

St. Anthony's Ready To Host Its Third NAM Convention



St. Anthony Maronite Church, Glen Allen, Va., host of the 2007 NAM Convention.

St. Anthony Church, host of the 2007 National Apostolate of Maronites convention, has grown to be one of the religious and cultural cornerstones of the Richmond, Va., region since its founding over ninety years ago.

Now located on fifteen wooded acres in the western suburb of Glen Allen, Va., St. Anthony's and its people have overcome early prejudices, a fire that destroyed its first building and shifting residential patterns to reach its current level of success.

"We sometimes take for granted what we have," said Monsignor George M. Sebaali, St. Anthony's Pastor. "While today's parishioners are responsible for the vitality that St. Anthony's now enjoys, we cannot forget all the hard work, sacrifices and wise decisions of our ancestors and predecessors that formed the basis of who we are today as a church and a community."

NAM 2007, which will be held July 25-27 at the Marriott Richmond, will be the third NAM convention hosted by St. Anthony's. The church and its members previously hosted conventions in 1972 and 1988.

The first Lebanese immigrants came to the Richmond area around 1895. With no Maronite church nearby, the newly arrived Maronites attended St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church in the city's Church Hill neighborhood. Once or twice a year, a Maronite priest would visit Richmond and celebrate a Maronite liturgy in the home of a Maronite family.

In 1902, Abraham Sanyour and Mansour John Kouri organized the "Star of the East Syrian Society" with a dozen charter members to promote the Maronite faith and traditions in the community. They petitioned the local bishop, asking to buy a section of the Catholic cemetery for Maronites. The bishop turned down the request, instead offering undeveloped land at the far end of the cemetery. For many years, Maronite graves were restricted to the segregated portion of the cemetery.

“As time went by, people became less aware of why the Maronite section was way in the back with a separate entrance” said Arthur Zohab, a long-time member of St. Anthony’s and chairman of the church’s convention committee. “They thought it was something special and didn’t understand the prejudice involved.”

By 1909, the Maronite population in the region had grown to the point where Maronite liturgies could no longer be accommodated in local homes. At that time, a new bishop for Richmond was appointed and he was more sympathetic to the needs of the Maronites. He granted Maronites the use of St. Patrick’s Church for two hours every Sunday.

In 1913, Maronites in Richmond were able to rent a hall atop a candy factory and renovated it into a chapel. A short time later, Father Abdulla Tarabay was sent to Richmond from Wilkes-Barre, Penn., to become the first parish pastor.

Tragedy struck Richmond’s Maronite community in late 1915, when the building containing the chapel burned down. Parishioners acted quickly to find a new home for their church.

In 1916, a chapel-like building was purchased not far away and renovated into a church. The Star of the East Society voted to name it St. Anthony Maronite Church. Father Tarabay stayed at St. Anthony’s until 1936, when he returned to Lebanon.

It was not until 1938 that another Maronite priest was sent to Richmond, Father Anthony Korkemaz. St. Anthony’s grew considerably under Father Korkemaz’s direction. By 1948, it moved into a new and larger location in the growing West End of the city. The hard-working parish was able to pay off its mortgage in just two years.

Father Korkemaz, who was elevated to Chorbishop, was succeeded in 1960 by another visionary priest, Father Beshara Salwan. It was Father Salwan who led the drive to purchase fifteen acres in what was then a very rural section of Richmond’s western suburbs to provide for future growth and to follow the move of parishioners in that direction.

Starting in the mid 1960s, the new land was first developed into a recreation and retreat center for the parishioners, and then the church was moved there in 1979. The complex also includes a social hall, daycare center, swimming pool and bathhouse, picnic pavilion, baseball field, basketball court and tennis courts.

Father Salwan, who was elevated to Monsignor, stayed at St. Anthony’s until he passed way in 1984. By that time, Father George Sebaali had been assigned as Administrator and then Pastor.

Father Sebaali, now also elevated to Monsignor, has continued to lead the growth of St. Anthony’s. It is now over 300 families strong and growing. St. Anthony’s may be best know in Central Virginia for its annual Lebanese Food Festival, a project initiated by Monsignor Sebaali. It is held in May, the weekend after Mother’s Day. This year’s festival attracted well over 20,000 people during its three days.

“We know it will be a challenge to host NAM 07 just two months after our food festival, but I am confident that the people of St. Anthony’s are ready for the task,” Monsignor Sebaali said. “We are eager to share our history and our future with our fellow Maronites.” □