

## Western-Rite Orthodoxy as a Canonical Problem

Jack Turner

---

### Abstract

(Українське резюме на ст. 248)

The recent transfer of thousands of Western Christians into Orthodoxy has raised the question of whether being Eastern Orthodox always entails using the East-Roman or Byzantine-Constantinopolitan liturgical tradition exclusively. A number of “Western-rite” parishes have been created, primarily in the Antiochian Orthodox Church in the United States, using modified liturgical forms historically derived from Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions. Must such parishes follow Orthodox canons – for fasting, calculating liturgical time, or determining the length of Lent and what foods may be eaten therein – which always presuppose Byzantine usages, and often explicitly condemn Western practices? Should such canons be observed or modified – and if so, how and by whom? Or should they be rejected for Western-rite communities, and if so, what should replace them and how would such new canonical legislation be generated? The author reviews the Council in Trullo and other relevant legislation, and concludes by suggesting practical changes, but notes that the issues remain complex and require much more sustained and serious reflection.



### ***I. Introduction***

Since the fifteenth century, there have been various attempts to establish an Orthodox Western rite, with attempts becoming more serious in the nineteenth century and enjoying extended success in the twentieth. Western-Rite Orthodoxy is unique in Orthodox Christianity, consisting of groups of faithful, most normally converts from other Christian traditions to the Orthodox Church, who utilize modified forms of the Western liturgies (such as the so-called Tridentine rite or the 1928 American *Book of Common Prayer*). They do not, in other words, use the East-Roman (Byzantine) rite even though they have joined the Eastern Orthodox Church.<sup>1</sup> Though similar to Eastern Catholics, Western-rite Orthodox do not constitute an autonomous particular Church *sui iuris*, but rather are integrated into the framework of the local diocese, the only difference being ritual use. Thus, theoretically, Western-rite Orthodox, as an integral part of their local Church, fall under the same canonical discipline as do Eastern-rite faithful and clergy.

Currently, there are Western-rite parishes in several Orthodox jurisdictions in Western Europe, North America, and Oceania. Most of them (twenty-six parishes and missions) are to be found in the Antiochian Western Rite Vicariate, a non-territorial vicariate coordinating the activity of all such parishes in the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America. All parishes are located in the territory of the continental United States, with the Vicariate itself further subdivided into three regional deaneries and Bishop Basil of Wichita appointed as archiepiscopal vicar to provide Western-rite parishes with episcopal representation to other Antiochian bishops in North America.

The Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) also has a few Western-rite institutions. There is one bi-ritual

---

<sup>1</sup> For further details on the history and liturgical uses of the Western rite, especially the Antiochian Western Rite Vicariate (=AWRV), see Jack Turner, "Cum Illi Graeci Sint, Nos Latini: Western Rite Orthodoxy and the Eastern Orthodox" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wales, 2010).

parish (primarily using the Byzantine rite) in the United States, one monastery in Canada with an attached parochial dependency, and a monastery in Australia with three small dependant missions. The ROCOR also has a number of monastics who celebrate various versions of the Western rite, though not attached to any monastery or serving an established parish or mission.

The last major body of Western-rite parishes is the American Diocese of the Autonomous Orthodox Metropolia of Western Europe and the Americas, more frequently shortened to the Holy Synod of Milan, consisting of approximately fifteen parishes. Unlike the Antiochians and ROCOR mentioned above, the so-called Holy Synod of Milan would be considered canonical only by some old-calenderist groups and not others. They would certainly not be canonical in the eyes of most Orthodox bodies worldwide.

One of the more serious though less frequently mentioned problems presented by Western-rite Orthodoxy is that the Western rite itself is ultimately a canonical problem. It is not a problem of canonical jurisdiction.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the problem is the lack of standing of the Western rite in Orthodox canon law. In the establishment of a Western rite, the applicability of various points of canonical legislation was never actually answered to any significant degree and indeed there is ample reason to think that these questions were never really asked in the first place. At best it seems these canonical questions were considered only superficially. Where they have been considered at all, most attention has been directed towards the text of the rites and not towards addressing the canonical issues per se. This canonical problem arises because the entire enterprise has been entered into without a thorough understanding of the concept of rite as more than just a liturgy. Such an approach is

---

<sup>2</sup> In terms of canonical jurisdiction, the question becomes problematic. Some Western-rite groups, like the Antiochians, would be considered canonical by most Orthodox groups because of their communion with the patriarch of Antioch. The same is the case for the Western-rite bodies belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, which is, as of 2007, now in full communion with the patriarch of Moscow and the entire Russian Orthodox Church.