

# SUNDAY THEOSIS #3-58

## Liturgical Services of the Eastern Church

By Patriarch Emeritus Gregorios III

### Introduction

#### Antioch: One Church in two languages, Greek and Syriac (continued)

At Constantinople there is a certain monolithism, or monism, because one finds there a sole culture, a sole language, a sole people. The same is true of Alexandria, where the Greek language reigned supreme in its Coptic form (the characters of the Coptic alphabet are Greek). Perhaps this is one of the reasons why so many Coptic prayers are found in the Greek rite. We must not forget though, that nine Syrian monks

preached the gospel in Ethiopia, of whom St. Frumentios of Tyre was the first bishop of Aksum (Eritrea).

Antioch is very different: there one finds Greek language and culture developed to its highest level. At the same time, the Syrian, and even the Aramean and Arab language and civilization, were splendidly and richly developed. Antioch is truly the homeland of pluralism in all its aspects; ecclesiastical, civil and cultural. It should be noted that Syriac is very different from Greek and although these two languages developed harmoniously, they remained independent in all their aspects.

This is a single and unique fact in the history of cultures and civilizations: this harmonious diversity remains in place up to our time. Indeed Syrians remain faithful to Syriac in spite of the fact that

they use Arabic in their liturgy; the same is true of the Maronites. In the same way, we, the Greeks, are called Greeks in spite of the fact that we have translated all our liturgy and offices into Arabic. Since the eleventh century we have been praying in Arabic, while still using Greek to this day.





This means that the Syrian Fathers were Antiochian Syrians, in spite of the fact that they wrote in Greek and most likely did not celebrate in Syriac. In the same way the Greek Fathers were Syrian and Antiochian in spite of the fact that they wrote in Greek and did not understand Syriac. This was because the Greek language was common to all cities, while the rural population spoke Syriac or Aramaic, but the inhabitants of the cities and villages came from the same ethnic stock.

St. John Chrysostom, the Antiochian genius (before he became Archbishop of Constantinople), was Syrian Antiochian and did not know Syriac. He used to preach in the cathedral of Antioch. During the great feasts there came from the town and villages the faithful, of whom one group spoke Greek (the town) and the other group Syriac (the villages). However, all belonged to the same diocese and Church. On the occasion of a great feast, he (St. John) had around him a large congregation, but had to apologize for not preaching in Syriac, the

language of the greater part of the faithful attending the liturgy. That is to say, the two languages of Greek and Syriac were the languages of the faithful of the same diocese of the Church of Antioch; the same people had two languages. One can draw an initial conclusion from this: we, called Greeks and Syrians, that is to say the Greek Orthodox, the Greek Catholics, the Syrian Orthodox, the Syrian Catholics and the Maronites are a single people, even if, nowadays, we belong to different rites.

We all know that St. John Chrysostom was the author (in a general sense) of the liturgy attributed to him, which he took with him to Constantinople and which is now celebrated in different forms in the Syrian, Armenian and Coptic rites. The liturgy gained several new, but rather minor, elements in Constantinople: the *proskomedia*; the procession of gifts and the chant 'O only begotten Son'; otherwise it is an Antiochian liturgy.

Similar to the instance of St. John Chrysostom is that of St. Cyril of Jerusalem, when he was given the task of pre-

paring catechumens: for them, he preached his famous *Catecheses*, during Lent and the Paschal season of 348, in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher, (all except the last five, which he gave in the rotunda of the Resurrection) standing on the hill of Golgotha, on top of the stone of Unction, where the catechumens had gathered, of whom one part spoke Greek and the other Syriac. However, St. Cyril only knew Greek and had recourse to a Syriac interpreter. All the catechu-





mens were members of the same Church of Jerusalem. Much later St. Cyril became bishop of Jerusalem. We must not forget that the monks of St. Saba belonged to different countries and spoke different languages, but belonged to the same Church and gathered together to celebrate the liturgy in the Greek language. Similarly, St. Jerome reports that at the funeral of Saint Paola psalms were sung in Greek, Latin and Syriac. A little-known sermon of St. Gregory of Nyssa shows that the province of Pontus (present day northern Turkey) and Cappadocia were following the Syriac rite at the end of the fourth century. The osmosis effective in Antioch and at Jerusalem was also effective in the region of Constantinople.

