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## The Self-Ruled Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America

“And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.” + Acts 11:26

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## History of the Archdiocese

By way of introduction

### THE SELF-RULED ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN ARCHDIOCESE OF NORTH AMERICA

#### *A Brief History*

**THE CITY OF ANTIOCH** on-the-Orontes was the most important city of the Roman Province of Syria, and, as such, served as the capital city of the Empire’s civil “Diocese of the East.” The Church in Antioch dates back to the days of the foremost apostles, SS. Peter and Paul, as is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. Scripture refers to Antioch as the place where the followers of Jesus Christ were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26), and records that Nicholas, one of the original seven deacons, was from that city—and may have been its first convert (Acts 6:5). During the persecution of the Church which followed the death of St. Stephen the Proto-Martyr, members of the infant community in Jerusalem sought refuge in Antioch (Acts 11:19), and while St. Peter served as the first bishop of the city, SS. Paul and Barnabas set out on their great missionary journeys to Gentile lands (Acts 13:1) -- establishing a tradition which would last for centuries, as from Antioch missionaries planted churches throughout greater Syria, Asia Minor, the Caucasus Mountains, Mesopotamia, Greece The Balkans, Italy and most of the Mediterranean Region.

At the first Ecumenical Council, convened in the year 325 by Emperor Constantine the Great, the primacy of the bishop (patriarch) of Antioch over all bishops of the civil Diocese of the East was formally sanctioned. The Great Schism of 1054 resulted in the separation of Rome, seat of the Patriarchate of the West, from the four Eastern Patriarchs of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem<sup>1</sup>.

During the reign of the Egyptian Mamelukes, conquerors of Syria in the 13th century, the Patriarchal residence was transferred to the ancient city of Damascus, where a Christian community had flourished since apostolic times (Acts 9), and which had succeeded earthquake-prone Antioch as the civil capital of Syria. The headquarters of the Patriarchate, which has jurisdiction over all dioceses within its ancient geographic boundaries (Syria, Lebanon Turkey, Iraq, and the Arabic Peninsula) as well as others in the Americas, Australia, and Western Europe, are located in Damascus on “the street called Straight” (Acts 9:11).

#### **The Archdiocese of North America**

In the late 19th century, events in their homelands forced Antiochian Christians to join the ranks of Europeans who emigrated to other parts of the world. The spiritual needs of those who settled in North America were first met through the “Syro-Arabian Mission” of the Russian Orthodox Church, which has had a presence in North America since 1794. In 1895, a “Syrian Orthodox Benevolent Society” was organized by Antiochian immigrants in New York City, with Dr. Ibrahim Arbeely, a prominent Damascene physician, serving as its first president.

Conscious of the needs of his fellow countrymen and co-religionists, Dr. Arbeely wrote to Raphael Hawaweeny a young Damascene clergyman serving as Professor of the Arabic Language at the Orthodox Theological Academy in Kazan, Russia, inviting him to come to New York to organize and pastor the first Arabic-speaking parish on the continent. Fr. Raphael, a missionary at heart, went to the imperial capital of St. Petersburg to meet with His Grace, Nicholas, ruling bishop of the Russian Diocese of the Aleutian Islands and North America, who was then in Russia to recruit new missionaries. After being canonically received under the omophorion of Bishop NICHOLAS, Father Hawaweeny arrived in the United States on November 17, 1895.

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Upon his arrival in New York, Archimandrite Raphael established a parish at 77 Washington Street in lower Manhattan, at the center of the Syrian immigrant community. By 1900, approximately 3,000 of these immigrants had moved across the East River, shifting the community center to Brooklyn. Accordingly, in 1902, the parish purchased a larger church building in that borough, at 301-303 Pacific Street. The Church, assigned to the heavenly patronage of St. Nicholas, the Wonderworker of Myra in Lycia, was renovated for Orthodox worship and consecrated on October 27, 1902, by NICHOLAS' successor, Archbishop TIKHON<sup>2</sup>. St. Nicholas Cathedral later relocated to 355 State Street, Brooklyn, and is today considered the "mother parish" of the Archdiocese.

