



The Road *from* Damascus

A Report from the Delegation to Damascus to Consecrate Three New Bishops for North America

Nestled among the busy Damascene streets, among the countless vendors and pedestrians engaged in a rich variety of commerce, the Patriarchate of Antioch rests on the Street Called Straight (Acts 9). It is an island of quiet in a sea of activity.

But on the morning of Sunday, December 5, 2004, the Patriarchal Cathedral of the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos was filled with an equal measure of people and purpose, as three priests from the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America — the Right Reverends Thomas Joseph, Mark Maymon, and Rafeek Mufarrij — were consecrated to the sacred episcopacy under the fatherly hand of His Beatitude Patriarch IGNATIUS IV. It was an occasion of joy, as the consecrations were both the fulfillment of a long and concentrated process, and the beginning of a new chapter in the life of the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America.

With the blessing of His Eminence Metropolitan Philip, a delegation of twenty-nine — led by His Grace Bishop Antoun, organized by Fr. Thomas Zain, guided by Mr. Fawaz El-Khoury, and comprised of clergy and laity, including members of the Archdiocesan Board of Trustees — traveled to Damascus, Syria from November 29 through December 10 to participate in this historic moment. The journey provided immediate reward, but, God willing, the real fruit of the consecrations will be enjoyed by every Orthodox Christian of the Antiochian Archdiocese in the months and years to come.

EXPERIENCING LEBANON

We gathered in Paris. From homes across North America, delegation members arrived sleepily and in stages at Charles DeGaulle airport in the French capital on the early morning of November 30. By that afternoon, we were settled in Beirut.

Prior to the consecrations in Damascus, the delegation spent several days in Lebanon. We were treated to a sample of Lebanon's natural beauty with a visit to the Jeita grotto-cave which had been discovered, intact and inspiring, only some sixty years ago. Members of the delegation strolled quietly through giant limestone rooms, elaborate



Archimandrite Mark reciting his confession of faith accompanied by his sponsors, Fr. Thomas Zain (left) and Father Thomas Gallaway (right)



Bishop Thomas receiving his miter from the Patriarch



Bishop Alexander receiving his pastoral staff and admonition to use it to shepherd his flock from the Patriarch



Patriarch IGNATIUS IV with Bishops Thomas, Alexander and Mark

The historical continuity of the Patriarchate of Antioch has been documented, with an unbroken line of apostolic faith dating from St. Peter in 43 AD and extending to the present Patriarch.

and circuitous with thousands of stalactites and stalagmites, and some of us wondered if these walls had perhaps heard the prayers of cave-dwelling monastics from centuries long ago. The Christian history of this part of the world allows for such a possibility.

The Phoenician history here is more explicit in Jbeil (known to much of the world by its Phoenician name, “Byblos”), a coastal town thirty miles north of Beirut. Continuing its journey through Lebanon, the delegation spent a few hours walking the grounds of what is one of the world’s oldest continuously inhabited cities. The remnants of monocellular huts, with crushed limestone floors, indicate the presence of a small Neolithic fishing community here as early as 5000 BC. Modern shops now pepper the streets of Jbeil, and the side-by-side existence of antiquity with modernity — even, at times, separated by only a few feet of road — seemed evident everywhere the delegation traveled through Lebanon and Syria.

Shortly before leaving for Damascus, the delegation traveled to the shrine of Our Lady of Lebanon, erected in 1908 by the region’s Maronite Catholic community. The shrine includes a tall, white, and famous figure of the Virgin Mary on the Beirut landscape, but getting there required more than a bit of courage as we stepped tentatively into swaying cable cars — sort of a ski lift without the snow, but *much* higher — and creakily ascended the mountain called Harissa on which the shrine rests. An additional climb up 104 spiraling stairs rewards the determined traveler with both a place at the feet of the towering figure and a spectacular view of sprawling Beirut.

Safely back on earth and later that evening, our first specifically liturgical experience would make a lasting impression. The delegation was invited by His Eminence Metropolitan Elias of Beirut to attend Vespers in the chapel of his headquarters. During the service he quietly consulted with, then motioned to the clergy of our delegation to sing “Gladsome Light” in English at the appropriate time, and on several occasions during Vespers we were invited to add our English contributions to the communal prayer otherwise unfolding in Arabic. The beauty of this cannot be overstated, for a shared prayer life is a high expression of one of the highest of Christian virtues — hospitality. It was a simple gesture by His Eminence, but simple gestures often contain transcendent meaning.

