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St. George Maronite Church observes jubilee

By Frances Borsodi Zajac, Herald-Standard
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The Most Rev. Stephen Hector Doueih of Brooklyn, N.Y., bishop of Eparchy of St. Maron, will be the main celebrant for the pontifical divine liturgy on Sunday at 11 a.m. at St. George Maronite Church in Uniontown when the parish concludes its diamond jubilee celebration.

Chorbishop John D. Faris, whose home parish is St. George, the Rev. James Root of Our Lady of Lebanon Church in Carnegie and the Rev. Joseph R. David, pastor of St. George, will concelebrate the liturgy. The Knights of Columbus and members of the Order of St. Sharbel will serve as honor guard.

A balloon launch will follow the liturgy. A reception will begin in the social hall at 12:30 p.m. and a formal dinner will be served. The dinner includes a short program with attorney Simon B. John as master of ceremonies. Guest speaker will be attorney Joseph M. George. Uniontown Mayor James Sileo will give remarks.

Sunday's events mark the end of a year of celebrating St. George's 75th anniversary. Last November, the church celebrated the 25th anniversary of Chorbishop Faris. In April, Chorbishop Gregory John Mansour, a former pastor, visited the church. St. George hosted a homecoming picnic in August.

The church also has two new icons in the sanctuary: Christ Enthroned and Mary Enthroned. Standing 4-foot-by-8-foot, they were created by artist Robert Lint of New Mexico. A new piece of artwork was also placed on the front of the altar this year. It shows the hand of God in a sunburst above the Holy Spirit shown as a dove, above the Eucharist in a chalice,

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above the Book of Seven Seals.

"It's been a joyful year," said Rev. David. "There's a deep commitment here. People are very committed to the parish."

Rev. David and subdeacon Tom R. George explained that St. George is one of only four Maronite Catholic churches in this area: Uniontown, Pittsburgh, New Castle and Wheeling, W.Va. There is another church in Philadelphia. Altogether, there are 60 Maronite Catholic parishes, from coast to coast. Rev. David estimated there are 600,000 Maronite Catholics in the country. The church has two bishops in the United States: Bishop Doueihy resides in Brooklyn and Bishop Robert Shaheen resides in St. Louis. Chorbishop Mansour is first assistant to Bishop Shaheen.

"For a small town, this is a large parish," said Rev. David, reporting that St. George has 200 families as members. "There isn't a town this size in the country that has this large a parish."

According to a history of St. George Maronite Parish, which serves all of Fayette County:

The beginnings of the Maronite community in Uniontown extend back to 1890, with the arrival of the first Syrians and Lebanese in the area. (Rev. David and George reported that the majority of parishioners at St. George came from a village called Abdilly in Lebanon.)

Most of the early immigrants attended St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic Church or other Catholic parishes in the area.

In 1922, the Rev. Paul Abi-Rizk, a Maronite priest from Lebanon, founded the first place of worship for the Maronite congregation on Wilson Avenue in Uniontown.

In 1927, the Rev. Elias Basil, also a Maronite priest from Lebanon, was assigned by Pittsburgh Bishop Hugh C. Boyle of the Latin rite Catholic Church to serve the Maronites of the Uniontown area. Through Rev. Basil's supervision, the Maronite congregation built a church at 136 Lincoln St. that was completed in March 1928.

In 1960, the parish undertook a building fund for a new church. A tract of land was purchased from the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority behind the old church, extending eastward to Madison Avenue and comprising nearly four acres. Bishop William G. Connare, of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Greensburg, lent the congregation \$225,000. Thad M. Pyzdrowski, a local architect, drew up the plans.

In June 1966, Pope Paul VI appointed the Most Rev. Francis M. Zayek as eparch for all Maronites in the United States.

Until that time, the Maronites had been under the jurisdiction of the bishops of the Latin rite Catholic Church. Bishop Zayek gave approval for St. George to begin construction of the new church building.

The cornerstone was laid Nov. 5, 1967, at the new church, whose address was on the newly named Lebanon Terrace.

The first divine liturgy was concelebrated on Christmas Eve by the Rev. Elias G. Nader, pastor, and the Rev. Joseph J. Shaheen, assistant pastor.

The Rev. Peter J. Mahfoud became pastor in 1969 and worked hard to pay off the mortgage, accomplishing the task in 1977. Rev. Mahfoud led the parish in other fund-raising goals that included paving the parking lot, installing air-conditioning, new furnishings for the church and the creation of a bell tower in the front yard of the rectory.

Priests who have served St. George include the Rev. Paul Abi-Rizik (later chorbishop) who founded a place of worship in 1922 and was assisted by the Revs. Peter Elian and Gabriel Koury; the Rev. Elias Basil (later chorbishop), 1927-28; the Rev. Nehemtallah Hayek (later chorbishop), 1928-47; the Rev. Harold Phillips from St. Vincent Archabbey in Latrobe, who served on an interim basis, and the Rev. Thomas J. Dunn of St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic Church in Uniontown was administrator until late 1950; the Rev. Elias G. Nader, 1950 to 1969; the Rev. Joseph Shaheen, first and only assistant at St. George, 1967-69; the Rev. Peter J. Mahfoud, 1969 to 1983, and who now serves as pastor emeritus; the Rev. Gregory John Mansour (now chorbishop), 1983-1994; the Rev. Christopher J. Henderson, 1994-98; and the Rev. Joseph R. David, present pastor.

St. George has produced several vocations, including the Rev. Paul Abi-Rizk, Monsignor Joseph C. AbiNader, the Rev. Maron AbiNader, the Rev. Peter Elian, Chorbishop John A. Faris, the Rev. Gabriel Koury, the Rev. Elias G. Nader, Subdeacon Thomas R. George, Sister Jeannette AbiNader and Sister Linda Yankoski.

The history noted, "In the 75 years since the building of the first church, St. George Parish has grown to become a diverse parish which welcomes people from many different backgrounds and paths without ignoring the Faith of the Mountains which the earliest members practiced and left as a beautiful and precious spiritual heritage.

"Members of the parish are actively engaged beyond the parish in numerous service projects within the greater Uniontown community, and St. George is known and respected as 'the little church with the big heart.'"

"Maronites are people who are very committed to the Lord and to his Church," said Rev. David. "Our origin goes back to the Acts of the Apostles when the first Christians were called at Antioch. St. Peter, prior to going to Rome, was at Antioch and St. Paul was there."

George noted, "The people from Lebanon came here and they lived that type of life: attached to the Church, its beliefs and teachings.

"They brought that here. The deep religious beliefs came from the church in Lebanon."

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