At the request of Archbishop TIKHON, Hawaweeny was elected to serve as his vicar bishop, to head the Syro-Arabian Mission. His consecration as "Bishop of Brooklyn" took place at St. Nicholas Church on Pacific Street on March 12, 1904. Bishop RAPHAEL thus became the first Orthodox bishop of any nationality to be consecrated in North America. He crisscrossed the United States and Canada, and even ventured deep into Mexico, visiting his scattered flock and gathering them into parish communities. He founded al-Kalimat [The Word] magazine in 1905, and published many liturgical books in Arabic for use in his parishes, in the Middle East, and in emigration around the world. After a brief but very fruitful ministry, Bishop RAPHAEL fell asleep in Christ on February 27, 1915, at the age of fifty-four. In 2000 Bishop RAPHAEL was glorified as a saint by the Orthodox Church in America with participation from hierarchs of the Antiochian Archdiocese. His feast day is celebrated on the first Saturday in November.

Not long afterwards, the tragedy of the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia brought financial and administrative ruin to the Orthodox churches in North America, and shattered the measure of unity they had enjoyed. Movements arose in every ethnic group to divide it into ecclesiastical factions. Deprived of its beloved founder and bishop, the small Syro-Arabian Mission fell victim to this divisiveness, and it would take sixty years from the death of Bishop RAPHAEL—in June of 1975 -- for total jurisdictional and administrative unity to be

restored to the children of Antioch in North America. Some communities desired to remain under the jurisdiction of the Russian Church, while others opted to be received into the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Antioch. The hierarchs of that period were: Metropolitan GERMANOS (Shehadi), Archbishop AFTIMIOS (Ofiesh), Archbishop VICTOR (Abo-Assaley), and Bishop EMMANUEL (Abo-Hatab). By 1936, all of the parishes were in one or two Antiochian archdioceses—the Archdiocese of New York, headed by Metropolitan ANTONY (Bashir) and the Archdiocese of Toledo, Ohio, and Dependencies, headed by Metropolitan SAMUEL (David).

On June 24, 1975, Metropolitan PHILIP (Saliba) of the Antiochian Archdiocese of New York and Metropolitan MICHAEL (Shaheen) of the Antiochian Archdiocese of Toledo, Ohio, and Dependencies signed the Articles of Reunification which restored administrative unity among all Antiochian Orthodox Christians in the United States and Canada. This document was presented to the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate, which ratified the contents on August 19, 1975, recognizing PHILIP as Metropolitan-Primate and MICHAEL as Auxiliary-Archbishop. Archbishop MICHAEL fell asleep in the Lord on October 24, 1992.

In October, 2003, in a history-making decision, the Holy Synod of Antioch unanimously approved a resolution which granted this Archdiocese the status of a self-ruling Archdiocese. Effective with this resolution, the Auxiliary Bishops took their positions as Diocesan Bishops.

Diocesan Bishops serving the Archdiocese are Bishop ANTOUN (Khouri) of Miami and the Southeast consecrated January 9, 1983, at Brooklyn's St. Nicholas Cathedral; Bishop JOSEPH (Al-Zehlaoui) of Los Angeles and the West, consecrated May 8, 1991, at Damascus' St. Mary Cathedral; Bishop BASIL (Essey) of Wichita and Mid-America consecrated May 31, 1992, at Wichita's St. George Cathedral; Bishop THOMAS (Joseph) of Oakland PA and the East consecrated December 5, 2004 at the Patriarchal Cathedral in Damascus, Syria; Bishop MARK (Maymon) of Toledo and the Midwest consecrated December 5, 2004 at the Patriarchal Cathedral in Damascus, Syria; Bishop ALEXANDER (Mufarrij) of Ottawa Eastern Canada and Upstate New York consecrated December 5, 2004 at the Patriarchal Cathedral in Damascus, Syria. The Metropolitan is a member of the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Antioch, the chair of the Local Synod, and a member of the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA)<sup>3</sup>.

Today the faithful of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America are served by seven hierarchs and over four hundred clergy in 238 churches and missions throughout the United States and Canada<sup>4</sup>. In summary, there are Twenty-three established departments and commissions, and four service organizations, which exist on the parochial, diocesan, and Archdiocesan levels: the Fellowship of St. John the Divine, Teen SOYO (Society of Orthodox Youth Organizations), AOCWNA (Antiochian Orthodox Christian Women of North America), and the Order of St. Ignatius of Antioch. The WORD magazine, published monthly (except July and August), continues to be the official publication of the Archdiocese.

