

# *the* Maronite **Voice**



*Baptized in the name of the Father,  
and the Son, and the Holy Spirit*

# the Maronite Voice

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# Lenten Observances 2024

The Most Reverend Bishops Gregory J. Mansour and A. Elias Zaidan have issued the following Lenten guidelines for the Maronites of the United States.

## Fasting and Abstinence

- + All Maronites who are physically capable are to **abstain** from meat on **Ash Monday** (12 February 2024) and all **Fridays of Lent**.
- + **Ash Monday** and **Great Friday of the Crucifixion** (29 March 2024) are also days of **fasting**. Fasting in the Maronite Church involves **eating and drinking nothing** at all (except water and medicine) from **midnight until noon**. The rest of the day normal meals can be taken, but without meat. All Maronites who are physically capable should fast on these two days.

## Distribution of Ashes

All parish priests are to bless and distribute ashes on **Ash Monday** during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy as indicated in our liturgical books. This ceremony may **not** be celebrated on the vigil of Ash Monday (Cana Sunday). For the convenience of some faithful of the Latin Church who may come to the Divine Liturgy at a Maronite Church on their Ash Wednesday, ashes that were blessed on Monday may be given to them after the Divine Liturgy. However, ashes are **not** to be blessed again on this day.

## Lenten Services

All parish priests are to celebrate the **Benediction with the Cross** every **Friday of Lent** except for the Great Friday of the Crucifixion. This service may be preceded by **Evening Prayer (Ramsho)**, **Stations of the Cross**, or even the **Divine Liturgy**. Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament should **not** take place on the Fridays of Lent.

## Traditional Fasting Discipline

Clergy, religious and laity who wish to observe the more **traditional** Maronite practice of fasting and abstinence are **encouraged** to do so.

That practice is summarized in the following, taken from **current Maronite Particular Law**:

Every weekday of Lent (Monday through Friday) is a day of fasting and abstinence from meat and dairy products (eggs, butter, milk, etc.). Fasting involves eating and drinking nothing at all (except water and medicine) from midnight until noon. The rest of the day normal meals can be taken, but without meat or dairy products. Dairy products are excluded because they are animal byproducts. Saturdays and Sundays are exempt from fasting and abstaining, as are the following feast days: St. Joseph (19 March) and the Annunciation (25 March).

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# The Sanctity of Marriage

One of my joyful ministries was to prepare couples for a lifelong covenant, a marriage between a man and woman who fell in love and chose to live together as husband and wife. It was refreshing to see their love for each other, the excitement to plan their wedding and prepare for their life together as husband and wife. Marriage in the Church has a very special place in our lives as Catholics. It is one of the Holy Mysteries when a man and a woman take vows

before God, the Church, their families, and their friends to love each other above all else despite the hardships of life. For couples, it is not a decision that is taken lightly or easily but is instead a journey to form a family, the domestic Church. Despite the changing times and the changing attitudes toward the sanctity of marriage, we as Catholics retain our beliefs, our laws, and our need to defend the Mystery of Holy Matrimony.

Marriages are present throughout the Bible beginning with the first couple, Adam and Eve. As Adam says, “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; This one shall be called ‘woman,’ for out of man this one has been taken” (GENESIS 2:23). Then man and woman were created for each other. A couple is meant to be one when they enter into marriage and to work together towards a life of faith and family.

In our Maronite Liturgy of the Mystery of Crowning when the couple join their hands on the Bible, the celebrant says, “May their marriage be as firm as the covenant by which heaven and earth were created, and be blessed as was the covenant by which Sarah was joined to Abraham, Rebecca to Isaac, and Rachel to Jacob, so that nothing shall separate them but death.” Looking back at the successful marriages in the Bible, we hope that the married couple will also enjoy the blessings and realize a marriage that lasts a lifetime. The Catechism of the Catholic Church highlights the importance of the marriage bond, “the consent by which the spouses mutually give and receive one another is sealed by God himself. From their covenant arises ‘an institution, confirmed by the divine law,...even in the eyes of society.’ The covenant between the spouses is integrated into God’s covenant with man: ‘Authentic married love is caught up into divine love’” (PARA 1639).



The Code of Canons for the Eastern Churches (CCEO) is the collection of laws which make up the governing of the Catholic Church. When addressing marriage, the CCEO says “By the marriage covenant, founded by the Creator and ordered by His laws, a man and woman by irrevocable personal covenant establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life; this covenant is by its very nature ordered to the good of the spouses and to the procreation and education of children” (CAN. 776 §1). The marriage bond establishes a relationship between a man and a woman which is meant to be for life, where they have children, and raise their family in the life of the Church.

The world has been changing and there have been changes to laws that allow marriage beyond a man and woman to be acknowledged by secular governments. This is not a belief we condone or support as Catholics. As His Holiness, Pope Francis stated “I would like to share with you some reflections on marriage, because in the Church and in the world, there is a strong need to rediscover the meaning and value of the conjugal union between man and woman on which the family is based. Indeed, an aspect, which is certainly not secondary, of the crisis that is affecting many families is the practical, personal, and collective ignorance regarding marriage” (Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Officials of the Tribunal of the Roman Rota for the Inauguration of the Judicial Year, 2023). This is creating a crisis around the world because of the misconception regarding the definition of marriage, the roles of a man and a woman, and the structure of a family.

Even in the last press release (Jan. 4, 2024) concerning the reception of *Fiducia Supplicans*, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith reaffirms, “This Declaration remains firm on the traditional doctrine of the Church about marriage... Therefore, rites and prayers that could create confusion between

what constitutes marriage—which is the ‘exclusive, stable and indissoluble union between a man and a woman, naturally open to the generation of children’—and what contradicts it are inadmissible. The conviction is grounded in the perennial Catholic doctrine of marriage; it is only in this context that sexual relations find their natural, proper, and fully human meaning.”

As Christians, it is our duty and our calling to defend the sanctity of marriage. For us, marriage is not something transitory or conditional but is instead a covenant between a man and a woman likened to the covenant between Christ and the Church. Couples come before God to bless their union and before their families and friends to witness such an important part of their lives when their journey together begins. The modern world has developed a sentiment that marriage is nothing but a throwaway word, the ceremony has no meaning, and the bond is easily broken through divorce. Unfortunately, this is exactly the reason why so many marriages fail to last a lifetime. Yes, marriage is never easy. It requires constant work and nurturing of love, mutual sacrifice and honesty, on-going communication, and working together to overcome the challenges of life.

As we emphasize the importance of the marriage between a man and a woman, we can’t disregard others; we need to always care and show compassion towards people who are not living under the norms of the Church. We have the obligation to reach out to them, to extend to them a helping hand, and to bring them the tangible love of Christ. They are still children of God who deserve respect and love. Although the cultural sentiment on marriage changes and the secular world continues to modify the norms and rules of marriage, we as Catholics can only support and defend the marriage between a man and a woman as it is designed by God, written in the Bible, and according to the Sacred Tradition of the Church. ■

*Bishop A. Elias Zaidan*

## Schedule **BISHOP A. ELIAS ZAIDAN**

- 4 FEBRUARY** St. Louis, MO | St. Raymond Cathedral | St. Maron Celebration
- 6 FEBRUARY** Virtual | Meeting of the Maronite Catholic Foundation Board
- 9-11 FEBRUARY** Youngstown, OH | St. Maron Church | Pastoral Visit
- 10 FEBRUARY** North Jackson, OH | Day of Reflection for the Antonine Sisters
- 12 FEBRUARY** Cleveland, OH | St. Maron Church | Ash Monday
- 18 FEBRUARY** Orange, CA | St. John Maron Church | Pastoral Visit and Diaconal Ordination of Subdeacon Joseph Waked
- 25 FEBRUARY** Los Angeles, CA | Our Lady of Mt. Lebanon-St. Peter Cathedral | St. Maron Celebration and Banquet
- 26-28 FEBRUARY** Lutz, FL | Bethany Center | Officers of the Catholic Bishops Conferences in America Meeting
- 2-3 MARCH** Nashville, TN | St. Sharbel Mission | Pastoral Visit
- 9-10 MARCH** Riverside, CA | St. Joseph Mission | Pastoral Visit
- 12-13 MARCH** Washington, DC | USCCB Administrative Committee
- 15-19 MARCH** Phoenix, AZ | St. Joseph Church | Pastoral Visit
- 19-21 MARCH** St. Louis, MO | Chancery | Meeting of the Eastern Catholic Bishops Association
- 21 MARCH** St. Louis, MO | St. Raymond Cathedral | Divine Liturgy of the Consecration of the Holy Oils
- 23-30 MARCH** Houston, TX | Our Lady of the Cedars Church | Hosanna Sunday and Passion Week Mission
- 31 MARCH** St. Louis, MO | St. Raymond Cathedral | Easter Celebrations

## The Order of Saint Sharbel New Members

### ANNUAL

- SALIM SALEH** | *St. Maron* | Detroit, MI
- NORMA JEAN ABRAHAM** | *Our Lady of Lebanon* | Miami, FL
- GHASSAN HARIKA** | *St. Anthony* | Glen Allen, VA
- MOUFID MAKHRAZ** | *St. John Paul II* | Sleepy Hollow, NY
- KIMBERLY PHELAN** | *St. Michael the Archangel* | Fayetteville, NC
- HALIM CHOUBAH** | *Our Lady of Purgatory* | New Bedford, MA

### PERPETUAL

- RITA FARAH** | *St. Maron* | Minneapolis, MN
- AEJ CAMPBELL** | *Our Lady's Parish* | Austin, TX



The Order of Saint Sharbel is an organization of lay people and clergy who have pledged their spiritual strength and financial support for Our Lady of Lebanon Seminary and the retired Maronite clergy of the Maronite Eparchies in the USA.

