

SO WHAT IF YOU'RE EASTERN MARONITE CATHOLIC?

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IN A RECENT issue of *Compass* (2009/2), two articles appeared in regards to Eastern Catholic students. 'Eastern Catholic Students in Catholic Schools' was co-authored by Fr Olexander Kenez and Fr Brian Kelty and addressed issues in the education of Eastern Catholic children in Latin Catholic Schools. This paper elicited a response from Richard Rymarz in his article 'Eastern Catholic students in Catholic Schools.' Rymarz offered arguments on how and why Eastern theology should be incorporated into the existing curriculum. The following in response, provides Eastern Maronite Rite details that may be readily incorporated in teaching lessons.

The Arguments

Kenez and Kelty wrote on behalf of the Maronite, Melkite, Ukrainian and Chaldean Churches to the Latin Church Australian Bishops' National Catholic Education Commission, Catholic Education Offices and Catholic Teachers of Australia. A major concern was that children of Eastern Catholic descent in Roman Catholic schools were educated in Latin Catholic spirituality to the extent that they abandoned their Eastern Church of origin. Ignorance among Catholic teachers was demonstrated by the regular religious practices of one-size-fits-all approach.

Recommendations put forward by the Eastern Bishops included inviting Eastern Catholic priests to celebrate the Eastern Divine Liturgy, as well as extending pastoral hospitality to Eastern Catholic clergy in cases where large numbers of Eastern Catholics were enrolled. It was further recommended that in-services be offered in regards to the needs of Eastern Christians in schools.

The raising of these concerns is a timely reminder that in the classroom there are numerous contexts that need to be attended to, including religious beliefs, nationalities and cultural practices of students.

In response Rymarz wrote, 'In terms of the formal religious education curriculum there is a case for including more material on Eastern Catholic Churches in existing units as well as developing the new ones that have a distinctive Eastern theological focus.' However, getting one's hands on relevant information that can be included in an RE curriculum that is relevant to Year 7-10 students is not always easy. The intention here therefore, is to provide material on Eastern spirituality with particular regards to Maronite spirituality and Liturgy.

Spirituality of the Eastern Churches

According to Roccasalvo (1992), the Eastern Churches reflect a spirituality that has four central ideas. First, for the Eastern Christian, holiness is concerned with remaining attentive and ready to be interiorly transformed. Second, tradition and customs are observed with great reverence. Third is the ascetic tradition of silence and mastery over one's passions, in order to experience contemplation and union with God. Eastern Christians are fond of repeating the phrase, 'Lord have mercy' in their prayers and Eucharistic service. Fourth, the Eastern Churches celebrate the feast of the Resurrection as the main event of the liturgical year. The faithful greet one another with the refrain, 'Christ is risen!' This is preceded by an intense celebration of Great Lent beginning with a rigorous fast on Ash Monday (un-

like the Ash Wednesday of the Roman Catholic Rite).

In the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgies, a sense of the sacred and transcendental is conveyed (Roccasalvo 1992). In the Maronite Church, the Eucharist is called the Divine Service of the Holy Mysteries. The service exhorts the faithful to celebrate the liturgy with heartfelt praise, gratitude and need. This is done joyfully yet with dignity, carefully preserving the sense of mystery and transcendence. The celebration of the Sunday Eucharist represents the high point of the week.

In body praise, Eastern Churches perform the sign of the Cross not only to praise the Trinity and to revere the cross but also to symbolize the sacredness of their bodies as temples of God. Numerous Eastern Churches are resplendent with the visual beauty of icons and liturgical furnishings. Incense is used to reverence the interior of the church building, the offertory gifts, the icons and the faithful.

The Eastern Churches call the faithful to honour Mary because she is the one who bore God and is appropriated a place with her Son in the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgies. Maronites hail Mary's strength and fidelity under the term 'Cedar of Lebanon.'

Maronites hear the words of consecration solemnly proclaimed in Syriac (Aramaic), the language used by Jesus. Retaining, in part, the mother tongue, reflects one of many ways in which the lifeline to the past is kept alive in Eastern Christian worship.

Maronite Spirituality

Maronite spirituality has distinguished itself from other Eastern Churches through attachment to the land of Lebanon, ecumenical openness, and emphasis on a spirituality of the suffering, crucified and risen Christ. Furthermore it is a spirituality which has remained faithful to its monastic character of a daily eremitical life in work, prayer, obedience to the Church and devotion to spiritual authorities. It was around the monasteries that the



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Maronite community continually re-formed (Hourani and Habchi 2004).