Shortly after Vespers, he received us into his salon, or receiving room, for refreshments and light conversation,

smiling easily and often and evincing an obvious joy. The Metropolitan of Beirut is a remarkable figure for, among other things, the charitable work he sustained in the region during Beirut's historically recent fifteen-year civil war, from 1975 to 1990, a difficult conflict from which the city is impressively emerging.

THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

The transition from Lebanon to Syria is noticeable through bus windows. Our delegation traveled a sixty-mile stretch of mountainous road from Beirut to Damascus, and the passing scenery faded from green and brown to mostly brown, since Lebanon lies on the moist Mediterranean coast while Syria is farther inland. We were delighted to discover that our first evening in Damascus would include an audience with His Beatitude IGNATIUS IV.

The historical continuity of the Patriarchate of Antioch has been documented, with an unbroken line of apostolic faith dating from St. Peter in 43 AD and extending to the present Patriarch. A geographical shift of the Patriarchate headquarters from Antioch to Damascus, to its present location on the Street called Straight, occurred in 1343 AD, and it was to that site that our delegation was received on the evening of December 2.

Kind and engaging, His Beatitude spoke to us in thoughtful terms about the significance of the consecrations, about the challenges and opportunities of existing as a Christian minority within a non-Christian culture, and about his joy in witnessing the "seed of Antioch" grow in the soil of North America. The evening was enriched further by an impromptu telephone call placed by His Beatitude, while seated and visiting with our delegation, to our own Metropolitan Philip, a call followed by remarks from His Beatitude to the delegation about the respect he feels for our Metropolitan. Finally, the bishops-elect from our Archdiocese were excused for private consultations with His Beatitude, while the rest of the delegation toured the Patriarchal Cathedral.

The days in Damascus before the consecrations were not idle. The delegation ventured into the rural Syrian countryside to visit two ancient monasteries — Ma'aoula and Saydnaya. The site of one of the only villages in the world to keep alive the Aramaic dialect of our Lord, Ma'aoula is also the location of the Convent of St. Thekla, who was converted to Christ through the preaching of St. Paul in 47 AD. Pilgrims can still walk the long trail through the miraculous split in the mountains provided by our Lord for St. Thekla

when she fled on foot from pagans who sought to defile her innocence.

Equally inspiring was the Monastery of Saydnaya, rising on its mountainous foundation and dedicated to the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos. Established by St. Justinian in 547 AD, this community of approximately fifty nuns also manages a vibrant orphanage. Of special note is its side chapel — cozy and illuminated only by candles — that houses one of the four surviving icons of the Theotokos written by the hand of the Apostle and Evangelist Luke.

Soon after, interests turned prosaic as some delegation members braved the *souk el-Hamadiyeh*, the ancient marketplace, in search of bargains on items ranging from postcards to purses, from quality gold to curious fabrics, from hand-woven silk scarves to hand-made backgammon sets. Finally, several members of the delegation walked the streets of Damascus's "Old City" in search of the Omayyad Mosque. Specifically, we set out in search of the head of St. John the Baptist.

Inside the huge Mosque, which had been an Orthodox Christian church until the seventh century, is a rectangular shrine distinguished by columns of opaque green glass. Inside the shrine is a case, again large and rectangular in shape, draped by an ornate tapestry covered in Arabic script. Inside that case is the head of the Forerunner of Christ. Although this hasn't always been so, the shrine is now rarely opened for the purpose of veneration (made possible by a hole on each side of the case where a hand can be inserted to touch the top of the skull). Still, pilgrims — Christian *and* Muslim, who also venerate St. John for his saintly qualities — knelt, leaned, rested, strolled, and prayed quietly near the shrine. Presumably, in any religious site around the world, veneration is one of those activities that distinguishes the pilgrim from the tourist.

CONSECRATIONS TO THE EPISCOPACY

Sunday, the fifth of December, 8:15 AM, and the mood in the Cathedral salon is exhilarating. The mood had been nurtured by the night before, when our delegation was treated to a lovely dinner with a lovelier view — to gaze upon Damascus at night is to behold city lights sprayed, like millions of bright drops of white paint, on a wide black canvas.

The clergy — deacons, priests from the Patriarchate and from our Antiochian Archdiocese, bishops, and finally His Beatitude — organize into a procession. We cross the clean gray-white courtyard between the Patriarchate offices and



the Cathedral, then enter the church to begin our preparation for Proskemedia, Matins, and the hierarchical Divine Liturgy.*

The church is crowded with several hundred faithful, and chairs have been reserved near the front for distinguished guests, among whom the Patriarchate has graciously included the lay members of our delegation. A program has been prepared that contains both the biographies of each of the bishops-elect and the Order of the Service. “At the appointed time,” the program reads, “the Bishop-elect is led by his Sponsors before the Patriarch and the other Bishops. After kissing their right hands and receiving their blessings, he goes to stand on an eagle rug facing the Patriarch as the confession of faith begins.”