For more information about the Order ask your Pastor, visit [www.orderstsharbel.org](http://www.orderstsharbel.org) or write to:  
 Eparchy of Saint Maron  
 109 Remsen Street | Brooklyn, NY 11201 or  
 Eparchy of Our Lady of Lebanon  
 1021 South 10th Street | St. Louis, MO 63104

## Schedule **BISHOP GREGORY J. MANSOUR**

- 3 FEBRUARY** Brooklyn, NY | Our Lady of Lebanon Cathedral | St. Maron Celebration
- 10 FEBRUARY** Torrington, CT | St. Maron Church | St. Maron Celebration
- 11 FEBRUARY** Brooklyn, NY | Our Lady of Lebanon Cathedral
- 18 FEBRUARY** Allentown, PA | Sts. Joachim and Anne Mission | Dedication of New Church
- 19 FEBRUARY** MYA Board Call
- 21-22 FEBRUARY** Livingston Manor, NY | Sisters of Bethlehem
- 23-25 FEBRUARY** MYO Retreat for Southern Region
- 2-3 MARCH** Washington, DC | Our Lady of Lebanon Church | Pastoral Visit
- 4 MARCH** Washington, DC | Our Lady of Lebanon Seminary | Pastoral Visit and Child Protection Review Board Meeting
- 6 MARCH** Virtual | Maronite Couples Talk
- 7 MARCH** Virtual | Lenten Talk
- 9-10 MARCH** Somerset, NJ | St. Sharbel Church | Pastoral Visit
- 11-16 MARCH** Lutz, FL | Bethany Center | Annual Priest Retreat
- 16-17 MARCH** Naples, FL | Pastoral Visit
- 19-21 MARCH** St. Louis, MO | Chancery | Meeting of the Eastern Catholic Bishops Association

**Eternal rest grant to him, O Lord.**



### **PASSING OF EMILE KHALLOUF**

We received the sad news of the passing of Mr. Emile Khallouf, the brother of Fr. Raymond Khallouf, who died in Lebanon 1 January 2024. He was preceded in death by his father, Joseph and mother, Alice, and two brothers.

He leaves behind his brothers Georges and Fr. Raymond, and his two daughters Lea and Joy.

His funeral was held Wednesday 3 January 2024, at Saint George Church in Hadath Beirut, Lebanon.

Father Raymond offered the Divine Liturgy on 7 January at his parish in Jacksonville. Condolences may be sent to Fr. Raymond Khallouf at Saint Maron Church located at 7032 Bowden Road, Jacksonville, Florida 32216.

On behalf of the Eparchy of Saint Maron, Clergy, Religious and Laity, we extend to Fr. Raymond and his family our condolences, and promise of prayer.

May Emile rest in God's peace.



# Baptism and Chrismation in the Maronite Rite

by Rev. David A. Fisher

The Holy Mysteries/Sacraments of Initiation comprise Baptism, Chrismation, and Holy Eucharist. In the holy liturgy, the initiated person died and rose to a new life. A life not constituted by the limitations of biological existence, but a life reborn by entering into the life of the Church, constituted by the Mystery of the Triune God.

The experience of early Christianity and the Church, especially before the Roman Emperor Constantine favored the Christian faith, was the initiation of many adults, many families, and not just babies and youth as is often the case today. Indeed, the Holy Mysteries of Initiation were and are visible words and actions that fulfill the words of the great fourth-century Egyptian Church Father, St. Athanasius of Alexandria: “God became man so that man might become god.”

Since, the Rites of Initiation are more often than not celebrated for the newborn or young child today; the Church has adopted various traditions. In the Roman Church, baptism is celebrated, with an anointing, that will be confirmed (Sacrament of Confirmation) usually by a bishop later in the life of the child. In most of the Byzantine Churches, the three Holy Mysteries are still celebrated together in the Liturgy of Initiation, even for newborns and young children. In the Maronite Church, Baptism and Chrismation are celebrated together, and the Eucharist is given in a similar way as is done in the Roman Church, as a First Communion later in one’s young life.

When the Maronite Church in the U.S.A., created an official text for Initiation in English, the intention was to recapture the more ancient tradition:

While the Syriac text focuses mainly, if not only, on baptism as such, the English one widens the vision and looks at the mysteries of initiation as a whole. In that sense, the general title is no longer “On Holy Baptism”, which seems to ignore the presence of the two other mysteries (confirmation and communion), but rather is now “The Mysteries of Initiation.” (Mysteries of Initiation, Diocesan Office of Liturgy, 1987, revised 2021)

The intention of the Diocesan Office of the Liturgy at that time was to reflect, “the original vision and praxis of the Church of the East as well as that of the West.” Thus carrying out what has often been said of the Maronite Church, as being the bridge between the East and West as regards the prayer and liturgical practice of the Catholic Church.

## **Ritual of the Entry of the Mother and the Child Into the Church**

This rite is only used for children, as the mother returns to the church with her child. The priest meets them at the entrance of the church and blesses the mother and child.

The blessing over the mother invokes the Incarnation and the entrance of Mary and the Child Jesus into the Temple for the Circumcision of the Lord:

... You took a human body from the Virgin Mary and received circumcision on the eighth day. You offered the sacrifice prescribed for your purification, yet you are yourself the gracious sacrifice and the pleasant aroma, in whom your Father delights, for the sake of our humble and feeble race.





O Lord and mighty God, bless your servant, N. She comes today to your holy temple, and to me, your humble and sinful servant, to present her offering and supplication, and to implore the gifts of your heavenly grace, which you bestow upon us, through the order of priesthood....

The prayer over the mother is followed by the prayer over the child. The third paragraph of the prayer beautifully references the power of the Holy Spirit, by whose power we all become children of God:

...Enable him/her to enter your holy temple and to receive the glorious seal of the Holy Chrism, the pleasant aroma, through which, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and according to your true promises to us, we become children of God and heirs of his kingdom. For you are our God, to whom we raise glory, now and forever.

What follows is the leading of the child to the altar, being carried by the priest/presider. After presenting the child to the altar, the priest gives the child back to the

mother for the rite of naming the child and sealing the child by his or her name, with the holy cross, a “symbol of victory.” The blessing and prayer anticipate the Holy Mysteries that will constitute the child’s full entrance into the life of the Church. “...through the waters of baptism. Then, when you are granted this seal of your Lord, you will enter and join with his spiritual flock forever. Amen.”

### The Mysteries of Baptism and Chrismation

The poetic beauty of the theology of the Syriac Fathers, which took root in the liturgical language of the Antiochene Syriac Maronite liturgical tradition, is captured even in translation in the prayers of the liturgical celebration of Baptism and Chrismation.

Most importantly, it is prayer which is Trinitarian; where the two hands of the Father, drawing from the teachings of the great second-century Father of the Church, St. Irenaeus; where the Son and Holy Spirit give us rebirth in the Kingdom of God, Our Father. The beauty of the prayers are not detached statements of doctrine, or poetry detached from theological truth; they are poetically beautiful acclamations of the power of God in the life of the one who is regenerated in the water and oil of new life.

Lord God, you entrusted this spiritual service of holy baptism to your divine apostles and commanded them to baptize the world in fire and Spirit. May it be administered through us sinners to this soul N, who prepares for holy baptism. Adorn him/her with the gifts of your Holy Spirit. Then he/she will raise glory and praise to you, to your blessed Father, and your living and Holy Spirit, now and forever. (from Preparatory Prayers, Service of the Word, Opening Prayers)

The *Prayer of Forgiveness* reminds us that although he was in no need of being baptized, Jesus sanctified the waters of the Jordan River and bowed his head before John the Baptizer. “The Father proclaimed and

## “Baptism and Chrismation in the Maronite Rite”

*Continued from page 9*

thundered from heaven: ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I’m pleased.’ The Holy Spirit came down in the form of a dove...” Hence, the presence and power of the Holy Trinity bless the water, forgive our sins, and lead us through the waters of rebirth.

After the **Qadeeshat Aloho**, the Readings from the Sacred Scriptures take place. When the **Homily** is completed the **Rite of Catechumens** takes place, which consists of the Diaconal Proclamation, Prayer over the Candidate, Exorcisms, Renunciation of Satan, Profession of Faith, and The Creed.

