

*The Syriac Orthodox Church
of Antioch*

A Brief Overview



2000

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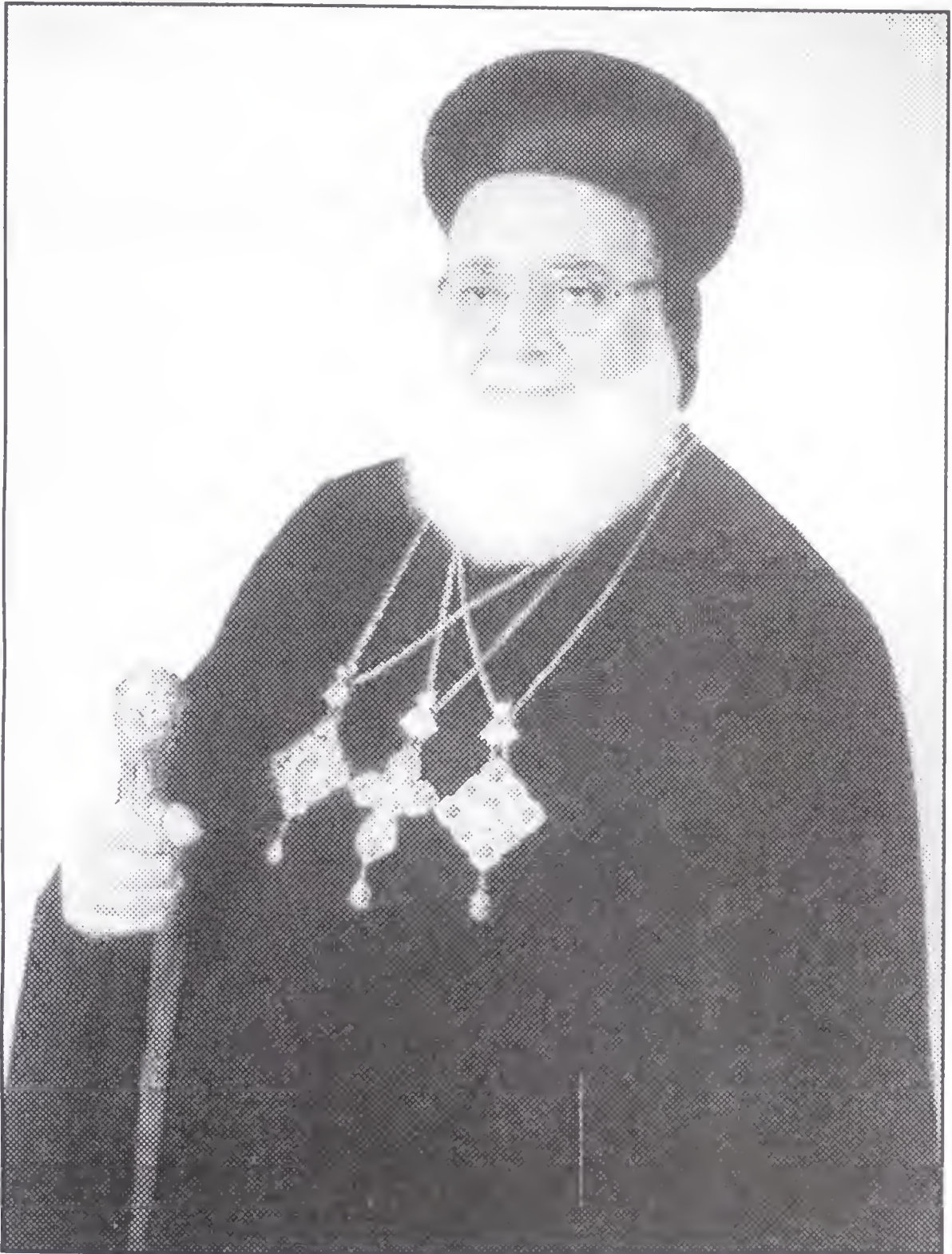


