

What is the “Roman Catholic Church” in Ecumenical Dialogue?

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When the Catholic Church enters into ecumenical dialogue with other Christian communities it is referred to as the Roman Catholic Church and not simply the Catholic Church. All Christians are related to and profess belief in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. Catholic in this sense means the church which exists in all places and all times. When we read an alphabetical list of member Churches in bodies such as the National Association of Australian Churches we need to look to ‘R’ and not ‘C’ to find what we Catholics call the Catholic Church.

A communion of Churches

The Roman Catholic Church that is referred to in ecumenical dialogue is a communion of Churches according to *Lumen gentium* (23). The world wide Roman Catholic Church exists in and from the local churches (diocese) which witness to a common apostolic faith expressed in their union with each other and the Church of Rome and its bishop. Rome is not head quarters of a multinational body called the Church in the way that a multinational company may have head quarters in New York or London. The Bishop of Rome presides over a communion of Churches with all the bishops. They are called Roman Catholic Churches because they are in full communion with the Church of Rome.



Some of these local Churches (dioceses) share a common form of liturgy, spirituality, law, and ways of expressing common doctrines with a number of other local Churches or dioceses. The common groups of Churches are referred to as particular Churches; they have a particular and common way of expressing the common Catholic faith but in very diverse ways. There are twenty-one particular Churches in the Communion of the Roman Catholic Church all of which are equal to each other.

The most common form of particular Church is the Latin Church. Most Catholics belong to the Latin Church. This is the Church which has the same liturgical tradition, laws and doctrinal expression as that of the Church of Rome. It is called Latin because that is the official language for documents and it had its origin in the Latin speaking part of the ancient Roman Empire. This is the form of Catholicism which most Catholics and the general population are aware.



Insiders language

Within the Catholic Church we use the term Roman Catholic to mean the Latin or Western Catholic Church which follows the liturgical and other traditions of the Church (diocese) of Rome. Catholic Churches that have their origins in the ancient Eastern Roman Empire are not called Roman Catholic when we communicate with each other in the Catholic Church. People sometimes, and incorrectly, call these other Churches ‘Eastern Rites’, which identifies them by the form of ritual celebration of the sacraments and especially Eucharist, but they are not simply defined by their rites. There is a whole patrimony of spirituality, ecclesiastical organisation, law, practices and life which define their character. They are Churches and not simply rites just as the Latin Church is not only defined by its rituals.

Twenty particular Roman Catholic Churches have their origins in the East of the ancient Roman Empire. These Churches may be grouped together under a few “families”, the Byzantine Churches, Armenian Church, Antiochian Churches and the Alexandrian Churches. Among the Byzantines would be included the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, the Melkite Church as well as thirteen other Churches. Among the Antiochian Churches would be included the Maronite Church (West Syrian) and Chaldean Church (East Syrian) as well as others. The Alexandrians Churches include the Coptic Catholic Church and the Ethiopian Catholic Church.



The twenty-one Churches witness to the diversity which is the Roman Catholic Church. For example the liturgy of the Byzantine Catholic Churches would not be different to that of the Greek or Russian Orthodox Churches. Married or single men may be ordained as diocesan priests and deacons (not as religious/monastic's) although bishops are always celibate men. Most Eastern Churches do not use unleavened bread.

An Australian presence

In a country like Australia many Catholics of the Eastern Churches have made a home here and the numerically dominant Latin Catholics may not be aware of their presence and sometimes are not aware of their traditions and unique heritage.



Some of the Eastern Catholics communities in Australia are large enough to have their own diocese (eparchy) to care for their communities. We have four eparchies in Australia, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Eparchy of Saints Peter and Paul, Melkite Catholic Eparchy of St Michael, Archangel, Chaldean Catholic Eparchy of St Thomas and the Maronite Diocese of St Maroun.



Recovering a richness

The Roman Catholic Church, in the sense used in ecumenical dialogue, witnesses to unity in diversity in the one Church and makes it all the more important for ecumenical witness that we fully embrace the diversity in this unity. Popes since Leo XIII have encouraged the Eastern Churches to recover their patrimony by shedding Latin influences and at the same time encouraged Latin Catholics to know better the richness of the Eastern patrimony within our one Catholic Church.