



THE HISTORIC TRIP TO THE MIDDLE EAST

By **VERY REV. JOSEPH ANTYPAS**

ON MONDAY, JUNE 3, 2002, His Eminence Metropolitan Philip left his Archdiocesan headquarters on his way to Paris, France. He was accompanied by the Vice-Chairman of the Archdiocese Board of Trustees, Dr. George Farha of Wichita, KS. In Paris, His Eminence was greeted by Metropolitan Gabriel Saliby of Western Europe and Archimandrite Gregory Saliby, and dined with them. In Paris the other members of his delegation, the Very Reverend Joseph Antypas, Mr. Nicola Antakli, and Mr. Fawaz El-Khoury, joined His Eminence, and together they took their flight to Damascus, Syria on Wednesday, June 5. The purpose of the trip was two-fold: first, to participate in the regular meeting of the Holy Synod of Antioch, which was to be held at the patriarchate in Damascus, Syria. Secondly, to participate in the dedication of the Athletic and Cultural Complex at

the Balamand University, which was named after His Eminence.

At Damascus International Airport, His Eminence was greeted by many bishops and officials. From the airport His Eminence went to the Patriarchate headquarters and was greeted by His Beatitude Ignatius IV, Patriarch of Antioch and of All the East. From there we went to the Sheraton Hotel, which became his hub for the next 10 days.

On Thursday, June 6, His Eminence received in his suite the Ambassador of the United States of America, the Honorable Ted Kattouf, who is an Antiochian Orthodox from Altoona, PA. The discussion focused on issues related to the September 11th incident and other issues dealing with the US policy in the Middle East. His Eminence received many calls from church leaders and public officials, who welcomed him and wished him a happy stay. Thursday night Sayedna made

a telephone call to his sister-in-law, Mrs. Elaine Saliba, and extended sympathies on the death of her father, the late George Abodeely of Worcester, MA. Memory be eternal.

On Friday, June 7, the meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Balamand University took place at the Patriarchate. The meeting was presided over by His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV. Metropolitans Philip Saliba, Ilyas Kurban, Elias Aude, and George Khodre are members of the Board, together with some notable laymen from Syria and Lebanon, including the Balamand University President Elie Salem. The discussion focused on the financial picture of this thriving institution of higher learning, its constitution, its active departments, and its future goals. Many vital decisions were made, including the appointment of Dr. Talee Bashour of San Francisco, CA as a Vice-President for Medical Affairs. It is to be noted that the



Members of the Synod with the President at the Presidential Palace



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Balamand University is booming as a shining beacon in the Middle East and continues to attract new students seeking knowledge and education. President Salem invited all the hierarchs and members of the Board to the dedication of the Metropolitan Philip Saliba Athletic and Cultural Complex, which was to be held on Friday, June 21.

On Saturday, June 8, Metropolitan Philip held a private meeting with His Beatitude and shared with him some vital concerns about the forthcoming discussion: the question of autonomy for the Church in North America. He emphasized how important it was to deal with this issue, as it expresses the real concerns and aspirations of his children in North America. Saturday afternoon he met with some highly influential public officials of the Syrian government, and had a one-hour interview on Syrian TV. The interview covered many subjects such as the question of autonomy, the Arab-Americans in the United States after the September 11th terrorist attack, his memoirs about the late President Hafiz Assad, and his role in bringing together the Christian and Muslim leaders in the United States to work together for the welfare of some worthy causes. Metropolitan Philip said, "I am rooted in this land spiritually, culturally, and ideologically. Anyone that alleges that Metropolitan Philip will sever relations with the Mother

Church of Antioch is of the devil." The interview was televised twice and received much praise and appreciation. Saturday night, Sayedna and his delegation were

the Church of the Dormition (Al-Marimieh) and had lunch with His Beatitude. That same day and on the occasion of the second anniversary of the passing on of the late

President Hafiz Assad, His Eminence wired President Bashar Assad the following telegram: "On behalf of myself and my delegation I extend to you and to the people of Syria our genuine condolences on the loss of a great leader. May God establish his soul in His heavenly kingdom. I have no doubt that you will continue the move which your great father has taken."