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His Holiness Moran Mor Ignatius Zakka I Iwas
Supreme Head of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch

The Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch
A Brief Overview

By

George Anton Kiraz and Thomas Joseph

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Published by The Syriac Heritage Committee
417 E. Fairmount Rd.
Burbank, Ca 91501-1705
USA
Tel: (818) 845-5089
E-Mail: MorClemis@aol.com

The emblem of the Committee, shown on the outside cover, is a Cross set in a classical laurel wreath which rests on two sea monsters trying to swallow a pearl. This design appears in the *Beth Qadishe*, 'House of Saints' or burial place, of Deir al-Za'faran, Turkey, and goes back to the 6th century. The pearl symbolizes the human soul, and the two sea monsters, representing the grave or death, try to swallow it. The wreath around the Cross on top of the sea monsters represents Christ's triumph over death. The message is: those swallowed up by the grave triumph over death with the sign of the Cross.

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Preface

The Holy Synod of the Syriac Orthodox Church, held between March 28 and April 3, 2000, decreed that various committees be formed to strengthen the activities of the Church. One of these committees was The Syriac Language and Heritage Committee, under the chairmanship of His Eminence Mor Clemis Eugene Kaplan, Metropolitan Patriarchal Vicar of the Western United States. As the domain of the said committee is enormous, His Eminence deemed it appropriate to split the task between two committees, one to be concerned with the Syriac language and the other with Syriac heritage.

The Syriac Heritage Committee was formed with three initial members. His Eminence Mor Clemis Eugene Kaplan, serving as Chairman, the Very Rev. Archpriest Dr. Joseph Tarzi, and Deacon Dr. George A. Kiraz. An advisory board was also formed from renowned scholars in the field of Syriac, consisting of Dr. Sebastian Brock of the University of Oxford, Prof. Rev. Sydney Griffith of the Catholic University of America, Prof. Suzan Harvey of Brown University, and Prof. Luk Van Rompay of Duke University. His Eminence will appoint additional members to the committee when necessary.

One of the initial projects of the Committee is the publication of a series on the heritage of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch. The Committee saw it fit that the first fruit of its work be a concise overview of the Church, its history, faith and hierarchal tradition, written by Dr. George A Kiraz and Dr. Thomas Joseph, co-editors of the Syriac Orthodox Resources website (<http://sor.cua.edu>). It is our hope that this overview will help in educating our Syriac people who are now scattered all over the four corners of the earth as a result of immigration.

We pray that this elementary booklet proof beneficial to our Syriac faithful, please the Lord as a small service to His people, and be a mean for the exaltation of the Church and the glorification of the Lord's name.

July 30th, 2000

Feast of St. Jacob Baradaeus

**The Syriac Heritage Committee
of the Syriac Orthodox Church**

The Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch

A Brief Overview

A few Christian denominations can claim the antiquity of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch, whose foundation can be traced back to the very dawn of Christianity. The Church justifiably prides itself as being the earliest established apostolic churches. It was in Antioch, after all, that the followers of Jesus were called Christians as we are told in the New Testament, “The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.” (Acts 11:26).

According to ecclesiastical tradition, the Church of Antioch is the second established church in Christendom after that of Jerusalem, and the prominence of its Apostolic See is well documented. In his *Chronicon* (I, 2), the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea tells us that St. Peter the Apostle established a bishopric in Antioch and became its first bishop. He also tells us that St. Peter was succeeded by Evodius. In another historical work, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Eusebius tells us that Ignatius the Illuminator, “a name of note to most men, [was] the second after Peter to the bishopric of Antioch” (III, 36).

In the mid of the 5th century, the Bishop of Antioch, and his counterparts in Alexandria,

Byzantium and Rome, would be called patriarchs. The Syriac Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch used to be known by his own name; however, since 1293 the patriarchs of Antioch adopted the name Ignatius, after Ignatius the Illuminator. The See of Antioch continues to flourish till our day, with His Holiness Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I, being the 122nd in the line of legitimate patriarchs.

