

# On the Patriarchate

By

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**Patriarch**

To most Westerners, the Oriental Churches and their customs are little-known—if known at all. The elaborate vestments, rhythmic chants, and intricate rituals are as foreign to them as the exotic lands of their origin. So, too, are the offices of the clergy: archimandrite and chorepiscopus to name but two. But none is more misunderstood than that of Patriarch.

Upon mention of the word, one's mind drifts to historic Patriarchates of Jerusalem, Constantinople, Alexandria and Antioch. Patriarchs are envisioned as Bishops leading millions of faithful Orthodox Christians, and indeed, that is the case. But the thought of Patriarchs in the West, heading Churches miniscule their number of members, is a concept that one may be reticent to accept.

What is a Patriarch? The great Eastern Christian scholar, Peter Day, in his hallmark work, *The Liturgical Dictionary of Eastern Christianity*, gives this definition:

“The supreme Bishop of an autocephalous Church, especially one that is either Catholic or Orthodox. Among the non-Catholics the Patriarch is the highest episcopal authority and has the right to call other metropolitans to a synod. Throughout a Patriarch's jurisdiction it is normal for him to ordain all the bishops and to send them the holy chrism for use in their dioceses.”

In the above definition, there is no mention of East or West, of millions of members or a mere handful. The key words are “highest episcopal authority” and “autocephalous,” that is, completely self-governing and owing allegiance to none but Christ. It must be noted that a Bishop cannot assume the office of Patriarch; it must be granted to him by, traditionally, a unanimous vote of the synod. And as the Patriarch is the greatest authority in the Church, so is he the greatest servant of all.