

WEEKLY REFLECTION

I offer another reflection given by Fr. Francis on the History of our Church

Brief History

“Very briefly, to understand the uniqueness of the Italo-Greek Church, one needs to understand its complex origins. Beginning in the 7th Century and continuing through the 12th Century, peoples from the Eastern Regions of the Roman Empire (initially Greeks, but then Muslims, Albanians, North Africans and others) migrated to the West for a variety of reasons, as a result of wars, trade opportunities, etc. and settled in Southern Italy and Sicily. For various periods of time, this region was under different political jurisdictions, as well as different ecclesiastical jurisdictions. For example, in the 7th Century, Emperor Constantine II named Syracuse (on Sicily) as the de facto capital of the Byzantine Empire.⁵ It was the strategic center of the Mediterranean and thus served as the stimulus for the transition of the island of Sicily to Greek. The Greek culture and language continued to be dominant until the Norman invasion in the 11th Century.⁶ Thus, Sicily and the Southern “boot” of what is now Italy became – and remained – a vital portion of the secular and ecclesiastical Eastern Roman Empire for centuries. The shift in ecclesiastical jurisdiction over Sicily and Southern Italy from the Patriarchate of Rome to the Patriarchate of Constantinople took place in 732-733. By the Ecumenical Council of Nicea -787- they were under Constantinople. In closely examining the social, political and religious connections that existed in Southern Italy, Sicily and the rest of the empire centered in Constantinople, the Italo-Greek Church, while on the fringe as a kind of last Western outpost, was very much integrated into the Byzantine Empire and considered themselves an integral part of that world.⁸ Monasticism was the primary method the religion spread in this geographic area. The monks performed important work in society by beginning new settlements, and growing the parishes throughout the region. When Imperial authority broke down in the West, under the stress of Barbarian invasions, the only organization that survived was the Church. Thus, while in the surviving Empire of the East the Emperor remained autocratic and the source of law, in the West the Emperor’s place was naturally taken by the head of the Church and the Bishop of Rome inherited his position as autocrat and the source of law. This period was disordered, anarchical, and in constant political turmoil. Under Justinian I, as noted above, the region had been under the authority of the Eastern Roman Empire as well as the ecclesiastical jurisdiction, which changed from Rome to Constantinople, and continued as such until the 11th century. The Byzantine culture had taken root within the Italo-Greek Church, so even though the area was later changed to be within the Latin Patriarchate, the Italo-Greek (also known as the Italo-Albanian in different times of its history) Church followed and has preserved the Byzantine rite to the present day. Multiple attempts at Latinization were made through the centuries, but not all of the Italo-Greek (Italo-Albanian) Churches Latinized. These attempts were finally stopped by Pope Benedict XIV with his bull *Etsi Pastoralis* in 1742. Pope Leo XIII in *Orientalium Dignitas* in 1894 recognized the equality and dignity of the Italo-Greek Church.¹⁰ Thus, the Church continued with its Byzantine structure to the present day and its practices sanctioned by Rome. When the immigrants came to America, between 1890-1921, they brought with them the cultural history and background of the Italo-Greek Catholic Church of the original Greeks, which came from the tradition of Constantinople. Despite the complex political challenges which confronted the region as it had moved through empires, to city-states, nation-states, countries, etc., the Italo-Greek Byzantine Catholic Church, (as are the Maronites), are unique in that they have always remained faithful to Rome and have no Orthodox counterpart.

There are currently approximately 60,000 members of the Church worldwide [NB this text was written some time ago].”

Since Fr. Francis wrote this text it is worth noting that now there is only one Italo-Greek parish in all of the US. That’s us! So its time we start thinking mission. God help us to establish the Italo-Greek Church throughout the US.

In Christ,
Fr. Nathan Symeon