



# Eastern Catholic Churches

## The Syriac Catholic Church of Antioch

### The Syriac Church of Antioch, Liturgical family: Antiochene

#### Cultural Background of Adherents

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

One of twenty-three Eastern Catholic Churches, The Syriac Catholic Church is independent and is in full communion with the Holy See, allowing the Syriac Catholics to keep their ecclesiastical traditions and rites. Most of them still speak Syriac – their mother tongue – and live in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey and all around the world.

The main centre of the church is located in Antakya, Turkey. The patriarchal headquarters is currently located in the Lebanese capital, Beirut, and its patriarch always bears the name of St Ignatius of Antioch – the patron saint of the Patriarchal See – as a first name, following with the personal name of the patriarch.

The Syriac Catholic Church is a member of the World Council of Churches and the Middle East Council of Churches. Current statistics indicate that the number of adherents of the Syriac Church in the world is approximately 350 thousand, distributed throughout the Middle East and other countries.

During the First World War, the Syriac Catholics were subjected to the horrific massacres that affected the Armenians and Chaldeans at the hands of the Turkish forces and the criminal Kurdish militias in the Tur Abdin region and southern Turkey in general. Approximately 75,000 Syriac were killed, according to Syriac Catholic sources.

The sons of this church were and still are being persecuted, killed, and displaced, forced to leave their original homelands in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

Since the US forces occupied Iraq in 2003, Christians, including Syriac Catholics, have been subjected to a systematic campaign to leave their country and emigrate. They are exposed daily to kidnapping, killing and displacement. The last attack was in 2014 at the hands of the Islamic State (ISIS), which took control of the Mosul area, the Nineveh Plain, and other Christian villages, which forced Syriac Catholics, Christians and other religious minorities to be displaced from their homes, churches and properties, seeking asylum in Australia, Europe, America and Canada. This was the biggest catastrophe they have suffered during the twenty-first century.

Since 2012, the people of this church in Syria have been subjected to the same fate of kidnapping, killing and displacement at the hands of terrorist gangs ISIS and armed Islamic groups, and many of them have left their homes to live as immigrants in Western countries. Most of the members of the Syriac Catholic Church live in the countries of diaspora, including Australia, where more than 20,000 thousand people have immigrated, and they live in the various Australian cities that have welcomed them during the past six years.

In the middle of the twentieth century, Syriac immigrants began to come to Australia from Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and then Iraq.



With the growth of the Syriac community in Australia, there was a need to establish missions for the Syriac Catholic Church in Australia. The Syriac Catholic Church was established in Sydney/Australia in August 1985 by Monsignor Michael Barbari who came from Egypt. Later on the first mass was celebrated according to the Syriac-Catholic rite of the Syriac Catholic Church of Antioch.

The first immigrants arrived in Melbourne in 1983. Later on due to the Gulf War, a second wave arrived during late 1991 to 1995. This group was from Iraq. After almost 2 decades of slow growth of the community another large group arrived in 2014 due to the occupation of Christian towns and villages by ISIS.

Following this significant growth in the community, Victoria's first priest of the Syriac Christian community was appointed. Father Fadhel Alqass Ashaq was appointed by Archbishop Dennis Hart, the former Archbishop of Melbourne.

Fr Fadhel arrived in 2011 from Iraq. In June 2011 he celebrated the first mass in the Syriac language at the Holy Child Church in Dallas and founded the Mission of the Holy Spirit for the Syriac Catholic in Melbourne Victoria. The Mission of the Holy Spirit for the Syriac Catholic currently includes 950 families, most of them from Iraq and Syria.

There is also a smaller group of about 50 families in Queensland who arrived after 2016.

## The language used in the liturgy

The liturgical language of the Syriac Church is the Syriac language, which originated from the Aramaic language used in all liturgical rites. Arabic has also been used for a while, and more recently the English language is used here in Australia.

## Liturgical seasons

The Syriac liturgical year consists of seven seasons focused on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

### The Season of the Glorious Birth of the Lord

This is a season of preparation for the birth of Christ which includes:

1. Sanctification and renewal of the church
2. Announcement to Zachariah
3. Announcement to the Virgin Mary
4. Visitation to Elizabeth
5. Birth of John the Baptist
6. Revelation to Joseph
7. Genealogy Sunday
8. Glorious Birth of the Lord
9. Finding of the Lord in the Temple
10. New Year's Day – World Day of Peace

### The Season of Epiphany



Our church used the Syriac word (denho), meaning 'appearance' or 'sunrise', to denote the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ to the world and the beginning of his human mission with his baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. Our Syriac Catholic Church celebrates the Epiphany on January 6 of every year and holds the ritual of blessing the water. This is so that with the coming of the Holy Spirit upon it becomes a divine power for the health of both soul and body, the flood of divine mercy, and the believers and their homes blessed by sprinkling or drinking from the blessed water. During the procession in this rite, one of the children carries a blessed water bottle representing John the Baptist, and people bring water bottles to the church to celebrate the blessing during the liturgy. Children are baptized and given the sacrament of confirmation on this day in honour of the Baptism of the Lord Jesus.

