

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

Growing from this small beginning the Lebanese (or "Syrian" as it was known then) community of immigrants, true to the Maronite faith, longed for the familiarity of the traditional liturgy and language. As a temporary remedy, a few priests were sent from Lebanon to act as "circuit riders," a method employed earlier in U.S. history to minister to spiritual needs. Acting as missionaries, the priests traveled across the country from town to town saying mass, hearing confessions and performing marriages and baptisms. This practice satisfied the immediate need.

The early immigrants availed themselves of other Catholic churches nearby, especially St. Columba (2). The first Maronite baptism in Youngstown is believed to be that of Tannous G. Abraham on November 15, 1902.

However, by 1902, there were enough Maronites in Youngstown that serious consideration was given to establishing a permanent church and pastor. To this end, their first church, known as St. Anthony's, was a home rented at 118 South Walnut Street, in the block now occupied by the Social Security Administration. The rectory was apparently next door at 116 South Walnut. The first Maronite priest who served was Reverend Peter Asmar (3). His length of service was from January of 1902 to the end of November 1902 and which time Rev. George Emanuel (4) became pastor. The small parish struggled to exist and changed location by the beginning of 1905 to the corner of Wood and Hazel Streets, to a building, which was previously occupied by St. Columba (5). Father Emanuel was obliged to board at the Colonial Hotel.

In January of 1906, Father Paul Eisa⁶ took up pastoral duty of St. Anthony's. Father Eisa (6) boarded with Michael and George Essad at 345 West Federal Street.

Indicating more difficulty, St. Anthony's was for a while without a pastor in (or part of) 1907. By the beginning of 1908 Rev. Paul Aser (7) was pastor of the parish. The parish temporarily relinquished its identity in 1909 after an apparent financial struggle. The building occupied by St. Anthony's Syrian Church became a church for the "Italian Catholic Church." And in 1911, the building once again became a property of St. Columba, styled as "St. Columba's Hall".

During the period from 1902-1911, a great wave of Maronite immigrants arrived in Youngstown. Working for wages of \$1.10 per day or less, many found themselves living at the Steven's House, located on East Federal Street, a large house 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). Many spoke no English and possessed nothing when they came to this country -no money, no education, no job. As Msgr. Peter Eid expressed so eloquently years later, "They had, however, two things: faith in God and faith in themselves that they would succeed." They were characterized as typically unshaken by the hardships and risks of emigration. They were rugged individualists who loved adventure and challenge. They were villagers and farmers and often poor and uneducated, but they were witty and determined to make it (9). Many intended to return to Lebanon, but stayed, partly due to the intervention of the First World War, and found new skills as steelworkers, or became self- employed in service type business establishments.

Many of the Maronites who arrived in Youngstown at this time were from the Districts of Jbail and Batroun. Youngstown became their destination because of other, earlier immigrants.

One in particular was Lahoud Yazbek and his wife, Amelia, whose generosity and hospitality to new immigrants was widely known.

A sampling of some heads of families all clustered in an ethnic neighborhood on and around East Federal Street in 1910 calls to mind many family names yet on St. Maron 's records: ABBAS, ABBEY, ABOOD, ABRAHAM, ASEFF, AZZIES, CORY, DAHAR, ELIAS, ELLIS, ESSAD, FERRIS, FERRY, GEORGE, HABIB, HA YEK, 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). Many of these must have been staunch supporters of an early Maronite Church in Youngstown.

In 1911, Right Reverend Msgr. N .S. Beggiani came to serve the Maronites (11). In 1912, with the financial assistance of several prominent Maronites, he purchased what had been the meeting place of the Trinity English Lutheran Church at 815 Wilson Avenue and named it Saint Maron Church. 818 Wilson Avenue served as the rectory. Later, 826 Wilson Avenue, then 748 Wilson Avenue was the rectory addresses and finally 823 Wilson Avenue.

