

The Consecration and Renewal of the Church

“I was amazed at the feat that Christ prepared for the blessed Church, his bride. As I entered I saw prophets martyrs, and the just; the apostles with the priests, then Baptism and the Cross. On the altar there was placed Christ’s own Body and His Blood for the pardon of all sins,” from the *qolo hymn*, Maronite liturgy for the Feast of the Consecration and Renewal of the Church

The Maronite liturgical year is inaugurated by the Feast of the Consecration and the Renewal of the Church. If there are two Sundays available before Zechariah Sunday, then it is observed as two feasts. On one Sunday, the Consecration, and on the next, the Renewal of the Church. By opening the liturgical year, this feast is in effect *the New Years Day* of the Church. It shows us, also, that church is our spiritual home.

The liturgical year ends with the Season of the Holy Cross, when we solemnly remember the four last things: Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. In that period, the Gospel readings remind us of the Lord’s prophecies of the final days, and of the tribulations and persecutions which will come. These readings always strike us with an impact, for they remind us that even if we are not alive when the end of human history comes, yet we each of us face our own deaths, and what will be true of all the world will also be true of us, in a small personal way.

As the first Season of the Liturgical Year, before the Announcement of the Lord’s birth, baptism, teaching, life, death, Resurrection, and Ascension, these feasts show that the work of the sanctification of the Church and her children is the work of all the year. This feast encapsulates what all the feasts of the year mean and point to: God’s mysterious plan of salvation through Our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the diving off point, so to speak, for our engaging once more in the unfolding history of the redemption.

We can also think of this feast as being like a wedding anniversary: each year we are reminded of the new covenant between God and humanity, signed with the blood of the Lamb. So too, each anniversary, the bride and groom are reminded of their covenant solemnised at the altar of God.

The Church on earth is formed in the image of the Church in heaven. This is shown by the importance of the holy city, Jerusalem. There is a heavenly Jerusalem just as there is an earthly one, and in the Eastern tradition, every church is built on the pattern of the Jerusalem Temple where God presided. This idea lies behind the prayer: “Thy kingdom come,” in the Our Father. When the Kingdom of God is established on earth, the Church shall not disappear: rather, the

Church is that very kingdom, and she is a part of it now, even if an imperfect part of it. But when the age of ages arrives, and God is all in all, nothing and no one who is impure or sinful can be within the kingdom. The coming of the Kingdom of God is the final consecration and renewal of the Church. So once more, it is entirely fitting that this feast should be the first of the liturgical year and the Season of the Cross its final season.



The above icon was produced by Fr Abdo Badwi, and is based on the iconography of a British Library manuscript, called “7170.” This manuscript, together with another one called *Vaticanus syriacus* 559 (dating from the first half of the fourteenth century, from in or around region Mosul, now in upper Iraq, ancient upper Mesopotamia), show us that our Maronite liturgical calendar has been in use for at least 700 years. It could be even older, there are just no documents.

In this icon, we see Our Lord seated on His throne. To his right stands St Peter, the Rock on which He founded His Church (picking up the Gospel which read on the Feast of the Consecration.) To the left of the Lord stands St Maroun holding the church which he built, and now offers to the Lord. This can be understood both as the temple pagan which he exorcised and

turned into a church, and to the Maronite Church which he inspired. St Maroun's right hand is extended to the Lord in supplication for the church.

The Lord is seated on his throne. In the British Manuscript illustration, the throne is empty: or rather, He who sits upon it is invisible. This practice of leaving the throne empty goes all the way back to the ancient Phoenicians who out of regard for the surpassing majesty of the gods – and to show that they were above thought or human imagination – often presented them on empty thrones, i.e. the god cannot be seen with our mortal eyes. However, behind the throne is the celestial circle: the circle is the perfect shape, and hence appropriate for heaven, and this circle has different gradations, shown as inner circles. In 2 Corinthians 12:2, St Paul speaks of being caught up to the third heaven, while other ancient Mesopotamian and Jewish traditions say that there are seven heavens (even in the Our Father, the original Greek of St Luke's version does not say "who are in heaven" but "who art in the heavens.")

The throne is placed on a foundation (dais) and then two smaller circular disks. This footstool may also be a symbolic representation of the altar where He is also present. Behind the throne are some shapes, possibly meant to indicate the Ark of the Covenant with its covering, and the wings of the seraphim and cherubim.

In his book *The Liturgical Year, Iconography of the Syro-Maronite Church*, Fr Badwi writes: "This icon is composed according to the *Deisis* model, but replacing the Virgin and the Baptist with St Peter and St Maroun. It reminds us of the *Maiestas domini* introduced in iconography after the tenth century, particularly in the West" (54).

By linking the iconography to other iconography from the Christian world and its divine cult, Fr Badwi shows that the Maronite Feast of the Consecration and Renewal of the Church is likewise linked to the entire Christian Church and to the entirety of the Church year.

The icon on this page is a splendid example of the *Deisis* or *Deesis* style. It comes from Saint *This was written by a Maronite priest. Of your mercy, please pray for those souls in Purgatory who have no one else to pray for them, and also pray for that priest.*

Catherine's monastery, and was produced in the 13th century. The Greek word "deesis" means "prayer" or "supplication." Christ is shown in a way described both as "Christ in Majesty" and as "Christ the Almighty." To His right is the Blessed Virgin, and to His left, St John the Baptist. Other saints can be shown if desired.



Closing Thoughts

Since the Feast of the Consecration opens Church time, which is divine time, and it never ever falls on the first of January, we have an interesting marker of the fact that divine and worldly time are measured by two different clocks. So we live in two times, even if we are not aware that our soul is living in eternity, while sharing in passing time.

In a similar way, we live in two societies, the human and the heavenly. The heavenly society cannot appear in its fullness on earth until the final consummation, when the Will of God is done here. But we can participate in something of its life: we can join in the life of the search for holiness, in the life of the Church. Hence the sacrament of the Eucharist is only for baptised Christians in communion with the Church. We may ourselves not be perfect, but we know perfection when we attend at the Divine Sacrifice of the Eucharist, for Our Lord then offers Himself through the hands of the priest as the perfect sacrifice.

Hence, just before the communion service in each Divine Liturgy, the priest holds aloft the transubstantiated sacred elements and declares: "Holy gifts for the holy with perfection, purity, and sanctity." This should be a comfort to us: no matter what we have undergone, no matter how bad we are, how tough the world is, yet, at each Mass the divine offering of the perfect, the pure, and the sacred is realised.