

## The Church today

### Focus

This topic examines the present structure and mission of The Catholic Church

### Learning outcomes

By the end of this topic, you should:

- understand how the Catholic Church is structured
- understand the differences between the various Rites within the Catholic Church

### Introduction

In the introduction to Topic Eight we saw that there are approximately 1.1 billion people in the world today who identify themselves as Catholics. These people are served by just over 405,000 priests and by approximately 4800 bishops. Among the bishops are some 185 cardinals, of whom just over 110 are currently eligible because of their age to elect the pope. The pope himself is not only the head of the Catholic Church but is also recognised internationally as the head of state of the Vatican.

In this topic we will examine how the contemporary Catholic Church is structured and what it considers its mission or purpose to be.

### The structure of the Church – Ordained and Laity

One way of describing the structure of the Catholic Church is to do so by referring to the two different **groups** of Catholics who participate in the life of the Church. One group is comprised of men who are ordained as deacons, priests or bishops. This group is called the “ordained” or “**hierarchy**”. The other group, the vast majority of Church members, consists of men, women and children who are known as “lay people” or “**laity**”. Some members of the hierarchy and some lay people belong to **religious orders** or **congregations**. Lay members of orders or congregations are usually called nuns (or sisters) and brothers. Examples would be Sisters of Mercy and Marist Brothers.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out that the differences between hierarchy and laity serve to provide unity and an understanding of the Church’s mission:

**873** The very differences which the Lord has willed to put between the members of his body serve its unity and mission. For "in the Church there is diversity of ministry but unity of mission. To the apostles and their successors Christ has entrusted the office of teaching, sanctifying and governing in his name and by his power. But the laity are made to share in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ; they have therefore, in the Church and in the world, their own assignment in the mission of the whole People of God." Finally, "from both groups [hierarchy and laity] there exist Christian faithful who are consecrated to God in their own special manner and serve the salvific mission of the Church through the profession of the evangelical counsels<sup>1</sup>." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994)

The roles of bishop, priest and deacon are outlined in the *Catechism*:

**1594** The bishop receives the fullness of the sacrament of Holy Orders, which integrates him into the episcopal college and makes him the visible head of the particular Church entrusted to him. As successors of the apostles and members of the college, the bishops share in the apostolic responsibility and mission of the whole Church under the authority of the Pope, successor of St. Peter.

**1595** Priests are united with the bishops in sacerdotal dignity and at the same time depend on them in the exercise of their pastoral functions; they are called to be the bishops' prudent co-workers. They form around their bishop the presbyterium which bears responsibility with him for the particular Church. They receive from the bishop the charge of a parish community or a determinate ecclesial office.

**1596** Deacons are ministers ordained for tasks of service of the Church; they do not receive the ministerial priesthood, but ordination confers on them important functions in the ministry of the word, divine worship, pastoral governance, and the service of charity, tasks which they must carry out under the pastoral authority of their bishop. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994)

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also summarises the role of the laity:

**940** "The characteristic of the lay state being a life led in the midst of the world and of secular affairs, lay people are called by God to make of their apostolate, through the vigor of their Christian spirit, a leaven in the world" (AA 2 § 2).

**941** Lay people share in Christ's priesthood: ever more united with him, they exhibit the grace of Baptism and Confirmation in all dimensions of their personal family, social and ecclesial lives, and so fulfill the call to holiness addressed to all the baptized.

**942** By virtue of their prophetic mission, lay people "are called . . . to be witnesses to Christ in all circumstances and at the very heart of the community of mankind" (GS 43 § 4).

**943** By virtue of their kingly mission, lay people have the power to uproot the rule of sin within themselves and in the world, by their self-denial and holiness of life (cf. LG 36)

## The structure of the church — Rites

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<sup>1</sup> Poverty, chastity and obedience.

Most people in Australia would be familiar with the term "Roman Catholic". Most people in Australia who call themselves Catholics would also refer to themselves as "Roman Catholics". However, there are many forms of Catholicism in addition to the Roman Catholicism with which most of us are familiar. These diverse forms of Catholicism are called "Rites", and those which originated in eastern cities of the Roman Empire, such as Damascus or Byzantium, are generally referred to as "Eastern Rites". Each Rite celebrates the liturgy differently from the other Rites, and different Rites also have different rules for their members. For example, celibacy is the rule for priests in the Roman (or "Latin") Rite, but it is not the rule for priests in some Eastern Rites.

