

From Lebanon to North Carolina

Maronite Catholics seek to strengthen, grow their church in Southeast

by JOHN STRANGE

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DURHAM -- Father Joseph Thomas has a gift for some North Carolina Catholics -- a gift of "self-knowing" and a return to the traditions of their ancestors in the Maronite Catholic Church.

"I encourage the people of Maronite origin, people who all their lives have heard the word 'Maronite' but never knew what it meant, to make themselves available" and open-minded when considering the Eastern church, Father Thomas, pastor of the Maronite Catholic mission of St. Sharbel in Raleigh, told the NC Catholic.

St. Sharbel hosted the Nov. 14-16 Southeast regional conference of the National Apostolate of Maronites, where much of the focus was on how to strengthen and grow the Maronite Catholic Church in the Southeast.

The Maronite Church is one of 22 Eastern Catholic churches with origins in Eastern Europe, Asia or Africa, often identified by a national or ethnic character. The Maronites, for example, trace their history back to St. Maron (born about 350) and the ancient monasteries in the mountains of Syria and Lebanon.

The Eastern churches are in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church, equal parts in the body of the Catholic Church, although they have their own distinctive liturgical and legal systems. It is not known how many of today's North Carolina Catholics have their roots in Lebanon and the Maronite Catholic Church. What is clear, however, is that the Diocese of Raleigh owes much of its early development to Lebanese immigrants who settled in North Carolina years ago.

No other state in the country has had more early influence from Maronites than North Carolina, Father Thomas said.

Father Robert Lawson, a retired priest of the Diocese of Raleigh, said during the conference that to find Lebanese immigrants in North Carolina one had only to "follow the railroad."

The rail brought immigrants from the north, branching off through Raleigh in the east and Charlotte in the west. Many of these new Americans found their homes in these cities and at other railroad stops.

They came to the United States to escape religious persecution in Lebanon, Father Lawson said, but in North Carolina they found no established Maronite church and much prejudice. Not only were they foreigners in early 20th-century North Carolina; they were also Catholics.

They found Catholic parishes struggling to get their footing in often hostile communities. There were few Catholics, few priests, few churches.

"People rightly came to the country and joined the Latin Rite Catholic Church," Father Thomas said.

Father Lawson was born in Durham in 1923, the year before the Vatican established the Diocese of Raleigh.

"It was the last mission territory in all of the United States," Father Lawson said. "It was called the China of the Americas."

There were 5,000 Catholics in the whole state, he said, and of those, "at least 1,500 were Lebanese."

Father Lawson said he and other pioneering priests in North Carolina came to appreciate and love the Lebanese Catholics for their undying faithfulness and devotion to the Catholic Church.

He said that before the conference he had spoken to retired Msgr. James Jones, who asked Father Lawson to bring a message to the conference: "Tell them that no one in the state of North Carolina has been better, more faithful to the Church than the Lebanese Catholics. They kept the faith in the state when there was nobody else."

He and Father Jones represent two of the oldest priests of the Diocese of Raleigh. "We both say we depended on the faithfulness of the Lebanon people. This is your diocese. We are very proud of you."

For his part, Father Thomas first came to North Carolina in the early 1970s. Bishop Vincent Waters had long lobbied the bishop of the Eparchy of St. Maron of Brooklyn, the Maronite diocese that covered the entire eastern seaboard, to send a Maronite priest who could serve the Maronites living in North Carolina.

Father Thomas was assigned to establish a mission in Fayetteville, now St. Michael the Archangel Church on Arsenal Avenue.

He found initial resistance on the part of Lebanese Catholics to join the mission. They had become ensconced in their Roman Catholic parishes and in the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. Further, they expressed concern that to move to the Maronite community would be to segregate the Lebanese Catholics from the rest of the community, something they hated to do in the racially divisive South.

But Father Thomas said many came to a "growing love and admiration for the tradition that was their own, but one that they never knew."

It is the same today for Catholics who have a Maronite tradition in their past, he said. "They have never known what it meant to be a Maronite Catholic."

Father Thomas and others at the conference said that while they wish to reach North Carolina Catholics who have Maronite roots, they are in no way in "competition" with the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, they said, they want to especially reach those Maronite Catholics who have "fallen away" and are not active in either church.

In addition, they said, in today's modern Catholic Church, it is acceptable for Catholics of both traditions to participate in both rites if they wish.

What is important, said Ed Shiner, said executive director of the National Apostolate of Maronites, is that people are aware of what is available to them.

"They should be aware of who they are and where their roots are," he said.

Shiner said the Maronite liturgy is a traditional one usually featuring three languages: Arabic, Syriac, and English. People are "intrigued" by the liturgy, he said, its spirituality, and the "poetry of our liturgical texts."

While the Maronite Catholic Church is a traditional Eastern Catholic church with roots as far back as the year 350 with St. Maron's birth, it is growing and changing with the times. Especially in the United States, Father Thomas said, it is no longer "only" an ethnic Lebanese church.

"We were never meant to be an ethnic church," he said.

Boston's Roseanne Solomon, a past president of the national apostolate, said the Maronite Church has roots in Lebanon, but being Lebanese is not the most important thing about being a Maronite.

"My father was Irish and English," she said, "and he was a very good Maronite. He had not one ounce of Lebanese blood."

Good Maronites are faithful, she said, and "we open our arms and take in anyone who wants to be a part of us."

Shiner predicted that in 50 years the Maronite Church will still have a core that is distinctly Lebanese, but its members will be a "tossed salad" of different races and nationalities.

Father Thomas likened the synod in importance and impact to the Second Vatican Council. It was the first such synod since 1736, he said, and while the second session of the synod begins next October, already it has sent an important message to Maronite Catholics worldwide.

Before the synod, Father Thomas said, the Maronite Church outside of Lebanon was known as the "Church of the Diaspora," or the church of immigrants.

But one of the first findings of the synod was that the Maronite Catholic Church in the world will be known instead as the "Church of the Expansion."

"It is the very nature of the church is to extend itself throughout the world," Father Thomas said. "It is within our nature to expand ... for the church to spread all around the world, bringing our traditions and enriching the Catholic Church in its full glory."

John Strange is the editor of the NC Catholic.

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