The mood is solemn but cheerful. Our three bishops-elect stand in the center of the solea, each in his turn speaking strongly and clearly. The ancient Confessions of Faith, which express the articles of Nicene belief in detail, are read. The first Confession is the Creed itself. Then, the Patriarch asks the men to “explain to us in greater detail what you believe concerning the ineffable Holy Trinity.” The second Confession elaborates in nine precisely-worded paragraphs on the three Persons — Father, Son, Holy Spirit — and their internal dynamic within the Trinity, as well as their external relationship with creation. Finally, the Patriarch asks for

even greater detail, especially on “the incarnation of the Son and Word of God, and how many natures you believe that Christ has.” The third Confession is read, and in addition to their pronouncements about the Son and Word of God, the bishops-elect join their voices to the continued episcopal renunciation, dating back to the fourth century, of certain false teachings (and teachers) that attempt to distort the timeless truths spoken moments earlier.

By submitting himself to the sacred details of what God has revealed about Himself to the Church, each bishop-elect stands in a long, historic line of Orthodox Christian bishops who, among other beliefs outlined in the Confessions:

- “believe in one God in Three persons — by which I mean the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”
- “believe that He is divided in regard to characteristics but not divided in essence”
- “believe that the Father is the cause of the Son by begetting, and the origin of the Spirit by generation”
- “believe that the Word of God is equal to the Father in eternity beyond time”

ABOVE: His Grace Bishop Antoun thanking the Patriarch during the Banquet sponsored by our Archdiocese at the Holy Cross Church Hall in Damascus following the consecrations

- “believe that He [Jesus Christ] took upon Himself all of our infirmities and conflicts in our nature except sin: hunger, thirst, fatigue, tears and the like”
- “believe those traditions and narrations concerning the One Catholic and Apostolic Church which we have received from God”
- “literally and truly confess our Sovereign Lady, Mary the Theotokos, as having borne in the flesh one of the Trinity”
- “reverence, relatively, but not in the way of worship, the divine and reverence-worthy images of Christ Himself, and of the all-undefiled Mother of God, and of all the Saints, addressing to their originals the honor shown to them.”

Finally, the assembly hears each bishop-elect publicly acknowledge that his participation in the inauguration of his particular episcopal ministry has been personal: “I, Archimandrite Thomas, by the mercy of God elected for the holy See of Pittsburgh and the East, have signed this confession of my faith with my own hand”; “I, Archimandrite Mark, by the mercy of God elected for the Holy See of Toledo and the Midwest, have signed this confession of my faith with my own hand”; “I, Archimandrite Alexander, by the mercy of God elected for the holy See of Ottawa and Upstate New York, have signed this confession of my faith with my own hand.”

From a host of striking images, one emerging from this hierarchical Divine Liturgy is the Patriarch himself, who, during the recitations of the Nicene Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, engages the faithful with his gaze and the gentle movements of his hands. He is leading them, prompting their participation in the recitations in smooth and measured cadences. It is the countenance of a shepherd amidst his flock.

The consecrations conclude with the placing of miters upon the heads of the newly-consecrated bishops and staffs in their hands. After remarks of good will offered by the Patriarch (as well as words of gratitude offered by two of our newly-elected bishops [one address in English, one in Arabic]), a drum and bugle corps escorts the clergy and faithful through the courtyard. Perhaps the members of our delegation, sprinkled throughout the assembly, are processing back precisely the way we came in — alert to the present and hopeful for the future.

Following the consecrations, the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America provided a banquet in honor of our three new bishops and our Patriarchal hosts

for the consecrations. We gathered in the dining hall of Holy Cross Orthodox Church, a few miles from the Patriarchate, where delegation members from North America shared conversations with many of the Antiochian clergy and faithful who live in the Middle East, most of whom speak English. Indeed, distances are bridged by learning names and listening to stories.

Our delegation’s departure from Damascus, bringing closure to the chief purpose of our pilgrimage, included a long drive through the northern Bekaa Valley and a tour of one of the wonders of the ancient world, Ba’albeck. The largest Roman temples ever built are also among the best preserved, and every turn through these monuments holds another architectural marvel. Construction of the main temple, dedicated to Jupiter, was begun in the last quarter of the first century before Christ, and was nearing completion in the final years of the reign of Emperor Nero (37-68 AD). It is as if the precision, the art, the perseverance required to complete such work, reveals a powerful yearning for transcendence, a culture’s persistent struggle to fashion the material world into a doorway to the divine.

