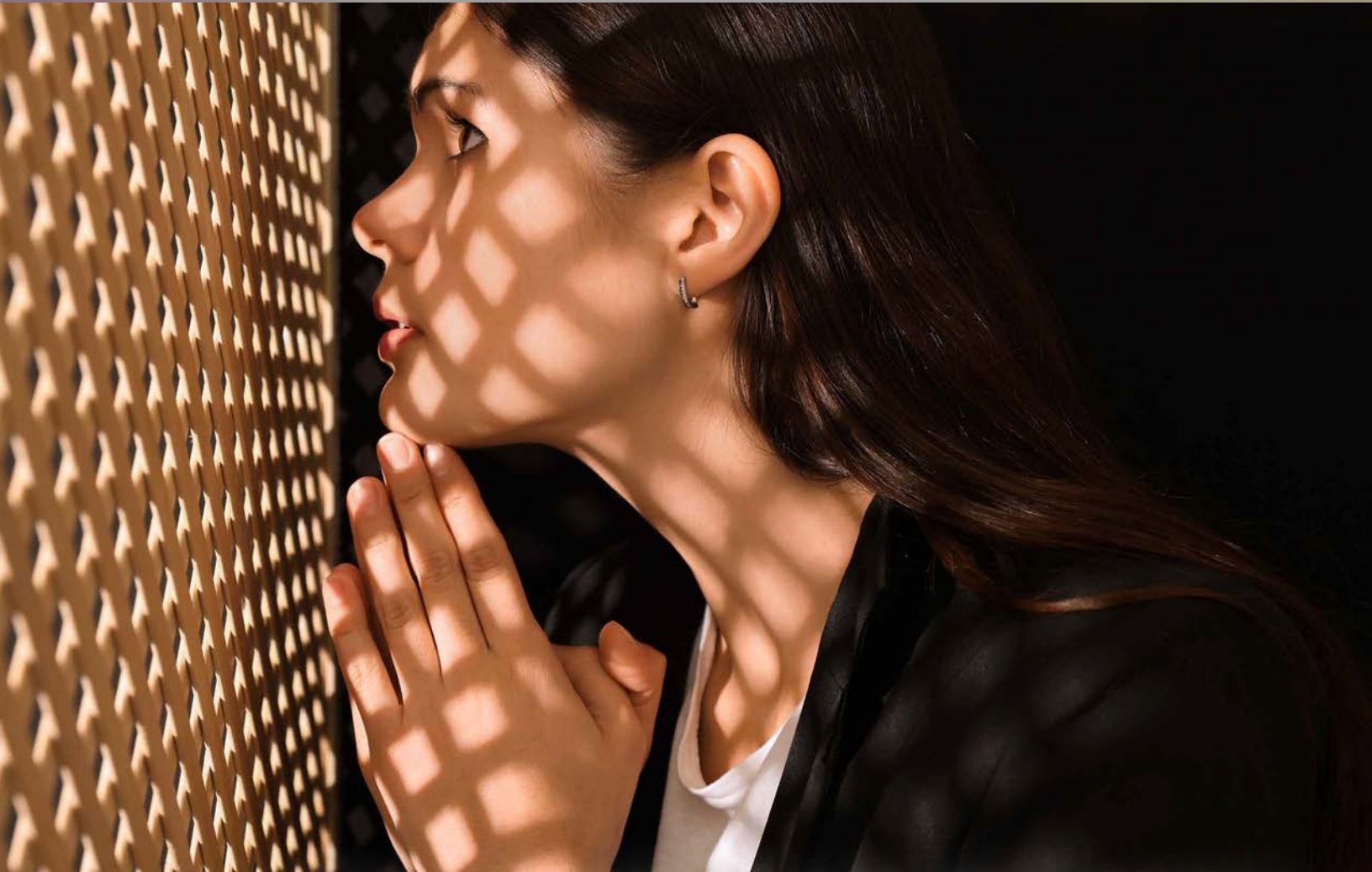


Volume 21 | Issue 2 | March/April 2024

# *the* Maronite **Voice**



*Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.*



# the Maronite Voice

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## Forgiveness *by Bishop Gregory J. Mansour*

*W*hat does it take to forgive and be forgiven?

Usually it takes great courage to seek forgiveness. We must first admit our faults, and then ask for forgiveness. This is never easy.

Moreover, it also takes great courage to forgive. It is much easier to secretly nurse a grudge, seek revenge, or want to see the offender come to realize the harm done, rather than to actually forgive.

It has been said “to err is human, to forgive is divine”; how very true. Most of the time, we don’t want to say we’re sorry or don’t want to admit we need forgiveness. It takes much divine assistance to help us!

But God is “rich in mercy.” He has forgiven us, and gave us the command to forgive one another. He told us, in fact, to pray “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

There is not much room for doubt that this is a command, and God would not have commanded if it were impossible. But even though it may seem impossible, “all things are possible with God.”

Holy Saturday in our Maronite tradition has always been a day reserved for forgiveness. In our “rite of forgiveness,” on this day we seek peace with those whom we have offended as well those who have offended us.



This is why the first ritual we celebrate on Easter Sunday is called the “rite of peace.” For we have been granted his peace, as he has reconciled us to God by his death and resurrection; and therefore we seek reconciliation with others as well.

What does it take to forgive and seek forgiveness: much courage and much divine assistance!

O Lord, “Ocean of mercy and forgiveness,” grant us the courage to do this divine work, to forgive others and to seek forgiveness from you and from others, and thus we will truly receive “that peace which is beyond all comprehension” and that “only you can give.” Amen. ■

## Schedule BISHOP GREGORY J. MANSOUR

- 4 APRIL** Virtual | Oriental Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue
- 9-11 APRIL** Washington, DC | Our Lady of Lebanon Seminary | Enrichment Days
- 12-13 APRIL** Pittsburgh, PA | St. Sharbel Spiritual Life Center | Dedication
- 14 APRIL** Uniontown, PA | St. George Church | Pastoral Visit
- 21 APRIL** Brooklyn, NY | Our Lady of Lebanon Cathedral
- 28 APRIL** Philadelphia, PA | St. Maron Church | Pastoral Visit
- 29 APRIL-7 MAY** Morristown, NJ | Silent Retreat
- 11 MAY** Brooklyn, NY | Our Lady of Lebanon Cathedral | Diaconal Ordination of Subdeacon Adonis El Asmar
- 12 MAY** Watervliet, NY | St. Ann Church | Pastoral Visit
- 18 MAY** Pleasantville, NJ | Our Lady Star of the East Church | Diaconal Ordination of Subdeacon Fahed Nammour
- 19 MAY** Brooklyn, NY | Our Lady of Lebanon Cathedral | Pentecost
- 26 MAY** Brooklyn, NY | Our Lady of Lebanon Cathedral
- 29 MAY-18 JUNE** Bkerke, Lebanon | Annual Maronite Synod of Bishops Meeting



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

### **PASSING OF MSGR. ASSAD AWAD**

Bishop Gregory John Mansour announced the passing of Monsignor Assad Awad on 24 February 2024 in Lebanon.

Monsignor Awad was born 25 April 1932, in Mar Mema, Lebanon. He served as a pastor of St. Ann Church in Scranton, Pennsylvania, from 1969 until 1972, as pastor of St. Elias Church in Roanoke from 1972 until 1997, and in the year 2000, was appointed pastor of Our Lady of Mercy Church in Worcester, Massachusetts.

At the canonical age of 75, Monsignor Assad retired on 1 June 2009, and spent his final years in Lebanon. During his January

visit, Bishop Gregory anointed Msgr. Assad with some of his family present.

Monsignor Assad was preceded in death by his parents, and being from a large and loving family, has many brothers and sisters. His funeral was in Mar Mema, his village, with Bishop Mounir Khairallah, who presided. Our condolences go out to his brothers and sisters and their families.

Please keep Monsignor and his family in your prayers. May he rest in peace.