Msgr. Beggiani had come to Youngstown as his first parish from Beit Chebab in Lebanon. He was held in high esteem by the parishioners and served here until 1925 when he was assigned to the Maronite 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:

- 1925- Reverend Anthony Yazbeck Khairallah
- 1925-1926 Reverend Paul Rezk (Maad) (12)
- 1927-1928 Reverend Peter V. Hyland
- 1928-1929 Reverend Emmanuel EI-Khoury Hanna. (13)

In 1929 Monsignor Elias EI- Hayek arrived in Youngstown to serve as pastor of St. Maron Church for ten years (14). Monsignor Hayek had come to the United States in 1928, briefly serving first in Fall River, Massachusetts. His arrival in Youngstown coincided with Palm Sunday of 1928. While in Youngstown, Monsignor Hayek directed the remodeling of the church, the excavation of a cellar for the parish hall, an addition for the sacristy and purchasing an adjoining house for a parish rectory. It was a credit to his industry and to the parishioners that the debt was cleared during the Depression. He died in 1939 and was buried in the church of his native village, Bejje. He was a stern but intellectual priest and he laid the groundwork in many areas for St. Maron's future growth.

Upon the death of Monsignor Hayek, Father Peter A. Eid was named as replacement at St. Maron Church. In 1939, Archbishop Joseph Schrembs of Cleveland had re- requested that Fr. Eid be brought to the United States to serve Our Lady of the Cedars of Akron. Soon afterward, Fr. Eid was transferred to Youngstown; in October of 1939, he was officially assigned to St. Maron parish.

Within the context of the larger Youngstown community, the immigrants rapidly grew strong in numbers and influence, the "Colony of 2,000 Syrians" joined together around 1934 to assert their political views and undertake charitable activities. It was a sign of the times. The Great Depression was no less severe on America's immigrants than on its native born population. 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 of the organization said that the organization while devoted to politics and charity, really was organized to advance Americanization of its people and the development physically, mentally and culturally of its youth.¹⁵

Still a focus for almost all social, as well as religious activity, the quest for a better building for the parish was sought and 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. The initial remodeling of the structure was not extensive since World War II had begun and building materials were scarce. This early remodeling in 1943 consisted of excavating a basement, remodeling the south wing, and the 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. Inauguration of the first phase of remodeling began August 21, 1944.

Forty thousand dollars was loaned from the Bishop of the Diocese at an interest rate of 2 1/2% for the second phase of remodeling of the Church, which was accomplished between the years 1946-1947. The work was done by B & B construction Company. The second phase included removal of partitions, refinishing and removal of bricks on outside walls, and building the church. The total cost of the second phase remodeling was \$32,944.32. On September 24, 1947, the newly remodeled church was dedicated. Offerings from the congregation totaled \$9,593.22.

On June 23, 1953, the third phase remodeling began. A loan was taken from Mr. Naoum Abraham of Warren for \$40,000. Remodeling included both 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, in recognition of Fr. Eid's work presented him with the keys to the city not once, but twice.

In the 1950's when St. Columba Cathedral burned, St. Maron's was used as an example for all parishes of the area because of its willingness to help pay for the cost of reconstruction. St. Maron Church and the Maronites were recognized by the Latin Church by the placement of a picture of St. Maron on the main altar of the Cathedral. Through Father Eid's efforts and leadership in 1952, the idea of a Maronite Seminary in the United States was originated. Through the efforts of Father Peter Eid's brother, Father Maroun Eid, who came to Youngstown in 1948 as Father Eid's assistant, a Maronite Seminary was established in Washington, D.C.

Father Eid also worked for the construction of the National Shrine of Our Lady of Lebanon in North Jackson, Ohio. It was in August of 1960 that the Maronite parishes of Youngstown, Akron and New Castle, Pennsylvania joined in the planning and construction of the Shrine. Eighty acres of land on Lipkey Road were purchased for \$40,000. Groundbreaking ceremonies were held August 16, 1964, 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 people in attendance. 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 had helped staff the Shrine and their convent, located on the grounds of the Shrine, had been blessed the same day the Shrine was dedicated. This was the order's first foundation outside of Lebanon.

Father Eid also purchased Cedar Lake in 1955. It was opened in 1956 as a summer recreational area mainly for parishioners but also for public use. It was closed in 1970 and is still fondly remembered as a place where families gathered for good times.

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

In 1970, after serving St. Maron's for 32 years, Father Eid requested that he be permitted to retire. The Bishop granted this request. Father Eid was active in St. Maron's and Our Lady of the Cedars Maronite Church in Akron and at the National Shrine until his death in 1982.

