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Eastern Rite, Latin Rite churches seek to enhance common ground

Father Kenneth Sherman, a Melkite Catholic priest, recalls a brief exchange he took part in after administering penance one day at a neighboring Roman Catholic parish.

"A retired priest came up and asked, 'When are you going to become Catholic?' I said that I just gave penance, so I sure hoped I was Catholic," Father Sherman remarked.

In a similar vein, Father Vasile Godeancuc recently concelebrated a wedding at a Roman Catholic parish. A church employee, he said, was incredulous that he is a Catholic priest and is also married.

These anecdotes typify some of the misunderstandings — even among clergy — about the Eastern Rite held by members of the Latin Rite, more commonly known as Roman Catholicism.

"I know Roman Catholic priests who don't have an idea of what the Ukrainian Church is about," stated Father Philip Weiner, pastor at St. Nicholas Church in Elmira Heights.

St. Nicholas is one of five Eastern Rite parishes located within the boundaries of the Diocese of Rochester.

Four of those parishes are Ukrainian Catholic and attended mostly by people who are direct immigrants of Eastern Europe, or whose ancestry is traced back to those countries. Those churches include Church of the Epiphany and St. Joseph's Church, both in Rochester; St. Nicholas in Elmira Heights; and Ss. Peter and Paul Church in Auburn. All four of these parishes are part of the Ukrainian Catholic Diocese of Stamford,

Conn.

Rochester's St. Nicholas the Wonderworker Church, meanwhile, is aligned with the Greek Melkite Eparchy (diocese) of Newton, Mass. This parish, along with the four Ukrainian parishes, represents two (Ukrainian and Melkite) of the 17 Eastern Rites in existence.

Administrators at the five parishes agreed that differences between Eastern Rite and Latin Rite (Roman Catholic) traditions have led to misunderstandings, even though both rites are fully recognized by the Catholic Church.

"It's the same faith, but it's expressed differently," said Father Sherman, the presbyter at St. Nicholas the Wonderworker.

Eastern Rite Catholics "have their own heritage, but have the same sacraments" as Roman Catholics, said Father Mihai Dubovici, administrator at Ss. Peter and Paul Church.

"We worship differently, but our theology is the same and the dogma is the same," added Msgr. Roman Golemba, pastor of St. Joseph's Church.

Msgr. Golemba noted that the small number of Eastern Rite parishes in the Rochester diocese — the ratio is approximately 32-to-1 — should not diminish the authenticity of the Eastern Rite beliefs.

"The number of the faithful does not change the validity of the rite," he said. "We are Catholics in union with Rome, and we are 100 percent as Catholic as they are."



Iconography such as this graces St. Joseph's Ukrainian Church, Rochester.

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