## Schedule BISHOP A. ELIAS ZAIDAN

- 6-7 APRIL** Denver CO | St. Rafka Church | Pastoral Visit
- 10-11 APRIL** Washington, DC | Our Lady of Lebanon Seminary | Enrichment Days
- 13 APRIL** Indianapolis, IN | Our Lady of Cana Community | Pastoral Visit
- 14 APRIL** Cincinnati, OH | St. Anthony of Padua Church | Pastoral Visit
- 19-21 APRIL** Livonia, MI | St. Rafka Church | Pastoral Visit
- 27-28 APRIL** West Covina, CA | St. Jude Church | Pastoral Visit and Ordination to the Diaconate of Subdeacon George Haddad
- 4 MAY** Las Vegas, NV | St. Sharbel Church | Pastoral Visit
- 5 MAY** Los Angeles, CA | Our Lady of Mt. Lebanon Cathedral | Pastoral Visit
- 7 MAY** Virtual Meeting | USCCB Committee on International Justice and Peace
- 8 MAY** Virtual Meeting | USCCB Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development
- 11-12 MAY** Lombard, IL | Our Lady of Lebanon Church | Pastoral Visit
- 18-19 MAY** Millbrae, CA | Our Lady of Lebanon Church | Pastoral Visit
- 24-25 MAY** Detroit, MI | St. Maron Church | Pastoral Visit and Ordination to the Diaconate of Subdeacon Elias Hazkial
- 31 MAY-1 JUNE** Austin, TX | Our Lady's Church | Pastoral Visit and Ordination to the Priesthood of Deacon Alejandro Landin
- 2 JUNE** Houston, TX | Our Lady of the Cedars Church | Pastoral Visit
- 5-15 JUNE** Bkerke, Lebanon | Annual Maronite Synod of Bishops Meeting



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

### PASSING OF BADIH KHOURY

Mr. Badih Khoury, brother of Father Ghattas Khoury, passed into eternal life on 19 March 2024, in Lebanon. The Funeral Service was held on March 20 in Bekaakafra, Lebanon.

Mr. Khoury is survived by his wife and his children and their families. He is also survived by his siblings, including Father Ghattas.

Bishop A. Elias Zaidan on behalf of the clergy and laity of the Eparchy of Our Lady of Lebanon of Los Angeles extends our condolences to Father Ghattas and the entire Khoury family.

Condolences may be sent to Father Ghattas to:  
St. Sharbel Maronite Catholic Mission  
4981 East Eight Mile Road  
Stockton, CA 95212

# The Mystery of Penance in the Maronite Church

by Rev. Claude W. Franklin, Jr.

The Mystery of Penance is one of the two 'Healing Mysteries,' along with the *Mystery of the Anointing of the Sick*. Penance is considered a 'Healing Mystery' because its goal is to heal the penitent's soul, while the primary goal of the *Mystery of the Anointing of the Sick* is to heal the infirm of their body, though a spiritual healing is also acknowledged. The *Mystery of Penance* is known under various titles: penance, confession, reconciliation, repentance, forgiveness, pardon, absolution, etc. The various titles depend upon the particular focus being expressed and are different aspects of the same Mystery being celebrated.

The Mystery of Penance has a varied history in its development to the current form known today, which would require more space than we have here to recount. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes the mystery as understood in our day:

During the first centuries, the Reconciliation of Christians who had committed particularly grave sins after their Baptism (for example, idolatry, murder, or adultery) was tied to a very rigorous discipline, according to which penitents had to do public penance for their sins, often for years, before receiving Reconciliation. To this 'Order of Penitents' (which concerned only certain grave sins), one was only rarely admitted and in certain regions only once in a lifetime. During the seventh century, Irish missionaries, inspired by the Eastern monastic tradition, took to continental Europe the 'private' practice of penance, which does not require public and prolonged completion of penitential works before reconciliation with the Church. From that time on, the Sacrament has been performed

in secret between penitent and priest. This new practice envisioned the possibility of repetition and so opened the way to a regular frequenting of this Sacrament. It allowed the forgiveness of grave sins and venial sins to be integrated into one Sacramental celebration. In its main lines this is the form of Penance that the Church has practiced down to our day. (n. 1447)

Before the Mystery of Penance developed into what the rite is today, we see its infancy in the Holy Scriptures. There is the mentioning of 'binding and loosing' in both Matthew 16:19, regarding Saint Peter specifically, and in Matthew 18:18 regarding the Twelve Apostles. The language of 'binding and loosing' is not unique to Matthew's Gospel, as similar language is found in Isaiah 22, where Eliakim the son of Hilkiah is given the 'key of the house of David' and he will 'open' and 'shut' the door. The language of 'binding and loosing' at the time of Jesus was Rabbinical juridical terminology for declaring things forbidden or permitted.

We also read in John 20:22-23, Jesus breathes upon the Apostles, saying: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." And in James 5: 14-16, "Let him call for the Elders (*Presbyters*) of the Church...and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed."

St. John Chrysostom, in *The Priesthood*, writes "What Priests do on earth, God ratifies in Heaven. The Master confirms the decision of His servants. Indeed, He has given them nothing less than the full authority of heaven." (III, 5)



The Early Church reflected upon these verses from the Holy Scriptures and gave some treasured advice to the faithful of their times. For example, we read in Chapter 14 of the *Didache* [c. 96] “Confess your sins in Church and do not go to (the Eucharistic) prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of life.” (c. 96) St. Cyprian in his work *The Lapsed*, urges “Let everyone confess his sins while he is still in this world, while his confession can still be heard, while the forgiveness of his sins granted to him by a Priest is still acceptable to God.” (20)

As for the Maronite Church, it never developed its own individual private ‘Rite of Penance.’ Rather, the current official ‘Rite of Penance’ used in the Maronite Church in the United States is an English translation of the ritual found in the *1942 Ritual Book*, a modified version in Syriac of the Latin text found in the Tridentine ritual books, including the ‘Prayer of Absolution.’”

The Maronite Church, like the other Syriac Churches, developed a special penance service celebrated on the *Saturday of the Light*. This service is entitled the ‘Prayer of Forgiveness.’ It has many similarities to the rigorous discipline of the fourth century practice of ‘public penance’ and ‘readmission’ to the community, described above in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Unfortunately, the manuscripts do not indicate whether this ritual was celebrated with the faithful publicly confessing their sins, or as a ritual of preparation for ‘private’ confession, or even as some form of ‘general absolution.’

Of special note, is the Sedro of the Hoosoyo from the ‘Prayer of Forgiveness.’ This Sedro is almost identical to a ‘Prayer of Absolution’ in the Rite of Pardon in the East Syriac tradition (Chaldean/Assyrian Church of the



East). The Syriac word Hoosoyo itself means ‘pardon’ or ‘forgiveness,’ thus it seems appropriate that our Maronite Church should consider utilizing this Sedro as the ‘Prayer of Absolution’ for private confessions, if any reform of the ‘Rite of Penance’ should take place.

While today the normal way to receive forgiveness in the Church is through the formal individual Rite of Penance, the Church has always acknowledged that in cases of non-serious sins (what the Latin tradition calls ‘venial sins’), there can be other acts to achieve pardon from the Lord. Among these acts of penance, the most common are prayer, fasting and almsgiving, which are precisely those called for by the Church during the Great Fast, which is a season of repentance.

Regarding prayer, the *Qurbono* (Divine Liturgy) provides numerous opportunities for the penitent



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## “The Mystery of Penance...”

*Continued from page 9*

to receive God’s forgiveness. As noted above, the Hoosoyo prayer is a source of pardon in the Maronite Church. During the Hoosoyo, the Priest burns incense on behalf of the praying community. This act itself is symbolic of the forgiveness taking place. The incense represents our sins; the burning coal represents God’s mercy; and when our sins are placed upon God’s mercy they are transformed into sweet-smelling and pleasing prayers rising before the Lord.

Throughout the Qurbono and the Maronite Divine Office, there is a constant reminder that we need God’s mercy. In the Anaphora, before receiving Communion, we have a summary Rite of Penance, where after praying the Lord’s Prayer the Priest imposes his right hand over the faithful to pardon them of their non-serious sins, and then declares: “Holy Gifts for the holy.” The “Holy Gifts” are the Eucharist and the “holy” are the faithful; however, we are immediately reminded that we are never worthy on our own merits to stand before Him or receive Him in the Eucharist, when we pray: “Make us worthy, O Lord... May our Communion be for the forgiveness of our sins and for new life...” but it is only by His grace and mercy that we are permitted. And, when we receive the Lord’s Body and Blood, again we are reminded of His forgiving power and our need of pardon, when the Priest says: “The Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ are given to you for the forgiveness of your sins and for eternal life.”

