

Church-Naming Practices among Eastern Rite Catholics in the United States

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Religious allusions occur in the names attached to many landscape features in the United States, from schools, hospitals, and cemeteries to counties, cities, and towns. Unquestionably the most prevalent toponymic expression of religion appears, however, in the multitude of church names dispersed throughout the placename cover.¹ Moreover, church names reflect more clearly than any other placename category the vast religious diversity of American society. Church names thus represent an important facet of American toponymy, symbolizing the presence of distinctive religious groups and their traditions in the United States.

This note examines church names as symbols of the four leading bodies of Eastern Rite Catholics (Magosci 301-02). Three of these groups adhere to the Byzantine Rite: **Melkites**, composed of Arabs from Egypt, Palestine, and Syria; **Ruthenians**, a mixture of Slavic nationalities including Carpatho-Rusyns, Slovaks, Hungarians, and Croats; and **Ukrainians**. The fourth group, the **Maronites**, is made up of Lebanese Arabs who follow the Antiochene Rite. The following discussion focuses on variations among the ecclesionymic practices of these groups and how those practices reflect each group's religious traditions. *The Official Catholic Directory* for 1980 provided lists of church names for each group.

The Eastern Rite Churches originated in countries that were once part of the Eastern Roman Empire or were evangelized from it. Unlike the Orthodox Churches, the Eastern Rite Churches are in union with the Roman Catholic Church and recognize the spiritual authority of the Pope. Eastern Rite church-naming practices have thus developed in accordance with the general rules of Catholic ecclesionymy. Following these rules, churches are dedicated to God in honor of a particular patron, from whom the church takes its name. A church name may refer to the Godhead, the angels, the Virgin Mary, biblical saints, or non-biblical saints. This last category includes saints associated with

Catholicism at large, Eastern Catholicism, and the specific Eastern Rite Churches.

In naming their churches, the Eastern Rite groups clearly prefer dedications tied in some way to their specific traditions: that is, references to saints associated with their rite or nationality, or to features of the Virgin Mary emphasized in their religious practices. As a result, relatively few Eastern Rite church names refer to the Godhead, since such references are in most cases universal Catholic symbols (Table 1). Dedications to the Godhead thus account for less than a fifth of the churches of each Eastern Rite group and only four percent of Maronite churches. Only a single ecclesionymic reference to the Godhead reflects a group's specific heritage: the Ruthenians' Infant Jesus of Prague, named after a statue that has become an object of popular devotion in Czechoslovakia (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*).

Other dedications to the Godhead include the following (numbers in parentheses indicate more than one occurrence of the name): **Maronites:** *Holy Family, Holy Trinity*; **Melkites:** *Holy Cross, Holy Resurrection, Holy Savior (2), Holy Transfiguration, Holy Trinity*; **Ruthenians:** *Ascension (2), Christ the King, Epiphany, Holy Cross (2), Holy Spirit (12), Holy Transfiguration (3), Holy Trinity*

Table 1. Church-Naming Practices among Eastern Rite Bodies in the United States.

| | Number of Churches | Percentage of Church Names Referring to: | | | | | |
|------------|--------------------|--|--------|-------------|-----------------|--------------|------|
| | | Godhead | Angels | Virgin Mary | Biblical Saints | Other Saints | |
| Maronites | 53 | 4% | 2% | 32% | 15% | 47% | 100% |
| Melkites | 33 | 18% | 0 | 30% | 33% | 19% | 100% |
| Ruthenians | 222 | 15% | 10% | 24% | 26% | 25% | 100% |
| Ukrainians | 203 | 12% | 10% | 26% | 24% | 28% | 100% |
| Total | 511 | | | | | | |

(6), *Holy Wisdom, Nativity, Resurrection*(2), *Sacred Heart*; and Ukrainians: *Ascension, Christ the King* (3), *Epiphany* (2), *Holy Cross, Holy Family* (2), *Holy Spirit* (5), *Holy Transfiguration* (3), *Holy Trinity* (5), *Presentation of Our Lord, Sacred Heart* (2).

The preference for names tied to group traditions has also limited references to the angels in Eastern Rite ecclesionyms. No Melkite church name contains such a reference, and only one Maronite church is dedicated to St. Michael the Archangel. Dedications to the angels are more common among the Ruthenians and Ukrainians; both have named a number of churches in honor of St. Michael (22 and 21, respectively), and the former have also dedicated a church to the Holy Angels. The angels nonetheless account for a smaller proportion of the churches of these two groups than any other category of names.

Ecclesionymic references to the Virgin Mary vary considerably in frequency among the four groups. Such references are most common in Maronite church names, because of the popularity of the name *Our Lady of Lebanon* (11) and its variants *Our Lady of the Cedars of Lebanon* (2) and *Mt. Lebanon*. These names refer to Old Testament metaphors comparing the beauty of the mother of the Messiah to that of Lebanon, and they are widely used by Maronites in Lebanon and throughout the world (Faris). Together they represent over a fourth of Maronite churches in the United States. Marian references are less common in Ruthenian and Ukrainian church names and mostly refer to feasts celebrated by all Catholics. An exception is the Protection of the Mother of God, a major feast in the traditions of both groups; several Ruthenian and Ukrainian churches (1 and 7 respectively) are known by this name or one of its variants, *Patronage of the Mother of God* (1 and 2) and *St. Mary Protectress* (1 Ukrainian)² Marian references occur least often in Melkite church names, only one of which contains a specifically Eastern dedication, to *Our Lady of the Cedars of Lebanon*.