The patriarchate was forced to move from Antioch in A.D. 518, after a period of turbulent history, to various locations in the Mesopotamia until it settled in Deir az-Za'faran monastery in Mardin, Turkey, during the 13th century. After another period of heinous violence during and after World War I, which took the lives of a quarter million Syriac Orthodox faithful, the Patriarchate was transferred to Homs, Syria, in 1933, and later to Damascus in 1959.

The Syriac Orthodox Church is quite unique for many reasons. Firstly, it presents a form of Christianity which is Semitic in nature, with a culture not far from the one Christ himself experienced. Secondly, it employs in its liturgy the Syriac language, an Aramaic dialect akin to the Aramaic spoken by Christ and the Apostles. Thirdly, its liturgy is one of the most ancient, and has been handed from one generation to another. Fourthly, and most importantly, it demonstrates the

unity of the body of Christ by the multiethnic nature of its faithful: A visit to your local Syriac Orthodox Church in Europe or the Americas would demonstrate, for example, the blend of Near Eastern and Indian cultures in the motifs and vestments of clergy. The Syriac Orthodox faithful today live primarily in Middle Eastern countries and the Indian State of Kerala, with many communities in the diaspora.

The Syriac Orthodox Church has been a member of the World Council of Churches since 1960, and is one of the founding members of the Middle East Council of Churches. The Church takes part in ecumenical and theological dialogues with other churches. As a result of these dialogues, the Church has issued two joint declarations with the Roman Catholic Church and another with the Eastern Orthodox churches.

The Church has been known in English by the name “Syrian Orthodox Church”. The Holy Synod of the Church adopted the translation “Syriac Orthodox Church” in its session of Mar 28-Apr 3, 2000 due to the needs of the faithful in the diaspora.



History

Throughout Syria and Mesopotamia, Aramaic, in its many dialectical forms, was the language of the land, and Syriac, originally the Aramaic dialect of Edessa in Northern Mesopotamia, must have been the most influential literary form of Aramaic. When we speak of Syriac Christianity, we refer to Christians whose native tongue was and still is Syriac, and those who employed Syriac as their liturgical language.

Syriac Christianity was not centered just in Antioch, the Roman capital of Syria. In fact, Syriac Christianity can be traced further East in Mesopotamia. As tradition tells us, Christianity was received in Edessa during the time of the Apostles. This is reported in a number of documents including Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*. He gives us the text of a correspondence between the city's king, Abgar Ukomo ܐܘܓܪܘܟܘܡܘܫ, and none other than Jesus Himself:

Abgar Ukomo, the toparch, to Jesus the good Savior who has appeared in the district of Jerusalem, greetings. I have heard concerning you and your cures, how they are accomplished by you without drugs and herbs ... And

when I heard of all these things concerning you I decided that it is one of two things, either that you are God and came down from Heaven to do these things, or are the Son of God for doing these things. For this reason I write to beg you to hasten to me and to heal the suffering which I have ...

The reply from Jesus to King Abgar, according to the same tradition, was carried by a certain Ananias and read:

Blessed are you who believed in me, not having seen me ... Now concerning what you wrote to me, to come to you, I must first complete here all for which I was sent, and after thus completing it be taken up to Him who sent me; and when I have been taken up, I will send to you one of my disciples to heal your suffering and give life to you and those with you.

The story continues to describe how one of the Seventy Disciples, named Adai, was sent to King Abgar to heal his disease.

Historical literary sources tell us that by the second half of the second century there was an established church in Edessa, though probably most of the inhabitants remained pagan. The *Chronicle of Edessa* tells us that in the year 201, a disastrous flood destroyed the church of the Christians in the city. However, it took only about a century until most of the city was under the umbrella of Christianity. Edessa, home of the Syriac form of Aramaic, indeed prides itself as the first Kingdom that officially accepted the new faith.