This season also includes, the rite of blessing candles on the feast of the entry of Christ into the temple. It's also called the feast of Simeon Al Sheikh, whose memorial day falls on our Rite on February 3.

### The Season of the Great Fast (Lent and Holy Week)

The Rite of forgiveness (Monday of the Forty Lent). The season of Lent begins with the Rite of Atonement, on the Monday of the first week. This special rite is to be performed after the liturgy and inspired by evangelical theology, which affirms the forgiveness of the neighbour (Matthew 21:18-34), through humility and love, as a prerequisite for receiving God's forgiveness. Thus the believer begins his fast with forgiveness. The rite is performed through the symbolism of anointing the foreheads of the faithful with consecrated oil – a sign of joy and pleasure (Matthew 6: 16-18). This rite focuses on how to fast, revealing the theological, spiritual and human dimension of the act of fasting, which is forgiveness, reconciliation and recognition of one's sin and the other. Lent is a preparatory period before the Easter holiday. It is a period of spiritual struggle following the example of the Lord Jesus to break free from slavery and gain a real, free life. This season includes six weeks or Sundays dealing with a miracle, such as: the wedding of Cana in Galilee (John 2:1-11), the healing of the leper (Luke 5-12-17), and the healing of the paralytic (Mark 2: 1-12)., the healing of the daughter of the Canaanite (Luke 7: 1-10), the revival of the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7-11-18) and the healing of the blind of Jericho (Mk 10: 46-52). The time of fasting begins according to the Syriac of Antioch Rite, on Monday. Called the entry of Great Lent after the first Sunday of it, it ends on Friday of the sixth week –the fortieth Friday and before Lazarus Saturday – with the exception of Holy Week. His prayers express repentance as a period of healing and forgiveness, and also for meditation on God's Word through daily readings. Each of the following days has a specific focus.

### The rite of prostration to the cross (in the middle of fasting)

After the discovery of the wood of the cross in Jerusalem between the years 335-347 AD, Christians began to respect this important relic and prostrate before it in remembrance of the sufferings of the Lord the Redeemer. In rituals of the fourth and fifth centuries, this stage was offered for prostration on Good Friday from morning until noon.

In our Syriac rite, this rite comes in the middle of the fast, on the Wednesday of the fourth week of fasting, and is considered a festive feast. It coincides with the anniversary of the conversion of Abjar, the first Christian king of Edessa, which was an independent kingdom until the year 200 AD. On this day the Syriac Church remembers the martyr Habib Al-Rahawi.



### *The rite of blessing the branches on Palm Sunday*

In the prayer of blessing the branches, the believer supplicates to the Lord to “qualify him to imitate his humility that is for our sake.” So, these blessed branches would be a blessing, source of pride, preservation, sanctification and purity for all categories of believers, from the young to the elderly, and any pregnancy would become “a sign of salvation and praise to the Redeemer Lord.”

### *The Rite of Al-Nahira*

The rites of the Nahira. This rite is celebrated on the afternoon of Palm Sunday after the evening prayer of Holy Monday. The old name for it is ‘Access to the Mina’ (*wadoo Imino*). It is currently called ‘Al-Nahira’, and this name refers to the carrying of candles and torches in the course of this rite

Investigating the rite of Al-Nahira in an effective representative framework that leads the believers to meditate, reflect on life, and strive to live according to the biblical requirements of the month, and vigilance and righteous deeds. Thus they enter the heavenly numbness and participate in the endless wedding.

### Thursday of Mysteries (Holy Thursday)

The Church believed from the beginning that Jesus instituted the priesthood at the Last Supper – in which the feet were washed. Both events took place at the same time and place: in the attic while Jesus was eating dinner on Easter Eve

### Great Friday (Good Friday)

The Syriac rite celebrates Good Friday in three ways. The first is the Walk of the Cross on Good Friday. It is also called the Feast of the Cross, after the sixth hour. It represents the path of suffering in which Jesus reached Golgotha; then the rite of prostration to the cross after the ninth hour prayer when it was then completed.

Jesus on the cross over Calvary and his death: with the washing of the cross, prepare for the rite of the burial of the cross that takes place in the evening with the Good Friday sermon.