Monday, June 10, was a special day in the life of Metropolitan Philip, his 71st birthday. Early in the morning he read a card from his secretary, Kathy Meyer, wishing him the best of health. The members of his delegation gave him a surprise party at the Sheraton. Hierarchs were invited. Speaking on behalf of the members of the delegation, Dr. Farha reiterated the love and appreciation for Sayedna's leadership in the Church as a whole. Also, because of a recent crisis that hit the Syrian Arab Republic, the destruction of the 4th largest dam in Syria, which left many casualties and destruction of prop-



Lobby of the Phoenician Hotel — Fawaz El-Khoury, Leslie Saliba, Metropolitan Philip, Fr. Joseph Antypas, Dr. George Farha

hosted by the Minister of Transportation of Syria, the Honorable Makram Obeid and his wife, to an exclusive dinner. We are very proud indeed of our Orthodox



The Lebanese Presidential Palace — Nicola Antakli, Dr. George Farha, Metropolitan Philip, President Emile Lahoud, Fawaz El-Khoury, Fr. Joseph Antypas, Leslie Saliba

faithful in Syria, who serve their country in the highest capacities as public officials.

Sunday, June 9, Metropolitan Philip attended the Divine Liturgy at

erties, His Eminence refused to accept any personal gift. Instead, the amount of 500.00.00 Syrian pounds (\$10,000.00) was given to the victims in honor of our Primate.



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A telegram was sent to Syrian President Assad, expressing condolences on the occasion of the catastrophe of the Zizoon Dam. The Syrian foreign ministry responded, expressing the appreciation of Syria for the thoughtfulness and generosity of the contribution. Once again we take this opportunity to wish our Father in Christ, Metropolitan Philip many good years to come. We do appreciate his

sensitivity and awareness to the needs of the victims. His Eminence cut another birthday cake at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Adnan Takla on Monday night in the presence of His Beatitude the Patriarch, and Metropolitans Khodre, Aude, and Chedraoui, Ministers of Public Health, Higher Learning, and Petroleum, their spouses, members of the delegation and other friends. Mr. Takla is originally from Homs, Syria and is a member of the Balamand Board of Trustees and a Damascene layman and contractor.

The Holy Synod of Antioch held its regular 35th meeting at the Patriarchate in Damascus, Syria, from June 11 to 14, presided over by His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV and in the presence of Metropolitans Ilyas Kurban, Philip Saliba, Spiridon Khoury, Constantine Papastephano, George Khodre, Youhanna Mansour, Elias Aude, Boulos Bandali, Elia Saliba, Elias Kfoury, Antonios Chedraoui, Serjius Abad, Kirrilos Dumat, Damaskinos Mansour, Saba Esper, Paul Saliba, George Abu Zakhm, Paul Yazgy, and auxiliary Bishops Elias Najm, Niphon Saykali, Youhanna Yazgy, Mousa Khoury, Basilios Nassour, Luka Khoury, Ghatas Hazim, and Dimitrius Hosny, including the Secretary of the Holy Synod, Economos George Dimas. The Autonomy issue was first on the agenda. The discussion lasted three days. Metropolitan Philip made a



Patriarchal Cathedral in Damascus — Board of Trustees of Balamand University

detailed presentation on the issue of autonomy. He assured the members of the Synod that autonomy does not mean severing relations with the Mother Church of Antioch. He reviewed the details of the decision of the General Assembly of the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America, which was adopted in Los Angeles, CA on July 26, 2001. He gave the rationale upon which the plea of autonomy was established: namely, the distance of the Archdiocese from the Mother Church, the identification with the civilization of North America and the way work is handled, the amazing growth of the parishes and missions of the Archdiocese, and the fact that there are already five bishops who are governing the pastoral needs of the Antiochian Church in North America. His Eminence was hopeful that the holy fathers of the Synod would respond to the needs and expectations of their children in North America. On Thursday, June 13, the Holy Synod issued a SYNODAL DECISION blessing such effort, and recognizing the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America as autonomous. They expressed their conviction that autonomy will strengthen the Antiochian witness and make it more effective. In order to cover the canonical and pastoral factors which will affect the constitutions of the Patriarchate and of the Archdiocese,

the Holy Synod, revealing again and again the conciliar spirit of the Church, expressing visions for responding to the plea of this historic decision.

Under the patronage of His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV, the Orthodox community in Damascus and its suburbs is experiencing a spiritual revival. New churches are being built, new organizations are created and some long standing and existing institutions are starting new projects, responding to the growing needs of men and women, the young and the old-aged, as well. It is noteworthy to mention the project which is undertaken by the St. Gregory Orthodox Society for Orphans and Old People. Founded in 1912, the Society continues to take care of a varying number of old people of both sexes, and orphans, making sure that they live in a friendly, family-like atmosphere, providing them with health care, and social leisure activities.

