

Who Are Christians in the Middle East?

Seven Churches, each bearing a great and ancient history with unique liturgical traditions and culture, comprise the Catholic Church in the Middle East. Each of these Churches is in full communion with Rome, but six with an Eastern tradition are *sui iuris*, or self-governing, and have their own Patriarchs. All these Churches are Arabic-speaking and immersed in Arabic culture.

The Maronite Catholic Church is the largest of the Eastern Catholic Churches in the Middle East at around 3 million members. It has a strong presence in Lebanon, with smaller communities in Syria, Jordan, Cyprus, and the Holy Land. However, slightly over half its members have emigrated from the Middle East to countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Australia, Mexico, Canada, and the United States. The Maronite Church traces its origin back to a community formed around St. Maron, a 4th century monk who led an ascetic life. They were staunch defenders of the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon and thus received papal recognition in 518 A.D. There is a strong tradition among the Maronites that their Church never lacked communion with the Holy See since its formation in the 4th century. The Patriarch of Antioch of the Maronites resides in Bkerke, Lebanon.

The Melkite Greek Catholic Church is the next largest Eastern Catholic Church in the area, at 1.6 million members, of which over 750,000 reside in the Middle East, principally in Lebanon and Syria, but also in Jordan, Israel, Egypt and the Sudan, with a small number in Iraq. As with the Maronites, about half of its members have emigrated, moving especially to Brazil and Argentina, but also to Australia, Canada, the United States, Venezuela, and Mexico. The Melkite Church was formed in 1729 in Syria after a group separated from the Greek Orthodox Church to unite with the Holy See. The Patriarch of Antioch of the Greek Melkites resides in Damascus, Syria.

The Armenian Catholic Church has over 500,000 members, one tenth of whom reside in the Middle East and the remainder spread across Europe, North America, Latin America, and Australia. The largest concentrations of Armenian Catholics within the Middle East are found in Lebanon and Syria, but there are also dioceses in Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Turkey, and Israel. Until the 18th century, Armenian Catholics were under the authority of the Armenian Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople. Needing their own spiritual leader, the Armenian Catholic bishops, after petitioning Rome in 1742, elected their first

Patriarch, who chose as his patriarchal seat the monastery at Bzommar, Lebanon. After a brief relocation to Constantinople, the Patriarch of Cilicia of Armenian Catholics returned his seat to Bzommar, with his residence and offices in Beirut, Lebanon.

The Chaldean Catholic Church has almost 500,000 members, with about 60 percent residing in the Middle East. The Chaldeans are historically concentrated in Iraq as they came from the Assyrian Church of the East. In 1552, a group of Assyrian bishops decided to seek union with Rome. Although Pope Julius III proclaimed Patriarch Simon VIII Patriarch “of the Chaldeans,” pro- and anti-Catholic parties struggled within the Assyrian Church of the East until 1830, when another Chaldean Patriarch was appointed. The Patriarch of Babylon of the Chaldeans sits in Baghdad, Iraq; Chaldeans comprise about two-thirds of Iraqi Christians. The Chaldean Catholic Church is under particular stress due to the war in Iraq and many Chaldeans have fled to Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan to escape violence. Chaldeans can also be found in Iran, other Middle Eastern countries, Australia, and the United States.

The Coptic Catholic Church’s almost 164,000 members are in Egypt, particularly in Upper Egypt. In the 18th century, a Coptic Orthodox bishop became Catholic and the pope appointed him Vicar Apostolic of the small community of Egyptian Coptic Catholics, which at that time numbered no more than 2,000. Since 1947, the office of Patriarch has been filled. The Patriarch of Alexandria of the Copts is located in Cairo, Egypt.

The Syrian Catholic Church is spread through much of the Middle East, but roughly 140,000 of its nearly 160,000 members are in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. A few thousand are in the United States or Venezuela. The 17th through 18th centuries saw an increase in Syrian Catholics, and in 1729, the first in a long chain of Syrian Catholic Patriarchs was elected. The Patriarchate moved several times before settling in Beirut, Lebanon.

The Roman Catholic Church (Latin Rite) holds a substantial presence in the Middle East, more than any other Catholic Church, at nearly 2.7 million members. However, almost 2.5 million of these Latin Catholics are migrant workers who come from countries like the Philippines, India, and Ethiopia to work mainly in the Arabian Peninsula and Kuwait. Of the remaining 200,000, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem comprises the largest number of Latin Catholics at about 160,000. These Roman Catholic jurisdictions are not *sui iuris* like the Eastern Catholic Churches, but function like other dioceses of the Latin Rite.