

of the Church.” Let us pray that this seed grows, blossoms and brings forth abundant fruit so that her light, shining from Mount Lebanon, may shine to all men.

### Liturgy

The Divine Liturgy (the Mass) was originally said in Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic which was spoken by Our Lord. At some point, probably around the time of the Arab conquest, the language for all the parts of the liturgy, with the exception of the Consecration, changed to classical Arabic. Since classical Arabic is a *dead* language (i.e., unchanging), its use in the liturgy may be likened to the use of Latin in the Roman Rite.

The Maronites’ faithfulness to Rome also had less desirable implications in the wake of Vatican II. Although it took them thirty years, they adopted modern liturgical “reforms,” and the Synod of Lebanon in 1992 implemented a modified liturgy. Partisans of change claim that they only dropped the “Latinizations,” but, except for vestments, this is not evident. The changes seem to be simply a shortened, re-worded form, with some minor additions from the *Novus Ordo* — the “New Mass,” or hacked up version of the Roman Rite implemented by Pope Paul VI. But it must be said that, even with this modernized version, the Liturgy is beautiful. It is always chanted (even “Low Mass” has chanting and incense), and



*Maronite Monks in Petersham, MA*

there is a great deal of silence and majesty — at least that is how it was celebrated at the monastery which was visited during research for this article. One can only imagine how inspiring must have been the original liturgy! The new one, which still retains some of the hymns composed by St. Ephrem, maintains a version of the solemn “farewell” to the altar that was said at the end of the “Mysteries”: “Remain in peace, O altar of God, and I hope to return to you in peace. May the sacrifice which I have offered upon you forgive my sins, help me to avoid my faults, and prepare me to stand blameless before the throne of Christ. I know not whether I will be able to return to you again to offer sacrifice. Guard me, O Lord, and protect Thy Holy Church so that She



*Patriarch Yūsuf al-Khāzin (1845-54)*

may remain the Way of Salvation and the Light of the World.”

The people of the Middle East enjoy a culture remarkably different from that which we are used to here in the United States. Theirs is a much simpler, more “natural” life. It is beautiful to hear how the families would rise in the mornings and attend Mass together, then head back to house or vineyards for the day’s work. In the evening, large groups or even an entire village would attend Ramsho (Vespers).\* With the monastery at the heart of the lay community,

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\* Again, even through the awkwardness of a clumsy, faulty, modern translation, the beauty of this monastic office shines through in the readings, rituals, and the Eastern chant.

the Faith was the center and focus of their lives.

Some practices which Latin Rite Catholics would find interesting include: a profound bow (touching the floor with one’s fingertips and then making the sign of the cross) in place of our genuflection; the small hand-held crucifix used for giving a blessing; and a special chant, similar to Gregorian, but with an Eastern flavor.

In the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, Maronites use unleavened bread for the Consecration, but Holy Communion is given by intinction — communicants receive the Host dipped in the Precious Blood.

Just to give a very quick overview of the Maronite hierarchy, the present Maronite patriarch is His Beatitude Nazrallah Sfeir, Patriarch of Antioch and of all the East. Outside this region, Maronite bishops are under the Patriarchate of the West. They are subject to an Apostolic Delegate, therefore, and not to the Patriarch, except in matters liturgical. Thus, when the Patriarch ordered that altars be restored to their original position (facing East and away from the people), he *could* have imposed this mandate on Maronite bishops outside his patriarchate. However, he declined to exercise his authority, leaving it to the bishops themselves to decide. Consequently, the Maronite bishops in this country have refused requests to conform to the Patriarch’s mandate.