### The Season of Resurrection

This rite begins on Easter night. We celebrate two rites; the rite of resurrection and the rite of peace. The rite of Resurrection is celebrated after preparing the offerings in the liturgy, when the celebrants head towards the tomb – the place designated for the burial of the Cross on Good Friday. This place is usually in the middle behind the main altar. The celebrant raises the three seals from the tomb, opens the door, incenses the buried cross and then removes the coffins from the cross. In this praise, the clergy sings special hymns in Syriac during the liturgy. The cross is then carried in procession inside the church during Easter mass.

The rite of peace is celebrated immediately after the rite of resurrection and peace is exchanged between believers.



## Ascension Thursday

The Syriac Church celebrates the feast of the Lord Jesus' ascension to heaven forty days after his resurrection. It is called the Sprinkler Festival, where believers bless themselves with water by sprinkling it on themselves and their homes.

## The Season of Pentecost

The Season of Pentecost is the time of the Holy Spirit in the Church's march towards the kingdom. It begins with the Feast of Pentecost, which comes 50 days after the Resurrection (10 days from the Feast of the Ascension), and it is called the Feast of Pentecost in Syriac. It continues until the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, the time of the Holy Spirit and his arrival to the Church. This rite takes place in the Syriac Church of Antioch on the morning of Pentecost during the festive mass, specifically after the lifting of the holy mysteries. As the celebrant washes his fingers and begins the rite that consists of three parts, each part directs its prayers and bows to one of the three hypostases. This rite in the Syriac is the rite of prostration to the Holy Trinity. It includes: Trinity Sunday; Memorials of the Lord's Resurrection; the Virgin Mary, Mother of God; the Faithful Departed; the Apostles Peter and Paul; the Twelve Apostles; the Transfiguration; the Assumption.

### *The circumambulation in the Mass of the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross*

At the end of the liturgical year, the Church celebrates the Feast of the Cross. In the Syriac rite it is called the 'Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross' or 'Honouring the Cross', and it opens a new liturgical time – the time of the cross – ranging from six to eight Sundays.

## Significant Feast Days and Holy Days of Obligation

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

Baptism of Jesus - January 6

Nineveh - fast for a period of days

St Ephrem the Syriac

St Joseph - March 19

Annunciation - March 25

Transfiguration - August 6

Assumption of Mary - August 15

Birthday of the Mary - September 8

Exaltation of the Cross - September 14

St Behnam & Sarah and the Forty Martyrs (Patron Saint of the Syriac Church) - December 10



## Feast Days for the Syriac Parish in Victoria

Our Holy Spirit of Syriac Catholic Community in Melbourne, the feast of Pentecost Sunday (The descent of the Holy Spirit). In the Holy Spirit Church of the Syriac Catholic community in Melbourne, Pentecost Sunday (Descent of the Holy Spirit) is the official church feast, as Pentecost coincided with the celebration of the first mass in Melbourne at the Holy Child church in Dallas.

## The Reception of Mysteries (Sacraments)

### *Baptism and Confirmation*

In the Syriac Church, the child is given the sacrament of Baptism and Confirmation together. Baptism is the spiritual birth of a child. He enters into the church family, original sin is blotted out, and he becomes the son of the Church and the Son of God. And in the sacrament of chrism, he receives the power of the Holy Spirit forever.

### *Reconciliation and Eucharist*

Before the Eucharist, the child advances to obtain forgiveness of sins and to receive the sacrament of penance and confession in order to be eligible to present to communion. These two sacraments are given together, where Christ is united with the person through the sacrament of the Eucharist –the food of the soul – and soul gives eternal life. The first four secrets are called the secrets of initiation.

### *Anointing of the Sick*

The sacrament of the anointing of the sick is granted both to those who are sick and to penitents who ask for it. The prayers of this rite revolve around forgiveness and repentance. The priest recites them with reverence over oil that is anointed with the patient and preserved for the use of the sick. This oil is infused by the Holy Spirit, thus gaining the ability to heal

### *Crowning*

“The marriage contract made by the Creator and regulated by His laws, and by which a man and a woman establish, with personal and irrevocable consent, a partnership between them in the whole of life. Its nature is to aim at the welfare of the spouses and the procreation and upbringing of children.” Marriage is a covenant between two people who intend to live together in love and life: “The Creator has established and prepared by special laws that deep communion in love and life that the spouses compose: it is based on the agreement of the two spouses, that is, on their personal, irrevocable consent.

### *Holy Orders*

The sacrament of the priesthood is given by placing the hand on the head of the candidate, a tradition that has been passed down since the days of the New Testament. The priesthood is divided into three degrees:



the bishop, who is the successor of the twelve disciples and thus fills the mandate, the priest, who is the assistant bishop, and the deacon, a position stipulated in the Acts of the Apostles to assist in administrative affairs and some other ecclesiastical tasks.

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