

THE BYZANTINE CHURCH OF ITALY

ROMAN CHRISTIANS RECLAIMING THEIR BYZANTINE
HERITAGE IN THE GLORY OF LAWFUL HOLY WORSHIP

PENTECOST SUNDAY 2024AD - IN THE FULLNESS OF THE APOSTOLIC FAITH IMPARTED US!



SANCTUARY WITHIN THE CATHEDRAL OF MONREALE - PALERMO

Many Roman Christians from Italian heritage seek to go back to their roots, their Mother Church which for a large territory of Southern Italy was under the spiritual protection of the Great Church of Constantinople!

Alike adoption along with its various reasons – good, bad, and indifferent, one has the ardent desire to know their true heritage in order that their life receive healing and wholeness; the sense of belonging to that which is truly part of our DNA.

We should all be most grateful to the family that has adopted us and how various traditions have become part of the fabric which renders identity. Such must be carried through via aiding our growth and integration into society. Yet, these can only be complimented with every fibre of our being via the soil of our organic origins that truly secures the roots of communion.

As we know, history has been tainted by various bias which has played a role in keeping truths from being unearthed due to the political settings - often times overruling that which pertains to faith and its stronghold. We have a glimpse of such with the present ordeal between two cousins - Russia and Ukraine.

These days, no one group can be held completely accountable for past blunders, yet there is one fact that must be highlighted – there is no place like home! This place renders sanctuary, refuge, rest, and refreshment as encapsulated in Psalm 131; the returning home to one’s mother and resting in the comfort of her embrace.

Having stated thus, let us revisit those early years of our story which cements our belonging to the then Great Church of Constantinople – catechised by its monastics which settled in the grottos of the Italian mountainsides and beehive dwellings on the shores of Sicily.

It is interesting to note that there was a vast Celtic presence in Italy especially in the north which is evident in the beehive monastic stone dwellings found in various counties resembling that of the desert fathers. Various monastic communities (hermitages) throughout Roman Britany were indeed Syro-Coptic and Byzantine, there are similarities when we look at monastic dwellings taking the shape of a beehive – present in Egypt, Sicily, and the British Isles.



Further evidence is rendered via the ancient iconography of grotto churches; the original grotto temple of **Vallepietra** (400AD) is such an example which was transformed via the monastics into the grotto church of the Holy Trinity - the icon in the Syro-Coptic style testifies to their presence.



Just as the temple of old was adorned with sacred iconography testifying to the presence of the Lord in all things, so too were the glorious temple churches rendered –the Heavenly Communion which dwells in the heart of the Liturgy where the All Holy comes to dwell in the hearts of his holy.

Deacon: Let us attend in wisdom!

{The priest then raises the Lamb loaf “the consecrated body” with the following words then places it on the communion plate}

Priest: Behold, the Holy for the Holy!

All: *One is Holy. One is the Lord: Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.*

Various icons were brought to the shores of Italy via the monastics who came from Constantinople especially in the years of persecution and the heretical oppression of Iconoclasm – the outlawing of sacred images due to the ill interpretation of the second commandment.

In defence of the Holy portrayed in sacred iconography, there was a marvellous Father of the Church who the Holy Spirit gifted with knowledge to which he in turn used to defend the Apostolic Faith regarding Iconography: St John Damascene (675-749 AD)

“Often, doubtless, when we have not the Lord’s passion in mind and see the image of Christ’s crucifixion, his saving passion is brought back to remembrance, and we fall down and worship not the material but that which is imaged: just as we do not worship the material of which the Gospels are made, nor the material of the Cross, but that which these typify!”

“We honour such icons because the act of honour is not to the wood, pigment, and painting, but this honour we give is transferred directly to the prototype!”

“Thus, I do not worship matter, I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter.....I will not cease from honouring that matter which works for my salvation. I venerate it, though not as God. For anyone who constantly seeks God will surely find him for he is present everywhere and fills all things!”

Hence, some of the treasures bestowed Italy via the hands of the Byzantine monastics were the following. It is to be noted that the Madonna di Viggiano, the Madonna dei Sette Veli of Foggia and the Madonna Greca of Corato were hidden by the monks when there were Saracen invasions in Italy considering the South fell captive to the Arabs. Yet, via the indwelling of the Holy Spirit resting upon these sacred icons, they called the faithful to unearth them so that they be venerated once again.