ON TO BALAMAND

The purpose of our trip to Damascus now achieved, the delegation returned to Lebanon for a visit to the University of Balamand. Prior to our arrival there, we rested and prayed at the famous Monastery of Saydet el-Nourieh, “Our Lady of Light,” in the town of Hamat, to absorb the view from its high cliff location, and to venerate the miraculous icon of the Theotokos that, centuries ago, had often glowed with light to attract wayward ships.

At Balamand, we were warmly received — not surprising, since we had been warmly received in practically every encounter with local culture. A Monastery, Theological Institute, High School, and University have all been assembled atop the Balamand Mountain, largely through the labors of our present Patriarch and the support of our present Metropolitan. In fact, our delegation visited the Our Lady of Balamand Monastery and learned of its significance to the Antiochian Archdiocese in North America — Metropolitan Philip, some of our other bishops and many of our Archdiocesan clergy served in this monastery, lived in these dorms, walked through these courtyards, and studied in these halls.

Balamand is an impressive facility, and members of the faculty of the St. John of Damascus Theological Institute extended to us a special welcome. Additionally, three beau-



The Archdiocese Delegation with His Beatitude Patriarch IGNATIUS IV

tiful sets of shining gold bishop's staves were presented on behalf of the Dean of the Institute, His Grace Bishop John Yazigi, to our newly-consecrated bishops.

Dr. Elie Salem, the current president of the University and former foreign minister of Lebanon, provided the delegation with a nourishing luncheon, facilitated by students of Balamand's School of Tourism and Hotel Management, during which we enjoyed a taste of the kind of continuity between church life and academic life that the University encourages, as three professors — all Deans of their Departments — gathered in the center of the reception room to chant Nativity liturgical hymns in robust Byzantine style. In his bright disposition, President Salem spoke of our Metropolitan Philip as “the apostle across the ocean,” and included in our tour of Balamand both the recreational field that has been dedicated to His Eminence, and the “Antiochian Village” dormitory, both of which were funded into existence by the generosity of the North American faithful.

It is interesting to note that approximately half of the 1650 students who attend the University of Balamand are Muslim, and there are Muslim children who attend The Oasis of Joy, a school for children with mental disabilities managed by

the Diocese of Tripoli's Monastery of Our Lady of Protection, located near the base of the mountain on which the University rests. As our Balamand hosts explained to us, these are intentional examples to the world that persons of different religions can live peacefully, even creatively, in the midst of each other.

As the afternoon eased into evening, the delegation accepted the final invitation of the day: an audience with His Eminence Metropolitan Ilyas of Tripoli. His distinction is well established: as the senior-ranking hierarch of the Patriarchate of Antioch, yes, but especially for the superb musicianship — his choirs and his own chanting — that has defined his ministry. Many of the delegation members left Tripoli with gifts from the Metropolitan, including CDs and books. Had time allowed, we would have accepted his invitation to dinner, but rolled into our midst instead was a cart filled with many samples of Tripoli's famous desserts, thereby raising Tripoli's profile on our list of places to which we simply must return.

THE ROAD FROM DAMASCUS

No complete portrait of this historic journey to Damascus can emerge from the reflections of only one member of the

delegation; surely other stories, other details by other participants, could be shared — stories of soul and body, of churches visited and relatives reunited, of kind clergy and of the Christian hospitality that defined so many of the Arab Orthodox faithful. But the delegation is certainly united in our deep gratitude to His Eminence Metropolitan Philip for nurturing the vision for so many years that has finally made such a trip possible, even necessary. Also, we recognize Fr. Thomas Zain for his organizational finesse. Finally, we are grateful to our delegation guide, Mr. Fawaz El-Khoury, member of the Board of Trustees, whose considerable skills transformed a good trip into a great one.

The road from Damascus leads to new possibilities for the ancient faith. Indeed, while the faith “once and for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) is fixed and changeless, the *articulation* of that faith is as unique, nuanced, even as complex, as the cultures into which it spreads. May Our Lord Jesus Christ embrace to Himself our Metropolitan, our three new bishops, the clergy and faithful of our self-ruled Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, and “all Orthodox Christians of true worship, who live and dwell in this community” of North America. We live in a troubled world; may we remain ever mindful that a troubled world yearns for a true Church, an ark of salvation, an island of quiet in a sea of activity.

