



Eastern Catholic Churches

Russian Catholic Church

Russian

The Russian Catholic Church, Liturgical Family: *Constantinople*

1. Cultural Background of Believers

Origin and history of the Russian Catholics

The Russian Catholic Church understands itself to be the Russian Orthodox Church in communion with Peter's Chair at Rome. As a movement the Russian Catholic Church began in the middle of the 19th Century when some eminent orthodox laymen and clergy felt the need for communion with the Universal Church.

Most Russians in Australia come from Harbin in Chinese Manchuria and from continental Russia. Many of the older people in the present congregation arrived after the Second World War, having lived in refugee camps in Italy, Germany and Austria. Political and religious influences operating against the Church and people have remained the main reason for migration. A small number migrated in the late 1960s and in the following decade. Since perestroika the early 1980s many people have migrated from Russia. Most now live in the large cities on our eastern coast.

The language used by the people

Old, or Church Slavonic, is the liturgical language of the Russian Church used during the divine liturgy, the Sacraments and other Church services. Outside Russia the local language is interspersed with the Slavonic. In the Melbourne Church, one Sunday per month is entirely in English. The use of English must grow if present and future generations are to understand the tradition.

2. Liturgical Seasons

The Russian Catholic Church has four penitential or fasting seasons during the liturgical year during which abstinence from meat and dairy foods is recommended. The Church discourages parties, balls, weddings or theatre attendance during these penitential times. The longest period of penitence is Great Lent which leads to the celebration of



the Resurrection at Easter. There is a three-week fast leading to Christmas and two shorter periods before the feast of Saints Peter and Paul at the end of June and the Dormition of Our Lady in August.

The Season of Lent

Easter is preceded by a period of four weeks of fasting and five of the Sundays of Lent are celebrated with particular devotion but the Sunday before Lent begins is especially moving. This is called Forgiveness Sunday following Jesus' injunction in Matthew 5:24, 'Leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother and sister and then come and offer your gift.' Beginning with the priest, one by one we ask of all the people present their forgiveness for anything we may have done or said that has hurt, scandalised or offended them during the year. This is done face to face and with a holy kiss.

The Church moves towards Lent gradually over four Sundays. The first is the Sunday which celebrates repentance in the story of the Publican and the Pharisee and the second the theme of forgiveness in the story of the Prodigal Son. The next Sunday is called Meatfare Sunday when abstinence from eating meat begins. The next is Cheesefare Sunday after which dairy products are removed from the diet.

Like Western Christians the Russian Church has a Pancake day, in fact a Pancake Week which occurs between Meatfare and Cheesefare. During this week pancakes are eaten with honey, cream, caviar or herring.

During Great Lent people are encouraged to make regular confession of their sins and to receive Communion more frequently. In parishes the Divine Liturgy (Mass) is only celebrated on Sundays during Lent unless a great feastday occurs during the week. This may seem very strange to Western Christians for whom daily Mass is the usual. But the Eastern practice is very ancient. On Wednesdays and Fridays during Lent, the Church celebrates what is called the Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified. This is a very beautiful service and it is a surprise to learn that it is attributed to St Gregory the Great. These services are very beautiful, particularly because of the singing. The people love to pray the Repentance Prayer of St Ephraim the Syrian and to make the many prostrations (metanias) that punctuate the service. This service is best celebrated in the early evening because its structure is a combination of Evening Prayer and a Communion service. As in the West, the liturgical colours are sombre and range from black and red to purple.

Great Week (Holy Week)

Pussy Willow Sunday (Palm Sunday) marks the beginning of Holy Week. Pussy willows are used because their white buds are the first signs of new life to appear after the harsh Russian winter. On the eve of Pussy Willow Sunday, the branches are blessed and distributed to the people who hold them throughout the Divine Liturgy. It is a day of joy and triumph.

The morning of Great Thursday resembles that of the Western Church. There is a *mandatum* in the morning, the ceremony of the washing of the feet. Twelve men take part in this ceremony if a bishop is able to preside. The Divine Liturgy also takes place in the morning, and in the evening the Service of the Twelve Gospels of the Passion are read. These twelve readings weave together the story of the Passion



as it is found in all four Gospels. The great cross is placed in the centre of the church. Standing in front of the cross the Gospels are read with much incensing and the singing of odes and poems between the readings.

The morning of Great Friday sees the reading of what is called the Royal Hours. The First of these readings and prayers (or Hours) begins around 6am in the morning, the Third occurs around 9am, the Sixth at noon and the Ninth in mid afternoon.