The gloriously rendered marble statue of **the Madonna Greca of Ravenna** – (9th Century) The Statue was made in Constantinople and brought to Ravenna within the periods of Iconoclasm.



The beautifully carved icon statuary of the Virgin Mother – **the Madonna of Viggiano** (5th Century – 17th Century renovations)



The glorious icons of the **Madonna Greca of Monte Vergine** (13th Century)



The Miraculous icon of the **Madonna dei sette veli** of Foggia (6th Century – 17th Century innovations including the repainting of the Virgin's face to appear more western in style)



The **Madonna of Corato** (6th Century) which is a blend of Byzantine and Renaissance art.



The Madonna Greca of Capo Rizzuto (5th Century – arrives via sea and found in the 12th Century) are but a few of the many other expressions of Byzantine Italy.



Such treasures of rich spirituality were brought to Italy within the mid-6th century by the byzantine monks who settled in various areas and founded monasteries for the edification of the local people who were nurtured by their pastoral care. A strong Marian devotion was emphasised by the monks who dedicated their lives to the gospel under the direct protection of the Mother of God.

When one ponders on theological perspectives in the Byzantine tradition, Icons are known as windows into heaven which in themselves are written rather than painted. Hence, on pages 86-87 of the second chapter entitled 'The Eucharist' of his book 'For the Life of the World' the renowned Russian scholar Father Alexander Schmemmann writes: *The Orthodox Church rejects the dogma of the Immaculate Conception precisely because it makes Mary a miraculous "Geek" in this long and patient growth of love and expectation, of this "hunger for the living God" which fills the Old Testament.*

She is the gift of the world to God, as is so beautifully stated in a hymn of the Nativity of Christ: "Each of thy creatures brings thanksgiving onto thee: the angels offer the sun, the heavens its star, the wise men their gifts, the shepherds their marvelling, and we (humanity) – the Virgin Mother!" And yet it is God alone who fulfils and crowns this obedience, acceptance, and love "(Lk 1:35-37)" The Holy Spirit shall come upon you and the power of the Highest shall overshadow you. For with God nothing shall be impossible --- He alone reveals as Virgin the One who brought to him the totality of human love!

Furthermore, on page 244 of the seventh chapter entitled 'Pentecost and the time after Pentecost' of his book 'The Year of Grace of the Lord' featuring the Dormition of the Mother of God, the renowned French monastic Father Lev Gillet writes: *"The Dormition is not only the feast of Mary, but of all human nature. For, in Mary, human nature reached its goal.....Thus, associated with and subordinate to the cycle of Jesus's life, the cycle of Mary's life manifests the destiny and development of a human nature which is entirely faithful to God. It is the human race which is carried up and received into heaven with her."*

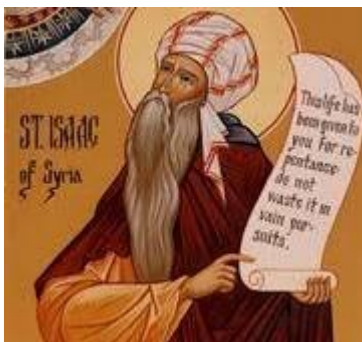
Hence, when we are given the gift of life via the grace of the Holy Spirit and the Love of our parents, we begin to live, move and utter our first word.....that of course is MAMMA! In turn, we ask that she Mamma Mariam Theotokos, shelter us under her protective veil and accompany us on our journey through life; aiding us when the time comes to introduce us to her Son by whom all things were created and whom every tongue will confess as Lord and Saviour!

Neither the tomb, nor death could hold the Theotokos, who is constant in prayer; thus we firmly hope in her intercessions. She became the Mother of Life and was translated to life by the One who dwelt in her virginal womb. Kontakion hymn of the Dormition.



12th Century icon from Constantinople.

In addition, our Father amongst the monastics **St. Isaac of Syria** (613-700AD) was appointed Abbot of the monastery in the town of **Spoletto** in Umbria – constructed by the people who needed God and his holy back in their lives.



