

Part III: The Alexandrian Rite (Nicholas LaBanca)

I remember standing in an empty parking lot one Sunday afternoon as I tried to connect to the internet on my phone. Across the street from me was St. Thomas of Canterbury Parish. The doors were locked and I was concerned as I thought I had shown up at the proper time for Holy Mass. Although I was at a Latin Rite parish, today I was visiting on a day when the local Eritrean Catholic community would be assembling for Sunday, as they do at the parish twice a month. I had thought that perhaps I had come on the wrong date, and walked up to the doors of the church in one last attempt to locate someone inside. I then heard a car door slam and saw a young Franciscan walking up to the building with a shorter man behind him. We exchanged greetings, and I found out that I was indeed at the right place for the Divine Liturgy, but I was a little early despite what I was told prior. "Oh, there's no hard and fast start time," grinned the Franciscan. "Father just starts when everyone gets here, so it might be another hour or so. Let's go inside!" The priest behind him nodded and smiled, and so began my first encounter with the Alexandrian tradition of the Catholic Church!

Rich Heritage: As detailed in the first part of this series of essays, there are twenty-four different "ways" to be Catholic. In the second part of this series, we delved into the rich patrimony of the Armenian Rite, utilized by the Armenian Catholic Church. Today, we will explore a part of the Church many in the West are not familiar with as most of these Catholics still reside in the eastern part of Africa. The focus is now on those which express themselves according to the Alexandrian Rite.

There are three Churches which use the Alexandrian Rite in their liturgies. They are the Coptic Catholic Church, the Ethiopian Catholic Church, and the Eritrean Catholic Church. Each of these Churches preserve and express the fullness of the Catholic Faith, albeit in a different way than Latin Catholics do. Fr. Awte Weldu, an Eritrean Catholic priest living in the United States, explains:

"In the case of Oriental Catholics we should first of all remember the juridical obligation of the faithful to observe their own rite everywhere insofar as possible, rite being understood as their liturgical, theological, spiritual and disciplinary heritage (cf. CCEO Can. 28, §1)."

The Coptic and Ge'ez Traditions: The Alexandrian Rite can be divided into two subgroups. The first, occasionally called the Coptic Rite, is used by the Coptic Catholic Church, and the liturgical language most often used is Coptic, and occasionally Arabic. The other subgroup, used by both the Ethiopian and Eritrean Catholic Churches, is referred to as the Ge'ez Rite. As one survey of the Eastern Churches points out: *"The Ethiopian Liturgy is of Alexandrian (Coptic) origin and influenced by the Syriac tradition. The liturgy was always celebrated in the ancient Ge'ez language ..."*

In this way, the Liturgy used by Ethiopian and Eritrean Catholics is similar to what Latin Catholics see and hear during Mass, as Fr. Weldu details: *"The Ge'ez Rite is common and identical for the Ethiopian and the Eritrean metropolitan sui iuris Churches... The only difference being the vernaculars: Amharic for Ethiopians and Tigrigna for the Eritreans. The official liturgical books are in Ge'ez, an ancient language of the regions which today, like the Latin language, is no more spoken but limited to the liturgy."*

A Growing Church: According to tradition, these Churches have very ancient origins. For Copts, their lineage traces back to St. Mark the Evangelist, while for the Ethiopians tradition states that Christianity first spread in the region through Saints Matthew and Bartholomew. Most Coptic Christians today are members of the Coptic (Oriental) Orthodox Church of Alexandria. Communion was broken with Latin and Byzantine Christians following the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

But as we learned in the case of the Armenians, those that reunited with Rome, and Rome with them, we know as the Eastern Catholic Churches. Therefore, many might be surprised to know that many Copts are indeed Catholic and not Orthodox. While they make up a relatively small number both in Egypt and abroad, the number of faithful and parishes have grown over the past ten years, despite persecution that has been experienced by all Christians in the area. There are currently thirty-one Coptic Catholic seminarians throughout Egypt, with the story of one of those attending St. Leo the Great Patriarchal Seminary found here.