In a special reception given in honor of the members of the Holy Synod, the President of the Society, Mr. George Nashawati, summarized the past, present, and future plans of this charitable arm of the Patriarchate, assured everyone of its commitments to the needy, thanked in particular Metropolitan Philip Saliba for his generous contributions, and wished all health and length of days.



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On Thursday, June 13, the members of the Holy Synod, headed by the Patriarch, were invited to visit with Syrian President Bashar Assad, who welcomed his guests very warmly. Metropolitan Philip and his delegation had a private audience with the President as well. Many ideas were exchanged concerning the role that the Antiochian Church can play in North America, bringing the light into the Arab-American relations that benefit the United States and all Arab countries. The President thanked Metropolitan Philip for his leadership and his role as a catalyst. Metropolitan Philip had written a moving poem in the Arabic language, based on the recent brutal Israeli aggression against the Palestinians, causing the destruction of human lives and properties. He had commissioned a young Damascene calligrapher to write the poetry on papyrus stationery. At the conclusion of the presidential visit photos were taken and a presentation of the poem in an exclusive frame was made to President Bashar Assad, who expressed his sincere appreciation for the gift. The visit proved to be one of the highlights of the trip to the Syrian capital. It gave us insight into the visions and aspirations of this young president, who is leading his people into the gateway of the 21st century with conviction and determination.

The Holy Synod concluded its meeting on Friday, June 14, and issued a press release expressing its blessings and recognition of the Autonomy of the Archdiocese of North America. The press release covered the condition of the School of Theology of St. John of Damascus and its continued growth; the plight of the Palestinians and the injustices inflicted upon them by Israel; the social and

economic binds the Lebanese are experiencing; and the assurance that the Antiochian Church will always be rooted in the Arab world, witnessing to the creative Christian-Muslim dialogue.

It should be noted that His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV put his automobile and driver at the disposal of His Eminence Metropolitan Philip. Saturday, June 15, the Patriarch and his entourage visited Sayedna at his suite and bid him farewell.

On Sunday, June 16, after a short stop at the home of Mr. & Mrs. Nabeel Shaghoury, the Metropolitan and his delegation crossed the Syrian border and entered Lebanon, making a short stop in Shtoura, Lebanon. His Grace Bishop Niphon Saykali, representative of the Antiochian Church in Moscow, hosted him and his delegation to a luncheon. Afterwards we headed to Beirut, Lebanon and stayed at the Phoenicia Intercontinental Hotel.

On Monday, June 17, Metropolitan Philip, accompanied by his niece, Miss Leslie Saliba, who had come to Lebanon to visit her relatives and attend the dedication ceremony at Balamand, made his way to the mountains. He visited his hometown, Shreen, and met with members of his family. Metropolitan George Khodre of Mount Lebanon was also invited to the luncheon. Being the hierarch who authored

the Arabic version of the Synodal decision on autonomy, he approved the English version which was presented to him. The Antiochian Orthodox Church is indeed fortunate to have as its own Metropolitan George, one of the most brilliant theologians in the Orthodox world. He is a man of action and vision. In his writings you can "feel" the work and the operation of the Holy Spirit of God. May God grant him many good years to come.

Tuesday, June 18th, Metropolitan Philip and his delegation visited the President of Lebanon, General Emile Lahoud, at the presidential palace in Baabda. Sayedna also had a private audience with him. They discussed issues related to Arab-American concerns, and President Lahoud commended Sayedna for his leadership in the United States of America. After the meeting, His Eminence visited the Cathedral of St. George, which is under renovation, and had a warm and friendly luncheon at the table of the dynamic Metropolitan of the Archdiocese of Beirut, Elias Aude. Metropolitan Aude surrounded Sayedna Philip with love, friendship and respect. Monday evening both Metropolitans and the members of the delegation, including Miss Leslie Saliba, were guests at the home of the former Minister of Environment, Mr. Samir Mukbel, and his lovely wife. His Eminence met many friends, public officials and hierarchs as well.