St. Isaac was an acetic, theologian and wonder worker who left us a marvellous homily/reflection upon holy darkness and the light of transfiguration; the following is but a portion regarding Jesus who is God the Son.

“For his flesh did not shine with splendour from without, not like Moses who was saturated via the uncreated light originating from the burning bush, but the Light came from within him. His light dawned and was drawn together in him – it did not depart and come from somewhere else to adorn him; nor was it for his use. He chose not to display the totality of his glory, but only as much as the limits of their eyes could bare!”

Italy flourished under the ancient **Italian Byzantine and Syriac traditions** - her architecture testifies to this land which was sanctified with the blood of her martyrs and preaching of her monastics. Sadly, good things tend to be short lived and in this case, such good things were violently ripped away from the Italian people by force especially in the **southern regions: most of Italy was under the spiritual guidance of the **Church of Constantinople** via **her Exarchates!****

In hindsight, the Byzantine Empire established its Italian Province (Catepanate) **Katepanikion Italias** from **Monte Gargano** to the **Gulf of Salerno** – embracing **Amalfi** and **Naples**. Its major **Exarchate of Ravenna** fell in 751AD yet was reclaimed in 868AD. Furthermore, **Otranto** was freed from the **Saracens** in 873AD whilst **Bari** was freed from the **Arabs** in 876AD.

In addition, **Apulia, Calabria, Campania, Basilicata,** and **Lucania** were reclaimed in 886AD under General Nikephoros Phokas Senior, yet **Sicily** was lost to the **Arabs**. The **Norman Invasion** of 1017AD paved the way for the decline of Byzantine Rule and Spirituality which resulted in 1071AD. Furthermore, the **Bishop of Rome** was proclaimed **Exarch of Ravenna** and granted **Papal Territories** via Prince **Pepin the Short** (Father of Charlemagne) in 755AD after the defeat of the **Lombards**.

Hence, **the fable** which unfortunately resounds in western circles is the idea of Constantinople severing itself from Rome. Historical facts disprove such theories especially when worldly kingdoms and empirical states were demanding alliances - considering the threat of the Norman invasions particularly in the south of Italy. In 1054AD **the Bishop of Rome Leo ix** (1049-1054AD) asked **Emperor Constantine ix Monomachos** (1042-1055AD) through his ambassadors for a joint military campaign between the Latin and Greek armies.

This plea was not received well due to the Bishop of Rome trying to exercise his power in Byzantine territory especially regarding the practice of Byzantine Rite Churches in Southern Italy. In 1053AD the Bishop of Rome enforced all Byzantine Churches in Italy to conform to the practices of the Latin Church – including the use of unleavened bread. This of course caused outrage in the East-renowned preachers and theologians like **Archbishop Leo of Ochrid** (1037-1056AD) denounced such demands regarding liturgical practice.

In the Byzantine Church, we do not use unleavened bread which was of the Old Passover where the people partook of the bread of penance, but Leavened Bread for the Church is the Body of Christ which rises to new life in him (Lk 13:20-21) Moreover, when the body is afflicted, the grace of the Holy Spirit binds that which is broken and heals that which is infirm via his very presence as the leaven in the dough: the great thanksgiving of peace (Lev 7:13) the offering of the first fruits (Lev 23:17) as the Eucharist – the peoples liturgy.

Hence, when the threat of closing Byzantine churches down who failed to comply reached the ears of **Patriarch Michael I Cerularius of Constantinople** (1043-1059AD) through **Cardinal Humbert de Silva Candida OSB** (1051-1061AD) the Legate of the recently deceased Bishop of Rome (Leo ix) the Patriarch strongly objected to such demands. This then fuelled Cardinal Humbert to issue a bull of excommunication upon the Church of Constantinople. The Patriarch reminded Humbert that Constantinople is not papal territory and she does not answer to Rome especially when threats are made via stealth!

Thus, all ecclesial jurisdictions (major diocese) did not answer to Rome for it was a major See (apostolic centre) alike Jerusalem, and Antioch of old. People tend to forget that **Milan** (Founded by Apostle St. Barnabas) was one such archdiocese that was equal in canonical precedence to **Rome** as was **Constantinople** (Founded by Apostle St. Andrew) along with **Aquileia** and **Alexandria** (Founded by Apostle St. Mark) with its pope (father of the local ecclesial family).