These rites and prayers, done primarily facing the East, (the rising Sun and the Son who rose), emphatically teach us that Baptism is a death to sin and evil and a rising to new life in Christ. The Profession of Faith before the recitation of The Creed says:

I believe in you, O Almighty God, the Father, in your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, in your holy and living Spirit, the Paraclete, in all your angels, in all your powers, in all the teachings of the holy, catholic and apostolic Church, and in all that is from you.

The **Anaphora for the Consecration of the Baptismal Water**, the priest blesses the water: “Glory be to the Father, + and to the Son, + and to the Holy Spirit, + who sanctifies this water through the mystery of the glorious Trinity, now and for ever.” Followed by various invocations of the Holy Spirit upon the water. “O Lord, may the Holy Spirit come and abide in this water. May he drive away from it the power of the enemy. May he enkindle it with an invincible strength... What stands out is the constant calling upon the Holy Spirit (Pneumatology).

This is uniquely an Eastern Christian quality that has often historically been lost in Western Christian liturgy and theology. It was the experience of Fathers Henri

d’Lubac, Yves Cougar, and Jean Danielou (who became major theological thinkers in the Catholic Church, right before, during, and after the Second Vatican Council), at the St. Sergius Russian Orthodox Center in France, that moved Congar to admit to the Roman Catholic propensity to develop (Christology), the study of Christ, often at the expense of a non-developed theology of the Holy Spirit (Pneumatology), which was taken over into Tridentine Liturgical life. For example, the lack of an (epiclesis) Invocation of the Holy Spirit in the Tridentine Mass.

After the waters of the baptism are anointed with the Oil of Chrism, the **Mystery of Baptism** takes place by pouring or immersion: “N. is baptized, a lamb in the flock of Christ, in the name of the Father, + and of the Son, + and of the Holy Spirit, + for eternal life.”

After the **Vesting With the White Garment**, which is a symbol of purity; the Holy Mystery of **Chrismation** takes place.

With the Chrism of Christ our God, sweet fragrance of the true faith, seal, and fulness of the grace of the heavenly Spirit. N. the servant of God is sealed in the name of the + Father, and of the + Son, and the + Holy Spirit.

The beauty of the **Final Prayer** is in many ways a summation of the liturgy that has just taken place. It speaks of the royal priesthood given to the new member of the Church.

...Grant, O Lord, that after being purified with the waters of your covenant, he/she may be a member of a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people, and a blessed community. ...

■  
*Father David A. Fisher, a priest of the Eparchy of Our Lady of Lebanon, is a regular contributor.*

# Faith of the Mountain in the Digital Age

by Deacon Joseph Chebli



The mountains have always played a significant role in Judeo-Christian tradition. From Mount Sinai to Mount Tabor, God encounters his people, reveals himself to them and commissions them to do good work. The mountains are particularly important to the Maronites. It is on a mountain, in the region of Apameus, Syria, that the “open air” hermit and priest, Saint Maron, lived and died. Subsequently, it is in the mountains of Lebanon that the early Maronite monks and hermits took refuge to encounter the Divine in their ascetic lives.

It is, therefore, appropriate that our Maronite religious education program is named Faith of the Mountain. The elementary and middle school series began in the 1980’s with the initiative of Chorbishop Dominic Ashkar and with the guidance of the late Archbishop Francis M. Zayek. The series was published and became the official religious education text for Maronites in the United States. Subsequently, it received two more revisions in 2000 and in 2010. The high-school series was developed by Chorbishop Seely Beggiani in 1993. Once again, this high school series is ready for renewal. As we enter the digital age, there is an imperative to not only preserve this rich heritage, but also to make it accessible to a world-wide English-speaking audience.

In a groundbreaking initiative, the Eparchies of the United States, Canada, and Australia have together embarked on a journey to review and digitize the Faith of the Mountain Maronite Catholic Catechism. This ambitious project aims to seamlessly blend traditional teaching with technology, ensuring that the teaching endures and resonates with a new generation. The new revision will ensure that the material developed over the years is edited to be age appropriate and able to reach the mind and heart.

The design aims to include more effective materials, as well as audio-visual clips, and interactive activities. The content will be our Catholic Faith (i.e., Theology, Spirituality, Liturgical practices, Sacred Arts...etc. specific to the Maronite Church). The revised Faith of the Mountain series will also highlight the three transcendentals: Truth, Beauty, and Goodness, as well

as Catholic Social Teaching and Pope John Paul II’s Theology of the Body. The learner and the teacher both will have the opportunity to dive deeper into various topics pertinent to the lesson. This series can also be used to share the Maronite Catholic Faith with parents and guardians as they see fit in anchoring their children in the Faith.

At the forefront of this venture is a collaboration of all four Eparchies with Fuzati, a leading expert in digital preservation and dissemination of cultural treasures. Fuzati, renowned for its expertise in digital solutions, has been enlisted by the Maronite Eparchies to bring a harmonious digitalization of tradition and technology to the elementary, middle school and high-school Faith of the Mountain series. However, Fuzati will not be developing the Faith of the Mountain series anew. Rather, they will use our existing material for level 1-8 and for high school as a basis, and improve on it, and bring it into a digital format. Their expertise will not only facilitate the seamless transition into the digital realm, but also enhance accessibility through user-friendly interfaces and interactive features as well as a print format for those who wish to use such mediums.

Furthermore, Fuzati is not alone in this venture. We are asking each participating Eparchy to form their own editorial team that will review and provide feedback on the work of Fuzati so we can better understand their respective needs and cultural ethos. Subsequently, one or two representatives from each Eparchy will join the Inter-Eparchial Editorial Board that works closely with Fuzati.

The Faith of the Mountain Maronite Catechism is key, alongside the Liturgy, to help us understand the Maronite Church’s distinctive theology, doctrine, and profound spirituality handed down throughout the ages. By harnessing the power of digital platforms, we hope to offer to everyone, beyond geographical barriers a virtual pilgrimage of Faith for the believers and the curious alike. May the prayers of our Father, Saint Maron, be with us. ■

# Why Baptize – and Why Infants?

by Rev. Timothy V. Vaverek

**B**aptism is the first of the sacraments, often called “the door” to the other sacraments and to the whole Christian life. It’s celebrated by virtually all Christian groups as a sign of adherence to Jesus and his plan of salvation, though the precise meaning of “sign” and “plan of salvation” can differ significantly. Our Catholic understanding of sacraments as signs instituted by Christ and of salvation as a participation in his divine life help explain our baptismal practices.

As an external rite signifying cleansing or new life, baptism (an “immersing” or “washing”) existed in Judaism prior to Christianity. The practice was central to John the Baptist’s prophetic mission of preparing the people for the Messiah. He called them to a renewed fidelity to the covenant with God expressed through metanoia (conversion/penitence/repentance) and baptism (Mk 1:2-6).

John’s baptism was a type of blessing and prayer for renewal; it didn’t have the power to change lives. He said the one coming after him would baptize with “the Holy Spirit and fire,” meaning with a divine power to purify (Lk 3:17). This is the baptism Jesus instituted when he directed the Apostles to baptize disciples “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19).

Catholics believe baptism is a work of the Trinity accomplished through Christ which changes the baptized person by conferring a new life. It is a “sign” in the unique sense of a “sacrament”: a visible sign which by God’s power causes what it signifies. In the case of baptism, the ritual sign of cleansing (pouring of water) or of death and rebirth (immersion and resurfacing from the water) in the name of the Trinity actually brings holiness and new life by uniting us to God in Jesus.



The principal effect of baptism is that God comes to dwell in us and we in him (Jn 14:20, 23). By this union with the Trinity, we are reborn as God’s adopted children and united to Christ as members of his Body and Bride, the Church (Rom 8:15; Eph 5:29-30). God bestows all we need to share his divine life: Faith, Hope, and Love (the “Theological Virtues”) and the myriad of gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit. So it is that the separation from God caused by the Fall of Adam and Eve (i.e., Original Sin) is overcome.

Baptism, therefore, really is the end of one way of life and the beginning of another. It’s a rebirth. When our name is pronounced in baptism, God calls us by name and enables us to be that unique person. It’s like the moment he said “Let there be Light” and there was light; he creates us anew.

God’s purpose in baptism is that by being united to him in Jesus we might share his divine life and join in his works of creation and salvation. We do that by living a life of metanoia (on-going purification





in his love) through prayer, self-sacrifice, and works of mercy (Mt 6). In that new way of life our sanctification unfolds daily and we become a means of God blessing the lives of others. We not only contribute to making the world a better place, we help make it, ourselves, and others more holy.

Of course, we don't always respond by living the holiness God offers. Our life and the world will be touched, intentionally and otherwise, by evil and the effects of sin until Jesus comes in glory. But the Good News—the astonishing news!—is that the Kingdom of God has already begun and is at work in and through us. Humbly sharing in Christ's life and mission, we trust God to help us remain faithful until we see him face to face.

