

History of St. Maron Church in Youngstown, Ohio

Introduction

Over one hundred years have passed since the story of St. Maron Youngstown began in 1883 with the arrival of the first Lebanese pioneers, Michael Thume and John Habib. In 1888, they were joined by Sliman Kathar and Naoum Joseph (1).

Early 1990s

Early immigrants attended nearby Catholic churches, especially St. Columba (2), yet Lebanese immigrants longed for the familiarity of the traditional Maronite liturgy and language. As a temporary remedy, a few priests from Lebanon came to act as "circuit riders," ministering to spiritual needs. Acting as missionaries, these priests traveled across the country, saying liturgy, hearing confessions, and performing marriages and baptisms. This practice satisfied an immediate need.

The first Maronite baptism in Youngstown was Tannous G. Abraham on November 15, 1902, the same year that a permanent church was established. St. Anthony Church, the first Maronite church in Youngstown, consisted of two homes at 118 and 116 South Walnut Street in the block now occupied by the Social Security Administration. Reverend Peter Asmar served as the first Maronite priest there from January to November 1902 (3).

Thereafter, Reverend George Emanuel became pastor (4) to the small, struggling parish, which moved in 1905 to the corner of Wood and Hazel Streets into a building, previously occupied by St. Columba (5). Father Emanuel boarded at the Colonial Hotel. In January of 1906, Father Paul Eisa assumed pastoral duty and boarded with Michael and George Essad at 345 West Federal Street (6).

For part of 1907, the parish went without a pastor until Reverend Paul Aser assumed pastoral duties in 1908 (7). After financial struggles, the parish temporarily relinquished its identity in 1909 the church building became a church for the "Italian Catholic Church." In 1911, St. Columba reacquired the property, styled as "St. Columba's Hall."

From 1902 to 1911, a great wave of Maronite immigrants arrived in Youngstown from Jbail and Batroun, Lebanon. Working for wages of \$1.10 per day or less, many resided at the Steven's House, on East Federal Street, a large home with 18 to 20 rooms. Four or five families would rent one room and live and work together; the women would sleep during the day while the men worked, and the

men would sleep at night while the women worked (8). Additionally, Lahoud and Amelia Yazbek were generous and hospitable to new immigrants.

Though most spoke no English and possessed little, as Monsignor Peter Eid expressed years later, "They had, however, two things: faith in God and faith in themselves that they would succeed." Unshaken by their hardships, they were rugged individualists who loved adventure and challenge (9). Though they intended to return to Lebanon, the First World War forced many to stay and become steelworkers or entrepreneurs in service establishments.

1910-1920s

Around 1910, a sampling of families clustered in an ethnic neighborhood around East Federal Street and became staunch supporters of the early Maronite Church in Youngstown: ABBAS, ABBEY, ABOOD, ABRAHAM, ASEFF, AZZIES, COURY, DAHAR, ELIAS, ELLIS, ESSAD, FERRIS, FERRY, GEORGE, HABIB, HAYEK, ISAAC, JABOR, JOHN, JOSEPH, KATHAR, MANSER, MIKES, MURKES, NAKLEA, NAMY, NASER, NASSEFF, ROCUS, RUGOS, RUSHWIN, SADD, SAGER, SARKIS, SHAHIN, SIMON, SLIMEN, TABETH, THURBEY, WILLIAMS, ZAYDEN, ZENNI (10).

In 1911, Right Reverend Monsignor N. S. Beggiani came to Youngstown from Beit Chebab, Lebanon (11). In 1912, with the financial assistance of several prominent Maronites, he purchased the building housing Trinity English Lutheran Church at 815 Wilson Avenue for Saint Maron Church and 818 Wilson Avenue for the rectory. Later, 826, 748, and finally, 823 Wilson Avenue were the rectory addresses. In 1925, Monsignor Beggiani was assigned to the parish in Cleveland.

By 1922, the Maronites of Youngstown numbered over 700 and Bishop J. Schrembs of Cleveland conferred the first Sacrament of Confirmation to 62 Maronite children.