Great Vespers of Great Friday begin in the early evening when the *epitaphios*, a painted cloth bearing the image of the laying of Jesus in the tomb, is placed before the great cross in the centre of the church. Vespers is followed by the Office of matins which includes the Lamentations of Our Lady (like mourning at a funeral). Ideally this should be done by the women. Great Friday Matins is a burial service during which the *epitaphios* is carried around the church three times before it is placed before the cross.

On the morning of Great Saturday, the Office recites fifteen prophecies, and an epistle and gospel. All the readings look forward to the Resurrection of Our Lord. Even at this point the light of Easter is beginning to dawn. The prophecies and readings are followed by the Divine Liturgy of St Basil the Great. Throughout Great Saturday the people come to kiss the image of Jesus and place flowers on the tomb. The afternoon is spent decorating the church with flowers and bright colours. At half an hour before midnight there is a short service outside the closed doors of the darkened church. The church in darkness represents the descent of Our Lord into Hades. At midnight the doors are flung open when the priest intones, '*Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death and upon those in the tomb bestowing life.*' The lights of the church are turned on, representing the resurrection. The tomb is now put aside and the *epitaphios* is placed on the altar. The Holy Eucharist is celebrated on the *epitaphios* until the Feast of the Ascension.

The first part of the Easter service is the Matins of the Resurrection composed by St John of Damascus. During the service the people and the church are incensed many times by the priest and deacon carrying a triple candle and proclaiming, 'Christ is risen!' The people respond, 'Indeed he is risen!' This becomes the daily greeting of Russian Catholics until the Ascension. At the end of Matins and before the commencement of the Divine Liturgy, the people exchange a holy kiss with the clergy and each other. It is a sign of Easter joy and celebration. The coloured Easter eggs and Easter foods are then blessed and the Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom begins. After Easter the priest blesses the people's homes by singing the Easter hymns with the family.

The Ascension and Pentecost

It may be a surprise to learn that the colour chosen for the celebration of Pentecost is green! This contrasts to the Western Church's use of the colour red which represents the power of the purifying Spirit of God. The Eastern Church's use of green is celebrating the Holy Spirit as the giver of life and all growth. On Pentecost Sunday the Church is decorated with grasses, flowers and plants.

The Christmas Fast

This season commences on 27 November after the feast of St Philip and concludes on Christmas Day. However this is not an Advent in quite the same way as the Western Church celebrates it. The Christmas



Fast is much the same as for Great Lent but not quite so strict. Christmas Day is celebrated on 25 December but it must be remembered that the Russian Church follows the Julian calendar. Consequently, 25 December is actually 7 January. On Christmas Eve there is a solemn service of Compline which is followed by a meatless supper. On Christmas morning however, the Divine Liturgy is celebrated and the dinner to follow breaks the fast. Christmas trees are decorated and gifts are exchanged on Christmas night. During this joyous season, the priest, as he did at Easter, visits the people's homes and blesses them singing the Christmas hymns.

Theophany or Epiphany

In the Russian Church, and all the Churches of the Byzantine Tradition, the Feast of the Theophany celebrates the Lord's Baptism in the Jordan. This was also the case in the West and was linked to the coming of the Magi. Over time the Coming of the Magi came to overshadow the celebration of the Jordan Baptism. In the East, Theophany or Epiphany remains a celebration of the revelation of the Holy Trinity in the Baptism of the Divine Man, Jesus. On the eve of Theophany, the Church blesses the waters which the people then take home to bless their houses. Once more, as at Christmas and Easter, the clergy visit the people's homes and bless them with the waters and the hymns of the Theophany.

3. Significant Feast Days

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

Feast of St Basil – 1 January

Presentation of Our Lord in the Temple – 2 February

St Nicholas – 9 May, perhaps the most popular saint in the East and the patron of the Melbourne community. This day celebrates the transfer of his relics from Myra to Bari in Italy
Feast of Ss Peter and Paul

St Nicholas – 6 December. There is a special service on this day.

Feast of Ss Peter and Paul – 29 June

Pokrov, or the Universal Protection of Our Lady – 1 October. On this day the church colours are changed to white or blue. It must be emphasised that all feast days for Our Lady are of great importance in the East. It should be noted that many of the great Marian feastsdays originated in the East and were later gifted to the Western Church.