Various other ecclesionyms also refer to the Virgin Mary: Maronites: *Our Lady of Mercy, of Purgatory, of Victory*; Melkites: *Our Lady of the Annunciation, of Mercy, of Perpetual Help, of Redemption, Virgin Mary*; Ruthenians: *Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (6), *Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (3), *Our Lady of the Annunciation, of Perpetual Help* (2), *Virgin Mary* (38), *Weeping Madonna*; and Ukrainians: *Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (8), *Immaculate Conception* (9), *Mother of Sorrows, Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (7), *Our Lady of the Annunciation* (4), *of Perpetual Help* (3), *Virgin Mary* (10).

Biblical saints associated with a group's traditions have also been favored as church patrons, especially by the Ruthenians and Ukrainians.³ Both groups have named churches in honor of St. Andrew (3 and 2), a patron saint of Russia, and nearly a fifth of their churches are named in honor of St. John the Baptist (20 and 17) or Sts. Peter and Paul (22 and 21), who are mentioned prominently in the Byzantine liturgy (Solovey 126). Melkites have not shown a similar preference for these names even though they too follow the Byzantine Rite; only one Melkite church was named in honor of St. John the Baptist. None of the biblical saints to whom Maronites have dedicated churches are directly related to their religious heritage, and so such dedications are relatively infrequent.

The following church names also refer to biblical saints: **Maronites:** *Anne (2), John the Baptist, Joseph (3), Jude, Peter*; **Melkites:** *Anne (4), Joseph (4), Jude*; **Ruthenians:** *Anne, John (4), Joseph (3), Jude, Mary Magdalene, Philip, Stephen (6), Thomas*; and **Ukrainians:** *Anne (2), John, Joseph (4), Paul, Stephen*.

The category of non-biblical saints contains the greatest diversity of church names, and most clearly reveals the ecclesionymic influence of Eastern Catholic traditions. Over a fourth of all Maronite churches are dedicated to the group's namesake, St. Maro (6); to the Maronite monks, Sts. Sharbel (2) and John Maron; or to St. Antony (6), the father of Christian monasticism, after whom several Maronite religious orders are named. The Byzantine groups have similar preferences for saints with prominent roles in the Byzantine liturgy or in early Byzantine history. Melkite church patrons thus include Sts. Basil (2), John Chrysostom, John Damascene, and Nicholas; **Ruthenian:** Sts. Basil (3), Gregory Nazianzen (2), Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom (2), Macrina, and Nicholas (25); and **Ukrainian:** Sts. Basil (5), Demetrui (2), Josaphat (8), Macrina, and Nicholas (20). In addition, the Ruthenians and Ukrainians have each dedicated a church to St. Pius X, who as Pope officiated in the celebration of the Byzantine liturgy on the thirteenth centenary of St. John Chrysostom, that liturgy's reputed author (Fortescue 42-44).

The Ruthenians and Ukrainians have also named many churches in honor of saints associated with their ethnic heritages. Dedications to St. Nicholas, for example, reflect his prominence as an Eastern saint and as a patron saint of Russia. Similarly, Ukrainian churches carry St. Josaphat's name because he is mentioned in the Byzantine liturgy and because he was of Ukrainian birth. Ukrainians have also dedicated churches to St. Vladimir (12), the ruler who

brought Christianity to Russia and the patron of Russian Catholics, and jointly to Sts. Vladimir and Olga, the latter Vladimir's grandmother and also an important figure in the evangelization of Russia. A single Ruthenian church is dedicated to St. Therese of Lisieux, a patron saint of Russia; both groups have named churches in honor of Sts. Cyril and Methodius (2 each), known as the Apostles of the Slavs; and one Ukrainian church is named for St. Constantine, the name by which Cyril was known for most of his life.

Finally, all four groups have dedicated churches to one or both of a pair of saints traditionally important in Eastern Rite devotion: St. Elias (or Elijah), the Old Testament prophet, for whom two Maronite, two Melkite, and three Ruthenian churches are named; and St. George, the most celebrated Eastern martyr, who is the patron of four Maronite, four Melkite, five Ruthenian, and three Ukrainian churches.

Other dedications to non-biblical saints include Sts. Anthony of Padua, Louis Gonzaga, Raymond, and Teresa among the Maronites, and Sts. Barbara, Emilian, Eugene, and Melany among the Ruthenians.

The church-naming practices described above demonstrate that Eastern Rite groups in the United States share a strong preference for names associated with Eastern Catholicism or with their own specific traditions. Maronites are most distinctive in this regard; two-thirds of their churches are named for Marian associations with Lebanon, Maronite saints, or major Eastern saints. Similarly, a majority of Ruthenian and Ukrainian church names refer to Byzantine or Eastern saints, national patron saints or saints commemorated in the Byzantine liturgy. The Melkites' church names are less closely tied to their traditions. Nonetheless, forty percent of their church names have Eastern or Byzantine connections.

These patterns reveal that the Eastern Rite bodies, while adhering to universal Catholic practices in naming their churches, most commonly adopt names derived from their own traditions, a trend that also appears among most Roman Catholic ethnic groups (Stump 137-39). A Catholic Church's name is thus more than a label attached to a structure; it is a symbol of the history, traditions, and patterns of devotion of the group that worships there. As a result, such names occupy an important position among American placenames, as indicators of the presence of distinctive religious communities and of the nature of their religious traditions.

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Notes

1. For the influence of religion on placenames in general see Brunn and Wheeler and Leighly; for church names see Rogers and Stump.
2. Attwater, *Dictionary of Mary* 229-30.
3. Biblical and non-biblical saints were identified with the aid of Attwater, *Dictionary of Saints* and *Saints of the East*; and the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*.

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