Between 1925 and 1929, four Maronite priests served Saint Maron Parish: in 1925, Reverend Anthony Yazbeck Khairallah; from 1925 to 1926, Reverend Paul Rezk (Maad) (12); from 1927 to 1928, Reverend Peter V. Hyland; from 1928 to 1929, Reverend Emmanuel EI-Khoury Hanna. (13)

After briefly serving in Fall River, Massachusetts, in 1929, Monsignor Elias El-Hayek came to serve as pastor and stayed for ten years (14). While in Youngstown, Monsignor Hayek directed the remodeling of the church, excavation of a cellar for the parish hall, an addition for the sacristy, and purchasing an adjoining house for a parish rectory. His industry and the parishioners' assistance

allowed the debt to be cleared during the Depression. In 1939, he died and was buried in the church of his native village, Bejje, Lebanon.

The Great Depression

During The Great Depression, immigrants in Youngstown rapidly grew strong in numbers and influence. The "Colony of 2,000 Syrians" joined around 1934 for political and charitable causes. Joseph Sarkies, secretary of the Lebanon-Syrian Welfare Society, stated, "We have no set policy for giving help, other than that we attend the needs only of our own people." Adolph Sohaiby, also a secretary, said that the organization aimed to advance Americanization of its people and the development physically, mentally, and culturally of its youth. (15)

In October of 1939, Father Peter A. Eid came to St. Maron, leaving Our Lady of the Cedars of Akron at the request of Archbishop Joseph Schrembs of Cleveland.

1940-1950s

Seeking a better building for the parish, in 1943 the church on Wilson Avenue was sold to the Diocese of Youngstown for \$18,000 and \$3,000 was paid as income tax to the treasury of the Diocese. At the same time, the Shehy School building was purchased from the Mahoning County School Board for \$4,250.

Remodeling of the structure began August 21, 1944. Because building materials were scarce during World War II, early remodeling consisted of excavating a basement and remodeling the south wing and upper hall for use as a temporary church. The third floor was converted into a residence for the priest. The total cost was \$34,842.23. Offerings from the parish totaled \$7,915.34.

For the second phase of remodeling from 1946-1947, the Bishop of the Diocese of Youngstown loaned \$40,000 dollars at an interest rate of 2.5% to the church. B & B Construction Company completed this second phase, which included removal of partitions, refinishing and removing bricks on outside walls, and building the church. The total cost was \$32,944.32; offerings from the congregation totaled \$9,593.22. On September 24, 1947, the newly remodeled church was dedicated.

The third phase of remodeling began on June 23, 1953. A loan from Mr. Naoum Abraham of Warren for \$40,000 financed remodeling of the rectory and the two halls. B & B Construction completed the work at a cost of \$60,718.50. Mr. Abraham's loan was paid in full on October 18, 1954.

St. Maron Church became known as the diamond of the East Side. The City of Youngstown recognized Father Eid's work by presenting him with the keys to the city twice.

In the 1950s when St. Columba Cathedral burned, St. Maron Church was used as an example of willingness to help pay for the reconstruction. In response, the Latin Church placed a picture of St. Maron on the main altar of the Cathedral.

In 1952, through Father Eid's efforts and leadership, the idea of a Maronite Seminary in the United States was born. Father Eid's brother, Father Maroun Eid, who came to Youngstown in 1948 as an assistant, established a Maronite Seminary in Washington, D.C.

1960-1970s

Father Eid also worked to construct the National Shrine of Our Lady of Lebanon in North Jackson, Ohio. In August 1960, the Maronite parishes of Youngstown, Akron, and New Castle, Pennsylvania, planned the construction of the Shrine on eighty acres of land on Lipkey Road, which they purchased for \$40,000. Groundbreaking ceremonies on August 16, 1964 were presided over by the Right Reverend Monsignor John L. Lettau, Chancellor of the Diocese of Youngstown.

On August 15, 1965, on the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady, the Shrine was dedicated with several thousand congregants. The Shrine was incorporated in the State of Ohio as a non-profit organization directed by clergy and laymen. On December 13, 1966, the deed to the Shrine was presented to his Excellency Bishop Francis M. Zayek.