*Serving the hierarchical Divine Liturgy were a total of sixteen bishops: His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV; Metropolitan Ilyas of Tripoli; Metropolitan Spyridon of Zahle; Metropolitan Elias of Beirut; Metropolitan Boulos of Akkar; Metropolitan Elia of Hama; Metropolitan Elias of Tyre and Sidon; Metropolitan George of Homs; Bishop Basilios of Tartous; Bishop Moussa, Bishop Luke, and Bishop Ghattas, all from the offices for the Patriarchate of Antioch. From the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America: Bishop Antoun of Miami; Bishop Thomas of Pittsburgh; Bishop Mark of Toledo; and Bishop Alexander of Ottawa. Also serving were the following priests from our Archdiocese: Fr. John Abdalah, Fr. Elia Shalhoub, Fr. Edward Hughes, Fr. Michael Abdelahad, Fr. Thomas Gallaway, Fr. Thomas Zain, and Fr. John Oliver, and in attendance was Deacon Dennis Bojrab.

by Fr. John Oliver

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daily devotions

MARCH, 2005

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| 1. 1 JOHN 3:11-20; MARK 14:10-42 | 18. ISAIAH 3:1-15; |
| 2. 1 JOHN 3:21-4:6;
MARK 14:43-15:1 (<i>fast</i>) | GENESIS 2:20-3:20;
PROVERBS 3:19-34 (<i>fast</i>) |
| 3. 1 JOHN 4:20-5:21;
MARK 15:1-15 | 19. HEBREWS 1:1-12;
MARK 2:23-3:5 (<i>fast</i>) |
| 4. 2 JOHN 1:1-13;
MARK 15:22-25, 33-41 (<i>fast</i>) | 20. HEBREWS 11:24-26, 32-12:2;
JOHN 1:43-51 (<i>fast</i>) |
| 5. 1 CORINTHIANS 10:23-28;
LUKE 21:8-9, 25-27, 33-36 | 21. ISAIAH 4:2-5:7;
GENESIS 3:21-4:7;
PROVERBS 3:34-4:22 (<i>fast</i>) |
| 6. 1 CORINTHIANS 8:8-9:2;
MATTHEW 25:31-46 | 22. ISAIAH 5:7-16;
GENESIS 4:8-15;
PROVERBS 5:1-15 (<i>fast</i>) |
| 7. 3 JOHN 1:1-15;
LUKE 19:29-40, 22:7-39 (<i>fast</i>) | 23. ISAIAH 5:16-25;
GENESIS 4:16-26;
PROVERBS 5:15-6:4 (<i>fast</i>) |
| 8. JUDE 1:1-10;
LUKE 22:39-42, 45-23:1 (<i>fast</i>) | 24. ISAIAH 6:1-12;
GENESIS 5:1-24;
PROVERBS 6:3-20 (<i>fast</i>) |
| 9. JOEL 2:12-26;
JOEL 3:12-21 (<i>fast</i>) | 25. HEBREWS 2:11-18;
LUKE 1:24-38 (<i>fast</i>) |
| 10. JUDE 1:11-25;
LUKE 23:2-34, 44-56 (<i>fast</i>) | 26. HEBREWS 3:12-16;
MARK 1:35-44 (<i>fast</i>) |
| 11. ZACHARIAH 8:7-17;
ZACHARIAH 8:19-23 (<i>fast</i>) | 27. HEBREWS 1:10-2:3;
MARK 2:1-12 (<i>fast</i>) |
| 12. ROMANS 14:19-26;
MATTHEW 6:1-13 (<i>fast</i>) | 28. ISAIAH 8:13-9:7;
GENESIS 6:9-22;
PROVERBS 8:1-21 (<i>fast</i>) |
| 13. ROMANS 13:11-14:4;
MATTHEW 6:14-21 (<i>fast</i>) | 29. ISAIAH 9:9-10:4;
GENESIS 7:1-15;
PROVERBS 8:32-9:11 (<i>fast</i>) |
| 14. ISAIAH 1:1-20;
GENESIS 1:1-13;
PROVERBS 1:1-20 (<i>fast</i>) | 30. ISAIAH 10:12-20;
GENESIS 7:6-9;
PROVERBS 9:12-18 (<i>fast</i>) |
| 15. ISAIAH 1:19-2:4;
GENESIS 1:14-23;
PROVERBS 1:20-33 (<i>fast</i>) | 31. ISAIAH 11:10-12:2;
GENESIS 7:11-8:3;
PROVERBS 10:1-22 (<i>fast</i>) |
| 16. ISAIAH 2:3-11;
GENESIS 1:24-2:3;
PROVERBS 2:1-22 (<i>fast</i>) | |
| 17. ISAIAH 2:11-21;
GENESIS 2:4-19;
PROVERBS 3:1-18 (<i>fast</i>) | |

Very Rev. George Alberts