This Catholic view of baptism and salvation is the reason we usually require those who are maturely accountable for their actions to begin professing the Gospel and practicing metanoia prior to being baptized. These are two essential aspects of the new life that they should be ready to undertake wholeheartedly when the indwelling of God begins in baptism. In special circumstances, like danger of death, a trust in God, belief in Christ, and penitence for sin are sufficient preparation for the sacrament.

Why, then, do we baptize infants? Because baptism is God's gift of himself dwelling within us and adopting us. It's natural that Catholic parents would desire this new, divine life for their children. That way, children can grow while sharing in the life of Jesus just as they grow sharing in the life of their family.

Of course, once children reach the age of accountability, they may turn away from God, but that's no different than someone who was baptized as an adult. Baptism marks the beginning not the completion or guarantee of our salvation.

The Orthodox hold similar beliefs about the sacrament of baptism and Christian participation in God's life. They, too, baptize infants. In fact, like Maronites and other Eastern Catholic Churches, they chrismate (confirm) infants and give them Holy Communion.

Most Protestants don't believe that baptism is a sign that actually changes a person. Many think it's a sign of the recipient's faith or, if an infant, the parent's faith. Some among the Evangelicals believe that accepting and professing Jesus as Savior (including his call to baptism) means a person is already saved. Those who understand baptism in these ways don't baptize infants because infants don't have faith.

For Catholics, baptism means the same thing for adults and infants: God has come to abide in us so we can spend our earthly and heavenly life growing in an ever-deepening union with himself and each other in Christ. We should daily pray that he who has begun this good work in us will bring it to fulfillment. ■

*Fr. Timothy V. Vaverek is the author of the recently published book, As I Have Loved You: Rediscovering our Salvation in Christ*

# Saints in the Maronite Calendar

by Rev. Claude W. Franklin, Jr.

In the Eastern Churches, saints closely associated with a major feast of Christ or Mary are commemorated on the following day. Such a commemoration is often known as a *Synaxis*. In this issue of *The Maronite Voice*, we will be examining the commemorations of Saint John the Baptist and Saints Simeon the Elder and Anna the Prophetess.

Saint John the Baptist is connected to the feast of the Glorious Epiphany (**6 January**), since in the Maronite Church it commemorates Christ's Baptism by the Forerunner. Saint Simeon the Elder is connected to the feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple (**2 February**), since in the Maronite Church in the ceremony of blessing the mother and child at the entrance of the Church, often called the "Church-ing of the Baby," the priest invokes the image of Saint Simeon as he prays over the child, saying: "I beseech you on behalf of your creature, the work of your hands this little child, who comes to your holy temple, in order to show forth the mystery you have revealed to us, through the body you took from our nature as old Simeon held you in his arms..." (*Mysteries of Initiation*) Following this prayer, the priest carries the child in his arms into the Church, as Saint Simeon the Elder carried Christ in the Temple.

## 7 January - Praises of John the Baptist

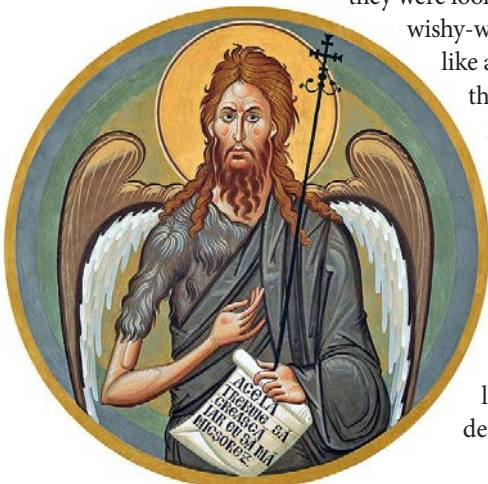
Among its numerous commemorations of John the Baptist, the Maronite Church commemorates the *Praises of Saint John the Baptist* on 7 January. However, this commemoration is unique in that it ultimately originates with Jesus. After Saint John the Baptist's disciples came to Jesus, on behalf of John who was in prison, to enquire if He was the Messiah or must they wait for another. Jesus replied back to John through the messengers to take note of all the miraculous works he has done (LUKE 7:22).

In Matthew 11: 7-19 Jesus praises John the Baptist and makes the crowd answer these questions within themselves: "What did you go out to the desert to see?"

they were looking for someone who is wishy-washy, swaying in the wind like a reed, that was not John the Baptist. John is a strong reed who would not bend under pressure, even to the point of being imprisoned on account of his teachings and exhortations. If they were looking for someone dressed in luxurious clothing, the desert is not the place to

find such a person, rather they should go to the royal palaces. John the Baptist was an ascetic, known to wear a hair shirt, and to eat honey and locusts. If they were looking for a prophet, then they are close, for John possessed the characteristics of a prophet. But John was much more, for he had a special role and calling. John was called by the Lord to prepare the way for the imminent coming of the Messiah. This is why Jesus quotes from the Prophet Malachi (3:1): 'Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way before you.' Jesus concludes His praises of John by saying: "Amen, I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." If we are able to commit ourselves to following Jesus completely, we have the potential to be greater in the kingdom of heaven than Saint John the Baptist.

The Church has followed Jesus' example and praises John the Baptist on 7 January, for with the baptism of Christ, John's mission has come to an end, for he has pointed out the Bridegroom Christ to His Bride, the Church, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" (JOHN 1: 29) In the Maronite Liturgy, we acclaim that "You [John] are the Covenant linking the two Covenants, for you brought the Old Covenant to an end and began the New." (Sedro - Birth of Saint John the Baptist) From now on, as Saint John said himself, "He must increase; I must decrease."



(JOHN 3:30) So too, we must follow the example of Saint John the Baptist and allow Christ to increase in our lives and allow ourselves to decrease.

### 3 February – Praises of Saint Simeon the Elder and Saint Anna the Prophetess

As good law-abiding Jews, Jesus' parents fulfill all the precepts of the Law and teach Him to do so likewise. Following the feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple (2 February), which commemorates when Jesus' parents, Saints Joseph and Mary went up to the Temple in Jerusalem on the fortieth day after His birth to fulfill the Law of Moses (LEVITICUS 12: 2-8). At Christ's Presentation in the Temple a couple of enigmatic characters, Simeon and Anna, appear. Saint Luke records that Simeon, a "righteous and devout" man, was "awaiting the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him." (LUKE 2: 25) Saint Luke continues: "It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Messiah of the Lord." (LUKE 2: 26) And "he came in the Spirit into the Temple...he took Him into his arms and blessed God, saying: 'Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace...'" (LUKE 2: 27-29)

Beyond these few details in the Gospel of Luke, we know very little about Saint Simeon the Elder (as he came to be known. Holy Tradition has given us at least one other account of Saint Simeon's life before this event. Saint Simeon the Elder was said to have been one of the scribes from Alexandria, Egypt, responsible for translating the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek for the translation known as the Septuagint. Tradition says that Saint Simeon was translating the book of the Prophet Isaiah and as he read the words: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive in the womb, and shall bring forth a son" (7:14), he thought that 'virgin' was incorrect, and he was going to correct the text with 'woman'. Suddenly, an angel appeared to him and refrained him from making the change. The angel said to him, "You shall see these words fulfilled. You shall not die until you behold Christ the Lord born of a pure and spotless Virgin." This, of course, was fulfilled when he held Christ in his arms. Tradition says that Saint Simeon the Elder died at an advanced age of 360.

For as little as we know about Saint Simeon the Elder, we know even less about Saint Anna the Prophetess. We know only what Saint Luke has recorded about her (cf. LUKE 2: 36-38). Saint Luke tells us that she was a prophetess from the tribe of Asher. Saint Anna had also been a widow until the age of eighty-four. Saint Luke recorded that she worshiped in the Temple day and night, and that she fasted and prayed, while awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem.

Where Saint John the Baptist is seen as the Covenant between the Old and New Covenants, Saints Simeon the Elder and Anna the Prophetess represent the last righteous figures of the Old Covenant. They are important examples for us of a man and woman dedicated to God, who awaited the fulfillment of God's promise of salvation and were granted the privilege of witnessing it. We are called to follow their example, as we await Christ's promise of salvation to us, as we pray on the feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple:

"Aged Simeon's heart was filled with joy when he saw you in the Temple and he cried out: 'O Master, let your servant go in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.' Today we share in his joy and like him we exclaim: 'Our eyes have seen your salvation.' (*Sedro of Safro* [Morning Prayer]) ■

*Fr. Claude W. Franklin, Jr., is pastor of Saint Joseph in Olean, NY.*







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## “The word of the Lord will always be the same.” – Father Milad

by *Brandon Shulleeta*

Despite society changing with time, Father Milad Yaghi has advice for Catholics that he believes transcends time. “Live the gospel,” Yaghi said. “The word of the Lord will always be the same. ... Jesus will be always Jesus for us.” It’s simple advice and a call for consistency. And it comes from a man consistently called to serve Christ since his youth.