Upon Monsignor Eid's retirement in 1970, Reverend Wadih Peter Tayah was assigned as pastor of St. Maron's. It was during his tenure that plans for and the actual construction of Bet Maroon and the Maronite Center, took place. On April 9, 1972, groundbreaking ceremonies for the construction of Bet Maroon were realized. The buildings, designed by K. Anthony Hayek and Associates, include the church, rectory, and social recreational hall. B & B Construction, winner of the construction bid, 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 (N. Syria).

Near the feast day of St. Maron, on February 25, 1973, Bishop Zayek inaugurated the Maronite Center. A special mass was held and other distinguished guests included Senator James Abourezk of South Dakota as main speaker at the banquet following the mass, Rev. Msgr. William A. Hughes, the Mayor of Youngstown, Jack C. Hunter, Monsignor Peter Eid, Monsignor Elias El-Hayek, and Rev. Seely Beggiani, among others. Congratulatory messages were read from President Nixon and Governor of Ohio, John J. Gilligan.

On June 7, 1973, Father Tayah moved from his Shehy Street residence to the new rectory on South Meridian. Fittingly, the first liturgy celebrated at the New St. Maron 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 and Bishop James W. Malone along with Father Tayah. As the final detail in the move from Youngstown's east side, the old church was sold for \$10,000.00 and was eventually razed.

On October 20, 1974, upon request of Pastor W. Peter Tayah, Joseph Nohra was ordained to the Subdeaconate 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 parish. In 1976, Father Joseph Amar joined Father Ashkar at St. Maron's to help minister to the parish. In the same year, Father William Bonczewski was assigned to the National Shrine on July 8th to replace Father Michael Kail.

Groundbreaking ceremonies for the much needed educational center, St. Ephrem Educational Center, were held in March 1977 and construction began in April of the same year. St. Ephrem Center houses the classrooms for CCD students and a large finished basement area used for the CCD pre-school class. During the week the basement area is contracted out to Color My World day-school nursery. In addition to classrooms, the Center houses a library which has concentrated its 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)

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

In August of 1981, the first parish festival was held and continues into the present. Proceeds from the annual event are directed into the educational fund. 1983 marked the actual establishment of the education foundation and contributions to date have exceeded \$200,000. The first scholarships will be awarded in 1987.

Over the years St. Maron's has been honored by visits of several dignitaries: the first was by future 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 Kennedy in Washington, D. C., the Patriarch traveled to Youngstown to call on St. Maron's Parish. In October of 1981, His Beatitude Antoine Peter Khoraiiche paid a visit, which was especially significant as it was at this time that two Maronite Seminarians were ordained to the priesthood, Father Louis Baz and Father Adel Abou Hanna. In August of 1984, a reception was held to honor the Melkite Patriarch's visit to the Shrine and the parish.

To further enhance the beauty and religious significance of St. Maron 's structure, in 1985 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 the retirement home for priests took place in the summer of 1982. Located on the property of the Shrine, construction started in the summer of 1986.

The parish community has demonstrated a deep abiding concern for Lebanon's welfare over the last twelve years of her strife and turmoil. Acting through NAM (St. Maron Parish hosted two NAM conventions, 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.

Several parish members were staunch supporters, Dr. Elias Saadi particularly in a leadership role, of 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;

Continuing in the same tradition, an austerity dinner was held in March of 1985 at the Maronite Center for Lebanon's relief under the auspices of the Diocese. In November of 1986, a banquet to honor Dr. Elias Saadi was held at the Maronite Center with the proceeds from the dinner to benefit the helpless and hungry in Lebanon. A surprise presentation was made at this banquet to Dr. Saadi as Ambassador Abdallah Bouhabib awarded him the National Order of Cedar, Grade of Knight.

In 1986, carpeting was installed and fresh paint was applied to make the Church fresh for the 75th Anniversary celebrations. The activities surrounding the celebration are outlined elsewhere. The year was especially marked inasmuch as St. Maron's was privileged to be the scene of celebration for Msgr. Ashkar's elevation to the office of Chor-Bishop, although the close of the 75th year saw Chor-Bishop Ashkar assigned to St. Maron's in Cleveland. Having served over eleven years here, the parish was reluctant to see him depart. But the St. Maron of Youngstown community warmly welcomed Father Jim Khoury and looks forward to many years of spiritual guidance under his pastorate.