**1203** The liturgical traditions or rites presently in use in the Church are the Latin (principally the Roman rite, but also the rites of certain local churches, such as the Ambrosian rite, or those of certain religious orders) and the Byzantine, Alexandrian or Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Maronite and Chaldean rites. In "faithful obedience to tradition, the sacred Council declares that Holy Mother Church holds all lawfully recognized rites to be of equal right and dignity, and that she wishes to preserve them in the future and to foster them in every way." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994)

In Australia there are to be found the Maronite Rite, the Melkite Rite (part of the Byzantine Rite), the Ukrainian Rite (also a part of the Byzantine Rite) and the Chaldean Rite. Each of these Rites forms a diocese and has its own Bishop, cathedral and parishes and the Maronite and Melkite Rites conduct their own Catholic schools, mainly in Melbourne and Sydney.

Eastern Rite churches are in the minority throughout the world and in Australia. There is always a danger that minorities can be regarded as inferior by the majority. Pope John Paul II warned against this danger in an Apostolic Letter, *Orientalis Lumen —The Light of the East—* in May 1995:

**21** ... conversion is also required of the Latin Church, that she may respect and fully appreciate the dignity of Eastern Christians, and accept gratefully the spiritual treasures of which the Eastern Catholic Churches are the bearers, to the benefit of the entire catholic communion; that she may 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 realization of the Church's universality. (*Orientalis Lumen*, 1995)

The following extracts from a recent article highlight some of the difficulties that Eastern Rite Catholics encounter in Australia (Kenez & Kelty, 2009):

***Some Issues regarding the Education of Eastern Catholic children in Latin Catholic Schools***

*A paper co-authored by Fr Olexander Kenez and Fr Brian Kelty*

Recent immigration has ensured a place in the Australian Catholic Church for many Eastern Catholics. The largest of these Churches have their own bishop(s) and therefore exist as autonomous ritual Churches. They are: the Maronite, the Melkite, the Ukrainian and the Chaldean Churches. Their people are mostly from the Middle East and Slavic countries. There are other communities who may have priests of their own Church but who depend on the local Latin bishop for governance and pastoral care. Some of the Churches included in this group are: the Armenians, the Catholic Copts, the Russians and the Syrians.

### **Pastoral Care...**

The Catholic School system in Australia was established to educate children in the Latin tradition of the Catholic Church. This being so, it is not surprising then, that they are successful in doing just that. When children of Eastern Catholic descent go to Catholic schools, they become educated in a Latin Catholic spirituality to the extent that they tend to become Latin Catholics themselves and abandon their Eastern Church of origin. This is obviously a highly undesirable state of affairs from the point of view of all the Catholic Churches.

There is a dichotomy here. Students from Eastern Catholic families find one spiritual experience at home, and another at school. At School they have a Latin Catholic spirituality which tends to emphasise salvation as mediated through the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. At home they have a different spiritual experience. In the Eastern churches there is an emphasis on the Resurrection of Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Trinity. The Latin Catholic Church talks about *Grace*, the Eastern Churches talk about *Theosis (becoming like God)*. *Grace* tends to emphasise a finality, whereas, *Theosis* puts an emphasis on a process of becoming.

The cold reality is harsh. Many things continue to happen which do harm to the Christian upbringing of Eastern Catholic children and adolescents. Eastern Catholic Bishops frequently deal with complaints about the many attempts to confirm the children of their churches who have already been *baptized* and *chrismated* in infancy. Latin Catholic clergy frequently refuse communion to young children who are entitled to receive holy communion from the time of their reception of the mysteries of initiation which includes first Eucharistic communion. The lamentable ignorance of some Catholic school teachers is demonstrated by the not infrequent claims that Catholic schools are designed and meant for the education of Latin Catholics exclusively; all others must simply accept the regular religious practices offered in a one size fits all approach. Thus on Ash Wednesday it is common practice in the school setting to insist that all students accept the imposition of Ashes whether they be Latin Catholic, Eastern Catholic, Orthodox or even Buddhist. This seems to fly in the face of canon law and the principles of Catholic education as found in this recent authoritative Vatican statement: *The personal conscience of individual students and their families must be respected, and this freedom is explicitly recognized by the Church.*<sup>[1]</sup> The same document goes on to refer to the imposition of religious practices as, *"a moral violence which is strictly forbidden, both by the Gospel and Church law"*. In support of this assertion the following item of Canon Law is cited: *It is never lawful for anyone to force others to embrace the Catholic faith against their conscience.*<sup>[2]</sup>

How much more so (one might hope) for fellow Catholics! The very enrolment of students in schools does carry certain rights as well as obligations. It is high time that the Catholic school system systematically

respected the rights of all those Eastern Catholics who choose to enrol in Catholic Schools. Take for example the wearing of the prayer rope (*chotki*) which is clearly a religious emblem; most schools treat this as a piece of jewelry and thus forbid it. Eastern and Orthodox youth respond to such intolerance with an attitude of keep your head down, tell no one that you are different; they feel that they must hide their identity and comply with the expectations of the school's dominant religious practices.