India had its own share of Syriac Christianity. According to tradition, Christianity in India was established by St. Thomas who arrived in Malankara (Kerala) from Edessa in A.D. 52. The close ties between the Church in Malankara and the Near East go back to at least the fourth century when a certain Joseph of Edessa traveled to India and met Christians there. The church in Malankara today is an integral part of the Syriac Orthodox Church with the Patriarch of Antioch as its supreme head. The local head of the church in Malankara is the Catholicos of the East, consecrated by and accountable to the Patriarch of Antioch.

Syriac Christianity spread rapidly in the East. The Bible was translated into Syriac to serve as the main source of teaching as early as the second century. Till our day, the antiquity of the Syriac

biblical versions is upheld with high esteem by modern scholars. In the words of Dr. Arthur Vööbus, “In our search for the oldest translation of the Greek original [of the New Testament] we must go back to the Syriac idiom” (*Studies in the History of the Gospel Text in Syriac*, p. 1). The Syriac Church Fathers made no less than six translations and revisions of the New Testament and at least two of the Old Testament. Their scholarship in this domain has no equal in Church history.

The Church of Antioch was thriving under the Byzantine Empire until the fifth century when Christological controversies split the Church. After the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451, two camps of the one Church emerged: The Greek Church of Byzantium and the Latin Church of Rome accepted Chalcedon, but the Syriac and Coptic (later Armenian as well) Churches rejected the Council. The former group professed that Christ is *in* two natures, human and divine, whilst the latter adopted the doctrine that Christ has one incarnate nature *from* two natures. It is worth noting that the drafts of the Council were according to the position of the Syriac and Coptic Churches. The final resolution, however, was according to the doctrine of the Western Churches and was rejected by the Syriac Church. This schism had sad consequences on the Syriac Church during the next few centuries.

As the Emperor supported the Chalcedonian camp, the Syriac Church came under much persecution. Many bishops were sent to exile, most notably Patriarch Mor Severius, who was later given the epithet ܩܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܫܘܪܝܝܘܬܐ *togho dsuryoye*, 'Crown of the Syriacs'. Mor Severius died in exile in 538. By the year 544, the status of the Syriac Church came to a low end when only three bishops remained. It was at this time that Mor Jacob Baradaeus appeared. Mor Jacob traveled to Constantinople for an audience with Empress Theodora, the daughter of a Syriac Orthodox priest from ܡܒܒܘܓ Mabbug, according to Syriac Orthodox sources, and wife of Emperor Justinian. Theodora used her influence to get Jacob ordained as bishop in 544. Later, Jacob would travel across the entire land reviving the Church. He managed to consecrate 27 bishops and hundreds of priests and deacons. For this, the Syriac Orthodox Church honors this saint on July 30 of every year, the commemoration of his death which took place in 578. A few centuries later, adversaries labeled the Syriac Orthodox Church 'Jacobite' after St. Jacob. The Syriac Orthodox Church rejects this belittling label which wrongly suggests that the Church was founded by St. Jacob.

Aside from their ecclesiastical role, Syriac Churchmen have contributed to world civilization.

As early as the fourth century, academies and schools were set up in monasteries throughout Syria and Mesopotamia. Monks and scholars were busy studying the sciences of the Greeks, commenting on and adding to them. It is no surprise that when the Muslim Arab, who conquered the Near East at the end of the seventh century, wanted to acquire Greek knowledge, they turned to Syriac scholars and churchmen. Arab caliphs commissioned Syriac scholars to translate the sciences of the Greeks into Arabic. In his film *Forgotten Christians*, Christopher Wenner describes the impact of Syriac scholars and Churchmen when he describes the school at Deir az-Za'faran دير زعفران, monastery, “It was through the monks here that the Arabs received Greek learning, and it was the Arabs of course who passed it back to Europe. Had it not been for the Syriac monks, we in Europe might never have had a renaissance.”

The Syriac Orthodox Church survived under the dominion of many empires in the centuries that followed. Under the Arabs, Mongols, Crusades, Mamluks and Ottomans, the Syriac Orthodox Church continued its survival. Neither intimidation nor oppression could suppress the faithful, but the Church diminished in size to a fraction of what it was.