A noteworthy fact to revisit was during the exile of **St. John Chrysostom** Archbishop of Constantinople (404 - 406AD) who appeals to Metropolitan **Chromatius of Aquileia**, Metropolitan **Innocent of Rome** and Metropolitan **Venerius of Milan**.

Such an appeal for canonical aid to be rendered via consensus regarding the uncanonical deposition caused by political manoeuvres of the empire under the leadership of **Honorius** and **Arcadius**. There was a trend for high ranking clergy to back such matters in order to gain prestige, along with chameleons who hijacked Apostolic Sees (ancient centres of Christianity) alike Metropolitan **Theophilus of Alexandria** on the grounds of sabotage.

All major Sees within the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church were equal in power and no metropolitan archbishop/patriarch/pope had the authority over another unless appeals were made, or an ecumenical council (representatives of all sees/archdiocese) was called so that the Church universal could sort out - agree or disagree on particular issues.

This fact is clearly highlighted in Psalm 18:2 which unveils the Lord himself as **the foundation stone of the Church** as the Rock of Faith who alone saves – highlighted by the Apostle who founded Rome; St. Paul in his letter to the Church in Corinth (I Cor 3:11) Furthermore, regarding primacy issues, the Lord clearly reprimands the Zebedee twins wanting to sit beside him which caused scandal amongst the 12 at the time. (Mt 20: 22-23)

Again, the Lord warns the 12 regarding precedence when he tells them not to behave like lords over each other. (Lk 22: 25-27) In addition, St. Peter who founded the See of Antioch and then Ravenna - affirms himself as being a fellow presbyter and servant like the rest of his brother apostles and nothing more. (I Pt 5:1) For humility is the true key to the Kingdom of God! (Lk 18:17)

Eventually, the **Primacy of Rome** came into effect after the death of **St. Leo the Great** 604AD firstly over the **Bishops of Gaul**. When Pope **Leo III** anointed **Charlemagne** as **Roman Emperor** on the day of Holy Nativity 800AD – the **City of Rome** became part of the **Frankish Kingdom**. Hence, the **Bishop of Rome's Primacy** now extended over the **Bishops of Western Europe**.

Again, when the Church becomes caught up within an empire and moulds itself to that criteria – state politics and governance sways its mission. Although worldly kingdoms valuably assist and safeguard her place of prominence, yet at the same time it (the Church) endangers herself in becoming remote from the totality of the gospels!

However, undesirable it is to move away from a particular situation hoping that the grass is greener on the other side; loyalty is most important and as proven in such situations - it comes with a price! One can work tirelessly to nurture a delicate young rose shrub - yet, if it is not tended too, pruned and eventually placed in the greater garden so that it may become a flourishing bush; it will not take root causing it to wither away!

Alas, all of the byzantine churches became culturally orientated in their eastern setting and practically died out in the west due to centuries of primacy from a sole jurisdiction which was aided by various kingdoms (remembering that Italy was divided until 1861AD) and empires. To revive such in its original state can only take place via a canonical (lawful) jurisdiction giving aid to its clergy from the west in order to place byzantine spirituality back in the western setting.

Thus, under Rome, byzantine churches were created as we see in Ukraine. Hence, Kiev was under the Polish administration of King **Sigismund III Vasa**, (1587 – 1632 AD) who promised to allow all Ukrainian churches to continue in the Byzantine Rite – an endeavour to keep Russian rule and influences away from Ukraine: the **Union of Brest-Litovsk** (1596 AD) under Pope **Clement VIII** (1592 – 1646 AD) this union was challenged by various bishops. Thus, Constantinople appointed Exarchs to Ukraine (1596 – 1679 AD) to secure its canonical territories.

Therefore, current ecclesial issue within Ukraine dates back to 13 century Mongol Tatar invasions and territorial disputes concerning the patriarchates of Russia and Constantinople. It should be noted that when the Tatars invaded, the metropolitans of Kyiv concerned for the welfare of the Church, moved the episcopal see - obtaining sanctuary across the border into Russian territory.