On the Sunday of the Healing of Bartimaeus the Blind, we pray: “Let us not be distracted by the futile things of this world, nor be blinded by its mirages.” This prayer is a reminder for us that in our daily struggles with temptations we are in constant need of God’s mercy, pardon, and healing, so that we may see clearly to follow Jesus on the way to salvation, for it is only through His grace and our acting upon it that we may reach the Harbor of Salvation when our journey in this world ends. ■

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

# 59th Annual NAM Convention

JULY 4-7, 2024 | ST. SHARBEL CHURCH  
DETROIT MARRIOTT RENAISSANCE CENTER



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## 59th NAM Convention Schedule

St. Sharbel Church - Clinton Township, MI  
Detroit Marriott Renaissance Center

July 4-7, 2024



**Maronites on Mission:**  
*Created. Called. Sent Forth.*

### EXCURSIONS



**MARONITE FAMILY REUNION**  
Tour the grounds of St. Sharbel Church and celebrate this unique NAM reunion with great food, dancing, and fun for all! (Thu 6:00 PM)



**SOLANUS CASEY CENTER**  
A special pilgrimage and guided tour of the official home/shrine of Blessed Fr. Solanus Casey in Detroit! (Fri 2-4 PM)



**DIAMOND JACKS BOAT TOUR + LUNCH**  
Dine and cruise with us as we enjoy lunch on the Detroit River with amazing views of the cities of Detroit, Windsor, and Ontario! (Sat 1-4 PM)



**MYO POOL DAY**  
Lay back and relax! Splash and cool down with your MYO friends at the Marriott Courtyard rooftop pool! (Sat 2-4 PM)



**MYA ROLLING PEDAL TOUR**  
Hop aboard and explore the bustling streets and neighborhoods of Detroit as you pedal your way to landmarks and dining hot spots! (Fri 3-5 PM)



### WORKSHOPS



**NAM: PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE**  
Gather to reflect on 60 years of NAM accomplishments and learn about NAM's upcoming missions for the Maronite Church in the US and abroad. (Thu 2-4 PM)



**PETER HERBECK**  
Our distinguished conference speaker and the author of many books and podcast recordings about discipleship, life in the Spirit, and evangelization! (Sat 10:30 AM)



**MYA THEOLOGY ON TAP**  
Have a drink and dive deep into an exciting discussion about our faith with our incredible Bishop Elias Zaidan and Bishop Gregory Mansour! (Sat 1-3 PM)



**MYO RIVERWALK SCAVENGER HUNT**  
Join us for an afternoon of dabke dancing, games, spiritual talks and an exciting scavenger hunt on the Detroit Riverwalk! (Fri 2-4 PM)



**VANESSA GARMO**  
An Evangelist, Christian Coach, and host of the "Epiphany" show on Ave Maria Radio in Ann Arbor. Vanessa joins us to share the power of the Gospel in our mission ahead! (Fri 10 AM)



**IGNITE YOUR CAREER**  
Come and build lasting partnerships with professionals from across the country who seek to live their faith and grow spiritually amidst a successful career. (Sat 2-4 PM)

### ENTERTAINMENT



**DJ FRANCO**  
Enjoy a great mix of Arabic and American hit songs the whole weekend as we dance the nights away! (Thu, Fri, Sat 10 PM - 2 AM)



**EMAD BATAYEH**  
Friday night dinner and hafla featuring Michigan's own premier singer, Emad Batayeh! (6 PM Cocktails | 7 PM Dinner & Dance)



**DANNY ACHKAR**  
Saturday night Grand Banquet Dinner and Hafla featuring Lebanese Superstar, Danny Achkar! (6 PM Cocktails | 7 PM Dinner & Dance)



## Eparchy of Saint Maron Priests Retreat

The priests of the Eparchy of Saint Maron gathered for the annual retreat at Bethany Center in Lutz, FL on 11-15 March 2024. Bishop Felipe Estevez, bishop emeritus of the Diocese of St. Augustine reflected on various themes from the Gospel of Saint John.





## Eparchy of Our Lady of Lebanon Clergy Retreat

The clergy of the Eparchy of Our Lady of Lebanon of Los Angeles gathered for their annual retreat at the Franciscan Renewal Center in Scottsdale, Arizona on 15-19 January 2024. The retreat master was Bishop Gerald Kicanas, the bishop emeritus of the Diocese of Tucson who spoke on the theme of "Renewing Priestly Ministry in a Synodal Church."

## Penance: The Sacrament of Purifying Love *by Rev. Timothy V. Vavarek*

The Sacrament of Penance is frequently called Reconciliation (which stresses our reunion with God) or Confession (which emphasizes we admit our sins). Those names are appropriate, but the heart of the sacrament is actually found in the action of penance itself, the on-going purification by which we enter into a deeper participation in Jesus' life, love, and saving work. That's the beautiful reality of penance that we need to rediscover in life, not just in the sacrament.

The heart of Jesus' message is the call to penance (*metanoia* in Greek) in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Mk 1:15). *Metanoia* means an "after thought" or "change of heart and mind" that turns us in a completely new direction (hence, a "conversion"). But this a continual process, it's not "one and done."

In modern English, the words originally used to express *metanoia* no longer fully convey that new way of life. "Penance" suggests sorrow over sin (as in being "penitent") or a process of making amends (as in "doing penance" or "penitentiary"). "Repentance" focuses on sorrow for sin (being repentant) or rejecting sin (as in "I repented"). "Conversion" narrowly refers to turning from unbelief to belief in the Gospel.

*Metanoia* includes those meanings, but it encompasses far more. It's the ever-deepening

movement of turning from our fallen, selfish ways to union with Christ and participation in His life and saving work. This movement is a divine gift by which we respond to Jesus who calls everyone to Himself. By that calling, we're drawn to baptism, when God comes to dwell within us and so unites us to Himself in Christ. Baptism radically changes us — heart, mind, and body — turning us from sin and death to holiness and new life.

The change, turning, or *metanoia*, arising from baptism is just the beginning. We share Jesus' life and work, and our sins are forgiven, but we don't yet love and serve God and neighbor as Christ does — and that's the goal of our entire existence. *Metanoia* is the process by which we share God's life so that we are progressively purified, perfected in His love.

Jesus describes the Christian life of *metanoia* in Matthew 6, where he calls His disciples to prayer, self-sacrifice (fasting), and works of mercy (almsgiving). These actions are fruits of God's abiding within us: prayer is God's love turning our hearts and minds to Him, self-sacrifice is God's love turning us from our selfish inclinations, and works of mercy is God's love turning us toward our neighbor. By cooperating with God in these "turnings," we share His life, are transformed through daily life, and bring Him and His love to others.



*Metanoia* is the way that in Jesus we completely empty ourselves in loving service to God and neighbor (PHIL 2:5-11). In so doing, our union with God and each other is purified until, by His grace, it's perfected in Heaven. That's what Catholics mean when we say that Christian life is penitential — not that it's sad and hard, but that it's an ever-deepening, self-sacrificing embrace of Christ and His mission.

Now we can begin to understand the Sacrament of Penance. Its purpose is to foster the *metanoia* of daily life by healing our damaged relations to God and neighbor through the pardon of sin and the bestowal of the specific graces we need here and now for sharing Jesus' life. It purifies us in His love, preparing us both for the tasks at hand and for being perfectly united to God and the saints in Heaven.

The Sacrament, then, isn't primarily about sin and forgiveness. It's about Jesus healing us and drawing deeper into His heart so that we can share his life. If we could grasp that, our view of Confession would change radically. We'd desire to confess our sins rather than worry about "having to" do so. Sure, we'd see our sins more clearly. But we'd also see them in the light of God's love calling us to greater intimacy with Himself and to greater love for our family and neighbors. Of course, we'd still want forgiveness, but we'd want it together with the other graces we need to share God's

life right now. Our focus would be on sharing life with Him and each other rather than on our sins.

Most importantly, this awareness would lead us to treat Confession as a sacrament, an encounter with Jesus who chooses to come to us in this way in order to embrace us as we struggle to embrace Him. He created the sacraments to bring us out of our self-enclosed existence and to emphasize that He always takes the initiative, coming to us so that we can come to Him. That's why we confess our sins to God in Confession as well as in private prayer, just as we worship Him both at Mass and at home. He sends the priest to celebrate the sacraments with us as a visible expression of His presence, the Good Shepherd tending His sheep.

Let us ask our Father to show us the beauty of penance in our life and to recognize that in the Sacrament of Penance we turn not to a Judge meting out punishment, but to the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls who offers us His abundant life (1 PET 2:25; JN 10:10). ■

*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.

