

The Chaldean People
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Who are the Chaldeans?

- Chaldeans are the indigenous Aramaic-speaking people of Mesopotamia, now called Iraq.
- They comprise one of the eastern “Rites” of the Catholic Church.
- They are of the same ethno-cultural people as Assyrians, most of whom belong to one of the non-Catholic Assyrian Churches.

Geographic Origin - Mesopotamia (Iraq)

- Had many different names in the past: it was part of the Ottoman Empire, the Persian Empire, etc.
- It is the “land between the two rivers,” the “cradle of civilization.”
- It is where the Garden of Eden was said to be located in Genesis 2:10-15.
- It is the land of Babylon, and all its history and legend.
- It is the land of the city called “Ur of the Chaldeans,” and therefore the culture of Abram who was called forth from it in Genesis 15:7.
- It is the most likely origin of the Magi following the star to the Messiah in Matthew 2.
- It is a land that has an extremely rich history and has seen many blessings and many tribulations.

Language - Aramaic

- The language still spoken by Chaldeans is Aramaic, which is the language spoken by Jesus.
- The dialect spoken by Chaldeans is called “Neo-Aramaic” in scholarly jargon, but popularly referred to as simply “Chaldean.”
- It is a completely different language from Arabic, though many Chaldeans also speak Arabic and many Arabic words have recently been incorporated into Chaldean.
- It is a distinct dialect of Aramaic from “Syriac,” which was the dialect of Aramaic used in the ancient Christian schools of Mesopotamia and Syria.
- The Chaldean Liturgy is now celebrated in various combinations of Chaldean, Syriac, Arabic, and English or other vernacular languages in the diaspora.

Religion – Eastern Rite Catholic

- The vast majority of those Chaldeans who practice a religion are Catholic, following the Pope as the head of the Church, but practicing their faith as one of the 22 eastern Rites of the Catholic Church.

- The Chaldean Mass, other liturgies, liturgical calendar, weekly readings, and other practices, are different from those of the Roman Rite, and most often go back to ancient times.
- St. Thomas and St. Jude Thaddeus are believed to have preached in Mesopotamia and established what is now called the Chaldean Church.
- The Chaldean Church, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Ancient Apostolic Assyrian Church of the East, are all branches of what was originally simply called “The Church of the East,” that is, the Church located east of the Roman Empire.
- This ancient Church was for a long time associated with the heretic Nestorius, and sometimes called “the Nestorian Church.”

Words to Avoid in Referring to Eastern Catholics:

- “**Uniate**” is considered a derogatory term, and originated as a slur used by the Orthodox to attack the segments of their Churches that united to Rome.
- “**The Eastern Church**” and “**The Eastern Rite**” are misnomers, since there are *many* eastern Rites and Churches within the Catholic Church. “Eastern Churches” and “Eastern Rites” is more accurate, and reflects the language of Canon Law and the practice of the Holy See.
- “Nestorian” is the name of a heresy, and most scholars question whether the Christology of the Church of the East was ever truly Nestorian, especially since the “Christological Agreement” signed between St. John Paul II and the Assyrian Patriarch in 1995.

Immigration

- Some Chaldeans immigrated to America as early as the 1930s, but in small numbers.
- The first big “wave” of Chaldean immigration was in the late 1970s, at the start of the Iran-Iraq war.
- The second wave was in the early 1990s, during “Operation: Dessert Storm.”
- The third wave was in the early-mid 2000s, during the second American conflict with Iraq. Many in this group, and the smaller groups who came later, experienced horrible atrocities both in Iraq and on their way to America through Syria and other countries.
- Estimates are not always precise, but it is thought that there are around 150-200,000 Chaldeans in metro Detroit, around 50-80,000 in metro San Diego, and with smaller pockets in Chicago, Phoenix, San Jose, and many other cities.
- Like many other immigrant communities, Chaldeans often have language and cultural struggles in their first generation.

Family Life

- The family structure in the Chaldean community is generally very tight, often patriarchal, and comparatively strict. Sometimes the family carries negative prejudices against other minorities, religions (especially Islam, which is seen as being a persecuting religion by those who immigrated from Iraq), and lifestyles.

- Extended families are usually fairly very large, and gatherings happen often and boisterously.
- There is often lingering sexism in Chaldean families, with boys and girls treated very differently. This can take different forms: sometimes girls are overprotected and feel imprisoned in their homes; other times, boys are expected to quit school and work to support the family.
- It is often difficult for parents to follow up with their children on their schoolwork, both because of language barriers and because of a heavy work schedule.

What to Look Out For

- Confirmation is done during the same ritual as Baptism, during infancy. If you have Chaldeans in your school, they're already confirmed.
- First Communion, as a sacrament of initiation, should properly be done at their local Chaldean parish where baptism and confirmation were done, or at least at their local Chaldean parish, so that the three sacraments are received in the same Rite.
- Canon Law says all Catholics should practice their faith within their own rite. It should be discouraged for them to register at a Roman Rite parish. It should be considered for discounts to be given to them without this, perhaps with proof that they are registered at their own parish.
- Among the differing liturgical practices, it's good to know about *Ba'utha*, which is a 3-day commemoration of Jonah's visit to Nineveh that takes place a few weeks before the beginning of Lent. It involves fasting until noon and avoiding meat and dairy, which may affect their day at school.
- Chaldean kids live between two worlds. Their family often carries Middle Eastern values, and as such is an enormous influence on their lives. At the same time, the overwhelming American culture surrounding them can make them feel out of place, even to third-generation immigrant kids. Be patient.

Further Reading

Jammo, *The Chaldean Liturgy: At the Gate of God*.

Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*.

Suha, *Christianity in Iraq*.