4. Reception of Mysteries (Sacraments)

Baptism and Chrismation (Confirmation)



If a child is to be baptised, it usually takes place in the first three or four weeks of life, though, in many Byzantine Churches, children may be anything up to one or two years old before they are baptised.

When the mother brings her child to be baptised, she is met at the entrance to the church where special prayers are offered, celebrating her motherhood and welcoming her back into the community after childbirth. Ideally, this service at the entrance to the church should take place separately from Baptism. It is really the 'Churching' of a new mother with child during which the mother is blessed and the child presented to the Lord and the Blessed Mother. The baby is even taken into the sanctuary during the service, a symbol that their final destination is communion with their God in the heavenly places.

Baptism consists of two parts. The first is a service that telescopes the catechumenate into one liturgical event. The second is the baptismal service itself. Baptism is always by total immersion and the newly baptised is clothed in a white garment as a sign of new life. Chrismation, or Confirmation, the Holy Spirit's moment in and sealing of Baptism, follows immediately. The newly baptised is anointed with holy *Myron* or Chrism on the forehead, eyes, nose, mouth, chest, hands and feet. If the newly baptised is a baby or child, Holy Communion is given in the form of the Precious Blood. On being baptised the new Christian is led around the baptismal font three times, while the priest and people sing, '*Everyone baptised in Christ has put on Christ. Alleluia!*'

The Mystery of Forgiveness (Penance)

Children are encouraged to receive this mystery from around 7 years-of-age onward. There is no formal preparation for the Sacrament, but individual instruction may be given depending on the child. The Eastern Church does not use a confessional room, though this has infiltrated some churches in the *diaspora*. It is an unfortunate development which detracts from the liturgical-ecclesial dimension of the Sacrament. The mystery of forgiveness is a Sacrament to be celebrated. To come to Confession, the penitent takes their place before a lectern on which is found the Holy Cross and a Book of the Gospels. When a person stands at this place, it is the sign that they wish to confess. Seeing this, the priest will come and stand at their side. The penitent confesses his/her sins and the priest pronounces absolution while placing his stole on the bowed head of the penitent. The Eastern Church uses a more deprecatory form of absolution, avoiding the phrase, 'I absolve you...' Declaring himself also to be a sinner, the priest says, 'The servant of God, (N.) is absolved', emphasising that forgiveness flows from God.

Solemn Communion

Holy Communion is received for the first time at Baptism and regularly from then on. However, in the case of children, they often receive a Solemn Communion after 7 years-of-age. This is a Western innovation that has crept in to some Eastern Churches and justified as a *first conscious reception of Communion*. There are no special clothes, ceremonies or celebrations on such occasions.

Holy Matrimony

The celebration of Holy Matrimony is one of the liturgical jewels of the Russian Church. This mystery consists of two parts. The first is the betrothal service which, ideally should be celebrated separately from the marriage service or the crowning. The betrothal service, during which rings are blessed and exchanged, is in fact the liturgical expression of the couple's engagement. Most usually the betrothal



service occurs at the entrance of the church immediately before the wedding or crowning. During the wedding ceremony the bride and bridegroom are crowned. The couple drink from a common cup of wine symbolising their communion with each other in Christ. Originally the marriage service was followed by the celebration of a nuptial Eucharist. The common cup is a relic of that ancient practice. The wedding service takes place before an icon of Our Lord or Our Lady which is placed on a stand at the front of the church. The crowned couple are led in a sacred procession or dance three times around the icon, while the verses from the prophet Isaiah are sung, 'behold the virgin is with child and will bear a son.' Finally, the couple then stand before the holy doors and are greeted and congratulated by the congregation.

Holy Orders

The major clerical orders in the Eastern Church are those of deacon, priest and bishop. The Eastern Church still maintains what are called the minor orders, the most important of which is sub-deacon. The sub-deacon assists the priest during the services with such things as incense and candles. The deacon's role in the Holy Liturgy is particularly important, being the link between the people and the sanctuary. Deacons, priests and bishops are ordained during Divine Liturgy by the laying on of hands by the bishop. The East does not have married priests, rather married men may be ordained priest, but priests and deacons may not marry after their ordination. This is an ancient rule. Bishops are usually chosen from monks or unmarried clergy.

Anointing of the Sick

This mystery is received when a person is ill and in need of Divine healing and consolation. In emergency circumstances, a short form of the Sacrament can be used, but normally the Holy Anointing is preceded by litanies, prayers and Scripture readings. If possible, the priest hears the sick person's confession and administers Holy Communion.