### 20 March

#### Saint Photina, the Woman at the Well

Saint Photina (also known as *Photini*), a Greek word meaning “light,” is the name given to the Samaritan Woman, whom our Savior Jesus Christ spoke with at Jacob’s Well, as recorded in the Gospel of John (JOHN 4:5-42). According to tradition, after Saint Photina’s encounter with Jesus, she became a devout follower of Christ, along with her sons, Saints Victor and Ioses.

Photina moved from Samaria to Carthage with her youngest son, Ioses where they preached the Gospel without fear, despite the persecutions against Christians under Emperor Nero. Her eldest son, Victor, was a military commander in the Roman Army assigned to Italy. Emperor Nero ordered all Christians in Italy arrested and punished. An Italian official, knowing that Victor was a Christian encouraged him to renounce Christ and submit to Nero’s will, and to encourage his mother and brother to stop preaching Christianity openly, but to practice their faith secretly.

Victor refused and said that he intended to follow their example and preach Christ publicly. Suddenly, Sebastian became blind and remained silent for four days. When he finally spoke, he declared to Victor: “The God of the Christians is the only true God.” He then told Victor that he had heard Christ calling to him. Sebastian was then baptized and regained his sight. Upon hearing this news, Emperor Nero ordered that these Christians be brought to Rome. The Lord spoke to Victor and told him that he would be called Photinos (meaning “light”), because, through him, many would be enlightened. Saint Photina, her son Ioses, and other Christians joined Photinos and Sebastian in Rome.

Emperor Nero ordered them be brought before him and demanded that they renounce Christ. At their refusal, Nero ordered that the saints’ fingers be broken, however, they felt no pain at all, and their hands remained unharmed. Nero then ordered that Sebastian, Photinos, and Ioses be blinded and imprisoned, while Saint Photina and five of her sisters were placed under the supervision of Nero’s daughter, Domnina, at the imperial court. Saint Photina soon converted Domnina and her handmaidens to Christianity.

Three years later Nero commanded the saints to be crucified and beaten. After four days they were still alive. Nero ordered them to be tortured even more cruelly. Sebastian, Photinos, and Ioses had their legs amputated and thrown to dogs, and their skin flayed. Photina’s sisters had their breasts cut off and their skin flayed.

Photina was flayed, thrown into a well and then imprisoned for twenty days. She was then brought before Nero and after refusing to renounce Christ, spit in his face, for which she was again thrown into the well. She surrendered her soul to the Lord in the year 66.





## 18 April Saint Thaïs the Penitent

The Maronite Church commemorates *Saint Thaïs the Penitent* on 18 April, while the Eastern Orthodox and Latin calendars commemorate her on 8 October. The Syriac and Greek accounts of her life are quite similar, except for the name of the monk who helped her achieve the epithet “the Penitent.” The Syriac tradition gives him the name Bessarion, while in the Greek tradition, it is Paphnutius. The Syriac account of her life is found in *Paradise of the Holy Fathers*, a seventh-century Syriac work about the Egyptian Desert Fathers and Mothers compiled by a Syriac monk, Ānân-Īshô.

Saint Thaïs was born in Egypt. The *Paradise of the Holy Fathers* describes Saint Thaïs as most beautiful and desired by men far and near. Out of their lust for her they sold their property so that they might have relations with her.

Hearing about how Saint Thaïs was leading many men to perdition, the monk Bessarion decided to pretend to be a customer. He dressed himself in civilian attire and presented her with some money. She brought him into her chamber and showed him to a bed. Bessarion inquired if she had another room, which would be more private. Saint Thaïs asked him: “If it be that thou art ashamed of men seeing thee, know that no man can see us in this chamber; but if it be God of Whom thou art afraid He can see us in whatsoever place we enter.” Realizing that Saint Thaïs knew about God, Bessarion spoke to her about the eternal punishment promised to sinners who lead other souls to eternal damnation. After hearing Bessarion speak in this way, Saint Thaïs fell prostrate before him and said: “I know that there is repentance for those who sin.”

Saint Thaïs then gathered all of the possessions she had acquired through fornication, placed them in the city square, and burned them in the presence of all, saying: “Come, O all ye who have had commerce with me, and see that I am burning before your eyes every possession

which I have gathered together by means of sin.” Saint Thaïs then found Bessarion, who took her to a women’s monastery and closed her in a small cell, with only a tiny window, through which one of the sisters would pass her bread and water each day. Bessarion then instructed her to “gaze towards the East, and thou shalt say nothing except, ‘O Thou who didst create me, have mercy upon me.’” Saint Thaïs dwelt in this small cell for three years, shedding tears of repentance. Bessarion received a Heavenly vision informing him that Saint Thaïs’ sins had been forgiven and that her soul would soon be departing her body. Bessarion returned to the women’s monastery and informed her that God had mercy on her and that she was forgiven. The biography concludes her account, “Now this blessed woman Thaïs lived after her repentance fifteen days, and she departed unto our Lord in peace. Thus was the crowning of the blessed Thaïs, who was lost and was found, and was dead and who came to life by the grace of Christ...” ■

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



## Whether Facing Persecution or Comfort — God Must Be No. 1

by Brandon Shulleeta

Father Manuel Rahmeh, the pastor of Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Church in Miami, Florida, knows persecution and struggle. He was born in Lebanon, where he started as a priest and where his father, also a priest, leads four Maronite parishes. There, Catholics increasingly feel the presence of Hezbollah.

“You know, sometimes I feel like persecution pushes you to be more religious,” Father Rahmeh said. Persecution is not only by “killing the body,” he said. “Persecution is by shutting you down, by shutting you up,” he said. And for Maronite Catholics in Lebanon, their faith is at the center of many of their lives, he said. That’s true of his father, Father Nabil Rahmeh, who he often turns to for guidance. “He’s ready to die, I believe,” Father Rahmeh said of his father’s commitment to the Catholic faith in an area where Christianity is a minority faith.

Beyond persecution, he’s seen many people strengthen their relationship with God when they face hardships, he said. He pointed to parents who lose a child as an example. “Sometimes, when we’re out of options, we turn to God. This is in our nature as a human. Sometimes we see God as the last option. And I pray that he does not keep us as the last option,” he said.

In a recent interview, Father Rahmeh had a clear message for all Christians: God must be the top priority in our lives — in good and bad times. He said he sometimes asks young people in his parish to write down their priorities. “Once they’re done, I ask them, ‘Is God in this list?’” he said. “If yes, what number is he? Is he No. 1? Is he No. 10? Is he after your paycheck, or is he above everything else?”



Father Rahmeh said it’s important to keep a close relationship with God even when we feel less desperation to call upon Him. “God wants us to come to Him when we’re happy ... and when we have no concern,” he said, adding that growing a relationship with Jesus can happen even with “baby steps.”

“To put God in first place sometimes is really easy. It’s just waking up and telling Him ‘I give you the day. Protect me. Protect my family.’ This is a small prayer and small connection with Him in the morning that might lead us to put Him as priority,” he said. “Everything with Jesus starts with baby steps. So, we need to put Him No. 1 again.”

For Father Rahmeh, the Maronite faith has been at the heart of his life. At 30 years old, he said he’s one of the youngest priests in the Eparchy. He was ordained nearly seven years ago in Lebanon and has been the pastor of Our Lady of Lebanon for about 2.5 years.

He has a large, diverse parish. More than 920 families have registered as members, and there are many more who attend regularly. He guesses about 40 to 50 percent are Lebanese, while others have Cuban, Palestinian, Puerto Rican, Syrian and many other backgrounds.

They're a close-knit community, and he works to try to make everyone feel welcomed. The masses are mostly in English, but it's not unusual to hear Arabic, French or Spanish, for example, during the course of church service.

The parish newspaper is The Maronite Miami Mosaic. The name is fitting. "We really are a mosaic. Everyone comes from his background, with his language, with his tradition, and together we make this beautiful picture. It is the mosaic," Father Rahmeh said.

Father Rahmeh, who joined the seminary as a teen, comes from a very religious background and said he felt "invited" by God to the priesthood. He said it's a powerful feeling that many priests encounter but can be hard to explain to others. In addition to his father being a priest, many of his relatives are also clergy members.

Rahmeh means "mercy" in Arabic, and for Father Rahmeh, he's worked to lead a large, diverse parish with grace and mercy.

