



# Eastern Catholic Churches

## Greek Melkite Church of Antioch

### Melkite

**The Greek Melkite Catholic Church of Antioch**, Liturgical Family: *Constantinople*

### 1. Cultural Background of Adherents

#### Countries of origin and history of migration to Australia

Members of the Melkite community are mainly from Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, the Holy Land, Jordan and Iraq. The majority of the Melkite community resides in Sydney and in Melbourne. The Head of the Eparchy is Located in NSW. The other parishes are in Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide and Canberra.

The Melkite presence in Australia began in 1896 when a priest of the Eastern Rite, Archimandrite Silwanos Mansour, was sent to Sydney. He set to work immediately and established the Church of St Michael in Redfern.

In Melbourne, the Melkite-Greek Catholic faithful depended on a Maronite priest, Monsignor Paul Al-Khoury, for their spiritual needs until 1972. It was then that, at their own request, the Patriarch sent them a Melkite priest – Archimandrite Joseph Awaad. After his arrival in 1972, he and his parishioners made great efforts to establish a church for the community. The church of St Joseph was inaugurated in 1976 by Archbishop Francis Little, then Archbishop of Melbourne, and a strong supporter of the Melkites.

#### The language used in the Liturgy

In liturgical celebrations, formal Arabic, which is different from the dialects spoken in homes, and Greek are used. While the liturgical language of the Melkite Church is Greek, it is only used in a few parts of the liturgy. The use of Greek in the liturgy is informal and the parts sung in Greek are chosen by either the priest or the choir.

### 2. Liturgical Seasons

#### The Season of Easter



On **Palm Sunday** parents usually buy candles for their children to carry in the processions. Traditionally, the candles match the height of the child. Children dress up and walk in procession with the priest who carries an icon of Christ. Adults carry palm branches symbolising the entry of Christ into Jerusalem. Special crosses are made from the palms. These are blessed and distributed to the people.

The focus of the ceremonies on **Holy Thursday** is the crucifixion of Christ. Sunset on Thursday night traditionally marks the beginning of Good Friday. Twelve children are chosen to have their feet washed by the bishop or priest. This is followed by a celebration of the Divine Liturgy during which all the elements of the Eucharist are consumed. This is to signify that Christ is no longer present. The liturgy is followed by the service of the Twelve Gospels during which the lights of the Church are turned out. Candles are lit and the priest carries a crucifix three times around the inside of the church. The crucifix is then placed on a special stand shaped like the hill of Golgotha. The lights are turned on and the people come up and bow before the crucifix and kiss the feet of the image of Christ.

The focus of the ceremonies on **Good Friday** is the burial of Christ, which is re-enacted by the priest and people. A crucifix is placed in a special casket which is filled with flowers and surrounded by candles. Four eminent men from the parish are chosen to carry the casket at the end of the service. It is carried around the inside and then the outside of the church. Once it is brought back into the church, the people come up and kiss the crucifix and take a flower. A special stand is placed in front of the altar screen doors (iconostasis). All the chalices and patens are placed there (empty) to again symbolise that Christ is no longer present.

The focus of the ceremonies on **Easter Saturday** is the bringing forth of the light as a symbol of the resurrection of Christ. The ceremonies begin at around 11 p.m. and the focus of the prayers is on the coming of Christ back from Hades. The lights of the church are extinguished and the priest takes a candle which symbolises the light of Christ. Everyone lights their own candles inside the church and then they process outside. The congregation and priest turn and face the main doors of the church, which symbolise the gates of Heaven and the saints and prophets who died before Christ. The priest knocks on the door and a person inside the church asks three times, 'Who is the King of Glory?' The doors are opened and the priest and people process inside carrying their candles. The Liturgy of St John Chrysostom is then celebrated at midnight. After the liturgy, eggs are given to the worshippers to break. This symbolises Christ coming out of the tomb. People carry their Easter candle home without extinguishing the flame (if possible).

### 3. Significant Feast Days and Holy Days of Obligation

The following are some of the significant days for Melkite Catholics:

**St Joseph** is the patron saint of the parish in Fairfield. The feast day falls on the first Sunday after Christmas Day but it is celebrated on March 19. The main celebration is the Divine Liturgy. This is usually celebrated by the bishop. An annual parish social follows (usually in the form of a barbecue).

Another significant day is that of **Ss Peter and Paul**, the patron saints of the parish at Hampton Park. This feast occurs on June 29. St Peter was the founder of the Church at Antioch before he went to Rome. The Melkite Church traces its historical development through the Antiochian Church. The Divine Liturgy is celebrated by the bishop to mark this parish feast and a social function for parishioners



follows.

The feast of **St Barbara** is on December 4. She was one of the last female martyrs of the Church before the Emperor Constantine accepted Christianity. On this day, children wear masks to the church where vespers is said on the evening of the feast. Following the service, the people eat a meal of boiled wheat. Before the meal, the story of St Barbara is told. The sweetened, boiled wheat is prepared and brought into the church. The wheat represents the Christian saints who died before their spiritual fruits were of benefit to others or themselves. The meal of grains of wheat also represents death and the expectation of new life. The beauty of St Barbara is represented through the sweetening of the wheat. She was famous for her beautiful eyes and on this day young girls highlight their own eyes using make-up.

## 4. Reception of Mysteries (Sacraments)

All mysteries, except Holy Orders and first Solemn Communion, are administered outside of the Divine Liturgy.

