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Archbishop Joseph Tawil, Melkite eparch of the United States, celebrated the pontifical liturgy at St. Nicholas in honor of the parish's 60th anniversary and the ninth centenary of the translation of the relics of St. Nicholas, the parish's patron saint. On either side of the archbishop is the iconostasis, a screen decorated with religious images, which stands between the sanctuary and the congregation.

## Melkite parish marks 60 years of sacred tradition

By Teresa A. Parsons

Stand and listen to the chanters at St. Nicholas Church and you will discover the heart of the Melkite tradition.

Close your eyes and the unfamiliar harmony will transport you to an ancient time and a faraway street corner in Jerusalem, Turboul or Heliopolis.

But listen carefully and you will discover that the words are English — very much at home in 1987 on the corner of Leo and Remington streets in the City of Rochester.

That's the essence of what Eastern-Rite Catholics of St. Nicholas Melkite Greek Catholic Parish strive to do — to remain true to the earliest Christian traditions while living in the modern world.

The parishioners of St. Nicholas are people whose past lives hand-in-hand with the present. Thus it was fitting that they combined the May 23 celebration of their 60th anniversary as a community with the May 9 centenary of the translation of St. Nicholas of Myra's relics.

The centenary commemorates the date in 1087 when Italian soldiers retrieved the saint's remains from the city of Myra, in present-day Turkey, where his tomb was threatened by the onslaught of Islamic conquerors. Brought to the city of Bari in Italy, the relics were enshrined in a basilica.

Renowned for his extraordinary charity, St. Nicholas is among the most popular saints of both Eastern and Western culture. In North America, he is best known as Santa Claus. Among the Eastern-Rite churches, however, St. Nicholas is still primarily identified as the Bishop of Myra — a defender of the faith, and worker of great signs and wonders both before and after his death.

The strength and durability of Rochester's St. Nicholas the Wonderworker parish has been something of a quiet miracle in itself. Nearly 30 immigrant families from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Israel established the parish in the 1920s. They had settled in Rochester after fleeing from the same kind of bloody conflict between Christians and Moslems that continues in Lebanon today.

A history of St. Nicholas Church compiled by parishioner Anne Nealon relates that at first, most of the families worshipped at local Latin-Rite churches. But many were dissatisfied with their inability to celebrate the Divine Liturgy (Mass) and the Holy Mysteries (sacraments) within their own tradition.

Frustration led to action in the case of founding members Jacob and Agaby Sabela. The couple sought a priest who would confer upon their newborn child the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and Eucharist within a single ceremony, as is dictated by the Melkite Rite. When a local Roman Catholic priest refused, the Sabelas and other members of the community began to petition the nearest Melkite church in Brooklyn as well as Rochester Roman Catholic Bishop Thomas F. Hickey for a pastor and a parish of their own.

With Bishop Hickey's permission, the Melkite community began building a church, which they literally paid for one brick at a time. In order to raise money, they went door-to-door, asking family members and friends to purchase bricks at 10 cents



Children and adults commonly come forth from the congregation to touch the elaborately decorated gospel book, as Father Mark Melone, pastor at St. Nicholas, proclaims the gospel reading.



One-year-old Jamal Sarkis watched in delight as parishioners from St. Nicholas enjoyed a traditional haffli dance — one of the highlights of a parish dinner/dance on Saturday, May 23.

apiece. Those unable to contribute money lent their skills in construction or painting.

Monsignor John F. O'Hern, vicar general of the Roman Catholic diocese formally dedicated St. Nicholas Church in October, 1927.

Anne Nealon's historical account notes that such nearby Roman Catholic parishes as Our Lady of Perpetual Help, St. Michael's and St. Andrew's offered church

furnishings and other assistance to the founders of St. Nicholas.

On the other hand, Melkites and other Eastern-Rite Catholics also suffered at the hands of their Roman brothers and sisters in the United States. Some bishops refused to accept the credentials of Melkite priests, who are allowed to marry prior to their ordination. Children who attended Roman Catholic parochial schools were sometimes



Father Charles Mezzomo, a visiting priest from Ss. Peter and Paul Parish in Auburn, closed his eyes in contemplation as he raised an icon of St. Nicholas of Myra.

harassed and ridiculed by those who didn't understand or accept their traditions. Some Eastern-Rite parishes were even forced, for the sake of survival, to conform to aspects of the Roman Rite.

Relations between Latin- and Eastern-Rite churches began to improve more than two decades ago as a result of the Second

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