He said it's important for a priest to gain the trust of parishioners and show commitment to them and God. Then, he said, they'll open their doors. He said it's important as a priest to focus on not being easily offended, apologizing for mistakes, and accepting others' apologies for their mistakes, while praying for parishioners often. Being a good priest requires prayerfulness and a focus on doing what is good, instead of doing what is desired, he said.

He urges other Christians to take that same approach — focusing on doing what's "right" instead of what we "want," while always making God No. 1." ■

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

## The Order of Saint Sharbel New Members

### ANNUAL

**JOHN & EDWINA SABA** | *St. George* | *San Antonio, TX*

### PERPETUAL

**CECIL & CONNIE BOSTANY** | *St. Elias* | *Birmingham, AL*

**EDMUND & RIMA CABBABE** | *St. Raymond* |

*St. Louis, MO*

**DEACON BRIAN DUNN** | *St. Anthony* | *Fall River, MA*

**MOHSEN ELANDARY** | *Our Lady of Lebanon* |

*Lewisville, TX*

**DAVID EMRICH** | *Our Lady's* | *Austin, TX*

**DONNA ESSEY** | *St. Teresa of Calcutta* | *Baden, PA*

**PASCALE LATTOUF** | *St. Anthony* | *Fall River, MA*

**DIMA DIAB-MAKHOUL** | *St. Anthony of Padua* |

*Cincinnati, OH*



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



## Eastern Catholic Bishops Gather in St. Louis

From Tuesday, 19 March until Thursday, 21 March, the annual spring meeting of the Eastern Catholic Associates (ECA) — the bishops of the Eastern Catholic churches of the United States — was held in St. Louis, MO. Following a long-standing tradition, the meeting was hosted by Bishop Elias Zaidan of the Maronite Eparchy of Our Lady of Lebanon at the Maronite Catholic Pastoral Center, located next to the Maronite Cathedral of St. Raymond in downtown St. Louis.

Besides normal administrative matters, other topics of common interest to the Eastern churches of the United States were addressed during the meeting:

Chorbishop John Faris and Donna Miller (Catholic Law Society of America) reported on the progress of the new English translation of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches.

Rev. Daniel Dozier, the Director of the Eastern Catholic Conference of Eparchial Directors of Religious Education (ECED), along with ECED

Business Manager, Amanda Singel, reported on the activities of the ECED during the past year. The ECED is the publishing arm of the ECA, which prints and distributes religious and catechetical literature for our parishes.

Rev. Dr. Mark Morozowich reported on preparations underway for the National Eucharistic Congress to be held from 17-21 July 2024 in Indianapolis, IN. An Eastern Catholic Divine Liturgy is scheduled to be celebrated in Lucas Oil Stadium, the main venue of the Congress, on Saturday, 20 July.

Some time of the meeting was devoted to reports on the struggles, challenges and even persecution being faced by the faithful in the ancestral homelands of our Churches.

Metropolitan Borys Gudziak of Philadelphia reported on the current situation of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in areas of Ukraine under Russian occupation. He also spoke to the efforts and initiatives of the Ukrainian Church and other generous



donors in the United States in providing financial and humanitarian aid to some of the many millions of people who have lost their homes and livelihoods as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Bishop Yousif Habash of the Syriac Catholic Church reported on the challenges faced by the Church in Iraq, Bishop Elias Zaidan of the Maronite Church reported on the challenges facing the various Christian churches of Lebanon, Bishop Mar Joy Alappat of the Syro-Malabar Eparchy of St. Thomas of Chicago spoke to the challenges facing his Church in the face of growing religious sectarianism in India, and Bishop Mikael Mouradian spoke to the situation of his Church in Armenia.

On Wednesday, the bishops enjoyed a tasty Lebanese lunch prepared by the ladies of the cathedral parish. They were joined by the Roman Catholic Archbishop of St. Louis, Most. Rev. Mitchell Rozanski and the Bishop of Belleville, Most Rev. Michael McGovern.

On Wednesday, the bishops also had the opportunity to pray the Maronite Divine Liturgy (Holy Qurbana), celebrated by Bishop Elias Zaidan in the chapel of the pastoral center.

The meeting reconvened on Thursday morning at 9:00 am. The bishops had a chance to give a short review of the work of the various committees and sub-committees of the USCCB of which they are members. Two of our number serve as chairs of USCCB committees.

Dr. Julia McStravog from the USCCB gave us a report on the progress of the Synod on Synodality and the path towards the culmination of the Synod in Rome in October of this year. The bishops had an opportunity to offer their own observations on the process.

During our annual meeting, we have made it a tradition to learn more about our sister Churches. This year, Bishop Philippos Mar Stephanos gave a presentation of the history, spirituality and current situation of the Syro-Malankara Church of India, of which he is the head in the United States.

The meeting concluded with a fraternal lunch in the Maronite Pastoral Center.



## Saints Joachim and Anne Mission

### Allentown, Pennsylvania *by Chet Wade*

George Makhoul has had a long and sometimes winding road to become a founding member of the Saints Joachim and Anne Maronite Catholic Mission in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Following his birth in Syria and growing up in the United States, he attended Antiochian Orthodox, Melkite, Roman, and Syriac Catholic churches but he never found a permanent connection.

He admits to many years of estrangement from the church before attending services at a nearby Syriac Catholic mission. “I began to attend Mass and my revelation began,” Makhoul said. But he still wasn’t quite “home.”

Makhoul and his wife, Basma, later began to practice as Maronites at Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Church in Easton, PA. But like many in the Allentown area, they found the long drive was a challenge.

After a petition by the Makhouls and other families, Bishop Gregory J. Mansour established the mission in 2017 and negotiated the part-time use of a Roman Catholic church.

The Makhouls and many other Maronites in Pennsylvania’s Lehigh Valley finally had their “home.”

“Our prayers were answered,” Makhoul said.

Parishioners of the mission reflect the diverse background of the region’s Arab-American community. Along with those of Syrian and Lebanese heritage, others have ties throughout the Middle East and beyond. The Arab American community in the region has continued to grow in recent years with additional immigrants and many of the parishioners were not born in the United States.

“All are welcome. All are equal for me,” said Father Georges Arrouk, who became administrator of the mission in December 2021. Father Georges was ordained in Lebanon in 2016 and served as a monk and missionary in South Africa for four years before coming to the United States.

The mission — which is named after the parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the grandparents of Jesus — has made significant strides since Father Georges arrived. The church community has grown from about 30 to 40 people then to 100 to 120 regularly attending liturgy with more for Christmas and Easter.

It also achieved a major milestone in the fall of 2023 when it acquired a permanent home. The mission





bought the Saints Peter and Paul church from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Allentown.

“The parishioners realized they had fulfilled a dream,” Father Georges said. “They have had their dream come true.”

“We both have found our home,” Makhoul said of him and his wife. He is a sacristan and administrator of the weekly newsletter. His wife sings in the choir.

Father Georges and Makhoul both give great credit to Father Kamil Al-Chouefati for the success of the mission. Father Kamil was the first administrator, serving four years until Father Georges was appointed. Throughout his time as administrator at the Saints Joachim and Anne mission, he also fulfilled his duties as pastor of Our Lady Star of the East Maronite Catholic Church in Pleasantville, NJ. That meant driving more than 120 miles each way to officiate Sunday evening masses in Allentown after conducting services at his home church — trips often exacerbated by heavy traffic.

“For four years, Father Kamil continued to sacrifice so that we would not miss a single mass,” Makhoul said. “Several times when the weather turned ugly, I would beg Father Kamil to cancel mass and not make the trip. His reply was always the same. ‘If one parishioner comes to mass, I will come to celebrate.’”

The arrival of Father Georges allowed for the liturgy to be moved to Sunday mornings as well as the scheduling of services on Holy Days of Obligation.

Father Georges said he values how the mission community has grown and built traditions. This year, the parish youth helped celebrate the first Christmas in the new church building with a Nativity.

Father Georges said he also is impressed with how parishioners have rallied around other events that help build their community and raise funds to pay for the building. This includes dinners for Mother’s Day and Christmas and a saj day picnic. During Lent, there are special fund-raising luncheons and dinners.

Another highlight of the church community is the annual two-day summer festival, where the parishioners share Maronite Catholic culture, traditions and food.

The goal is to continue to grow so the mission can become an official church.

This being his first time leading a parish, Father Georges said he is continuing to learn. At first, he was quiet and observed a lot.

“Now I work a lot with people, visiting people,” he said. “I am always ready to see them and help them.”

Makhoul said the parishioners can see the love Father Georges brings for them.

