

Discovering Treasure: Maronite Liturgy

"The Eastern Rites are the treasure of the Church." (Pope John XXIII) Contributed by Joan Bugbee

As a newcomer to Roanoke in 1996, I had noticed the beautiful stone church on the hill, marked with a triple bar cross. A discreet sign proclaimed "St. Elias Catholic Church Maronite Center." I had no idea what that meant, being woefully ignorant of the different Rites within the Catholic Church. Though the architecture, the cross, and the arched courtyard were unfamiliar to me, the first thing I saw when I entered was a picture of Pope John Paul II, and I knew I was home.

Since that time, I've joined St. Elias and come to love its Eastern Liturgy, one of the most beautiful in the Catholic Church. This year has been dedicated by His Excellency Bishop Doueïhi to the Holy Spirit in preparation for Jubilee 2000, preparation aimed at "accomplishing a new spiritual awakening." Discovering the Maronites has been, in a small way, an awakening and a reminder of the diversity of our faith. Perhaps some of what I've learned may be interesting to others.

As a "cradle Catholic" of the Roman tradition, I tended to think of my Liturgy as the "Catholic" one. Not so. I was surprised to learn that the Maronite tradition predates the Roman, tracing its lineage to the church that St. Peter and St. Paul founded in Antioch before they went to Rome. St. Maron was one of the early Antiochean Christians, a monk and hermit in Northern Syria who was revered for his humility and piety. His disciples, who founded a monastery in his honor, came to be known as Maronites. Their loyalty to the church and to the Pope, especially their staunch defense of the Council of Chalcedon decree in 451 concerning Christ's Divine and Human Natures, led to persecutions over the centuries, and the Maronites eventually moved to Lebanon where they established the Patriarchate.

The Maronite Catholic Church preserves the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic faith, administers the seven sacraments, follows all Papal rulings and is characterized by devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and to Mary, the Blessed Mother. The differences that strike a newcomer are mainly connected with the Divine Liturgy, which is reverent, beautiful and deeply spiritual.

The first obvious difference is that Maronites stand during much of the Liturgy to demonstrate respect, similar to the Roman Catholics rising to show respect during the reading of the Gospel. While most of the worship is conducted in English, the liturgical language used during certain special parts of the Liturgy, such as during Words of Institution, is Syriac or Aramaic, the language Christ spoke. It seems not only appropriate, but greatly meaningful to be able to experience the Eucharist in Christ's own language.

The Liturgy compels attention and involvement. The priest and people chant the prayers back and forth, with the people sometimes simply assenting with an "amen" and sometimes responding at more length. For example, before Communion the priest elevates the chalice, saying: "This is the cup which our Lord prepared on the cross. Come forth, O mortals, and drink from it for the forgiveness of sins." And we in the pews answer: "The Church proclaims: 'Come, O brothers and sisters, take the body of the Son, drink His blood in faith and sing of His glory'."

Another difference is that the Eucharist is distributed under both species, bread and wine, by Intinction---that is, by dipping the Host into the chalice, and then placing the Host on the communicant's tongue. Many communicants also bring their young children with them for a blessing, the priest gently resting the chalice for a moment on the child's head.

Some terms were unfamiliar: I learned that "Anaphora" means to offer or oblation, and "Qurbano" is the book of offering containing liturgical prayers. The Maronite Church has its own liturgical year (calendar). It begins on the first Sunday of November, which is the Sunday of the Consecration of the Church. There are six seasons in the Maronite liturgical calendar: Announcement; Epiphany; Lent; Resurrection; Pentecost; and Holy Cross. For example, the season of Lent begins on Cana Sunday followed by Ash Monday, versus Ash Wednesday, as in the Latin Rite. In addition to observing holy days of obligation, such as Christmas, Easter, the Ascension, and the Immaculate Conception, the Maronites also observe the Feasts of Epiphany January 6th, St Maron February 9th, and the Saints Peter and Paul June 29th.

Newcomers also notice that the order of the Divine Liturgy is slightly different---for instance, the Sign of Peace is before the Consecration, which signifies that we are making peace with each other before Jesus is physically present with us in the Eucharist. The Sign of Peace flows from the altar through the priest who encloses the hands of the servers with his hands and the servers bring that Sign to the ushers and in turn to the congregation. The Intercessions follow the Consecration, so that we can speak directly to Jesus who is now physically present in the Eucharist.

The solemnity and reverence characterize the entire Liturgy, from the incense wafting "heavenward" to the beauty of the prayers rolling sonorously between the priest and people, to the hush that descends when we are all caught up in the Mystery of the Consecration.

Speaking of the Byzantine, Maronite and other Rites, the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994), reminds us that..."Holy Mother Church holds all lawfully recognized Rites to be of equal right and dignity, and...wishes to preserve them in the future and to foster them in every way." Surely that mission is being carried on at St. Elias, where the worship

daily proclaims the diversity and intense spirituality of our faith.