

“WESTERN RITE” ORTHODOXY AND THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

What is “Western Rite” Orthodoxy?

The vast majority of Orthodox Christians identify with a specifically Orthodox way of worshipping. Though different languages are used throughout the Orthodox world, Orthodox Christians who are traveling - or simply visiting a different "jurisdiction" in America - can count on the church architecture looking familiar, the outline of the Liturgy being the same and the means of approaching and receiving the sacrament of Communion being the same as they are used to. Or at least they could until recently. In America an increasing number of converts to Orthodoxy are using a liturgical ritual that looks far more like services done in Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism some fifty years ago. This phenomenon is known in some quarters of the Church as "Western Rite" Orthodoxy.

The idea of using a "Western Rite" in the Orthodox Church first surfaced in England during the 19th century. A former Roman Catholic, Dr. Joseph Julian Overbeck, joined the Orthodox Church in that country and apparently decided that Orthodoxy would never be able to evangelize the West unless it used western forms of worship. Otherwise, he reasoned, the Church would not have a "western memory." He suggested that a version of the Roman Mass - purified of any medieval errors - be used. His proposal, though received with interest in parts of the Orthodox Church, was never implemented.



Dr. J. J. Overbeck.
1820-1905

In the past century, the Antiochian Archdiocese in America has adopted the “Western Rite.” Through the “Western Rite,” the Antiochian Archdiocese has received a number of disaffected Episcopalians – sometimes including entire parishes. “It is argued that the existence of a ‘western rite’ within Orthodoxy offers these Anglo-Catholics a virtually perfect solution, since they can enter the Church without substantially changing their way of worship.” So writes Fr. Michael Johnson, an Orthodox priest from Tacoma, WA. It is said that these “Western Rite” communities represent a return to the Orthodox Church of the authentic, pre-schismatic (that is before the East-West division of the Church in 1054 A.D.) Orthodox worship of the ancient Christian west and therefore enhances her catholicity and appeal to all people.

Today, a “Western Rite” vicariate is canonically sanctioned in two canonical Orthodox jurisdictions: the Antiochian Orthodox Church and in the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR). (NOTE: At the time of the Russian Revolution a number of parishes in Russia, mostly those in favor of the monarchy, separated from the Moscow Patriarchate. They established their headquarters in Paris, a magnet for Russian émigrés. The Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) reconciled with Moscow in 2007.



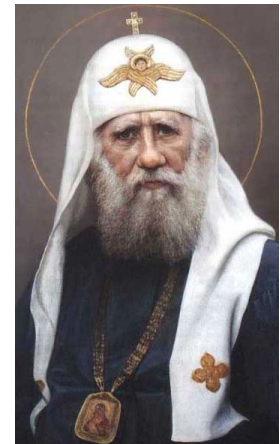
Liturgy of St. Gregory at St. Gregory Antiochian Orthodox Church. Washington, D.C.

Discussion of Western Orthodoxy's Rites

There are two approved "rites" for worship in the Western Rite as practiced in the Antiochian Orthodox Church (ROCOR has many more [see the ROCOR website at <http://www.rwrv.org/wrliturgy.html>]).

First, the "Liturgy of St. Gregory": this liturgy gets its name because it supposedly represents the Roman rite as practiced in the time of St. Gregory the Great, the bishop of Rome from 590 to 604 AD. This rite is more akin to the Tridentine Latin Mass (i.e., the Missal of Pius the V, printed in 1570), translated from Latin into King James English.

Second, and in wider use, the "Liturgy of St. Tikhon": The Liturgy is named after a 20th century Russian saint. **St. Tikhon** served as the Bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church in North America before being elected Patriarch of Moscow in 1917. During his tenure in America, he received a petition for the use of a "Western Rite" from a group of American Anglo-Catholic Episcopalians. St. Tikhon then forwarded their request (and the *Book of Common Prayer* Liturgy proposed for use in "Western Rite" parishes) to the Holy Synod in Moscow, which examined this proposal carefully and granted the possibility of a "Western Rite," provided that some changes in the *Book of Common Prayer* rite were made. However, this was not to occur. The Episcopalians who had petitioned St. Tikhon withdrew their petition, and St. Tikhon did not receive any Episcopalians before returning to Russia in 1907. At this point, neither the Holy Synod of the Church of Russia, nor St. Tikhon, had approved the rite.



