

Parish History

Our Lady of Lebanon Church in Miami had its official beginnings on September 8, 1973, a day on which we celebrate two feasts of the Virgin Mary: Her Nativity and Her title as the Patroness of Cuba, the Virgin of Charity (*La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*). At that time, Archbishop Francis Zayek was the Bishop of the Maronites in the United States. He personally founded the parish on that day, celebrating the first Mass at Saints Peter and Paul Church in Miami. Approximately 350 people participated in the Mass and took part in the luncheon afterwards, which was hosted by Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Abraham.

Archbishop Zayek was so impressed with the response of the faithful that he appointed the newly ordained priest, Father Joseph Kaddo, as the first Administrator of Our Lady of Lebanon Mission in Miami, on September 28, 1973. The first Mass was celebrated by Father Kaddo at the Assumption Ukrainian Catholic Church. The first Sunday collection taken was \$143.26. Father Kaddo lived in an apartment provided by Mr. and Mrs. Woodrow Woody and later by Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Abraham. Subsequently, Father Kaddo began celebrating Sunday Masses at the Syrian Lebanon American Club on Coral Way.

The official parish registers indicate that the first Baptism and Confirmation was that of Joseph Coury Lawrence, whose parents are Michael and Patricia Lawrence, on March 31, 1974. The first child to receive First Holy Communion was Laila Gacel, child of Alfredo and Yasmin Gacel, on September 8, 1974. She was alone making her First Communion on that day, the first anniversary of the founding of the parish. Those sacraments were celebrated by Father Joseph Kaddo. The first Marriage was that of Ameen Zaidan and Acine Azouri, on December 3, 1974, celebrated by Chorbishop Mansour Stephen of Brooklyn, New York. The first funeral was that of John Yunis who died on January 6, 1974 and was buried by Father Kaddo on January 8, from Saint Hugh's Church in Coconut Grove.

Church sponsored clubs soon began to form and various fund-raisers were held. The first formal Ladies' Guild meeting took place on March 17, 1974, and their first "Card Party" which took place that May, proved to be a great success. On November 7, 1974, the first parish *Hafli*, "An Evening in Lebanon", was held and realized a profit of \$3,339.69. A men's club was then formed called "The Saint Maron's Men's Society". That club held a "One Hundred Club Raffle" on April 19, 1975, and made a net profit of \$6,000.00.

Father Joseph Kaddo was transferred at the end of May, 1975 and Father Kenneth Michael was appointed as Temporary Administrator pending the arrival of a more

permanent priest. He served a brief tenure of three months.

On August 31, 1975, Father Wadih Peter Tayah was appointed Pastor of Our Lady of Lebanon Mission. He wasted no time getting started and within four months, on December 29, 1975, the current property at 2055 Coral Way in Miami, was purchased for \$386,256.76. This former "Food Fair Supermarket" would serve as an all-purpose building providing ample space for a church, offices and a social hall, as well as retail rental space. Father Tayah celebrated the first Mass there, in the midst of empty grocery shelves and freezers, on December 30, 1975.

Renovations on the old supermarket began on March 29, 1976, under the supervision of Architect Maria Rosa Sellek and the Engineering firm of Planas and Franyieh. The completed project, Our Lady of Lebanon Church and Maronite Center, was dedicated on the weekend of November 27-28, 1976. At that time the church was elevated from the status of a Mission to that of a Parish by Archbishop Zayek.

Father Tayah continued to live in the apartment provided by Mr. and Mrs. Abraham. That changed on July 31, 1980, with the acquisition of the current rectory at 420 Como Avenue in Coral Gables. The house of approximately 3,000 square feet, was purchased for \$162,000.00.

In 1990, the parish was kept very busy with the remodeling of the church, offices and social hall. Also, in August of that same year, it hosted the annual Convention of the National Apostolate of Maronites (NAM).

Father Tayah served the parish until the end of 1995, when he was appointed by Pope John Paul II as the first Maronite Bishop of the newly established Maronite Diocese in Mexico.

While waiting for the arrival of another Maronite priest, thanks to special arrangements made between Archbishop Zayek and Archbishop Favalora, Father Jorge Perales, of the Archdiocese of Miami, served in the interim as Temporary Administrator for a few months.

March 19, 1996, the Feast of Saint Joseph, marked the arrival of Father Michael Thomas. On February 1, 1999, the part of the building which served as the church was totally demolished and a new church began to be constructed on the same site. The cost of the new church was approximately \$1,100,000.00. It was Dedicated by Consecration on December 12, 1999, by Bishop Stephen Hector Doueih. The Architect for the church was Jorge Azze and the contractors were Jad Lahoud and Nazih Hardan. Funding for this project was provided totally by contributions made by parishioners and friends. Special mention must be made of two large donations, one made by Mr. Anthony Abraham, whose support has made this dream a reality, and the other by Mrs. Amelia Coury and her family, who have certainly gone above and beyond the call of duty. Thanks to the generosity of so many families in the parish, the entire project was paid for upon its completion. This project included proper drainage for the parking lot and its resurfacing and the widening of the sidewalk in front of the new church on Coral Way.

On June 20, 2000, the parish purchased the vacant parcel of land adjacent to its parking lot at 1901 Coral Way for \$318,000.00. With this purchase, the entire city block facing Coral Way now belongs to Our Lady of Lebanon Parish.

As the parish continued to grow, Father Michel Friefer was assigned in May of 2000 as a parochial vicar to assist the pastor in serving the needs of the faithful. Three years later he was replaced by Father Jorge Perales who serves at the same time, as parochial vicar at the Church of Saint John Bosco.

The parish sponsored the education of its first permanent deacon, Charles Gebron and witnessed his diaconal ordination on February 27, 2000. Deacon Gebron was transferred to Springfield, Massachusetts in November of that same year. Currently the parish is sponsoring the education of its second candidate for the permanent diaconate, Simon Abi Nader, who has been serving the parish as a sub-deacon since June 3, 2001.

On March 2, 2001, the Feast of Saint John Maron who was the first Maronite Patriarch of Antioch, the parish was blessed by a truly historic event with the visit of the Maronite Patriarch from Lebanon, Cardinal Nasrallah Peter Sfeir, who celebrated Mass on that day along with ten other Maronite bishops.

During the year 2002 the parishioners once again came through by covering all of the expenses for the complete replacement of the 20,000 square foot roof of the parish hall at an expense of \$53,000.00.

In May 2004, Msgr. Michael Thomas was named Vicar General and Chancellor of the Eparchy of Saint Maron of Brooklyn, New York and Fr. Elie Mikhael was appointed as the new Pastor on July 10, 2004.

Our Lady of Lebanon Church has truly been blessed by God in its brief history, under the patronage of His Blessed Mother and we pray that He will continue to shed His Graces upon the parish for many years to come.