

# *West Syrian Worship*

## **Introduction**

The West Syrian Church, known to many as “Jacobite” (after Jacob Baradeus, the 6th century reorganizer of the West Syrian Church) and as Monophysite (after the erroneous idea prevailing in Byzantium and the Latin West that the West Syrians believed only in the divine nature of Christ), historically inherited the Semitic, Palestinian tradition of Christianity, though not uninfluenced by the Hellenic milieu in which they lived.

The Syrian tradition broke up soon into four families - the East Syrian (Edessa), the West Syrian (Antioch), the Melchite (Greek) and the Maronite (Lebanon).

## **Liturgical rites**

The West Syrian church has probably the richest and most diverse heritage in the matter of eucharistic anaphorae and canonical offices. In addition to these are the rites of baptism and Chrismation of which three different forms are known. Ordination rites also vary substantially; the whole liturgical corpus also includes rites of matrimony (separate rites for first and second marriages), burial (different for clergy, laymen, women and children), anointing of the sick (not extreme unction - again different for clergy and laity), profession of monks, consecration of churches and altars, translation of relics etc.

## **The Eucharistic Liturgy**

The liturgy is now - a - days celebrated mostly in the vernacular - Arabic in the Middle East, English in America, Malayalam in India and so on - though certain portions may still be said by the priest in Syriac. The officiating priest and the people alternate in practically all the prayers, and the deacon plays an important part, admonishing and directing the people to stand with fear, pray and understand the nature of the event that is going on in the Liturgy. Choirs have not been allowed to usurp the place of the congregation as in certain other certain liturgies.

Some scholars have spoken of a hundred different west syrian anaphorae, though only about 70 can be traced by the present writer. Some of these, especially the principal anaphora of St. James goes back in its basic structure to the Jerusalem Church of Apostolic times. Other anaphorae come from 2nd (Ignatius of Antioch) to the 14th centuries, if we take the names of the anaphorae at face value. New liturgies continued to be created in every century up to the 14th, though production was most prolific from the 4th to the 7th. The twelfth century produced at least six new anaphorae and about the same number was produced by the 13th. With the 13th century the development reached its peak in Gregory Bar - Hebrews and has remained more or less static ever since.

Two peculiarities of the West Syrian rite are (a) the liturgy of Incense between the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the Eucharist proper; and (b) the prayer of adieu to the altar at the end of the liturgy - The liturgy of incense which recalls the offering of incense in the Temple (Exodus 30:1-10) seems to have replaced the dismissal of the Catechumens, and comprises a general absolution of the priest and people before the offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice. It also represents a sort of offertory, for incense symbolizes the good works and prayers which are well pleasing to God. It symbolizes also the prayers of the departed saints which mix with those of the congregation, as a true spiritual offering of praise and adoration.

The epiclesis occurs in all the 70 known liturgies, though the form of the epiclesis varies verbally from anaphora to anaphora, as also does the verbal content of the "words of institution."

Not all the 70 anaphorae are in common use. The ones most commonly used in India are St. James (on all principal feasts, for the first Eucharist offered by a priest, or offered at a new altar), Dionysius Bar Salibhi, St. John Chrysostom and St. John the Evangelist.

The canonical offices for ordinary days is called the Schhims, and has recently been translated into English by the Benedictine Fr. Griffiths. The more elaborate office, the Fenqith, has not yet been translated into English or Malayalam and is rarely used even in the Syriac. The Syriac text of the Fenqith is available in our Indian edition as in a moral edition (1886-1896).

One major feature of the Eucharistic liturgy and the daily offices is the Sedro, a long meditative - homiletical prayer, preceded by a pro - emion which seems to be an elaborated form of the Gloria. These prayers are rich in theological content, and play a considerable role in the religious education of the faithful, especially in the absence of biblical preaching.

An introduction and critical text of the Syriac anaphorae with latin translation have been published by the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome (Anaphorae Syriacae, 1953). The 9th century commentary of Moses Bar Kepha on the Syrian liturgies was published with an English translation by R. H. Connolly and H. W. Codrington (Two commentaries on the Jacobite Liturgy).

The people communicate rather rarely, the legal minimum of once per year being observed by most, usually on Holy Thursday. Communion is in both kinds, usually by intinction for the laity. The priest usually administers, though the deacon is allowed to serve communion to the laity.

Reservation of the sacrament for adoration is forbidden, it may be reserved in case of need for the sick, and for those who fast till the evening.

Confession before communion is often demanded, though this is not necessary for those who communicate frequently. Fasting from the previous midnight is required.

The lections during the liturgy of the word are three, one from the acts or Catholic Epistles (representing the twelve), then from the Pauline epistles, and then finally the Gospel which is

read with great ceremony by the officiating priest. Sermons had gone out of use, but are coming back more recently as priests become better trained.

The creed recited is the Niceno - Constantinopolitan, introduced into the liturgy by Peter the Fuller in the 5th century as an anti-chalcedonian measure.

Two of the west Syrian anaphora lack the actual words of institution - Mathew the Shepherd and Sixtus of Rome. The latter says simply: "He, when he was prepared for his saving passion, by the bread which by him was blessed, broken and divided among his holy Apostles, gave us his propitiatory body for life eternal; in a like manner, also by the cup etc."

The canon of the mass, with words of institution, anamnesis and epiclesis is said aloud by the priest, with responses from the people.

### **Select Bibliography**

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3. Ziade, I article on Syrienne (eglise) in Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique, Paris 1914, vol. 14, pp. 3017- 3088.