St. Tikhon (1865-1925), Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, "Enlightener of North America."



Holy Incarnation Orthodox Church in Detroit, Michigan -- the first parish to celebrate the Liturgy of St. Tikhon

In the 1970s, however, the Liturgy of St. Tikhon was re-produced for use by Episcopalians who wished to convert to Orthodoxy but who wanted to retain the liturgy to which they were accustomed. The text of the liturgy is based upon the Episcopal Church's 1928 *Book of Common Prayer*, which was then adapted by The Right Reverend Archimandrite Joseph Lester Angwin (d. 2007), the late Rector of the Church of the Holy Incarnation, Detroit, Michigan, for Orthodox use. To do this, the Liturgy was modified to contain certain features of the Mass of the Roman Catholic Church prior to the Second Vatican Council, along with certain modifications to make it conform to Orthodox theology and practice (see those changes below).

At present, the Liturgy of St Tikhon of Moscow is celebrated in the “Western Rite” churches of the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America and the Archdiocese of Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines.

What, then, is the "Liturgy of St. Tikhon," the most commonly used “Western Rite” liturgy? In modern times, this liturgy for the service of Holy Communion is basically the service as found in the 1928 *American Book of Common Prayer*. Today the Bishops of the Antiochian Archdiocese (following the lead of the Holy Synod of Bishops in the Russian Church) prescribe that the “Western Rite” as used in the Antiochian Archdiocese make the following changes to the 1928 *BCP* rite: 1) add prayers for the dead; 2) add commemoration of the Archbishop; 3) remove “...and the Son” (the *filioque*) from the Creed, and 4) add a specific epiclesis (calling down of the Holy Spirit upon the bread and wine to change them into the Body and Blood of Christ).



Greek Orthodox
Bishop Kallistos
Ware of Diokleia,
formerly Timothy
Ware, an
Englishman

However, this usage was not universally approved in Orthodoxy. For example, this was the response of Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia (formerly Timothy Ware, author of the widely read book, *Orthodoxy*): *The Anglican service is in large part the work of Cranmer, who was Zwinglian in his theology (i.e., he did not believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist): do we make his rite "Orthodox" simply by inserting a Byzantine epiclesis? Indeed, is it right to take the Byzantine epiclesis and insert it into a western liturgical text where it does not properly belong? It is said that St. Tikhon of Moscow, while Archbishop of North America at the start of this century, blessed a rite of this sort. But how carefully was he able to examine the question? And if he were living today, would he recommend the same course? If we Orthodox are indeed to use a western rite, then there needs to be a full discussion on a pan-Orthodox level to clarify what western rite we should employ.* (From: *The Priest. A Newsletter for the Clergy of the Diocese of San Francisco*. Issue No. 5, May 1996)

Benefits and Deficits of Western Rite Orthodoxy

Properly understood and practiced, “Western Rite” Orthodoxy touches some Western people evangelistically in ways that the Eastern Rite does not. Simply put, there are people who come into the kingdom of God via the Western Rite, who would not come in at all, otherwise. Thus, the Western Rite should exist, especially for these people. But the fullness of the faith includes much more than a liturgical rite. Granted that the liturgical rite contains the center of our faith, it is surrounded by many more canonically prescribed beliefs and actions. What of icons, chrismation at baptism (“Western Rite” prescribes traditional “confirmation” conferred without oil at the age of discretion), the holy mystery of Crowning (referred to in the “Western Rite” as the “Rite of Marriage” and omits the Crowning of the bride and groom)? And there is much more.





For example, in the “Western Rite,” a number of congregations continue the ancient practice of communing the faithful in both kinds separately. Each parishioner receives a piece of leavened bread, and each parishioner also drinks directly from the chalice. However, Orthodox Canon Law prohibits anyone but the priest and deacon from touching the chalice, except to reverence it with a kiss after receiving the Body and Blood of Christ. The Canons are very clear about caring for the Body and Blood of Christ. Thus placing the bread into the hand, or even directly in the mouth apart from the traditional way of receiving (on a spoon with both the Body and Blood present) creates unmentionable chances for accidents and spills of the Holy Body and Blood.

It is almost inconceivable that one who has converted to Orthodoxy in the “Western Rite” may never chant the *“Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One”* or even know how to receive the Holy Communion in an Eastern Rite Divine Liturgy

Left: Orthodox reception of Holy Communion by spoon and a Communion spoon.