Father Milad dedicated his life to Christ at a young age, entering the seminary in Lebanon when he was 12. “When I was a little kid ... that was when I started my journey with the Lord,” he said. “Just got that feeling inside of you that you want to be a priest.” He said he was one of about 75 students who were in the seminary. He was ordained a priest at the age of 24 in 1988.



Yaghi has been in Houston, Texas, for 32 years, where he founded Our Lady of the Cedars Maronite Catholic Church. It’s one of the largest Maronite churches in the eparchy with more than 900 families.

As the pastor, he believes it’s his obligation to look after all of those people, adding that priests have an obligation “to live with your people and serve.” “Be with them when they need you. Look after them. Call them,” he said. “Your life is for them, to serve. ... Good times, bad times be always with them. Be always ready to help and to serve.”

Having such a large parish requires him to spend a lot of time on the road, visiting parishioners in need. He serves alongside associate pastor Father Edward Hanna and five subdeacons.

Our Lady of the Cedars Lebanon has a large Lebanese population and also parishioners from Jordan, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Egypt and others.

In addition to leading his church, he’s also the assistant to Bishop A. Elias Zaidan, whom Yaghi has known since the two met in the seminary when they were 12 years.

In addition to following the gospel, Yaghi advises Catholics: “Be humble, be patient, and people will love you.” ■

*Brandon Shulleeta is a journalist and parishioner of St. Anthony Maronite Church in Glen Allen, VA.*

## Our Lady of Purgatory Church

New Bedford, Massachusetts *by Matthew Thomas*

**O**n 8 December 2023, on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, exactly 105 years after the dedication of the original Our Lady of Purgatory Church, Bishop Gregory J. Mansour dedicated the new church.

Bishop Gregory joined the parishioners and their pastor, Father Vincent W. Farhat, Chorbishop Joseph Kaddo, Msgr. James Root, Father Tony Massad, and Fr. George Hajj, as well as over 15 other clergy members of the Eparchy of St. Maron of Brooklyn and the Diocese of Fall River. The Dedication kicked off a weekend-long celebration.

In addition to the church, the complex includes a rectory, a parish center, over 12,000 square feet of space

for festivals and outdoor activities, and a parking lot. The complex formerly served as Our Lady of Fatima Church and was purchased from the Diocese of Fall River on the Feast of St. John Maron, 2 March 2023.

The decision to move from Franklin Street, where the parish had been founded in 1917, was a bittersweet one, but after a period of prayerful discernment, it became clear that the new parish complex offered significant opportunities for the parish to gather and grow. Substantial renovations were necessary for the building to become the new home. The renovations were designed by parishioner Halim Choubah. The sanctuary and sacristy were expanded, new confessionals were built, and a handicap accessible restroom was

constructed. New energy efficient HVAC systems were installed, and the building was fully insulated. Krya Chomak Lawton, another parishioner and talented architect, oversaw the finishing design. M & E Contractors served as the General Contractor. Several of the subcontractors were also parishioners of OLOP. Fr. Vincent was assisted in general oversight of the project by Joseph Barcket, Halim Choubah, Gaby Baroody, James Kalife and Matthew J. Thomas, Esq.

The parish felt that it was essential to restore and incorporate the 67-year-old-stained glass windows



and icons, and the 97-year-old marble altars and altar rails into the design of the new church. The stained-glass windows were restored and installed in the new church by New England Stained Glass. Relocation of the altars and altar rails presented a more difficult challenge until the parish procured the services of John Aldrich. John is a master marble mason and he carefully and lovingly disassembled the altars and altar rails, cleaned the marble, and then installed them in the new church. Other parish treasures, including the precious vessels, statues, stations of the cross, and cupola were also moved to the new Church.

Following the dedication of the church, over 300 parishioners and friends of Our Lady of Purgatory Church gathered in the parish center for a marvelous dinner. During the brief speaking program, Bishop Gregory congratulated Fr. Vincent and the parishioners on their hard work and dedication in completing this part of its journey of faith. The Bishop also spoke of how the new parish complex would afford opportunities for the youth of the parish to gather. During his comments, Fr. Vince spoke of his gratitude and his belief that the Holy Spirit had guided the parish during this process.

The parish has raised \$365,000 toward its capital campaign goal of \$650,000. As the parish completes this phase of its 106-year-old journey of faith, it now looks forward to the future. In the words of parishioner Jimmy Kalife, "All this is very nice, but without all of us being present, it's just a piece of land with buildings on it. So please, we ask you all to jump in with both feet. Let's make it happen. Let's be family." We pray that through the intercession of Our Lady of Purgatory, our Lord will continue to bless the parish as it continues to honor its past, celebrate the present, and stride hopefully into the future. ■

*Matthew Thomas is a lifetime parishioner of Our Lady of Purgatory Church*

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# Lent

The Maronite Bishops' Annual Appeal takes place during Lent each year. You may make a donation in your parish on any Sunday during Lent in a special envelope marked "Annual Appeal." Or mail a gift or make a donation online:

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**Eparchy of Our Lady of Lebanon of Los Angeles**  
19300 Rinaldi Street  
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Porter Ranch, CA 91327  
[www.eparchy.org](http://www.eparchy.org)





## Spiritual Life Center Dedicated to Saint Sharbel Opens in Pittsburgh

Worship, education, ministry, training, and scripture studies to be offered

The Saint Sharbel Spiritual Life Center, dedicated to the Lebanese-born Maronite Catholic saint, whose prayerful intercession is credited for thousands of spiritual and physical healings, has been opened in Pittsburgh's Beechview neighborhood.

The mission of the Center is to assist each person to grow in holiness according to the teachings of Christ and the example of the great mystics of the Church and to cultivate a deeper devotion to Christ in the Holy Eucharist through the example of Saint Sharbel. Visitors will be able to do so through daily participation in the Sacraments, as well as Scripture studies, spiritual direction, classes in spirituality (East and West), personal prayer, reflection, and more.

The Center is located in the former Epiphany Center, 820 Crane Ave. It was acquired by and operated under the Eparchy of Saint Maron of Brooklyn, the episcopal See (headquarters) of the Maronite Catholic Church in the eastern United States. While there are churches and shrines named in honor of Saint Sharbel, this is the only spiritual life center opened with the intent to offer programming to help people grow deeper in spirituality.

"We are so very blessed to have this opportunity to share with our sisters and brothers the spiritual treasures that have been given to us," said the Most Reverend Gregory J. Mansour, S.T.L., bishop of the Eparchy of Saint Maron of Brooklyn. "Saint Sharbel is well known to Maronites and many other Catholics around the world, but now his spiritual disciplines and his deep prayer life, we will have the opportunity to know better. We will focus on married couples, single people, young adults, catechists, those discerning vocations, and on any person of goodwill who wants to grow in the spiritual life."

Dr. Anne Borik serves as the Center director. Dr Borik is a Catholic medical physician and is board-certified in Internal Medicine. She is the founder of the worldwide prayer group called the Saint Sharbel Global Prayer Net hosted on the Mighty Networks App.

"The personal testimony of God's miraculous power through Saint Sharbel's intercession has reached deep into my heart and soul," Dr. Borik said. "I was called to this opportunity, and I could not refuse it. I am deeply honored and blessed."





### ⊕ Center schedule

- **The Center welcomes visitors from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday.** It is staffed during those hours by Subdeacon Vincent Michael.
- **Divine Liturgy is celebrated at 11 a.m. Monday through Friday.** As a sign of unity within the Catholic Church, the Liturgies are celebrated by a rotation of priests from the Maronite, Byzantine, and Latin Catholic Traditions. The schedule is available at <https://saintsharbelcenter.org/mass-calendar>. Adoration and Confessions will also be available daily.
- **A special day of prayer and reflection will be held on the 22nd of each month** unless otherwise specified. On this day, Liturgy will be offered for the special intentions of all those who attend, with prayers lifted to the Lord, through the intercession of Saint Sharbel. Confession, time for quiet reflection, Eucharistic adoration, and veneration of the relic of Saint Sharbel will also be available all day.
- **One-day retreats can also take place on Saturdays or in the evening,** led by a faculty of presenters. (A schedule will be published soon.) Pastors can contact the Center to arrange a pilgrimage or a day of recollection for their parishioners.

### ⊕ About Saint Sharbel

Saint Sharbel Makhlof was a Maronite Catholic priest, monk, and hermit who lived from 1828 to 1898. During his life, he was revered as a humble and saintly priest, who prayed for blessings and miracles from God for those who sought his intercession.

Following his death, people reported seeing light around his tomb. When the tomb was opened, Saint Sharbel's body was found incorrupt and

exuding sweat and blood. Soon after his death, pilgrims started flocking to his tomb to pray for his intercession. God granted many physical and spiritual healings. Saint Sharbel's clothing was changed several times due to the continued exuding of sweat and blood.