### **Spirituality...**

If anything is to change practical strategies must be thought out which directly address the issues raised. Therefore, the following recommendations are made. The whole issue of sign and symbol in the Eastern Churches is of course central in Eastern theology as it is any deeply sacramental theology.

- First and foremost is the need to secure the appointment of an Eastern Catholic theologian at Australian Catholic University in order that the many recommendations made by the Holy See for theological education might begin to be fulfilled.
- The demands of ecumenism and international dialogue with the East have assumed primary importance in the agenda of Pope Benedict XVI. Not only ought we support this program of dialogue but we need to be very clear about our identity as Eastern Catholic Churches. We need theological support to do this.
- To make Eastern Catholic Spirituality visible in Catholic schools and Catholic institutions of higher education the use and veneration of icons with lamps ought to be present. Iconography and its theology should be taught in theological institutes.
- It would be helpful to provide an icon packet consisting of icons with explanations about the symbolism involved to every Catholic school in the country
- Not only is the sign of the cross made differently in the East, it also assumes greater importance. During the Divine Liturgy one makes the sign of the cross at least 36 times. In the Latin Catholic tradition this is not so.
- The making and wearing and praying the Jesus prayer (*chotki*) is one example of what may be done as a prayerful exercise perhaps during a retreat. All students especially Eastern Students could be encouraged to make and wear the prayer rope as a wrist band with strong religious symbolism.
- The Eastern Liturgy is accessible to schools in English these days. Every capital city in Australia has Catholic priests who can celebrate the Divine Liturgy. Pastoral hospitality for Eastern Catholic clergy ought to be available especially in those cases where large numbers of Eastern Catholics are enrolled.
- In 1997, *Eastern Catholics in Australia*, was published. It was a very important document. Perhaps it is time to reprint and distribute this

publication so that it might become an instrument for study and workshops on the many issues which concern Eastern Christianity.

- The Eastern Catholic Churches in Australia have grown sufficiently to seek the appointment of an education officer within the National Catholic Education Office. This officer would coordinate all information about Eastern Churches for distribution to the Catholic school system, and function as an Eastern Catholic information service.
- The issue at hand is to provide the teachers and the schools of the Latin Catholic system with a way by which they can be made more aware of Eastern Catholic spirituality.

### **Awareness...**

Perhaps it is time that we once again made religious education teachers more aware, of the presence of Eastern Catholic children in their schools. It is timely to offer a series of in-services for teachers sensitizing them to the presence and the needs of Eastern Christians in the schools. In addition, the preservice courses for teaching in Catholic schools at *ACU*, ought include an Eastern Catholic awareness program. In this way, new teachers would at least be aware of the spiritual needs of these children.

Some of the issues raised in this paper might seem less of an imposition if we just consider how the late Pope John Paul II proposed to respond to this problem. He listed six approved means by which mutual understanding and unity might be improved between the Latin and the Eastern Churches. He reasoned that an improved knowledge of one another must be a good thing.

### **The six means follow:**

- To know the liturgy of the Eastern Churches;
- To deepen knowledge of the spiritual traditions of the Fathers and Doctors of the Christian East;
- To follow the example of the Eastern Churches for the inculturation of the Gospel message;
- To combat tensions between Latins and Orientals and to encourage dialogue between Catholics and the Orthodox;
- To train in specialized institutions theologians, liturgists, historians and canonists for the Christian East, who in turn can spread knowledge of the Eastern Churches;
- To offer appropriate teaching on these subjects in seminaries and theological faculties, especially to future priests.

The pope then added the following remark, "*These remain sound recommendations on which I intend to insist with particular force.*" [ *Oriente Lumen* par. 24 ]

### **Conclusion...**

These days a great deal of attention is given to Christian spirituality and religious education in Catholic schools in Australia. Religious education syllabi include useful information about the Eastern Churches. In some schools this information is no longer taught. It is possible that the whole concept of Eastern Churches is simply neglected. For Catholic schools it is

a matter of recognizing the true nature of the church as Catholic. Catholicity according to Karl Adam is the Church's essential aptitude for the whole of mankind.[3] For schools to conform to such a lofty theological principle they must be far more adaptable to the varied religious identities now represented by the youth of the many other Catholic churches now present in them.

**FOOTNOTES:**

[1] Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*. Rome, 1988, par. 6.

[2] *The Code of Canon Law*. (English translation, 1983, The Canon Law Society Trust) Collins Liturgical Australia, Sydney, 2001. 748§2

[3] The notion of Catholicity as elaborated by **Karl Adam** is cited by **Robert Taft**. See Robert Taft, *Eastern-Rite Catholicism: Its Heritage and Vocation*, available for download as PDF file at: [www.byzantinecatholic.org/Heritage/taft.pdf](http://www.byzantinecatholic.org/Heritage/taft.pdf). accessed 9/03/2009. This passage occurs at about page 13 under the heading, the Significance of the Eastern Rites.