The Christians of Slavonic lands were hijacked by the Soviet regime which produced numerous martyrs – the fruit of faith! Yet, such regimes lust over control and will go beyond in order to obtain such as seen with the infiltration of agents into the ranks of the Church under the communist yoke.

When Vladimir **Lenin** (1917 – 1927 AD) separated Church and State under the auspices of the **Bolshevik Revolution**: the status of the Church along with her properties were ripped away – the repeat of the **English Reformation** (1509 – 1547AD) under **Cromwell**.

Furthermore, Joseph **Stalin** (1924 -1953 AD) sought to wage war against her (the Church) via the organization of a purge (1936 – 1937 AD) such resembled the slaying of the **Holy Innocents** under the Tyranny of **Herod the Great** (1 AD) the annihilation of clergy that were executed in their own church temples.

During **World War ii**, Ukraine fell into the complete administration of the **Third Reich** (November 28th 1941AD) a time where the **Soviet Regime** eliminated political prisoners, buildings of administration, infrastructure, and centres of agriculture, whilst withdrawing itself into the shadows. There was a major reconstruction of administrative territories which placed Galicia (Ruthenia) within the same portion of the occupied Polish territory – thus deemed **Reichskommissariat Ukraine**.

Apart from the tragic slaughter of its initial objective – the annihilation of the **Slav-Hebrew populace** under the iron fist of Erich **Koch** (1928 – 1945AD) all available resources were re-directed to sustain the Third Reich. Furthermore, over 2 million Ukrainians were taken back to Germany (slave labour) whilst Galicia (Ruthenia) was forbidden to function as a nation with its cultural calendar – crippling the country via drastically limiting its bread basket; education was also limited to its primary level.

It is in this timeframe that the **Third Reich** used **The Church** as a weapon of control via constructing a state (government controlled) church (similar to various current church organizations) by allocating its synod through a hand full of clergy – missioning to the **Polish** Community within the slave labour camps.

During the (Nikita) **Khrushchev** administration (1953 – 1964 AD), religious education was banned in schools and prayers along with any public reverence which was completely forbidden. In addition, the rise of **Perestroika** - the reformation of the Communist party (1980 – 1991 AD) – decreed that any zealot uprising would be fiercely eradicated; many people were falsely accused.

Furthermore, despite the political situation between Russia and Ukraine at which the Church suffered and continues to bear the scars of such political interference, hope dawned with the courage of saintly hierarchy. The Patriarchy of Kyiv was restored by the Locum Tenens of Kyiv, the Metropolitan **Iovan Bodnarchuk** (1929-1994AD) and the College of Bishops.

In order to re-establish original local churches which stem from the fount of its organic source, the western wing of the Kyven Church was established for Italy (Western Europe and Canada) within December 1993AD by His Holiness Patriarch **St. Volodymir Romanuk** of Kyiv. Hence, our belonging (Church of the Holy Apostles – Metropolis of Melbourne and Exarchate of the British Isles) to this most ancient apostolic church which embraces true catholicity within the various rites offered for our spiritual edification as Roman Christians of the Byzantine tradition of Elder Kyiv.

Therefore, via the diaconate who calls the baptized to prayer within the Divine Liturgy (Eucharist) let us then join the Church Universal and pray –

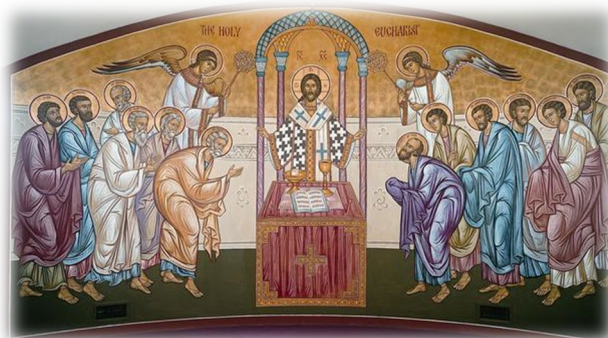
Deacon: That the whole world abound in peace via the prayers of Gods' Holy Church and that we be freed from all schisms and remain united to Christ our head, let us pray to the Lord.

All: Lord, have mercy.

+Raffaele

Metropolitan Archbishop and Exarch

CHURCH OF THE HOLY APOSTLES



UBI CARITAS ET AMOR DEUS IBI EST