In 1958, sensing a problem with the “Western Rite” and the “fullness of the faith,” His Eminence Metropolitan Anthony of the Antiochian Archdiocese issued an encyclical concerning his “Western Rite” Orthodox parishes. His Eminence makes clear that while the Orthodox Church accepts the priests and lay people of the “Western Rite” parishes as fully Orthodox his charges are to avoid any activity which would tend to imply agreement *with the formation of such parishes*. The reason for this disagreement is twofold: it is both liturgically unsound and pastorally unwise. The Bishop writes: *“Liturgically unsound because these rites are not in direct continuity with the worship of the early Church in the West, but are primarily the result of 16th century Reformation or Counter Reformation debates; pastorally unwise because this adds still further to our fragmentation as a Church in the Americas and creates a tiny group of missions and parishes that are liturgically isolated from the rest of the Church.”*

Finally, as late as 2013, the Synod of ROCOR Bishops (new headquartered in New York City) held an extraordinary session from which came a document dealing with “Western Rite” problems in its own jurisdiction. ROCOR Bishop Jerome had been the bishop overseeing ROCOR’s “Western Rite” parishes in the U.S.A. His failure to follow Canons regarding the ordination of priests resulted in his censure and removal as overseer of the “Western Rite” parishes: *“After exhaustive deliberation, it was decreed: ... To censure Bishop Jerome for his willfulness in administering the parishes adhering to the Western Rite, and in performing various ecclesial services not approved by the Synod of Bishops, and for criticizing his brethren in letters to clergy and laity. ... To deny recognition of the ordination of a group of individuals by Bishop Jerome during a single divine service, and to regularize them following a thorough examination of the candidates. ...”* (See the entire document as issued by the ROCOR bishops at http://www.synod.com/synod/eng2013/20130712_ensynodmeeting.html)

A Journey into Western Rite Orthodoxy

As an ordained priest of the Episcopal Church in the U.S.A., and practicing as an Anglo-catholic, it was made clear to me by the actions of the Episcopal Church that it had no intention of staying within the mainstream of the Tradition of the Church Catholic. Part of my journey into the Orthodox Church was recounted in the previous installment in this series.

However, before seeking Orthodoxy in the Russian Church, I and several of the parishioners of my Episcopal Church parish, inquired into “Western Rite” Orthodoxy. We even visited a “Western Rite” liturgy at a mission in Delaware. Encouraged by what we saw, the priest arranged a meeting for me with the Antiochian Archdiocese’s Director for the “Western Rite.” I even travelled to his home in eastern Pennsylvania. This priest had been director of the Western Rite since 1952 (our meeting was in 2001). He was cordial, but distant, and was mostly interested in how many parishioners I would bring with me into the “Western Rite.” He provided me with a list of documents I was to provide him, along with an autobiography and educational background (copies of transcripts, degrees, etc.). He also wanted the names and addresses of all those parishioners I would bring with me.

A large envelope of documents (mailed “Return Receipt Requested”) was sent to this priest. This included the list of names and addresses. The only response we ever got was the Post Office Return Receipt, signed by the priest. None of us ever heard anything again. Calls to his office (and home) went unanswered. Messages, letters and emails went unanswered. Even a letter to the Bishop went unanswered. A later visit with a “Western Rite” Antiochian priest in Washington, D.C., revealed that the Antiochian Archdiocese was only interested in receiving entire parishes, not individual priests with a handful of faithful people.



Fr. Frederick in the Lady Chapel of St. John's Episcopal Church, where he celebrated a Western Rite Liturgy.

As my previous installment revealed, I am now an Eastern Rite priest of the American-Carpatho-Rusyn Orthodox Diocese where I serve as chair of the Diocesan Stewardship Commission, and am now retired from parish ministry.

My thoughts generally on “Western Rite” can be found above. I still think that a “Western Rite” can be pastorally helpful in receiving individuals whose only memory of the Church is a traditional Liturgy, such as the Book of Common Prayer 1928. As a group, we who had been interested in “Western Rite” celebrated a 1928 BCP Liturgy at our Episcopal parish church with appropriate changes as decreed by “Western Rite” authorities in Orthodoxy. It was well attended, as I remember, and a beautiful gathering with, I am sure, the Holy Spirit present and guiding. It is that very Liturgy, “Divine” as it was, that I will remember as the best of the “Western Rite.”