In 1978 the Archdiocese acquired the Antiochian Village, over 300 acres of property located near the town of Ligonier in the Laurel Highlands of southwestern Pennsylvania. In addition to the popular summer camp program, which attracts children and young adults from throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico, the Village is also the site of the Heritage and Learning Center □ a modern conference facility housing one hundred guest rooms, and extensive theological and historical library, and a museum featuring an outstanding Icon collection and cultural displays. The master Plan also foresees a retirement village for senior citizen and a monastic community.

Following the completion of their undergraduate studies, candidates for ordination to the holy priesthood receive their theological education at one of the Orthodox seminaries to which they are assigned by the Archdiocese. Their program is augmented by specialized courses offered annually by the Antiochian House of Studies, held for two

weeks at the Heritage and Learning Center in Ligonier, PA during the last week of August/first week of September. The Antiochian House of Studies offers a Master of Arts degree (M.A.) in conjunction with the University of Balamand, and a Doctor of Ministry (D. Min.) degree in cooperation with the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. This degree is oriented to those clergy who hold at least an M.Div. degree and have served in full time ministry for no less than three years. Classes are held at the Heritage and Learning Center, and are offered on an intensive basis three times each year. A biennial Archdiocesan Clergy Symposium, under the auspices of the Antiochian House of Studies is convened for continuing education of all priests and deacons in the Archdiocese.

The Archdiocesan Board of Trustees, consisting of over fifty elected and appointed clergy and lay persons, and the Metropolitan's Advisory Council, consisting of clergy and lay representatives from each parish and mission, meet regularly to assist the hierarchs in the administration of the Archdiocese. Each summer, Parish Life Conferences are convened in each of the following dioceses: New York, Worcester and New England, Ottawa and Upstate New York, Miami and the Southeast, Wichita and Mid-America, Los Angeles and the West, Toledo and the Midwest, Eagle River and the Northwest, and Pittsburgh and Tri-State. These attract thousands of people of all ages from parishes and missions. The largest legislative body of the Archdiocese – the General Assembly meets in convention biennially.

A pioneer in the use of the English language in the Orthodox churches in the New World, the Antiochian Archdiocese has since 1917 kept in print and available Isabel Hapgood's pioneering English Service Book; it printed the first English music books for choirs in the 1920s; and its Father Seraphim Nassar produced in 1938 the first – and still the only – comprehensive collection of texts needed for the chanting of complete services in English (The Book of Divine Prayers and Services). A full-fledged publishing department was established in 1940, and it has produced and distributed numerous titles in religious education, sacred music, and liturgical services.

Thousands of people of various ethnic and racial backgrounds have “come home” to the Orthodox Church and have found a spiritual home in the parishes of the Antiochian Archdiocese, joining with Americans and Canadians of Middle Eastern descent to make the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America a vibrant witness for Christ and his Church.

The main chancery of the Archdiocese is located at 358 Mountain Road, Englewood NJ just outside New York City. Diocesan chanceries are located in Toledo OH, Wichita KS, Los Angeles CA, Ligonier PA, and Montreal Canada.

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#### Footnotes:

1. The Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East together with the three other ancient Eastern patriarchates (Constantinople, Alexandria and Jerusalem); four modern patriarchates (Russia, Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria); five autocephalous churches (Cyprus, Greece, Georgia, Poland, and Albania); and four autonomous churches (Sinai, Slovakia the Czech Lands, Finland and Japan) –many with dependent bodies throughout the world– comprise what is known today as the “Eastern Orthodox Church” with an estimated 250 million adherents, of whom, some 5–6 million live in the United States and Canada.

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million live in the United States and Canada.

2. In 1917, Archbishop TIKHON was elected Patriarch of Moscow, and steered the Russian Church through the bloody days of the Communist Revolution. In 1991 he was canonized by the Moscow Patriarchate.

3. The member jurisdictions of SCOBA are: The Albanian Orthodox Diocese of America, the Carpatho–Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Diocese, the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, the Bulgarian Eastern Orthodox Church, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese , the Orthodox Church in America, the Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese, the Serbian orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

4. The Patriarchate has established separated diocesan structures for the faithful in the countries of Central and South America.

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