By the beginning of the 20th century, Syriac Orthodox Christianity was confined mostly to mountainous rural areas, such as Tur Abdin, and various towns in the Ottoman Empire. The last of the persecutions was still to come. During World War I, massacres and ethnic cleansing befell the Syriac Orthodox Christians at the hands of the Ottoman Turks and the neighboring Kurds. The year 1915 is known in Syriac by **ܣܝܦܐ** *sayfo*, or ‘[the year of the] sword’. It is estimated that a quarter of a million perished; villages were emptied; monasteries and Churches were destroyed. This resulted in what the Syriacs call (in Turkish) *seferberlik* ‘the collective exodus’, a migration to the newly established countries of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine. Some left the Middle East altogether, forming new communities in the Americas.

As a result of further immigration that ensued, the Syriac Orthodox Church today has faithful not only in the Middle East and India, but in Europe, the Americas and Australia as well.



Faith and Doctrine*

The faith of the Syriac Orthodox Church is in accordance with the Nicene Creed. It believes in the Trinity, that is one God, subsisting in three separate persons called the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The three being of one Essence, of one Godhead, have one Will, one Work and one Lordship. The special aspect of the First Person is His Fatherhood, that of the Second Person His Sonship, and that of the Third Person His Procession.

As for Christology, the Syriac Orthodox Church further believes in the mystery of Incarnation. That is, the Only Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, took to Himself a body and became man. It further believes that at the time of Annunciation, when the Angel Gabriel was sent to the Virgin Mary, the Holy Spirit came upon her and cleansed her of all natural impurity, filling her with His grace. Then the Only Son of God came down and entered her immaculate womb, and took to Himself a body through her, thus

* This section and the following section are adapted from Ephrem I Barsoum, *The Shorter Catechism of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch* (reprinted by The Archdiocese of the Syrian Orthodox Church for the Eastern United States, 1999).

becoming a perfect Man with a perfect Soul. After nine months, He was born of her and her virginity was maintained contrary to the laws of nature. It further believes that His true Godhead and His true Manhood were in Him essentially united, He being one Lord and one Son, and that after the union took place in Him, He had but one Nature Incarnate, was one Person, had one Will and one Work. This union is marked by being a natural union of persons, free of all separateness, intermixture, confusion, mingling, change and transformation.

The Syriac Orthodox Church calls Mary ܡܪܝܡ ܕܐܠܘܗܐ *yoldath aloho*, 'Bearer of God', because she gave birth to Christ, God truly incarnate.

The Syriac Orthodox Church believes that the death of Christ was the separation of His soul from His body, but His divinity did not at any time leave either His body or His soul. It further believes that by His death for us, He conferred upon us salvation from eternal death and reconciliation with His Heavenly Father.

The Syriac Orthodox Church believes that the Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, the Spirit of Truth, proceeding from the Father. The Holy Spirit is equal with the Father and the Son. (Note. The word for 'spirit' in Syriac, ܪܘܚܐ; *ruho*

(which is also the word for 'wind'), is grammatically feminine. Holy Spirit is referred to with the feminine pronoun in almost all early Syriac writings, though later writings refer to it in the masculine.)

It further believes that the church is the body of true believers in Christ, and that the Head of the church is Our Lord God Jesus Christ. The Chief Bishop of the Syriac Orthodox Church is The Patriarch of Antioch.

With regards to Sacraments, the Syriac Orthodox Church believes that the Holy Sacraments are tangible signs designated by the Lord Christ to proclaim divine grace, which He gave for our sanctification. The Sacraments of the Church are seven: Baptism, Holy Chrism (Confirmation), Eucharist, Repentance, the Priesthood, Anointing of the Sick, and Marriage. Holy Sacraments are offered by the Bishops and the Priests. Only believers can receive the Sacraments. All but four of the Sacraments are essential for salvation: Baptism, Holy Chrism (Confirmation), Repentance and Eucharist. Of the sacraments, Baptism, Holy Chrism and the Priesthood may be received only once.