Maronite spirituality has an ecumenical character, stemming from its belonging to the universal Catholic Church, a fact which distinguishes it from other Syriac Churches. Its universalism has also been manifested through a dialogue with the Arab-Muslim world, a result of Lebanon's situation as the only Middle Eastern country where Christians hold some degree of political power. At the same time the Maronite Church in the predominantly Islamic Middle East has also been burdened by its political role.

The cross is at the centre of Maronite spirituality. The crucified Christ allows Maronites to understand the persecutions they have endured and offers meaning to their sufferings.

The Maronite Church claims a special devotion to the Mother of God. In villages, homes, mountains and the streets of Lebanon, one finds shrines to Our Lady. On Marian feast days, particularly the feast of the Assumption, Maronites gather in prayer at Churches named in honour of her. Mary is often referred to as Our Lady of Lebanon. Hymns, feast days and the liturgical life of the Maronite Church also express this devotion.

The high esteem for asceticism and respect for hermits has also been part of the Maronite people's faith. To them, hermits attest to the spiritual life and message of Christ. Four particular saints hold special admiration by the Maronites. Saint Maroun is considered the Founder of the Maronites and three modern

day saints, loved for their consecration and fidelity to Christ include Saints Charbel, Hardini and Rafqa.

The Maronite Divine Liturgy

It was noted at the beginning of this article that recommendations put forward by the Eastern Bishops included inviting Eastern Catholic priests to celebrate the Eastern Divine Liturgy at Latin Rite Schools. If this is to occur an understanding of the structure of the Eastern Divine Liturgy is essential. The following presents a brief look at the Maronite Divine Liturgy to enable students to be more attentive and active participants. With the dawn of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the importance of the Divine Liturgy was renewed.

The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows. For the aim and object of apostolic works is that all who are made sons and daughters of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of the Church, to take part in the sacrifice, and to eat the Lord's supper.¹ Along with the recognition of a Liturgy where all participated, there emerged a new understanding of the importance of the Lectionary.²

For Maronite residents in Australia, participating at a Maronite Divine Liturgy or Roman Catholic Mass is a possibility and reality. Yet the affinity towards the Maronite Divine Liturgy often sees Maronites returning to their parish on such occasions as baptisms, weddings and funerals. Christmas, Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter attract gatherings of people numbering in the thousands. Perhaps it is the nuances apparent between the two lived Liturgies that lead to Maronites showing a fondness for their Divine Liturgy. The following intends to clarify some of the differences in the hope of a better understanding and fuller participation at a Maronite Divine Liturgy celebration.

In the Maronite Church, the celebration of

the Eucharist is known by several names which include *Qurbono* (Syriac), *Quddas* (Arabic), Divine Liturgy, and the Service of the Holy Mysteries, which is derived from the Syriac meaning of ministering at the altar. The liturgy is replete with prayers, gestures and music, which reflect the glory and loving mercy of God. The Eastern Rites particularly focus on the call of worshippers to forgiveness and rebirth.

The Maronite Liturgy has two main sections involving the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The first part of the celebration which involves prayers of forgiveness, focus on the Church Season. Between the two main parts of the celebration is the Creed and pre-Anaphora which includes the Offertory. The second half of the liturgy is based on one of the eight Anaphoras, which include the Twelve Apostles, Saint Peter, Saint James, Saint John, Saint John Maroun, Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Mark or Saint Sixtus. These Eucharistic prayers are similar in structure but vary in their prayers. However the Narrative of the Eucharistic Institution (Consecration), the Memorial of the Plan of the Son (Anamnesis) and the Invocation of the Holy Spirit (*Epiclesis*) do not vary.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, often the celebration of the Eucharist revolves around the memory of a saint and serves as a reminder of all who have faithfully gone before us and still now celebrate with us in the glory of God. The Maronite Catholic Divine Liturgy tends rather to dedicate its Opening Prayer and the Prayer of Forgiveness to the recollection of the Season currently celebrated in the Church. God's plan of salvation plays an important role in the Maronite Liturgy as does the recollection of the past events, the present time and the future second coming. The Church recalls the past saints, the present people and those who have passed away.

The Holy Spirit is the principal minister in the liturgy. The Spirit is the beginning, the end and the perfection of all things. This is seen particularly in the emphasis on the *Epiclesis* in the Maronite Liturgy.