Wednesday, June 19th, Metropolitan Philip was the guest of the former President of Lebanon, Mr. Elias Hrawi. Present were Bishop Niphon Saykali, Ambassador Fuad Al-Turk, former Foreign Minister and member of the Parliament, Fares Buweiz, and His Excellency Issam Fares, the Deputy Prime Minister of Lebanon. President Hrawi remembered



Bishop John Yazgy introduces Sayedna Philip, June 21 at the Balamand Theological Institute



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the hospitality of Metropolitan Philip during his visit to the United States five years ago, and thanked him for his contribution and leadership. Wednesday night, he paid the Deputy Prime Minister a visit and had dinner on his yacht. His Excellency Issam Fares is known for his integrity and honesty, and is respected by all politicians and church leaders for his many contributions and good works.

On Thursday, June 20th, Metropolitan Philip continued his visits with the Lebanese public officials. He had an audience with the Prime Minister, Rafic Hariri, and met the press, where he pointed to the fact that Lebanon is emerging like a phoenix from the ashes of war and people should be more positive in their attitudes towards the country and its leaders and avoid “weeping and wailing.” That same day he met with the Speaker of the House, Mr. Nabih Berry, at his palace. He also made a surprise visit to Mrs. Violet Khalife, the mother of Walid Khalife, at her home. Later he had lunch with the American Ambassador to

Syria, the Honorable Ted Kattouf. That evening he had an open forum with the media, discussing diverse issues and topics.

Friday, June 21, is a day to be remembered. Metropolitans Philip and Aude, along with the delegation, traveled to Balamand University for the dedication of the Cultural and Athletic Complex named after Metropolitan Philip. The ceremonies started at the entrance of the School of Theology. Hierarchs, deans, professors, students, seminarians, including the President of the University, Dr. Elie Salem, and the Dean of Theology, Bishop Youhanna Yazgy, were present. With the chanting of “God is the Lord who has shown us light” rendered by the seminary choir, Metropolitan Philip was escorted to a hall where he delivered a speech on pastoral responsibilities and care, and answered questions. Dean Yazgy thanked him for the support he has given to the School of Theology throughout the years and presented him and his delegations with gifts. From the School of Theology all

guests moved to the Cultural and Athletic Complex, where Metropolitan Philip presided over the service of the blessing of grounds and sprinkled the complex and the audience with holy water. Then at the university auditorium President Salem welcomed all guests and thanked Metropolitan Philip and the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America for the many contributions given to the university. He expressed his joy for receiving all contributions rendered and referred to Metropolitan Philip as a “rock” and “oak tree” rooted in the Antiochian soil, witnessing to the Spirit of Antioch with visions and good deeds, and with a total sense of giving. Metropolitan Philip gave a moving lecture on the spirit of competition. He recalled his days at the Balamand Seminary, as a student and a teacher as well, where he was involved in sports. He outlined a historical sketch about sports in ancient Greece and how sportsmen competed in a brotherly fashion. He wished that politicians in Lebanon would learn from the true sense of

Metropolitan Philip blessing the Athletic and Cultural Center at the Balamand University.





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sportsmanship, and wished all those who would use the fields and the courtyards to build up a genuine spirit of competition, to build the Lebanon that meets their aspirations and dreams. The seminary choir then entertained the audience with some musical selections, and a lunch was served on the university campus. On his way back to the Phoenicia Hotel there was a short stop at the Church of the Ascension in Kfar Hbab. Sayedna encouraged the pastor and the building committee members to continue the good work and complete the project. The visit to Balamand University was one of the highlights of Sayedna's trip. We witnessed the growth and the emergence of a young university growing in the midst of rocks and olive trees and rising as a shining star, calling for collective financial and moral support under the patronage of our beloved Patriarch, and the intercession of our Lady Theotokos of the Balamand, who continues to pray for the growth and the well-being of this thriving institution of higher learning.

On Saturday, June 22, Metropolitan Philip had an interesting interview with the new TV station. The interview was very much appreciated for its focus on some important local and international issues. He dined with two of his longtime

friends, Ophthalmologist Dr. Kamal Zakka, and an Orthopedic doctor, Dr. Ghassan Skaff, and their spouses. On Saturday night a reception was held in his honor and in appreciation for his contributions, love, and support to the St. George Hospital. At the Bristol Hotel Metropolitan Elias Aude gathered the medical staff and the Board of St. George Hospital, including the Ambassadors of the USA and Greece, the honorable Vincent Patel and George Gabrielidis. The dinner was sumptuous. Gifts were exchanged and the ambience was extraordinary. Once again, Metropolitan Aude, Mr. Salam Rayes, director of the hospital, Miss Elaine Andrea, the public relations officer of the Archdiocese, Mr. Emile Rahbani, Superintendent of Building and Grounds, and the entire staff spared nothing to show their appreciation to their guest of honor and members of his delegation.