Pope Pius XII, in 1954, approved the decree recognizing the heroic virtues of the future saint. Pope Saint Paul VI presided over the beatification ceremony of Sharbel at the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council in December 1965, and Sharbel was appointed as Saint by Pope Saint Paul VI in 1977.

### ⊕ About the Maronite Catholic Church

The Maronite Catholic Church is one of 24 Catholic Churches in a communion of Churches with Pope Francis as the visible head. Each Catholic Church shares the same essence of Catholic faith but has a different expression of that faith. Each Church belongs to one of six major liturgical traditions, the Maronite Church follows the Antiochene Tradition.

The Maronite Church dates back to the early Christians of Antioch in ancient Syria (now Turkey) where "they were called Christians for the first time" (Acts 11:26). Maronites incorporate Syriac, a dialect of the Aramaic that Jesus Himself spoke, in their liturgies and take their name from the hermit-priest, Saint Maron, who died in 410 AD.

Today, the Maronite Church is led by Patriarch Bechara Peter Cardinal Rai in Lebanon. The United States is home to two Maronite eparchies (dioceses) with over 90 parishes and missions, along with a seminary, two monasteries, three convents, a Shrine to Our Lady of Lebanon, and now the Saint Sharbel Spiritual Life Center.

### ⊕ About the facility

The Saint Sharbel Spiritual Center is less than three miles south of Downtown Pittsburgh. It is adjacent to Our Lady of Victory Maronite Catholic Church, and there are two hotels close to the Center for overnight accommodations.

The 10,300-square-foot building on more than three acres was designed by the late Father Adrian van Kaam and Dr. Susan Muto as a center for spiritual formation.

The facility contains a chapel, a library with more than 10,000 books on spirituality, classrooms, places for quiet reflection and prayer, offices, and kitchens.

### ⊕ To donate

Saint Sharbel Spiritual Life Center is a 501(c)(3) organization. All donations are tax-deductible. Donations can be made online at <https://saintsharbelcenter.org/donate> or by mailing a check made out to Saint Sharbel Spiritual Life Center and sent to 820 Crane Ave, Pittsburgh, PA 15216.

Contributors become affiliate members, which entitles them to the monthly newsletter, online talks and courses, invitations to upcoming events, and much more.

### ⊕ For more information:

DR. ANNE BORIK  
Director, Saint Sharbel Spiritual Center  
(480) 628-3929 or (800) 473-7559  
[aborik@saintsharbelcenter.org](mailto:aborik@saintsharbelcenter.org)

or SUBDEACON VINCENT MICHAEL  
Assistant Director, Saint Sharbel Spiritual Center  
[vmichael@saintsharbelcenter.org](mailto:vmichael@saintsharbelcenter.org)

# Parish News

AKRON, OHIO

## Harmony of Angels: Our Lady of the Cedars' Inaugural Christmas Children's Recital

In the hallowed halls of Our Lady of the Cedars, the air is imbued with the spirit of Christmas. This year marked a momentous occasion as our parish hosted its first-ever Christmas Children's Recital—a heartwarming celebration that brought together the young voices of our community in a harmonious symphony of joy and festive cheer. The Children's Youth Choir, adorned in distinctive red uniforms, graced the stage with angelic voices that resonated with the innocence and purity of the season. As Saint Augustine wisely noted, "Singing is twice praying," and these young voices transformed the sanctuary into a sacred space of communal prayer.

From the timeless notes of "O Holy Night" to the jubilant strains of "Joy to the World," the recital unfolded as a tapestry of tradition and new beginnings. The Children's Choir, under the guidance of our dedicated musicians, not only



showcased their vocal talents but also embodied the essence of Christmas—the celebration of the Incarnation, where the divine takes on the form of the humble.

The sea of red on the stage symbolized more than just a uniform; it represented the warmth and love that binds our community. The recital

became a moment of unity, where families and friends gathered to witness the transformative power of music and the enduring spirit of Christmas. As we reflect on this joyous occasion, may the echoes of the Children's Recital linger in our hearts, a reminder that in the harmony of angels, we find the true essence of Christmas. ■

PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

## Lebanese Festival

The Lebanese Festival, hosted by Our Lady of Victory Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was held on 8-10 September 2023. Over 10,000 people attended and enjoyed the three-day Middle Eastern event which has become one of the most popular food and cultural festivities in Western Pennsylvania. A variety of delicious traditional Lebanese foods and desserts included: kofta, baked and raw kibbee, lamb, gyros, falafel on pita, saj, zaatar breads, baklava, *znood el sit*, and *tamriye*. There was live entertainment and dancing continued during all three nights. More than 100 volunteer parishioners and friends worked cooperatively to make this event a huge success. ■





LEWISVILLE, TEXAS

## The Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe

Our Lady of Lebanon Church has been serving our Catholic community in Lewisville for over 30 years. The Ordination of Father George Elandary, who was ordained here last May by Bishop Elias Zaidan, gave us more than the great gift of an honorable man serving God through Holy Orders but also a multilingual priest, who speaks not only Arabic and English but also Spanish!

Bishop Elias quickly gave our Catholic Maronite Church permission to offer a Spanish Liturgy and finally open its doors to our surrounding Hispanic neighbors. Liturgy books were then ordered from the Maronite Eparchy in Mexico, and we inaugurated our first Spanish Liturgy at 1:00 p.m. on Sunday, 22 October 2023. The Liturgy was advertised with help of the Legion of Mary and thanks to their efforts, 700 Hispanic believers attended that first Spanish Liturgy.

Our Lady of Lebanon then created a permanent Spanish Liturgy on every Sunday at 1:00 p.m. Many in the Hispanic community began to register with us and became parishioners. They like to arrive at 12:30 p.m., after 11:00 a.m. Liturgy, to pray the Rosary and they bring many believers along with them. We now also offer confession in Spanish on Saturdays from 3:00-5:00 p.m., thanks again to Father Elandary.

On the recent Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, our parish allowed the Hispanic culture to mingle and become part of the Lebanese culture. On this day, the Church opened at 5:00 a.m. for the Mariachi to sing Las Mañanitas (Happy Birthday Song) to St. Mary and more than 400 Hispanic parishioners were present. Our Legion of Mary prepared a very large and delicious breakfast for all visitors and prepared them for the Spanish Liturgy at 6:00 a.m. and a procession of the statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe. A band came to perform for Our Lady of Guadalupe and The Legion of Mary served a delicious Mexican cuisine for all of our visitors. This was such a beautiful event as we all came together to celebrate the feast. We are very thankful to Bishop Abdallah E. Zaidan for allowing us to open our Church to the Hispanic community and to all Catholics out there. ■



UTICA, NEW YORK

## Christmas Concert



On Saturday, 16 December, St. Louis Gonzaga Church in Utica, NY showed off its varied musical talents in a concert celebrating the Christmas season. Featured singers—traveling from far and near—offered solos and duets in both English and Arabic. Parishioners were treated to musical selections of years gone by as well as familiar contemporary Christmas carols. Dr. Joseph Obeid, the church cantor, was featured while he sang and played the organ for two traditional Maronite Christmas hymns.

Abouna Boutros El Hachem, along with Nick Abounader, the parish pianist and choir director, organized the concert and gave the parish an afternoon they will no doubt remember for years to come.

Everyone joined in singing the final selection: a rousing chorus of Happy Birthday to Abouna Boutros El Hachem, who celebrated his birthday that day.

The Divine Liturgy was celebrated immediately after and followed by a parish Christmas party in the George Sfeir Parish Hall. ■

# Parish News

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

## Winter Activities

On 5 November 2023, the children of St. Maron Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, were blessed and dedicated to God and the Blessed Virgin Mary symbolizes their commitment to spiritual guidance and care. Also, during November, working with St. Cyprian Roman Catholic Church, the MYO held their annual Thanksgiving Food Drive for the needy. Parishioners generously donated turkeys and nonperishable food items necessary to prepare Thanksgiving meals. The donations were delivered to St. Cyprian's Food Pantry and distributed to families in need. The CCD hosted their annual Holiday Bake Sale. All proceeds were donated to the Barbara Nassar Association providing support for cancer patients in Lebanon. They also prepared over 100 frozen meals for the Caring for Friends Organization in South Philadelphia who help feed the hungry.

In December, working with St. Cyprian's Church and nearby Liguori Academy, the MYO organized their annual Christmas Giving Tree to help make someone's Christmas Holiday extra special. Families selected name tags from the Christmas tree and purchased gifts for the children listed.

The designated families were extremely grateful for the generosity of the parishioners. Throughout the Christmas Novena, the congregation joined in daily prayer offering heartfelt intentions for the well-being of foster care children, safety of parishioners, and a plea for world peace. They shared various foods at their Christmas Potluck, and held a Christmas Hot Chocolate fundraiser to defray costs for MYO retreats. The Parish Council



organized a Christmas party for the children with treats and an exciting visit from Santa.