Attempts at Reunion: Concerning the actual reunion, there were some attempts made over the centuries which unfortunately produced few results. Most notable among these attempts, was the signing of the *Cantate Domino* by a delegation of Coptic Orthodox bishops at the Ecumenical Council of

Florence in 1442. It wasn't until the middle of the eighteenth century that a lasting union was achieved. In 1741, Coptic Orthodox bishop Anba Athanasius became Catholic, and in that same year Pope Benedict XIV appointed him as the Apostolic Vicar of the nearly two thousand Coptic Catholics in the region. As the population of Coptic Catholics increased over the next century and a half, Pope Leo XIII re-established the patriarchate by appointing Bishop Cyril Makarios as Coptic Catholic Patriarch of Alexandria in 1899. The current head of the Coptic Catholic Church is Patriarch Ibrahim Isaac Sidrak, elected in 2013. His predecessor, Patriarch Emeritus Antonios Naguib, is one of eight living Eastern Catholic cardinals, and participated in the 2013 papal conclave. Pope Benedict XVI, who raised Patriarch Naguib to the cardinalate, had these kind words to say on the occasion of his election:

"Your Beatitude, I am certain that, filled with the strength of the Risen One, you will be able to guide the Catholic Coptic Church with wisdom and prudence... May the Lord help you in your new ministry to proclaim the saving Word, so that it may be lived and celebrated lovingly, in accordance with the ancient spiritual and liturgical traditions of the Catholic Coptic Church."

A New Rite: Looking to the Ethiopian and Eritrean Catholic Churches, it's important to note that the latter of these two is the newest of all the Eastern Catholic Churches. Established in 2015 by Pope Francis, the Eritrean Catholic Church was formally part of the Ethiopian Catholic Church. This can be seen as a direct result of the Eritrean War of Independence which ended in 1991. In 1993, the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church was established, and many had anticipated something similar happening for Catholics. This makes the history of both of these Churches intimately linked.

Like the Copts, most Ethiopian Christians today belong to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, which also broke communion with other Christians following the Council of Chalcedon.

St. Frumentius: While tradition holds that Saints Matthew and Bartholomew first evangelized the area, tradition also largely credits another saint with bringing a lasting Christian presence to the region. Called the *Kesate Birhan* (Revealer of Light), St. Frumentius was the first person to bring Christianity to the Aksumite Kingdom in the fourth century. The Aksumite Kingdom covered the areas of present day Eritrea and northern Ethiopia. As we saw with the Coptic Catholic Church, there were many attempts at reconciliation between the Catholic and Orthodox Church in Ethiopia. In the sixteenth century, attacks from Muslim insurgents ravaged the region, and forced many Christians to decide between submission to Islam or death. The emperor appealed to Portugal for help, and with the Portuguese Navy came a swift defeat of the Muslim attackers, as well as Jesuit missionaries, hoping to unite the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. Despite the conversion of the Ethiopian emperor, this hope was short lived.

Full Communion with Rome: The missionaries that had come imposed many Latinizations upon those that utilized the Ge'ez Rite. The Ethiopians eventually expelled them and two hundred years would pass before any Catholic missionaries came back to the region. In 1839, the Ethiopians allowed Italian Lazarists and Capuchin friars to come into the region on a limited basis. This time, the missionary envoy did much better. St. Justin de Jacobis led these efforts. Instead of imposing Latinizations, he adapted to the liturgical traditions of the Ethiopian Christians there, and won many converts. St. Justin was ordained a bishop and was given the faculties to administer the sacraments according to the Alexandrian Rite (what we would call a bi-ritual priest today) and in 1849 was named the Apostolic Vicar of Abyssinia, thus establishing the Ethiopian Catholic Church in full communion with the pope in Rome. Today, the Ethiopian Catholic Church is led by Cardinal Berhaneyesus Demerew Souraphie. Cardinal Souraphie is one of the few Eastern Catholics cardinals, and is one of the 123 current cardinal electors. As for the Eritrean Catholic Church, the faithful are led by Archbishop Menghestab Tesfamariam, who has been bishop of the Archeparchy of Asmara since 2001.

Ritual Differences: Returning to my first experience of the Divine Liturgy in the Alexandrian Rite, particularly with our Ge'ez Catholic brothers and sisters, much can be said about the beauty in which the sacred mysteries were carried out. You can find a full report on that experience here. Keep in mind, though, that their Liturgy is of the same origin as Coptic Catholics. From the Catholic Encyclopedia: *"In the general effect of its liturgical rules the Ethiopian Church is allied to the Coptic Rite. Numerous modifications, and especially additions, have, in the course of time, been introduced into its ritual; but the basic text remains that of Egypt, from which, in many places, it differs only in the language. Its*

calendar and the distribution of festivals are regulated as in the Coptic Church ... ” This is why the Alexandrian Rite can be subdivided into the Coptic Rite and the Ge’ez Rite. As mentioned above, language is one of the main differences between them. Other differences include certain local customs such as the use of drums during the Liturgy. Also, some women in the congregation ululate at certain moments of the Liturgy, such as before the reception of Holy Communion. This is one of the traditions particular to the Ge’ez Rite, done as an act of praise.