### Baptism and Chrismation

The Melkite Church has three ceremonies connected with childbirth:

- i) the blessing of the new born baby;
- ii) the naming of a child on the eighth day (which takes place at home);
- iii) the presentation, when the child is brought to the church for the first time.

These mysteries are received at approximately 3–4 months of age. Parents are asked to bring a new bar of soap, white clothes, two large towels and a washer to the church as preparation for the mystery. On the day of the mystery, the priest speaks about the significance of Baptism and the duties of the godparents. Then the ceremony takes place. Baptism, Chrismation and Eucharist as Mysteries of Initiation are administered at the same time, as was the practice of the early Church. The person, therefore, is initiated into the fullness of the life of Christ.

Baptism is administered either through immersion or by pouring water on the head of the child who sits in the font. The Mystery of Chrismation is administered by anointing the child with chrism. After Chrismation the child is washed with soap and water as it would be after birth. This is to symbolise its new birth into the Church. The priest blesses the new clothes and touches the child with them. The child is dressed and those present light candles for the procession. A special baptismal candle is decorated with material in either blue (for boys) or pink (for girls). The child is carried in procession around the church. In the centre of the church the priest reads the Epistle and Gospel. The child is given Communion for the first time. This is done by the priest dipping his finger into the Blood of Christ and placing it in the child's mouth. A traditional gift, given to the child on this occasion, is an icon of the saint after whom he or she is named. Melkite Catholics encourage families to celebrate the baptismal day rather than the actual birthday.

*There are different groups of Catholic. Melkites are just one group. Our religion is very important to our family. (Sam)*



## Reconciliation

This mystery is received at around 7 or 8 years-of-age before the celebration of the First Solemn Communion. The preparation for this mystery begins with the school year when children attend Saturday school. Instruction continues after First Solemn Communion. Traditionally, the Mystery of Reconciliation is administered during the fasting periods of the liturgical year. The focus is on the penitent confessing sins to Christ through the medium of the Church. The emphasis within this mystery is on healing and repentance. Through this mystery the penitent is restored to a state of friendship with Christ. This mystery is received either in a confessional room or in front of the icon of Christ on the iconostasis.

## First Solemn Communion

While children may receive the Eucharist regularly after Baptism, a special ceremony is held when the child is approximately 7 or 8 to celebrate the First Solemn Communion. Once children have made their First Solemn Communion, they approach the reception of Communion based on their own conscience rather than on the faith of their family. Before receiving Communion, during a celebration of the Divine Liturgy, the children recite as a group special prayers. They receive Communion first and on their own. Children traditionally wear a white dress and veil or a new suit. Following the liturgy, the children receive a certificate of First Solemn Communion and a gift, such as an icon, to mark the occasion.

## Holy Orders

In the Melkite Church, priests train under the direction of the Melkite bishop. In Australia, candidates study in the Roman Catholic seminary as private students. Selected subjects are taken by the students. Practice and experience in rituals and tradition are under the direction of the bishop and may occur in Australia or overseas. Learning Arabic is an important part of the study.

In the Melkite Church there are three categories of holy orders: bishop, priest and deacon. Other ministries, such as cantor and reader, are conferred through ceremonies of blessing. These ministries are designed to enhance liturgies and worship. Eastern Churches ordain married men to the priesthood. However, bishops are chosen from unmarried priests. The ordination ceremony, which includes the laying on of hands by the bishop, takes place during the liturgy. The bishop places the Body of Christ in the candidate's hand as a symbol of service to the people. The new priest is vested during the ordination. He is ordained into the community which he serves. A procession moves around the altar with two priests leading the candidate by his shoulders. This is a reminder of early Christian times when people were led to be sacrificed.

## Crowning (Marriage)

The focus in this mystery is on the sanctification of the union of a man and a woman in marriage. The Mystery of Crowning does not take place within a Mass or liturgy. The ceremony consists of two services:

**Ceremony of betrothal:** The priest meets the couple at the door of the church and betroths the couple to each other. Candles are given to the wedding party and they are led down the nave of the church.



Rings are exchanged three times between the bride and bridegroom.

**Ceremony of crowning:** This takes place in front of the iconostasis. The actual crowning occurs at the end of the service. The crown symbolises that both partners are heads of their house and are called to rule wisely, with justice and integrity. The crowning is followed by the reading of the wedding at Cana. Wine is then offered to the couple symbolising the 'common cup' of life. The priest then leads the couple around the altar, symbolising the start of their marriage journey. The gospel book is placed on the altar, symbolising that Jesus is the centre of their married life. After the final blessing the couple leave the church.

## Anointing of the Sick

This mystery is administered for spiritual or physical illnesses. The anointing symbolises the person being buried and rising with Christ. This is not considered to be a last rite in the Melkite Church. The focus is on reflecting on our infirmities (spiritual or physical) and on the healing power of Christ. The priest prays, hears confession and distributes Communion. Traditionally, this ceremony is held on the Wednesday in Great Week. A floating wick in a bowl of olive oil is lit with each prayer. The oil is mixed with wine. At the end of the service the priest anoints the people with oil, in the form of a cross, on the forehead, the back of both hands, and sometimes on the cheeks. The gospel book is held over the person's head as a sign of the power of Christ who strengthens us when we are ill. Left-over oil is often taken home to use in times of illness. Families prepare a table covered with a suitable cloth, an icon or cross, and a candle. Oil and wine are placed in a bowl on the table.

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