“Father Georges’ personality is very welcoming and contagious,” he said. “One cannot help but feel a welcoming vibe from him. Truly, another servant of the Lord.” ■

*Chet Wade is a regular feature writer for The Maronite Voice*



## A Decade of Devotion: Navigating Maronite Young Adult Leadership

Being a leader within the Maronite Young Adults (MYA) organization both nationally and within the Eparchy of St. Maron over the past 10 years has been an immensely rewarding journey, one that has deeply impacted my young adult foundation. As I reflect on this chapter of my life, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the connections made and memories created within this welcoming and energetic organization.

The MYA is more than just an organization; it is a family bound together by our shared Maronite faith and vibrant culture. Through MYA events and gatherings, I have had the privilege of building lasting friendships and meaningful relationships with individuals who have become like family to me. It is within this supportive and inclusive environment that I not only found lifelong friends but also met my future spouse, with whom I am marrying this summer.

Together, we have celebrated numerous milestones, from weddings and graduations to the joy of welcoming new members into our MYA family. These gatherings serve as opportunities for us to come together, pray, dance, share meals, and create memories that will endure a lifetime.

It is my sincere hope and dream that the MYA will continue to flourish and grow, welcoming young adults from all over the country and providing them with a space to connect, grow, and thrive. Whether you are a newcomer or a returning member, I encourage you to join the MYA and attend the events. I promise that your experience will be one filled with warmth, love, and enriched faith, leaving you with a heart full of joy and many new friends to lean on.

In closing, I am deeply humbled by the profound impact that the Maronite Young Adults has had on my life. It stands as a testament to the power of faith







and the strength of our shared values and culture. I am grateful beyond words for the unwavering love and support from Bishop Gregory Mansour, our Director Sr. Therese Maria Touma, my outgoing Vice President Sandy Risha Napolitano, the MYA Eparchial Board, and my family and friends throughout my journey as President the past two years.

As I step away from my leadership role, I am filled with anticipation for the future of the MYA. I have full confidence in the abilities of my successors, President Marla Saikali, and Vice President Zelfa Harb, and the entire MYA Eparchial Board. I am excited to witness the continued growth and success of this organization. May God bless each and every member of the MYA, both present and future, as they continue to build upon the foundation of faith and friendship that we have cultivated together.

Thank you, from the depths of my heart, for being a part of this journey with me.

God bless,

*Maya Khoury*

OUTGOING MYA EPARCHY OF ST. MARON PRESIDENT

For more information, please visit the MYA website [www.myaeparchystmaron.org](http://www.myaeparchystmaron.org) and follow the MYA page on Instagram [mya.eparchystmaron](https://www.instagram.com/mya.eparchystmaron) to stay up to date on all the latest events and news. ■



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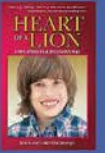
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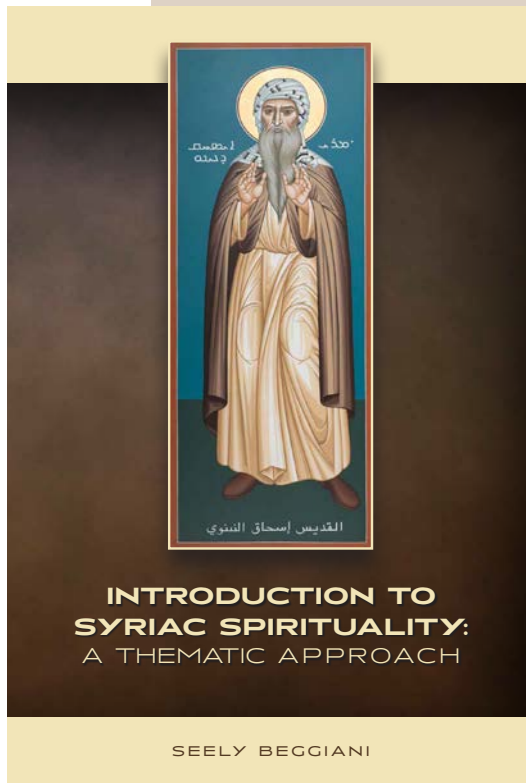
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The *Introduction to Syriac Spirituality: A Thematic Approach*, by the well-known Syriac scholar Chorbishop Seely Beggiani, is clear and succinct examination of the themes and insights of major Syriac writers from the fourth to eighth centuries. This book offers a synthesis of the works of these writers according to the principal themes found in their body of work, and presents an orderly presentation of the progression of Syriac spirituality during this time period. The book can be purchased from [SaintMaronPublications@gmail.com](mailto:SaintMaronPublications@gmail.com) for \$25.

Visit our Website at [www.SaintMaronPublications.org](http://www.SaintMaronPublications.org).



## March for Life *by Linda DiNardo George*

The Family and Sanctity of Life Office, the Maronite Young Adults, the Maronite Youth Organization, priests, seminarians, sisters and parishioners from several parishes of the Eparchy of Saint Maron gathered in our nation's capital for the 51st March for Life. Despite the cold and snowy weather, tens of thousands of people participated in the March.

We were graced with a video call from Bishop Gregory John Mansour, who was in Lebanon but sent his loving prayer and encouragement.

The testimony to the sacredness of each human life can be felt while walking together in solidarity, truly an experience of a lifetime. There are moments when you are moved to tears by witnessing and partaking in such a Christ-filled event.

The March for Life “is the largest annual human rights demonstration in the world. But this is not just a

protest... TOGETHER, WE GATHER TO CELEBRATE LIFE. We celebrate each and every life, from the moment of conception. We envision a world where every life is celebrated, valued, and protected.”

A huge thanks to all those from our Eparchy who assisted in coordinating the events for the weekend. Thank you to Rev. Rodolph Wakim for his talk at Our Lady of Lebanon Seminary. Thanks to Roukos Jacobs for his design of our beautiful new banner! We are grateful to all those who were unable to attend and prayed for us and the cause.

Follow us on Facebook for information regarding upcoming events at the local level. The Spring 40 Days of Life program will begin on 14 February, please contact our office for more information at [familyandsanctityoflife777@gmail.com](mailto:familyandsanctityoflife777@gmail.com) or 540.520.1679.



# Parish News

SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

## Diaconal Ordination

The weekend of 13-14 January was a time of great anticipation and excitement at St. George Church in San Antonio, Texas. Bishop Zaidan visited our parish to ordain two of the parish's subdeacons, Chris Pond and Joseph Harb to the order of deacons — another milestone on their path to the priesthood.

The weekend began on Saturday morning with Bishop Zaidan giving an informative and reflective presentation on the importance of the Holy Eucharist. Recounting the development of the Church's faith and belief in the Holy Eucharist, the bishop then focused on the importance and place the Holy Eucharist should have in the life of each individual Christian. After his presentation and discussion, all those attending spent a prayerful time in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

Sunday morning Liturgy was the high point of the weekend as Bishop Zaidan ordained subdeacons Chris Pond and Joseph Harb to the diaconate in the presence of Father Charles Khachan, MLM, pastor of St. George, Father Joseph Kallas, MLM, associate pastor, invited priests and deacons, their families and friends and the St. George parish community. The solemnity and the beauty of the liturgy was captivating to all who attended. Both men reflected upon the meaning of this day for each of them personally and shared their thoughts.

Joseph Harb said: "On the day of my ordination to the diaconate, a lasting chapter was manifested in my life. . . . As I stand at the threshold of this sacred calling, I pray that the work God initiated within me will continue to unfold. May it illuminate my intellect, guide my path with wisdom, and purify my heart, ensuring my intentions remain steadfast and pure. With unwavering devotion, I pledge to serve as a humble conduit of God's grace, a vessel through which His divine love and mercy may flow into the lives of those I am called to serve."

Likewise, Chris Pond reflected on what his ordination means to him. "The raising of a subdeacon to the office of deacon, or the raising of a deacon to the order of priests, while of course focusing on the achievements of the man being raised to a new

clerical rank, is, like the Divine Liturgy, a group effort and a celebration of our community and God's love for each of us. It reflects God responding to our prayers for vocations. I would like to take a brief moment to thank each of you for your support and prayers whether we have met or not. That is an important aspect of our Maronite community, to pray for one another. Be assured of my prayers for you as I move forward to the next stage of my priestly formation."

