

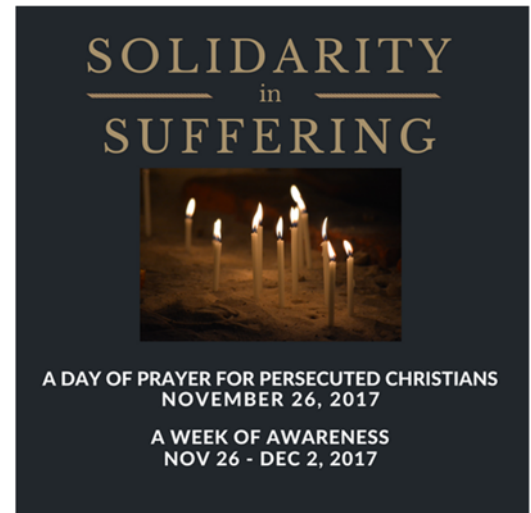


Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development  
Office of International Justice and Peace

**Background on Catholic Churches in the Middle East**  
September 2017

**Seven Catholic Churches** or "Rites," each bearing a great and ancient history with unique liturgical traditions and culture, comprise the Catholic Church in the Middle East. As is the case with other Christians, rather than living in segregated communities, these Catholic Churches are indigenous and have been integrated into their societies for centuries. They form part of ancient Christian communities that have long contributed vibrantly to their societies in the fields of science, philosophy, education, and medicine.

Each of these Catholic Churches is in full communion with Rome, but six Eastern Rite Churches are *sui iuris*, or self-governing, and have their own Patriarchs. All these Churches are immersed in Arabic culture and speak Arabic, although the Syriac Catholic liturgy is also conducted in Aramaic.



- The [Maronite Catholic Church](#) is the largest of the Eastern Catholic Churches in the Middle East at around 1.7 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 U.S. The Maronite Church traces back to a community formed around St. Maron, a 4th century monk who led an ascetic life. The Maronites are proud that their church never lacked communion with the Holy See since its formation in the 4th century.
- The [Melkite Greek Catholic Church](#) is the next largest Eastern Catholic Church in the region, at 1.5 million members, of which over 700,000 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 U.S., Venezuela and Mexico. The Melkite Church was formed in 1729 in Syria after a group separated from the Greek Orthodox Church to be in union with the Holy See.
- The [Armenian Catholic Church](#) has over 700,000 members, less than 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 in 1742, after

petitioning Rome, elected their first Patriarch, who chose as his patriarchal seat the monastery at Bzommar, Lebanon.

- The [Chaldean Catholic Church](#) has over 600,000 members, with about 45 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. The Patriarch of Babylon of the Chaldeans sits in Baghdad, Iraq; Chaldeans comprise about two-thirds of Iraqi Christians. This Catholic Church is under particular stress due to the war in Iraq, and many Chaldeans have fled to escape the violence. Chaldeans can also be found in Iran, other Middle Eastern countries, Australia and the U.S. A large population of Chaldeans in Michigan has recently come under threat of deportation back to Iraq.
- 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. The Patriarch of Alexandria of the Copts, a position filled since 1947, is located in Cairo, Egypt.
- The [Syrian Catholic Church](#) is spread throughout much of the Middle East, but roughly 130,000 of its 200,000 members are in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. An increasing number 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 \(Latin Rite\)](#) remains a substantial presence in the Middle East with nearly 2.7 million members, more than any other Catholic Church. 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 function like other dioceses of the Latin Rite.

## **Resources**

### **Expanded Details on Catholic Churches of the Middle East**

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/global-issues/middle-east/who-are-catholics-in-the-middle-east.cfm>

### **Background on Christians of the Middle East**

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/global-issues/middle-east/christians-in-the-middle-east/upload/christians-in-the-middle-east-backgrounder.pdf>

### **Detailed Statistics on Middle Eastern Catholic Populations**

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/global-issues/middle-east/christians-in-the-middle-east/upload/statistics-on-catholics-in-the-middle-east.pdf>

Visit [www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/mideast.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/mideast.shtml). Contact: Dr. Stephen Colecchi, Director, USCCB Office of International Justice and Peace, 202-541-3160 (phone), 541-3339 (fax), [scolecchi@usccb.org](mailto:scolecchi@usccb.org).