established communion with the See of Rome, while keeping their own traditions. Nevertheless, many groups and Churches in the East continue to be separate from the Universal Church.

Vatican II regarded the Churches not in full communion with the See of Rome with the greatest respect. “These Churches, although separated from us, yet possess true sacraments, above all - by apostolic succession - the priesthood and the Eucharist, whereby they are still joined to us in closest intimacy Everyone should realise that it is of supreme importance to understand, venerate, preserve and foster the rich liturgical and spiritual heritage of the Eastern Churches in order to bring about reconciliation between Eastern and Western Christians”.⁴³

Relations between the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches have never been good. Mutual ignorance and suspicion make any form of real dialogue very difficult. Besides the differences that exist in theology and church practice between the East and West, there is the question of Eastern Catholics. Many Orthodox consider the Eastern Catholic Churches exist only to convert simple Orthodox believers to Catholicism through trickery. In the past the Eastern Catholic Churches were often made illegal in Orthodox countries. In the former Soviet Union, many Eastern Catholic priests, nuns and lay people suffered death and imprisonment for their faith. The rebirth of these communities in their homeland has caused much bitterness among some Orthodox Christians.

The relationship between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches has passed from the dialogue of love to the dialogue of truth. The realities of the Eastern Catholic Churches are part of this truth and they have a unique role to play in the ecumenical movement.

⁴¹ Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, n. 18,
pp. 18-1

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 19

⁴³ UR, n. 15

As the Second Vatican Council states: “Eastern Churches which are in communion with the Apostolic See have a special duty to encourage the unity of all Christians, especially those of the East. The principles to which they must adhere have been laid down by this Synod in its Decree on Ecumenism. They must make use, principally, of prayers, the example of their life, loyalty and devotion to the ancient traditions of the East, improve mutual understanding, collaboration and a brotherly appreciation of acts and intentions”.⁴⁴

In striving for the unity among all Christians for which Jesus prayed at the Last Supper, the Eastern Catholic Churches will, as Pope John Paul II said, “play a constructive role in the dialogue of love and in the theological dialogue at both local and international level and thus contribute to mutual understanding and the continuing pursuit of full unity”.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ OE, n. 24

⁴⁵ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Ut unum sint*, n. 60, p. 71