Following the ceremony, the parish congratulated the new deacons and celebrated with a luncheon in the church hall. Truly, the weekend was a special time of grace for St. George, her clergy, and all her parishioners. ■



UNIONTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA

## Lenten Season

On 11 February 2024, a Ladies Appreciation Brunch was held at Saint George Church in Uniontown, Pennsylvania. A group of volunteer male parishioners celebrated the ladies of the parish for their hard work and dedication to the church throughout the year. The men prepared a delectable feast of hors d'oeuvres, entrees, and desserts. The hall was beautifully decorated, and many of the women won very nice prizes. It was a wonderful afternoon of camaraderie among family and friends. The following day, Ash Monday, 12 February, marked the beginning of the Lenten Season. Prior to liturgy and the distribution of ashes, parishioners gathered in fellowship for a meatless meager meal sponsored by NAM. Everyone enjoyed majadra, lentil soup, and fattoush salad.



The Lenten Season is a time for prayer, fasting, almsgiving, traditions and religious rituals, mutual kindness, and helping others in need. Parishioners contributed monetary donations to support the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) Rice Bowl. CRS Services offer resources to families and communities locally and globally who are experiencing hunger, poverty, homelessness, illness, and educational issues. Also, it was time for the annual St.

George "Lenten Fish Fry." Every Friday during Lent, volunteer parishioners offer take-out and/or eat-in lunch and dinner meals for the congregation and community members. Delicious food choices were fish, shrimp and falafel platters with a variety of homemade side dishes. Following dinner, parishioners held Lenten devotions (Stations of the Cross), and Father Aaron Sandbothe concluded with the Benediction of the Cross. ■

NORMAN, OKLAHOMA

## Campus Improvements

Exciting things are happening at Our Lady of Lebanon in Norman, Oklahoma. Our church is finally getting some much-needed updates. Spearheaded by our council president, we were able to install a brand-new roof after the old one sustained hail damage from the storm in 2021. By updating the roof, we were also able to remodel our hall to a spacious area that can accommodate many more people. It has already been rented out for several private events.

With the effort and generous donations of our council president, we will soon be able to raise a brand-new cross at the entrance of the church. Our next project is to install a fence and put in a playground for the kids. Our generous parishioners have donated towards this project but it is a big undertaking so we will be holding our annual Heritage and Food Festival on Saturday, 13 April 2024, to hopefully turn this project into a reality. ■



# Parish News

CINCINNATI, OHIO

## Annual Lenten Retreat

Sponsored by the NAM Chapter, the annual Lenten retreat took place on Saturday, 2 March 2024, guided by Father Ben Cameron of the Fathers of Mercy who presented the topic: "The Holy Eucharist: Shadows and Fulfillment."

Rose Abi Radi opened the event, welcoming Father Ben and all in attendance. Father George Hajj, pastor, introduced the retreat master highlighting that Father Ben is from Indiana. In his remarks, he mentioned that the parish in Cincinnati is assisting in the launching of Our Lady of Cana in Indiana. The theme of the retreat was related directly to the National Eucharistic Congress taking place this July in Indiana as well!

Over 35 people attended from different age groups and backgrounds, including four seminarians from the Fathers of Mercy.

Linda Conour, a lifelong parishioner who attended with her father, Bill Gervers, and aunt, Judy Ganim, stated: "The retreat helped me to contemplate the true meaning of sacrifice during Lent. It also helped me to fully focus on receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, and reflect that it truly is Jesus



in our presence — a reaffirmation of what we as Catholics celebrate at the Divine Liturgy each week."

Sophia Better Totten, an active member of NAM, St. Joseph Sodality and the Choir, says: "The retreat touched me on many levels. It was educational, informative and deeply spiritual [...] and left me wanting to hear more."

Hana Chemaly of the MYA stated, "From the Jewish traditions of sacrificing lambs in the Temple, to Jesus giving the Apostles the Lord's Prayer, Father Ben guided us through the book of Exodus. He answered controversial questions

about the identity of the Eucharist and how we've come to our belief that the Eucharist is in fact the body and blood of Christ our Lord and not only a symbol. Father Ben did a great job of meeting us in our faith and then leading us deeper into it with clear foundations of our Catholic Church."

Attendees were invited to visit the Blessed Sacrament throughout the retreat, prayed the Rosary, and received the sacrament of Reconciliation prior to the celebration of the Liturgy concelebrated by Fathers George Hajj and Ben Cameron. ■



AUSTIN, TEXAS

## Texas Rally for Life

***"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you and before you were born, I set you apart."*** — Jeremiah 1:5

On Saturday, 27 January, Chorbishop Don Sawyer, along with many parishioners from Our Lady's Maronite Parish in Austin, Texas, joined Texas Rally for Life in their statewide march to the state capitol. Thousands of people from across the state of Texas, as well as many pro-life dignitaries, gathered in support of the unborn and the sanctity of life. Our Lady's parishioners have been faithfully taking part in this march over the past years. ■



GLEN ALLEN, VIRGINIA

## Regional MYO Retreat

The MYO of St. Anthony in Glen Allen, VA, hosted nearly 50 MYO members from Our Lady of Lebanon in Washington D.C. and St. Sharbel in Raleigh, N.C. from 15-17 March. The retreat this year, themed “Walking in the Footsteps of Jesus,” featured a keynote session by St. Anthony Pastor, Chorbishop John D. Faris, where he chronicled a recent pilgrimage he led to the Holy Land.

Special thanks goes to Cathy George, Director of Pastoral Life, and Carmen Dailey, MYO Advisor, for planning, organizing, and leading the three-day retreat, and to all the children and chaperones from the Mid-Atlantic parishes who made the retreat so spiritually fulfilling. ■

TAMPA, FLORIDA

## Parish Activities

The parishioners of Saints Peter and Paul Church in Tampa, Florida, celebrated their annual Lebanese Festival from 10-12 November. The three-day festival, their largest event of the year, was held to help support the church financially, to build a greater bond with neighboring communities, and to allow parishioners to share their Lebanese heritage and fellowship. Arabic music permeated the air as the MYA and MYO groups performed the traditional Middle Eastern dabke. The highlight of this event was enjoying a variety of delicious Middle Eastern foods and desserts. Father Fadi Rouhana, pastor, extended many thanks to all donors and helping hands who worked cooperatively for over two months planning activities and preparing foods for the outdoor Festival. Nearly 4,000 people enjoyed this successful and memorable celebration!

On 19 November, Father Fadi led the MYA Bible Study group in a discussion about Jesus calming the storm. They discussed how Jesus’ disciples were afraid of drowning, but He reminded them to be strong in their faith and when God is with us, we have nothing to fear. Afterwards, everyone shared in a Thanksgiving potluck meal. The MYA members packaged Thanksgiving dinners and delivered them to the homeless in the Tampa community.

On 20 January, the MYO group welcomed a guest speaker, Kathy George, to their monthly meeting. Kathy was involved with the MYO in her hometown parish, Saint George Church in Uniontown, Pennsylvania. The group discussed the true spiritual meaning of Jesus’ baptism. Also, the MYO members outlined plans to organize a retreat for MYO groups across the region to join in strengthening their connections with God and one another. Finally, the group shared a delicious family meal together. ■



# Parish News

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

## Children and Vocation Sunday

St. Maron Church in Minneapolis has always given its children a sense of significance and opportunity within the parish community. For over 30 years, we have had children's Liturgies, plays, fun days and more. During the school year, monthly children's Liturgies offer an opportunity for students to be readers, lectors, and gift-bearers. They also are welcomed as ushers, choir members, and altar servers. All ages older than preschool participate.

This experience especially helps our first communicants. They have been introduced to the altar a few times before attention is focused on them as they sit near the altar area and answer questions from Chorbishop Sharbel. Our students narrate and act out brief plays. Our second-grade students play the main parts in the Nativity play. Other grades lead other presentations, for example: the miracles and life of Jesus and hagiographies of saints. Our "plays" are short, narrated costumed portrayals presented at the

end of the Liturgy. The presentation on Mother Teresa was especially heart-warming. We ended with a number of "nuns" tending to ten ill and ailing people on the "streets"—the marble steps surrounding the altar.

The Sunday of the Deceased Priests is our Vocation Sunday. It began with a children's Liturgy — reading, gifts, and intercessions all done by the 4-6th grade students. After Liturgy, Chorbishop Sharbel and Deacon Alejandro Landin answered questions from the students.