Sunday, June 23 was Pentecost Sunday; Metropolitan Elias Aude presided over the Hierarchical Divine Liturgy and the Kneeling service at the Church of the Annunciation. The choir was phenomenal. Following services, there was a private visit to the Cathedral of St. George, downtown Beirut. Metropolitan Aude gave Sayedna Philip a private tour of the site. He recalled

his past memories as a deacon of the late Metropolitan Elia Salibi, the echo of the voice of the late chanter, Andraos Mouaikel, and the beautiful services held there in the presence of the President and public officials on New Year's Day. The Metropolitan had brunch in the home of the honorable Minister of State, Beshara Merhej, who commented on Sayedna's role in the United States and in the Arab world as well. He thanked him for his strong leadership, friendship, and love. Metropolitan Philip responded with nice words and thanked him for his generosity. He had received two phone calls while he was still at Minister Beshara's home: one from His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV wishing him farewell, and another call from Archimandrite Atallah Hanna of the Holy Land, thanking Sayedna for his support of the Orthodox Christian Arabs in the Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

Monday, June 24, Metropolitan Elias Aude accompanied His Eminence as they visited the newly-built Church of St. Nicholas, located next door to the Archdiocese headquarters. The elegant edifice practically "sits" on top of the old church, which is currently being used for everyday services. Later he met the Minister of Public Works, Mr. Najib Mikati, at the Archdiocese residence





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and dined with him. His Excellency presented His Eminence a beautiful Icon of St. Nicholas the wonder-worker. Now, we were getting close to bidding farewell to many exciting experiences, gatherings, meetings, and scores of friends. The “last supper” brought some dear friends together at the home of Michael and Yolla Mufarrij. Such sweet memories will linger in our minds for many years to come. We

thank God for friends who continue to reveal their hospitality and true nature and those who endear themselves in a genuine spirit. The smiling face, the warmth of heart, and the hospitality of His Eminence Metropolitan Elias Aude had exceeded our expectations. Metropolitan Aude revealed to our Primate his love and good fellowship. Under his



Metropolitan Ilyas Kurban, Metropolitan Philip, President Bashar Assad of Syria, Patriarch Ignatius

able and dynamic leadership as the Metropolitan of the capital of Lebanon, churches are being built, remodeled, renovated, and restored. Priests and deacons are being educated to serve and minister to the flock. Young men are motivated to dedicate themselves and become future servants of the Church in various capacities. Institutions are

Hama, Syria, who proved to be a good friend and who stood by Sayedna Philip and gave him all love and support during his entire visit.

Tuesday, June 25th was our departure day. Sayedna Philip was interviewed by *Al-Safir* daily newspaper for one full hour. The interview was printed the following day. I hope one day our readers will benefit from it,



Beirut International Airport on departure day — Father Philip Said, Elaine Andrea, Mr. Kamal Saliba, Governor of Beirut, Metropolitan Elia of Hama, Dr. George Farha, Metropolitan Elias of Beirut, Metropolitan Philip, Mr. Fawaz El-Khoury, V. Rev. Joseph Antypas, Mr. Salam Reyes, Hala Homsey



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The Presidential Palace in Damascus — Nicola Antakli (Troy, MI); Metropolitan Philip; President; Dr. George Farha, Vice Chairman of the Archdiocese Board of Trustees; Very Rev. Joseph Antypas; Fawaz El-Khoury, Worcester, MA

reading it in both languages, Arabic and English, to appreciate the thoughts and mind of our great leader. At the airport VIP lounge, crowded by Metropolitan Elias Aude, the hospital staff, the Governor of the city of Beirut and many good friends, we bid all farewell. We departed, taking with us wonderful memories. This historic trip gave us a gift of a great price, which we will cherish for generations to come. The autonomy of the Archdiocese of North America is now a reality upon which God will establish His holy Church as one holy united Orthodox Church in the United States States and Canada, witnessing to Christ and to the true faith. It has been an honor and a pleasure to be with his Eminence as a member of his delegation, to serve him and to take care of his needs. May God grant him many years.

Fr. Joseph Antypas is pastor of St. George Church, Troy, MI.

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Sung in Arabic by

His Eminence The Most Reverend Metropolitan Philip
Primate of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America

The Joy of the Soul:

Favorite Selections of Byzantine Hymns and Gospels

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