The Syriac Orthodox Church conforms to the teachings of the Three Ecumenical Councils of Nicea (A D 325), Constantinople (A.D 381) and

Ephesus (A.D. 431). It rejects the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451).

Form of Worship

In accordance with Psalm 119, verse 164, "Seven times in the day have I praised thee for thy judgments, O Righteous One," the Syriac Orthodox Church set the times for prayer to seven: Evening or *ramsho* prayer (Vespers), Drawing of the Veil or *sootoro* prayer (Compline), Midnight or *lilyo* prayer, Morning or *saphro* prayer (Mattins), the Third Hour or *tloth sho`in* prayer (Prime, 9 a.m.), the Sixth Hour or *sheth sho`in* prayer (Sext, noon) and the Ninth Hour or *tsha` sho`in* prayer (Nones, 3 p.m.). The Midnight prayer consists of three *qawme* 'watches' (literary 'standing').

The ecclesiastical day begins in the evening at sunset. For example, Monday starts at sunset on Sunday evening. Hence, Monday's evening (*ramsho*) and compline (*sootoro*) prayers, are actually performed on Sunday in our modern reckoning. Today, even in monasteries, the evening and compline prayers are said together, as also the Midnight and Morning prayers, and the Three, Six

and Nine O'Clock prayers, reducing the times of prayer to three.

During prayers, the worshipper stands facing the East, holding his hands outspread. (For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man - Matthew 24:27.)

The sign of the cross is made with the right hand. The thumb, first finger and second finger are brought together and the first finger is extended further than the thumb and second finger, indicating that Christ is the One and Only Savior. The sign of the cross is drawn starting from the forehead, down to the breast and then from the left to the right shoulder. This tradition symbolizes that the Lord Christ, came down to earth from the heights, and redeemed our earthly body from the gloomy paths of darkness (left), to the paths of truth and light (right).

Public prayer is important in Syriac Christianity. Traditionally, the Holy *Qurbono*, i.e. Eucharist, is celebrated every Sunday, Wednesday and Friday. Presently, only monasteries observe the Wednesday and Friday Holy *Qurbono*. Monasteries, and almost all Churches, observe daily prayers known as *shhimo* 'simple [prayers]'.

Apart from sermons, all prayers are sung in the form of chants and melodies. Thousands of tunes and melodies existed, most of which are unfortunately lost. Still hundreds of melodies remain and these are preserved in the Treasury of Tunes known in Syriac as Beth Gazo. Since a musical notation system was not developed, the tunes were transmitted down the ages as oral tradition. As a result a few schools of music emerged, most notably Edessa, Diyarbakir, Mardin, Tur Abdin, Kharput, and Homs, name a few.

During the celebration of the Eucharist, priests and deacons put on elaborate vestments which are unique to the Syriac Orthodox Church. Whether in the Middle East, India, Europe, the Americas or Australia, the same vestments are worn by all clergy.



Church Hierarchy

The supreme head of the Syriac Orthodox Church is the Patriarch of Antioch and all the East. He also presides over the Holy Synod, the assembly of all bishops.

The local head of the church in Malankara (India) is the Catholicos of the East (temporarily the Church in Malankara is governed by a council of bishops following the death of the late Catholicos, Abun Mor Baselious Paulose II). The Catholicos is under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Antioch and is accountable to the Holy Synod and the local Malankara Synod. He is ordained by the Patriarch. He presides over the local Holy Synod.

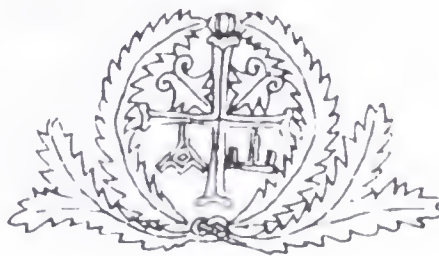
The local head of every archdiocese is an archbishop. He is under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch and is accountable to the Holy Synod. The archbishop is ordained by the Patriarch and at least two bishops. Some archdioceses are 'patriarchal vicariates'; the patriarchal vicar, regardless of ecclesiastical office, is accountable directly to the Patriarch.

