

The apostolic age was a period of theological and liturgical beginnings, and there was a diversity and improvisation from city to city and from year to year. The unity in faith of all Christians remained the ideal but absolute uniformity was not considered and never imposed as long as the unity of mind and heart and faith was not compromised. As St. Paul traveled establishing communities of Christians wherever he went, each church governed itself, and set up its own form of government.

In the apostolic age the Eastern and Western Churches of today were not yet completely organized. The development of particular churches was a natural process within the universal Church. It was inevitable that certain capital cities would become the centers of authority and models for surrounding cities and towns as the church grew. Therefore, Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria and Antioch became the primary patriarchal sees within the Roman Empire and centers of their particular churches. In the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the city of Jerusalem was granted equivalent status.

At the same time the Christian Gospel spread to other lands and particular churches were also established in these places. The kingdom of Armenia was the first nation to become officially Christian. Christianity also spread to Mesopotamia and areas of the Persian Empire. (The present adherents of this tradition is the Chaldean Church.)

The countries of Eastern Europe received their Christian culture from either Rome or Constantinople, depending on which church successfully evangelized them. The boundary line between Byzantine Christians and Roman Christians ran roughly between Poland, Hungary and Croatia on the Western side, and Russia, the Ukraine, Bulgaria, Ruthenia, Romania and Serbia on the Eastern side. The churches evangelized by the Byzantines retained the Liturgy of Constantinople, but with many local variations, and were often able to win their autonomy. However, they are all similar in theology, traditions and legal structures.

Small Bulgarian and Russian Catholic churches also exist, as does a small number of Byelorussians. There is a large Italo-Albanian Byzantine Church located in Sicily and Calabria. A small Byzantine Catholic Church was also established in Greece and in Romania.

In the nineteenth century the ancient Eastern Churches began a new phase of their story as economical and political circumstances caused them to immigrate to the United States of America seeking new opportunities. The first Eastern Catholics came to America about 1874. The Byzantine Ruthenians (or Carpatho-Rusins) came from what is now Eastern Slovakia and southwestern Ukraine. In 1924 these were separated into two jurisdictions - Ruthenian and Ukrainian.

There were many difficulties that faced these churches, both in finding their own identity in a culture vastly different from the one they had known and in gaining respect as their own particular church from a church that had been longer in America and numerically was much larger. These problems cannot be denied, but underneath them were churches that were alive and constantly growing.

Both the Ruthenian Church (Pittsburgh) and the Ukrainian Church (Philadelphia) were given Bishops in 1924. In 1963 a second eparchy (diocese) was established in Passaic, New Jersey. In 1969 the Parma, Ohio Eparchy was formed and Pittsburgh was raised to a Metropolitan Province with an Archbishop. In 1982, a fourth Eparchy, Van Nuys, California was established for parishes in the western part of the United States.

In 1956, a second Ukrainian eparchy, Stamford, Connecticut, was established and in 1958 Philadelphia became the metropolitan see. In 1961, a third eparchy was formed in Chicago, and in 1983 a fourth, St. Josaphat in Parma.

The foundation of these eparchies witnesses to the growth and spread of the Byzantine Church throughout the United States. The Byzantine-Ruthenian Church, along with the Melkites, pioneered the use of the vernacular in the United States. English has been used in the liturgy since the early 1950's, according to the Eastern tradition that worship be conducted in a language understandable to the congregation.

After the Ruthenians and the Ukrainians, the largest Byzantine Church is the Melkite Church, originating mostly from the present-day countries of Lebanon, Syria and Palestine. The first immigrants came before the middle of the nineteenth century. They settled first in Eastern and Mid-western cities, attracted by factory work. By 1900 there were Melkite Catholics throughout the United States. At first they were called Syrian Catholics and often served members of the Antiochian Church as well as Byzantine Melkites. In 1966, Pope Paul VI established the Melkite Apostolic Exarchate with its see in West Newton, Massachusetts. In 1976 this was raised to the status of an Eparchy.

The last major group of Byzantine Catholics to be organized into a diocese was the Romanians. There was a large immigration of people fleeing from the harsh economic conditions in Romania from about 1880. The first Romanian parish was established in 1905 in Cleveland, Ohio. It was not until 1982, however that an Apostolic Exarch of Romanians in the United States was named.

The largest of the non-Byzantine Eastern Churches in America is the Maronite Church, which follows the rites and traditions of the great church of Antioch. The first Maronites came to the United States as immigrants from Lebanon and other parts of the Middle East in the 1880's and 1890's. The Church continued to grow steadily and by the 1940's they had formed regional associations but as yet did not have a national organization. In 1966 Pope Paul VI established the Maronite Apostolic Exarchate for the U.S. In 1971 the exarchate was raised to the status of a diocese under the title of the Diocese of St. Maron.

The Armenian Church received its faith through Cappadocia. The main immigration began about 1880 settling mostly in large urban areas on the East Coast. There are three religious groups, members of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Protestant Armenians, and Armenian Catholics. In 1981 an Armenian Catholic Diocese was organized for the United States and Canada.

The first Chaldean immigrants reached the United States at the end of the first decade of this century. A few hundred followed after WWI and the first parish was established in Chicago in 1934. Thousands came in the 1960's and 1970's. In 1982, Rome established a Chaldean Apostolic Exarchate.