Differences in Communion: All three Churches administer the Eucharist through intinction, which means they dip the Host into the Precious Blood just before giving It to the communicant. The bread Coptic Catholics use is typically leavened bread and is stamped with the Coptic Cross before it is consecrated. As I experienced when visiting the Eritrean Catholic community, the Host was unleavened. As I approached to receive our Lord in Communion, a deacon stood next to the priest. The deacon held the chalice so the priest could dip the Sacred Host before administering It to each of us on the tongue. The server stood on the other side of the priest with a paten underneath each communicants’ chin. After everyone has received Communion, the priest blesses the congregation with the Sacred Species, just as in the Byzantine Rite.

The Sacraments and Seasons: Traditionally the Alexandrian Rite gives all the sacraments of initiation at the same time, including for infants. As we saw with Armenian Catholics, Chrismation (or Confirmation) is given immediately after baptism. Regarding the Holy Eucharist, Fr. Weldu quotes the Canon Law of the Eastern Churches: *“With respect to the participation of infants in the Divine Eucharist after baptism and chrismation with holy myron, the prescriptions of the liturgical books of each Church sui iuris are to be observed with the suitable due precautions (Can. 710).’ Thus, we are to keep the unity of the sacraments of initiation together.”* As for the liturgical seasons, the year typically begins with the Feast of the Cross in late September, which commemorates the finding of the True Cross by St. Helen. There are also many seasons of fasting throughout the year. The Great Fast does not start with an Ash Wednesday or Clean Monday as seen in the Latin and Byzantine traditions, but is usually stricter than Lenten fast seen in the Latin Church. The Apostles’ Fast also follows Pentecost in preparation for feast of Sts. Peter and Paul.

Alexandrian Rite Saints: Many great saints have come from the Alexandrian tradition in addition to the ones we already mentioned in passing. There’s a direct connection between the great St. Athanasius of Alexandria, Doctor of the Church, and St. Frumentius. After staying in the Kingdom of Aksumite for some time, he eventually travelled to Alexandria to ask St. Athanasius to send a pastor to look over the people in the Aksumite Kingdom. In the great Doctor’s wisdom, St. Athanasius ordained St. Frumentius himself as the first bishop of Aksum. He returned to Eritrea and spread the faith through his preaching and miracles. The Latin Church celebrates St. Frumentius’ feast day Church on October 27.

Fast-forwarding a bit closer to modern times, we also venerate the very first priest that St. Justin de Jacobis ordained, Blessed Michael Gabra—who converted to the Catholic Faith in 1844. Once St. Justin was consecrated bishop, he ordained Gabra as a priest in 1851. Together with St. Justin, Gabra wrote a catechism of Christian doctrine which the local Church adapted to its needs. Gabra also translated many works on moral theology into the native language of Amharic.

In 1855, Gabra and four of his companions were thrown into prison following a new persecution of Catholics. They were tortured so they might apostatize, but Gabra remained firm in his faith. His persecutors condemned him to death on May 31, but they granted him a reprieve so he would be imprisoned for life. For three more months he was subject to ill treatment. He finally caught cholera and died on August 28, 1926. Pope Pius XI beatified him and declared him a martyr in 1926. The Latin Rite commemorates his feast day on September 1.

Our Common Love for Jesus: While it may be a bit difficult to find one of these parishes in North America, it’s important to at least be aware of our Eastern Catholic brothers and sisters. My time spent with the local Eritrean Catholic community was an experience I will always cherish. I look forward to worshipping with them again in the near future. While Fr. Weldu reports there are no Eritrean or Ethiopian Catholic parishes in the United States, there are chaplaincies in various places such as Chicago and Washington, D.C. If you do have an opportunity to worship with our Coptic or Ge’ez Catholic brothers and sisters, you’ll find yourself warmly welcomed by a community that may appear a bit different than your own. However, you’ll soon find that your common love for our Lord Jesus will make things feel familiar very quickly.