Each parish is assigned a vicar. He is under the direct jurisdiction of his archbishop and is directly accountable to him. The parish is run by a board of trustees (or a parish council) which is elected by the parishioners and approved by the archbishop.

Deacons assist the priest in the administration of the liturgy. Each archdiocese may have one archdeacon who is called “the right hand of the bishop.” Only qualified and learned deacons are elevated to this office.

There are three ranks of priesthood in the Syriac Orthodox Church:

- Episcopate ܐܦܫܩܦܘܬܐ: Within it there are the ranks of Patriarch, Catholicos, archbishop, and bishop.
- Vicariate ܩܫܝܫܘܬܐ: Within it there are the ranks of ܫܘܪܝܘܝܐ *khooroyo* {archpriest} and ܩܫܝܫܘܬܐ *qashisho* {priest}.
- Diaconate ܕܝܐܥܘܢܐ: Within it there are the ranks of ܐܘܪܕܝܘܬܐ archdeacon, ܕܝܐܥܘܢܐ deacon, ܐܦܫܩܦܘܬܐ subdeacon, lector or ܩܘܪܝܘܝܐ *qoruyo*, and chanter or ܡܙܡܪܘܢܐ *mzamrono*.



Further Reading

The current essay is taken from *Syriac Orthodox Resources* at <http://sor.cua.edu>. The site contains invaluable information about the Syriac Orthodox Church.

The following is a beginner's bibliography. With a few exceptions, these books are in print and are available from Amazon.com.

Bible:

- Syriac Bible (United Bible Societies, www.biblesociety.org).
- Sebastian Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition* (SEERI, India). [An excellent introduction.]
- Sydney Griffith, *Faith Adoring the Mystery : Reading the Bible With St. Ephraem the Syrian* (Pere Marquette Lecture in Theology, 1997), Marquette Univ. Press. ISBN: 0874625777.

Spirituality:

- Bryan Spinks, *Worship Prayers from the East* (The Pastoral Press, Washington D.C., 1993) ISBN: 1569290008.
- Sebastian Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Cistercian Publications, 1987) ISBN: 0879079010.

- Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye, the Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian* (Cistercian Publications, 1992) ISBN: 0879075244.
- Seely Beggiani, *Introduction to Eastern Christian Spirituality, the Syriac tradition* (University of Scranton Press, 1991) ISBN: 0940866129.
- Seely Beggiani, *Early Syriac Theology* (University Press of America, 1983).
- Sebastian Brock and Susan Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient, Transformation of the Classical Heritage, No 13*, (University of California Press, 1998) ISBN: 0520213661.
- Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom, A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1975) ISBN: 0521205530. [A bit on the scholarly side. Out of print, but available in major libraries.]

Liturgy:

Most liturgical books, in Syriac and English translation, are available from the Syriac Orthodox Archdiocese of the Eastern United States, 260 Elm Ave, Teaneck, NJ 07661.

Church History:

- Aziz Atiya, *History of Eastern Christianity* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1967) ISBN: 0527037036. [Out of print, but can be found in many libraries.]
- Sebastian Brock, "The Syriac Background." In Michael Lapidge (editor), *Archbishop Theodore*, Chapter 2 (Cambridge University Press, 1995), ISBN: 0521480779. [This book is a collection of chapters on Archbishop Theodore, the Syrian Archbishop of Canterbury (668-690). Brock's chapter is a brief, but excellent, introduction to Syriac Christianity.]
- J. C. England, *The Hidden History of Christianity in Asia: the Churches of the East before 1500* (Delhi/HongKong: ISPCK/CCA, 1996).
- H. Hollerweger, *Turabdin* (Linz, Austria: Friends of Turabdin, 1999). [Written in English, German and Turkish, this is an excellent book on the Tur Abdin area, with 100s of colored pictures.]
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Queen Theodora
Syriac Empress of Byzantium (523-548)