On 22 December, following Novena, the CCD, MYO, and parishioners sang Christmas carols in both English and Arabic as they journeyed from house to house extending warm wishes and Christmas Spirit to the elderly and community members. ■

FALL RIVER, MASSACHUSETTS

## St. Joseph Men's Society

On 17 December 2023, Monsignor James Root and Fr. Christian Hbaiter concelebrated a very special Liturgy, the Sunday of the Revelation to Joseph, at St. Anthony of the Desert Church in Fall River, Massachusetts. During the summer months, Fr. Christian began gathering men of the parish to establish a men's ministry that would complement the successful women's ministry, the Blessed Mother Guild, who have served the church for decades. For several months, the men prepared spiritually for their installation by completing a 33-Day Consecration to St. Joseph. At the conclusion of the Sunday Liturgy, 25 men approached the sanctuary, recited their consecration prayer, and were formally consecrated and installed as members of the newly formed St. Joseph Men's Society. They were each presented with a gold medallion engraved with the name of the society and an icon of St. Joseph. The Society encourages and supports spiritual and social growth in the parish community. ■





HOUSTON, TEXAS

## A Spiritual Christmas Season with Choirs of Angels

The Christmas season at Our Lady of the Cedars in Houston, Texas, was replete with tradition, heritage, and festive gatherings of church organizations, including the very popular cookies and hot chocolate with Santa event. In addition to enjoying the jolly spirit of the season, our parishioners had multiple opportunities throughout December for spiritual discernment and preparation for the most glorious birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

On 9 December, multitudes of parishioners cheered the wonderful adult choir members and supporting musicians from our parish as they sang a repertoire of traditional songs, hymns and carols in Arabic, English and French, reflecting the cultural diversity of our community. Joseph Rouhana directed the angelic choir voices in an unforgettable evening of Christmas tradition.



On 15 December, our parishioners gathered for a half-day retreat to reflect on the depths of Our Blessed Mother's Magnificat, followed by Eucharistic Adoration. Father Edward Hanna offered reflections on various passages of the Magnificat, emphasizing Mary as our role model for humility and total surrender to God's will.

Finally, a Christmas Novena centered around God as our sign, hope, promise, and savior helped us all open our hearts to welcome the Word Incarnate on Christmas Day. It was a season to remember! ■

SOMERSET, NEW JERSEY

## MCF for Toddlers

The parishioners of Saint Sharbel Church in Somerset, New Jersey, launched a new MCF Program for toddlers and young children. Parents expressed an interest in teaching their young ones about St. Sharbel Church and its Maronite traditions. Michelle Mansour, (organizer, teacher, and parish mom) volunteered to create this new MCF program with the help of four other mothers. The first class was held on 2 December 2023 in the church hall. The program topic was



"The Real Meaning of Christmas," and eleven children participated. They enjoyed several activities including: circle reading time, arts and crafts, Christmas music, and snack time. Throughout the year, the group is looking forward to enrolling more children and involving them in activities that will enrich their lives and teach them about the Maronite Church. The classes will be held once monthly for mothers and children to attend. ■

# Parish News

UNIONTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA

## Fall & Winter Activities

On 19 November 2023, volunteers from Saint George Church in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, prepared and served over 200 *Thanksgiving dinners* to the needy in the community. Any parishioner or community member who simply wished to share a meal with family and friends were also invited to attend. As always, throughout the year, dedicated parishioners continued sponsoring Food Drives/Programs for those in need.

The *Saint George Ladies Guild and Altar & Rosary Society* held their annual *Christmas celebration* on 3 December in the parish hall. This was an opportunity for the women to relax and appreciate the camaraderie among family and friends. They enjoyed a delicious meal, played games, exchanged gifts, and won prizes. A prayer was recited in memory of the deceased members who faithfully served God and the parish for decades.

The children of the Maronite Christian Formation (MCF) program attended their annual *Christmas Breakfast/Christmas Party* sponsored by the *Ladies Guild* on 17 December. Santa Claus made an exciting visit, and an abundance of gifts and treats were distributed to the youth. Also, the MYO helped with numerous parish projects/events including: Trunk or Treat, Thanksgiving Dinner and Food Drive for the needy, church Christmas decorating, and the MCF Christmas Party. Socially, the MYO cooked Lebanese foods and went bowling together.



During December, several Fayette County churches, local businesses, chain stores, organizations, individuals, and fire station volunteers generously donated to the "Toys for Tots" Christmas Drive for the less fortunate children in the community. Saint George parishioners worked closely with the Uniontown Fire Department collecting, organizing and transporting all toys and donations to the Fayette County "Toys for Tots" site. This year, over 2,159 gifts and donations were distributed to registered Fayette County families. ■

OLEAN, NEW YORK

## International Christmas Fair

Saint Joseph Church in Olean, New York, has been the location for holiday activities and events. The parishioners celebrated their 2023 December *International Christmas Fair*. Father Claude Franklin displayed his beautiful Fontanini Nativity Village stretching across ten-eight foot tables in the foyer of the church hall for all to admire. Fun fundraisers were held to defray parish expenses including an auction of wonderful gifts donated to the parish by local community businesses. Some of these gifts included: two resort skiing passes, overnight hotel stay for two, gift cards, museum tickets, pizza oven, college refrigerator, and a hunting trip, etc. Children and adults participated in a bake sale and gingerbread house decorating contest. The winners, recognized for best decorating and creativity, were awarded loads of Christmas candy. Also, as part of the International Christmas Fair, parishioners discussed various Christmas traditions from around the world. They shared Christmas customs, cultural foods and pastries,



and presented different types of Santas from different countries. The children were excited to join together in a Christmas Scavenger Hunt with Christmas items from A - Z hidden in the displays such as: the German pickle. Future fundraisers are being planned, namely: the Cadillac Dinner, Lebanese Festival, Lebanese Hafli, and the spare change challenge in which volunteer parishioners match the amount of spare change collected for the parish. ■



YOUNGSTOWN, OHIO

## 50 years on 1555 Meridian Road!

On Saint Maron's Day in 1974, the community of Saint Maron Church in Youngstown, Ohio, dedicated its new Church, Banquet Center, Rectory, and Hall after many years of preparation, saving, and working together to help a dream become a reality. On Saturday, 10 February 2024, Saint Maron Church will celebrate 50 years at 1555! What started as a dream for Monsignor Peter Eid in purchasing 23 beautifully wooded acres on the west side of Youngstown came to fruition under the leadership of Monsignor Wadiah Tayah and the parish building committee. This has been the home of Saint Maron Church for the longest amount of time for a community that began as a mission in 1902 and became a parish in 1911.

In the last 50 years, Saint Maron Church located at 1555 Meridian Road has welcomed numerous bishops, religious, and civic dignitaries along with faithful from all over the area and beyond. The parish has hosted numerous ordinations, NAM conventions, and hosted MYO and MYA events while being active and vibrant with parish activities. During the pastorate of Chorbishop Dominic Ashkar, the Saint Ephrem Center was added along with the Monsignor Peter Eid Recreational Area, and since that time, the priests who served the parish have been Fr. James Khoury, Fr. Anthony Salim, Fr. Gary George, Chorbishop Michael Kail, and is

presently served by Fr. Tony Massad.

The community of Saint Maron, above all, thanks God for His blessings that have sustained our church and allowed our community to thrive over the last

50 years. We are blessed with the talented, generous, and faithful members of this parish who are dedicated to continuing the legacy of our ancestors in promoting Saint Maron Church to be a place where the Gospel of Jesus Christ is lived and shared. Our prayer is that God will continue to bless us with selfless and eager stewards and faithful who want to promote the Maronite faith and the Gospel of our Lord. It has been 50 wonderful, faith-filled, and blessed years. . . may God bless us with another 50 years of worship and service to Him and His people! ■



## FALL RIVER, MASSACHUSETTS MYO Activities

The MYO group of St. Anthony of the Desert Church in Fall River, Massachusetts, is planning many activities for the 2024 year. Following their beautiful Christmas event to the National Shrine of Our Lady of LaSalette in Attleboro, Massachusetts, they joined the MYO groups from Our Lady of the Cedars in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, and St. George in Cranston, Rhode Island, to commemorate Pro-Life Awareness month with a visit to the Abundant Hope Pregnancy Resource Center in Attleboro, MA. This center provides education, materials, and medical resources for



expectant women and their families. The MYO groups brought donations of clothing and diapers to the center, took a tour of the facility, and attended a presentation on the dignity and sanctity of life. They also participated in a service project helping to organize donations and prepare supply packages

for mothers visiting the care center. Afterwards, the MYO attended liturgy at St. Anthony of the Desert and began new plans for future activities including: Lenten Service Projects, Regional Lenten Retreat Day, amusement park trip, and Mother's Day flowers. ■