Invocation of the Holy Trinity is more common in the Maronite Catholic Liturgy than in the Roman Catholic Liturgy. In fact all prayers end with the invocation, '...through the Father, his only begotten Son and living Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.'

The use of incense in the Maronite Tradition conveys a sense of mystery and awe. The incense is a reminder of the sweet smelling presence of the Lord and the imagery of our prayers being offered up to God, 'Let my prayer be set forth as incense before you; the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice' (Pm 141:2).

The communal aspect of worship is emphasized in the Maronite Liturgy as the people experience themselves involved in a continuous dialogue with the celebrant. There is a significant participative role for the laity not only in the responses but also in the role of cantor, reader, choir member, and in the taking up of the offertory.

The sign of peace occurs just after the offertory, or more precisely, immediately prior to the Eucharistic prayer. It is a reminder that we gather and celebrate as one community, one body in Christ, as Eucharist is not only a personal matter but also a public event. This early insertion of the sign of peace is a further reminder that before we even think of communion and unity in the Eucharist, we acknowledge the unity with one another. As Scripture states, 'So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift' (Mt 5:23-24). Peace is exchanged from the altar without words but by a simple gesture of hands open to receive the hands that are joined to give.

The greatest emphasis is placed in the Maronite Divine Liturgy on the maintenance of Aramaic (Syriac). This was the language that Jesus used and is retained in the Narrative of the Eucharistic Institution. It is also heard in the entrance prayer the priest recites

and in the triple invitation to the greatness of God known as *Trisagion* (*Qadishat*) which is chanted in Syriac by all present, prior to the First Reading from the Epistles:

Qadishat aloho; qadishat hayeltono; qadishat lomoyouto. itraHam 'alain

Holy are you, O God; Holy are you, O Strong One;

Holy are you, O Immortal One. Have mercy on us.

The use of Greek is seen in the triple invocation by the congregation of *Kyrie Eleison* (Lord have mercy). The triple invocation highlights the emphasis on the Holy Trinity and is said during the *Epiclesis*, where the Invocation of the Holy Spirit occurs.

The Maronite Divine Liturgy echoes the Eastern theology of becoming divine. As Irenaeus stated, 'God became human, so that humans might become God.' This understanding is articulated in the communal hymn during the elevation of the Eucharist:

You have united O Lord, your divinity with our humanity,

and our humanity with your divinity;
your life with our mortality and our mortality
with your life.

You have assumed what is ours and you have
given us what is yours,

for the life and salvation of our souls. To you
be glory forever.

Immediately prior to receiving communion, the gathering pray as one:

Make us worthy, O Lord,
to sanctify our bodies with your holy Body
and purify our souls with your forgiving Blood.
May our communion be for the forgiveness of
our sins and for eternal life.

O Lord our God, to you be glory forever.

It is the accepted knowledge that the people have been forgiven by God and there is a deep awareness of God's mercy. In the Roman Catholic Mass it finds its equivalent in the prayer, 'Lord I am not worthy to receive you. Only say the word and I shall be healed.' This echoes the centurion's plea to Jesus, 'And Jesus went with them, but when he was

not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, 'Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed' (Lk 7:6-7).

Finally the Maronite Divine Liturgy has its own Maronite hymns and chants. These hymns tend to be more solemn rather than upbeat.

Conclusion

Immigration to Australia from distant parts of the world along with a high birthrate among

migrants of Eastern Catholic faiths, will witness to an increase in the number of Eastern Catholic students. With limited numbers of Eastern Rite Schools and parishes within Australia, Latin Rite Catholic schools become the location for educating these students in their Religious Tradition. Therefore, readily available resources in Eastern Catholic Traditions, becomes an urgent need. This paper intended to offer an introductory understanding of Eastern Spirituality and comparisons between the Maronite and Roman Catholic Divine Liturgies that can be readily used in any RE curriculum.

NOTES

1 Austin Flannery O.P Ed., 'Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*' in *The Documents of Vatican Council II* (N.Y: Costello Publishing, 1982), paragraph 10.
2 A detailed explanation of the differences between

the Maronite and the Roman Catholic Lectionaries can be found in the article 'Comparative Study: Roman Catholic and Maronite Catholic Lectionaries' in *Australian Journal of Liturgy* 11, no. 2, 2008:43-63.

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