Following the Q&A, Chorbishop Sharbel led them behind the altar to touch the new mosaic wall and gave the students a tour of the sacristy and its vestments and liturgical articles. They toured through the old sacristy, chapel, and grotto to see all the stained-glass windows, artwork, statues and more. They finished by touring the rectory and offices. The children look forward to this day every year. They spontaneously ask superb questions!



Our children, including preschoolers, have regular opportunities during their class time to tour the church and learn about our saints and the life of Christ through our beautiful stained-glass windows, icons, and mosaics. Some summers we have been able to provide a three-day Bible camp in which students may experience a sampling of all these rewarding activities. ■

LAWRENCE, MASSACHUSETTS

## Religious Services at "The Woods"

On 2 February, the parishioners of St. Anthony Church in Lawrence, Massachusetts, welcomed the residents from "The Woods," a Merrimack Retirement Community, to a "Liturgy and Lunch" on the Feast of the Presentation in the Temple. "The Woods" provided transportation for the residents to St. Anthony Church.

Following Liturgy, the Daughters of St. Anthony served a delicious homemade Lebanese lunch to their visitors. The residents enjoyed conversing with St. Anthony's parishioners to learn more about the Eastern

Churches and the Maronite Liturgy. A former resident and parishioner of St. Anthony's, Rosemarie Lahage, helped organize a weekly Communion Service in their chapel.

St. Monica and St. Lucy Latin Parishes also provide monthly Confession, Anointing, and Liturgy for the residents. This joint outreach of the Latin and Maronite Churches has established stronger ties and an appreciation for the fullness of each Catholic Church. Father Elie Mikhael, Mona Khoder, Bassima Aboujaoude, Elaine Daher, and Deacon Jim Demers arranged this event with the support of volunteer parishioners. ■



PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

**Parish Activities**

Saint Maron Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, has been involved in a variety of parish activities. On 7 January 2024, Father Andrawos happily thanked all volunteers who organized a Beef Shawarma Fundraiser to help support the church financially. Parishioners and community members were invited to patronize the event. This was followed by an E-bike Fundraising Raffle to aid with church maintenance projects. The three local companies who donated the e-bikes were the Philadelphia Pet Hotel Villas, Pauline’s Home Care, and Philadelphia Animal Hospital. The e-bikes were valued at \$1,600 each, and \$20 tickets were sold for a chance to win an e-bike. The lucky winners were announced on Hosanna Sunday, 24 March, during the Palm Sunday Annual Brunch.



Sparked by compassion and the loving support of their mothers, the Maronite Christian Formation students joyfully prepared and packed 180 meals for the “Caring for Friends” organization. Their humble acts of mercy tripled from last year’s number of meals exemplifying the youths’ Christian values of love, kindness, charity, and caring for others.

On 28 January, the MYO members held two fundraisers to defray the costs of their upcoming summer activities. They offered an American Pancake Breakfast served with fruit and chocolate and maple syrup. On 25 February, the youth group sponsored a Lebanese Breakfast. Father Andrawos extended a special thanks to the MYO and the wonderful mothers for their hard work and dedication to the church and its next generation. ■



# Parish News

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

## Feast of St. Maron

Parishioners of St. Elias Church in Birmingham celebrated the Feast of St. Maron in a special way with the 69th Annual Feast Day Banquet on Saturday, 10 February, in the parish hall.

Following the 5 p.m. Liturgy, celebrated by Fr. Peter Zogbi, guests were served a delicious steak dinner prepared by parishioners. Danny Bostany served as emcee of the banquet.

The program included a presentation by Dr. Alexander Harb, a local professor and Melkite Greek Catholic, on the "Heart of Jesus in the Eastern Tradition." Harb completed his doctorate in Eastern Christian Studies at the Pontifical Oriental Institute of Rome.

The highlight of the evening is always the presentation of awards to deserving parishioners. "Parishioners of the Year" were Vince and Gabrielle Bruno. The Silver Massabki Medal, an award for outstanding service presented by the National Apostolate of Maronites, was given to Matthew and Miriam (Semaan) Bolus. Richard Kassouf was recognized by receiving the Gold Massabki Medal, the highest award given by NAM, at last year's convention in July.

The most memorable moment of the evening was the announcement that the library in the newly renovated administration building would be named in honor of Pastor Emeritus Chorbishop Richard D. Saad. This was made possible due to the generosity of the Butrus family.

What a great evening celebrating the patron of our Maronite Church and our parish. A special thank you to all of those who made it happen. ■



CLINTON TOWNSHIP, MICHIGAN

## Leonard A. Thomas Administrative Center and Other Events

This summer, Bishop Elias Zaidan dedicated the all-new Leonard A. Thomas Administrative Center at St. Sharbel Church in Clinton Township, MI. The new building consists of offices for the clergy and volunteers, a state-of-the-art multi-purpose room/hall, and two new classrooms to accommodate our growing Catechism program. We are beyond thankful to Leonard Thomas for his generosity and vision for the future of St. Sharbel Church! May the Lord bless him abundantly and inspire others to do great things for their churches like Leonard Thomas did for us!

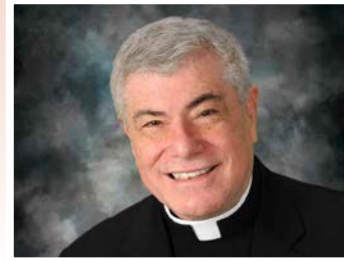


With over 800 attendees, the St. Sharbel Choir led the night with Christmas carols and hymns in four harmonious voices. The choir consists of over 35 individuals ranging from 12-60 years of age from all walks of life. Directed by Aziz Charabaty, they come together to spread a message of peace and hope in the metro-Detroit area! The 2023 Christmas Concert can be viewed on YouTube. Next stop, the 2024 NAM Convention this summer at the Detroit Marriott Hotel at the Renaissance Center!

St. Sharbel Parish sent one of the largest groups in the entire Eparchy to the MYO Regional Retreat this February in Centerburg, OH. With over 60 participants from the parish, our youth led group discussions, won the Talent show for their incredible Lebanese "Derbakeh" performance, and sang in the youth choir on Sunday during the send-off Divine Liturgy. Please keep our thriving youth in your prayers!

With over 235 children in our incredible Catechism program, St. Sharbel Parish is beyond proud of our amazing Catechists who gather each month for on-going formation and education, making their class the best it can be! With the all-new Leonard A. Thomas Administrative Center, we are thrilled to have more space for growing classes such as our all-new Kindergarten and high school classes! May the Lord continue to send youth to His Church to learn His Way. ■

## From the Editor



My dear brothers and sisters,

I was born and raised in Uniontown in southwestern Pennsylvania with a population today of 9,984. One thing that I have noticed over the years is that no matter where I go in the world — be it on the streets of Budapest or Rome — I run into someone from Uniontown! Not only that — being from the same town created a connection and a sense of camaraderie. **We were total strangers until we discovered a common geographic bond.**

Such bonding seems to occur only with geography. Why can we not look for common bonds in other areas of our lives? More often, when we encounter another, we focus on the differences that keep us apart.

For example, people frequently ask me, “What makes us different from the Orthodox or the Protestants?” I then carefully explain that Catholics accept the authority of the Pope while Orthodox do not or that Catholics believe in the true sacramental presence of Christ in the Eucharist while for Protestants the Eucharist is only a symbol. These are the points that separate us, give us fuel for fights and disputes, and give us reason to “keep our distance.”

**But what about those aspects of our faith that are the same, that we share?**

Catholics and Orthodox have the same priesthood, the same seven sacraments, the same reverence for the teachings of the Church fathers, and the same reverence for the saints. All these things can bind us — yet we prefer to argue about the authority of the pope.

Catholics and Protestants share the fellowship of the faith community, the love of holy scripture, in the joy of the Holy Spirit active in our lives.

Most importantly, we share a common baptism in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Why is it that we see Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, and Orthodox instead of fellow Christians who are part of the one Body of Christ?

And it need not stop there. We see the followers of Judaism or Islam and again we look for differences, things that separate us, things that can make us enemies. Can we not see that the followers of Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed believe in the one God who has revealed Himself to us? Can we not share in the awe that the eternal has broken into time?

We realize that differences — big differences — remain between us. However, our faith teaches us the importance of dialogue and understanding. Rather than focusing on our differences, let us strive to find commonalities that unite us. Our shared belief in the importance of prayer, the pursuit of justice, and the value of community, are opportunities for us to build bridges of understanding and mutual respect, thereby giving glory to God. ■

Devotedly yours in Christ,

Chorbishop John D. Faris

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