The Shrine is now in the name of the Maronite Exarchate. The Lebanese Antonine Sisters staff the Shrine and their convent, located on the grounds of the Shrine. This was the order's first foundation outside of Lebanon.

Father Eid purchased Cedar Lake in 1955, which opened in 1956 as a summer recreational area for parishioners but public use. Closed in 1970, Cedar Lake is fondly remembered as a place where families gathered for good times.

In 1967, during Father Eid's pastorate, the Church purchased property on Rush Boulevard for the construction of a new church. These plans were altered, and in August 1969, the 23-acre site of the present church on South Meridian Road was purchased for the purpose of building a new church.

After serving St. Maron Church for 32 years, Father Eid retired in 1970. Father Eid remained active at St. Maron, the National Shrine, and Our Lady of the Cedars in Akron until his death in 1982.

After Monsignor Eid's retirement, Reverend Wadih Peter Tayah was assigned as pastor of St. Maron Church. During his tenure, planning and construction of Bet Maroon and The Maronite Center, took place. On April 9, 1972, groundbreaking ceremonies for the construction of Bet Maroon occurred. The buildings, designed by K. Anthony Hayek and Associates, include the church, rectory, and hall. B & B Construction started work on August 26, 1972. On October 29, 1972, Bishop Francis M. Zayek blessed the cornerstone of the new church. The symbol engraved on the cornerstone is a replica of a 9th Century symbol found in the ruins of the Maronite Monastery of Qala' at Sima'an in North Syria.

Near the Feast Day of St. Maron, on February 25, 1973, Bishop Zayek inaugurated The Maronite Center. A special mass and banquet was held. Distinguished guests included Senator James Abourezk of South Dakota as the main speaker; Reverend Monsignor William A. Hughes, Mayor of Youngstown; Jack C. Hunter; Monsignor Peter Eid; Monsignor Elias El-Hayek; and Reverend Seely Beggiani. Congratulatory messages were read from President Richard Nixon and Governor of Ohio, John J. Gilligan.

On June 7, 1973, Father Tayah moved from his Shehy Street residence to the new rectory. The first liturgy celebrated at the new church was Christmas 1973. However, the new church was not officially dedicated until the Feast Day of St. Maron, February 9, 1974, at a liturgy celebrated by Bishop Zayek, Bishop James W. Malone, and Father Tayah. As the final detail in the move from Youngstown's east side, the old church was sold for \$10,000.00 and eventually razed.

On October 20, 1974, upon request of Pastor W. Peter Tayah, Joseph Nohra was ordained to the sub-deaconate by Bishop Zayek. Permission was given him to distribute communion. On December 7, 1980, Joe Nohra was ordained deacon.

Upon Father Tayah's departure to a parish in Miami, Florida, in August of 1975, Father Dominic Ashkar was assigned to St. Maron. In 1976, Father Joseph Amar joined Father Ashkar at St. Maron. In the same year, Father William Bonczewski was assigned to the National Shrine on July 8 to replace Father Michael Kail.

Groundbreaking ceremonies for the much-needed St. Ephrem Educational Center were held in March 1977 and construction began in April. St. Ephrem Center currently houses the Maronite Catholic Faith (MCF) classrooms, including a large finished basement area. The Center also houses a library comprised mainly of a

collection on Middle East history, religion, maps, art and language. The need for the Center was seen as "a responsibility to provide a forum within which the things we value as a community can be passed on." (16) For a period, during the week, the basement was contracted to Color My World Day-School Nursery.

The parish community consistently demonstrated a deep abiding concern for Lebanon's welfare. Acting through the National Apostolate of Maronites (NAM), St. Maron Parish hosted two NAM conventions in 1965 (the second) and 1974 (the eleventh). The Saint Maron Relief Fund, NAM had received \$36,000 from donations and fundraisers by the end of February 1976. The funds were transferred to the National Relief Fund in Lebanon.

1980-1990s

In July 1981, a parish recreation area, consisting of a covered pavilion with bathrooms, playground, a baseball field, and a parking area was dedicated.

In August 1981, the first parish festival was held. Proceeds from the annual event were directed into an educational fund. 1983 marked the actual establishment of the Education Foundation, and contributions to date have exceeded \$200,000. The first scholarships were awarded in 1987.