# Parish News

CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA

## Bishop Gregory Mansour's Pastoral Visit

Saint Stephen Mission in Charlotte, North Carolina, welcomed Bishop Gregory Mansour on his 16-17 December 2023, pastoral visit. On Saturday afternoon, Bishop Gregory visited Bou-ghazale, an elderly homebound parishioner, and brought him Holy Communion. Bishop Gregory also met with the parish council to discuss extended plans for their Maronite Mission. Bishop Gregory and Father Rodolph Wakim concelebrated the Saturday evening Liturgy. In his homily, Bishop Gregory complimented the parishioners and clergy for their hard work and dedication to the Mission. This was followed by the children's Christmas party and parish dinner. During dinner, Bishop Gregory acknowledged the growth, involvement, and commitment of the parishioners

working on various projects and events (Lebanese festivals, gala, parish receptions, etc.) to raise funds for their own future Maronite Church. Bishop Gregory was very pleased to be presented with a beautifully wood carved icon of the Blessed Mother made by parishioner Ghazi Savaya. On Sunday, the choir sang as Bishop Gregory and Father Rodolph concelebrated the Liturgy. Parishioners witnessed the baptism of a young adult man, Troy Evans, by Father Rodolph, and him receiving his First Holy Communion by Bishop Gregory. Following the Liturgy, a reception was held in the church hall. Father Rodolph commented, "Bishop Gregory's visit lifted the spirits of our parishioners and the love for their church. Everyone feels his calm and compassion." ■



JAMAICA PLAIN,  
MASSACHUSETTS

## Christmas Festivities

On 17 December 2023, to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the Nativity Scene, the children of Our Lady of the Cedars Church in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, presented a Nativity Play following the 11:00 a.m. Qurbano. Thirty-seven participants played a role in telling the story of the Nativity. They displayed their individual talents including: narrating, acting, and singing Maronite Christmas hymns in English, Arabic, and Latin. They played the piano, violins, guitar, flutes, oud, and percussion on chimes, drums, and xylophone. Through this joint experience, the parishioners felt an emotional, social, and



spiritual growth as they visited the birth of Jesus. Deacon Joseph Dickan described the geographical locations of ten biblical towns on the Nativity Trail from Nazareth to Bethlehem and the story of the Holy Family. The adult choir performed a Christmas Recital in Syriac, Arabic, French and English. The MYO Group performed the traditional dabke dance sponsored and led by the (WLCU) World Lebanese

Cultural Union. They invited everyone to join, especially Mr. & Mrs. Santa Claus who surprised the children with Christmas gifts. The clergy sends many thanks to the religious education catechists, volunteers, and to Our Lady of the Cedars who continues to guide and protect them. ■

NEW BEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS

## Christmas Pageant

For the past twenty years, the children of Our Lady of Purgatory Parish have led their fellow parishioners into the Christmas Season by presenting the annual Christmas Pageant. This year's pageant was even more special as it took place during the weekend long celebration of the dedication of the new church. Bishop Gregory Mansour joined the parishioners at the pageant, adding to the festivities.

The Pageant began with the telling of the story of the first Christmas based on the Gospel of St. Luke. As the children were changing out of their costumes, the parishioners participated in an old-fashioned Christmas Sing-a-Long. The children then returned and presented a Concert of Christmas Carols in English and Arabic. A highlight of the concert was when the alumni of the past twenty



years of OLOP Christmas Pageants joined the children to sing "Do You Hear What I Hear?"

Following the pageant, everyone was invited to a reception prepared by the parents of the children at the Parish Center. During the reception, Santa Claus

made a visit and took pictures with the children and their families.

The Children of Our Lady of Purgatory Church would like to wish you and yours a very Happy and Holy Christmas and a Healthy New Year. ■



## Encountering our Eucharistic Lord through Spiritual Direction

by Sr. Therese Maria, MSCL

When one is open to another person who can give spiritual guidance so much can change for the good. This has been my personal experience. I started to receive spiritual direction nearly 20 years ago as a young adult seeking to better understand and follow God's will for my life. It has been one of the biggest blessings for me as I have sought to grow in my friendship with God. To name a few benefits: it has helped me to be more objective and grateful, and to see and love others in and through our Lord Jesus. Moreover, it's been a privilege for me as a religious sister after having received such valuable help to now be able to return the favor, and offer spiritual direction as part of our ministry.

Spiritual direction involves both a director and a directee. It's a sacred relationship that requires mutual respect and trust. Praying for and seeking out a good and prayerful spiritual director and guide is vital. The primary goal of the spiritual

director is to assist the directee (all the while honoring their free will) to develop a deeper relationship with God in prayer. The role of the director is to affirm the directee's ability to hear and follow the voice of the Lord. In these sessions, the director and directee journey together as they both listen with the ears of their hearts, paying attention to God's movements.

For spiritual direction to be fruitful, the directee is encouraged to be consistent in daily prayer and spend time encountering our merciful Lord in His Word and in the Eucharist. The more open, attuned, and honest the directee is about feelings, struggles and desires the more they will receive practical wisdom from our Lord in prayer and spiritual direction. In a contemplative and evocative approach, the director reverently listens to the experiences (e.g. consolations, desolations, areas of resistance) of the directee, reflects back and creates a contemplative atmosphere to evoke more from the directee on how the Lord might be working. The directee's willingness and commitment to grow in virtue, docility and vulnerability is a key part of their overall growth in healing and freedom in this process.

Spiritual direction is so very important, especially if one is seeking to grow in their relationship with Christ. Our Eucharistic Lord is waiting for us, to come to him with our needs, joys, desires, griefs and wounds, and the ultimate director is the Holy Spirit. ■

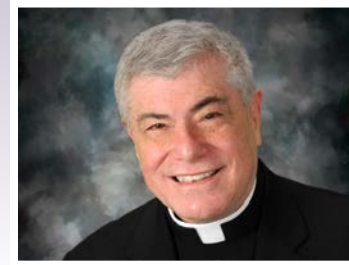




# From the Editor

## The Blessings of a Mother

by Archbishop John D. Faris



It was a warm day in Boston. The mother was seated in an outdoor auditorium waiting for the commencement ceremony of Harvard Medical School to begin. After years of hard work and sacrifice, her daughter was receiving a medical degree. Tears were streaming down the mother's face. It was truly an accomplishment against all odds. She could not believe that her daughter had done such a thing. When the mother was finally able to be close to the graduate, she traced a cross on her forehead. Then she gave her a hug and lots of kisses.

It was a hot, sticky day in Queens. The same mother was on a bus on Ryker's Island. Several nights ago, her other daughter had called from jail to tell her that she had been arrested for selling drugs. The bus would take her to the visitors' center where she would go through the last two security clearances. Seated in a plastic chair, she would wait a long time for her daughter to appear. Tears were streaming down her face—she could not believe that her daughter had done such a thing! When she was finally able to see her daughter, she traced a cross on her forehead. Then she gave her a hug and lots of kisses.

Did the drug-dealer deserve the blessing? Probably not. But, remember, we are dealing with a mother. Mothers don't ration their blessings and affection for their children. They hug, kiss and bless all their children—this is what mothers do!

Anyone who tries to stop them should beware.

Few of us graduate from Harvard or sell illegal drugs—these are extremes of behavior. Most of us are trying to do our best, with an occasional bump in the road. All of us seek the loving embrace of our mothers and the guidance and protection of God.

In December, the Vatican issued a declaration *On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings* (in Latin *Fiducia supplicans*). Theologians prepared this document after extensive study and consultation and submitted it to Pope Francis for approval. The message is a rather simple one: **The Church is a loving mother who will not withhold her love, affection, and blessings for her sons and daughters.**

Blessings are primarily aimed at giving glory to God for his gifts, asking for his favors, and restraining the power of evil in the world (*Fiducia* n. 10). The Church bestows blessings on people, objects of worship and devotion, sacred images; places of life, of work, and suffering; the fruits of the earth and human toil and all created realities that refer back to the Creator, praising and blessing him by their beauty. Blessings “lead us to grasp God's presence in all the events of life and remind us that ... human beings are invited to seek God, to love him, and to serve him faithfully” (*Fiducia* n. 8). In the Eastern Churches, liturgical blessings are reserved to priests.

The Declaration grapples with the much-debated issue of blessings for persons who are in irregular or same-sex unions. The Declaration does not change our Catholic understanding of a Christian marriage. Rather, the Declaration makes clear that marriage is an “exclusive, stable and indissoluble union between a man and a woman, naturally open to the generation of children.” The Church does not recognize same-sex unions as marriage. The Church's doctrine on this point remains firm.

Nevertheless, the Declaration admits the possibility of blessing persons in such unions who request it. This is not blessing the union nor approval of the relationship. (The mother blessed her daughter who had sold drugs.) The Declaration emphasizes that the “Church does not have the power to impart blessings on unions of persons of the same sex.” Moreover, the Declaration prohibits the creation of rites for the blessing of same-sex unions to avoid confusion with marriage as taught by the Church.

The Declaration is essentially a maternal response to a request for loving concern, affection, and a blessing. The Church, as our mother, embraces us and blesses us. None of us deserves God's blessings, but we all need them. ■

John D. Faris

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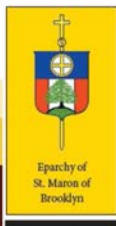
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