Fr. Khoury served our parish until 1988 when heart troubles forced him to return home to Florida. Fr. Anthony J. Salim was assigned as the new pastor. He was assigned to the Maronite Seminary in Washington DC. Associate Pastor Gary George was promoted to pastor, where he continues to lead the congregation with the help of 3 newly ordained Sub Deacons and Deacon Joe Nohra.

Footnotes

- Compiled by Judy J. Bishara. Some material is based on undated, unsigned material, previously printed. Some material was derived from a CCD project headed by Sister Isabelle and directed by Ginny Yazbek in 1977. Other material, submitted to the Ohio Historical Society, is believed to have been compiled by Ron Galip.
1. These are traditional dates. Actual dates from Mahoning County Naturalization Records indicate that Sliman Kutthar [sic] arrived in the U.S. in April 1883. His widow, in an interview in the Youngstown Telegram on March 22, 1934, stated that they came from New York to Youngstown in 1889. The same article quotes Nahome Joseph as arriving in Youngstown also in 1889. Dates for Michael Thume and John Habib are not found in the naturalization records. Other "Syrians" in these records are: Thomas Mansour, September 15, 1877; Charles Ferris, March 15, 1880; John Mike, July 23, 1880; F. M. Therby, September 6, 1880; Ellione Nader, November 14, 1880; Joseph Deip, October 1884; N. J. Seb, December 26, 1884; Albert Thomas, March 8, 1885; Bonlas Rizollh Zehem, June, 1885; and Thomas Haket, July 21, 1885. Source: Abstracts of Mahoning County Naturalizations, by William Powers to be published in 1987. Another early immigrant according to the 1900 census for Youngstown might be Elias Dohar who was born in 1860 and came to the U.S. in 1881. The census does not specify length of time in Youngstown.
 2. Rev. Edward Mears of St. Columba performed some early marriages: Elias Dahar and Lulu Rohanna in 1897 [Mahoning County, Ohio Marriage Record 9:470] and George Abraham and Sophia Faras in 1901 [Mahoning County Marriage Record 13:282].
 3. Rev. Peter J. Assmar [sic], Catholic, licensed in Mahoning County 27 January 1902 (Ministers License Record 1, page 155).
 4. Rev. George Emanuel has had the name "Gitawe" associated with him according to some oral traditions among parishioners. City Directories for years 1903, 1904 and 1905 list his name as Rev. George Em(m)anuel, as does his minister's license in Mahoning County, (Ministers License Record 1, page 162).
 5. Youngstown City Directory for 1904. However St. Columba's occupied another corner also on Wood Street. St. Columba's possessed two buildings and rented or loaned the one to the Syrian parish. See Atlas of Mahoning County, 1899-1900.
 6. Rev. Paul Eis(s)a has had the name "Achkouti" associated with him also according to parish tradition. City Directory for 1906 and his license list him as Rev. Paul Eisa -Syrian Catholic (Ministers License Record 1, page 179).
 7. This could be Rev. Paul Eisa. The City Directory for 1908 lists the pastor as "Rev Paul Aser." Although possible, there is no other evidence at this time for a priest by this name having served.
 8. Oral tradition attributed to Msgr. Peter Eid.

9. "New Frontiers in American-Lebanese Relations," Abdallah Bouhabib, Ambassador of Lebanon to the United States, 1986. Published by the Embassy of Lebanon, 2560 28th St., N.W., Washington, D.C.
10. Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910. Youngstown, Ohio, Enumeration District 110. There were approximately 200 "Syrians" in the neighborhood.
11. Rev. Nematallah Beggiani, Roman Catholic, licensed in Mahoning County, 21 September 1911 (Ministers License Record 1, page 214).
12. Rev. Paul Risk (the name "Ma ad" was not used) was licensed 29 April 1926 (Ministers License Record 2, page 92). Apparently Father Anthony Yazbeck Khairallah was here briefly -no record was found of his license.
13. Reference was found for Father Hanna, pastor of St. Maron's Syrian Maronite Church in the Youngstown City Directory in 1929.
14. Rev. Elias Hayek was licensed in Mahoning County II June 1930 (Ministers License Record 2, page 156).
15. See Youngstown Telegram, October 19, 1934. Other officers of the organization were John Rushwin, Treasurer, T.S. Saadie, President and Joseph Alexander, Vice-president.
16. Rev. Joseph Amar in "St. Ephrem Educational Center, Summer 1978" bulletin.