When picturing Antiochian culture, it is impossible to exclude other languages: Syriac, Greek and Arabic are endemic in the geographical area with which we are concerned here. So, one of those icons of the kind that best demonstrates the universality of that same Syrian-Antiochian culture across time and space, is the double-sided icon of Kaftoun. It has on the back a magnificent depiction of the baptism of Christ, with inscriptions in three languages, Syriac, Greek and Arabic.

Now a word on the subject of the term Byzantium: this town was named after its founder Byzas, in 658 BC. It was later called Constantinople, the name of its founder the Emperor Constantine, who inaugurated it in 330, when the name Byzantium disappeared. In spite of this, the name (Byzantium) became more renowned than Constantinople and it re-

mained that way until the name of Byzantium gave way to that of Istanbul. The term Byzantium became widely known in culture, architecture, thought and theology and this under the influence of Byzantinologists. Remember that Byzantium was dependent on Antioch. The term Byzantine, applied to the liturgy, appears much later.

### **Greek: the Common Denominator**

Thus the Greek language becomes a common denominator for the Eastern rites, which all conserve Greek terms. There are several examples of numerous common hymns between the Greek rite (called Byzantine) and the Syrian (Maronite), Coptic, and also between the Armenian and Ethiopian rites. The eight tones of the Resurrection are for the main part the same or very similar in Greek, Coptic and Syriac, as are the prayers and hymns of the little hours. So are the prayer which closes the little hours; the beautiful hymn 'O Gladdening Light' in the Greek, Armenian, Coptic and Syrian rites; the hymn of the Bridegroom; the hymns of Christmas and of Easter; the chants to the Theotokos; the anaphora of the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom and other prayers of that liturgy (the Armenian liturgy contains twenty-one prayers from that liturgy).

### **The Council of Chalcedon (451) and the Antiochian Rites**

The Eastern rites diversified and were fixed between the sixth or seventh centuries, around the Council of Chalcedon. This Council, where the theme of Christology occupied the place of honor, did not influence the liturgical texts or rites. The texts in which one finds traces of the





Christological dispute did not appear until later. The main parts of the liturgical texts were composed before the Council when there was only one bishop and two languages in Antioch, as also in Alexandria. We must not forget that Severus of Antioch and Dioscoros of Alexandria and numerous others, who are pillars of the Syrian and Coptic tradition, wrote in Greek, and lived before the (time of the) schism of Chalcedon. Hymns slowly replaced the psalms and were composed between the fourth and eighth centuries. In the same way the principal structures of the liturgical prayers (the hours) were being formed around the council of Chalcedon, but were not influenced by the conciliar disputes, in spite of the fact that these disputes were the reason for the diversification of the rites and the divisions of the churches.

This is to say that the majority of these hymns were written in the one Church, where there was still one bishop, before the divisions between patriarchates

and bishops into Chalcedonians, Greek Byzantine Melkites and non-Chalcedonians, Syrians and Copts. All these elements (a single bishop, the hymns, the hymnographers) are important factors for demonstrating that the Antiochian rite (in the two languages of Greek and Syriac) was formed and constituted before the Council of Chalcedon or a little after, and in any case before the foundation of the Syriac non-Chalcedonian jurisdiction of the time of Jacob Baradi (+578), denounced as a Monophysite. This is a proof of the unity of the Antiochian rite in both languages and in both traditions.

That is to say that the Syriac rite is Antiochian and the Greek rite is also Antiochian; the same rite in two languages. The Melkite rite is also Antiochian and is the origin of the rite now called Byzantine. That is to say that our rite, like that of the other Greeks and the Syrians is the unique rite of a single Church which had two liturgical languages, going back to one origin. The Council of Chalcedon gave rise to the separation of the Churches, not ritual differences. We all have one sole Antiochian rite in two languages (and the same can be said of the Maronites.)

*To be continued...*

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