To enhance the beauty and religious significance of St. Maron, the bell tower was dedicated and inscribed, "Dedicated to the heralds of our faith, the priests who have served us. February 9, 1985." Groundbreaking for a retirement home for priests occurred in the summer of 1982. Located on the property of the Shrine, construction began in the summer of 1986.

Over the years, St. Maron has been honored by visits by several dignitaries: the first was by President of Lebanon, Camille Chamoun, who visited the parish in 1947. In 1962, the Patriarch Paul Peter Meouchi visited the United States. After a visit with President John F. Kennedy in Washington, D.C., the Patriarch traveled to Youngstown St. Maron Parish. In October 1981, His Beatitude Antoine Peter Khoraiiche paid a visit, when two Maronite Seminarians were ordained to the priesthood, Father Louis Baz and Father Adel Abou Hanna. In August 1984, a reception honored the Melkite Patriarch's visit to the Shrine and the parish.

Continuing the interest in Lebanon's welfare, Dr. Elias Saadi took a leadership role in the American Lebanese League (ALL) in its efforts to provide relief for victims of the war in Lebanon. By sponsoring raffles, dinners, and clothing drives over a period of years, the Youngstown chapter contributed greatly to the cause.

An austerity dinner was held in March 1985 at the Maronite Center for Lebanon's relief under the auspices of the Diocese of Youngstown. In November 1986, a banquet to honor Dr. Elias Saadi was held at the Maronite Center, and the proceeds benefited the helpless and hungry in Lebanon. Ambassador Abdallah Bouhabib awarded Dr. Saadi the National Order of Cedar, Grade of Knight.

In 1986, carpeting and paint updated the church for the 75th Anniversary celebration. The year was especially marked by the privilege to celebrate Monsignor Ashkar's elevation to the office of Chor-bishop, although he was reassigned to St. Maron's in Cleveland at the close of the 75th year. St. Maron of Youngstown warmly welcomed Father Jim Khoury, who served the parish until 1988, when heart troubles required him to return home to Florida. Father Anthony J. Salim was assigned as the new pastor in October of 1988, serving for eleven years; he left to serve the Maronite Seminary in Washington, D.C.

Current Day

After Father Anthony Salim left the parish, Associate Pastor Gary George was promoted to Pastor in 1999, where he led the congregation with the help of three sub-deacons and Deacon Joe Nohra. Simultaneously, Father Gary George served the Maronite youth of the country in the two Eparchies by leading retreats and workshops. In the winter of 2002, the expansion of Antioch Hall was undertaken along with the extension of the sacristy and addition of the multipurpose room to St. Ephrem's Center. On August 14, 2009, the parish celebrated the ordination of a second permanent Deacon, William George. In April of 2010, after eleven years, Father Gary was reassigned.

Chor-bishop Michael Kail became the new and current pastor in 2010. Chor-bishop Kail leads the church with the support of Reverend Deacon William George, Sub-deacon Albert Dohar, and Sub-deacon Dr. James Essad. Under Chor-bishop Kail's leadership, St. Maron continues to be an active parish, hosting an annual Back to Cedar Lake Picnic, Wine Taste, Lenten Fish Fry dinners, and Annual Food Fest. The Maronite Youth Organization (MYO) of the church is also involved in many events within the parish, eparchy, and community.

Through 100 years of praying, socializing, and sacrificing, the parishioners of St. Maron Church Youngstown have worked toward the goal of establishing a strong, dedicated church for future generations. The parishioners' ancestors used their strength and determination to build a foundation for this church, and today's families are strong, dedicated, educated, and diverse. Today's parishioners have assimilated as their ancestors wished, but they retain their rich heritage and identity.

Notes

This history was originally compiled by Judy J. Bishara, based on undated, unsigned, previously printed material. Some material was derived from a Maronite Catholic Faith project. Other material was submitted to the Ohio Historical Society and has been paraphrased and edited by Rose Sahyoun. This version was edited by Diana Awad Scrocco in 2016 with guidance from Archbishop Michael J. Kail.