



San Charbel Maronite Catholic Church

Most parishes are what are termed *territorial parishes*, responsible for serving all Catholics living within a given area. The boundaries separating these parishes from neighboring parishes are plotted on a diocesan grid. There are other parishes whose boundaries are not so designated. These *private parishes* minister to specific groups rather than all Catholics in a given territory. Most commonly, they are *national parishes* serving various immigrant groups from non-English speaking countries. During major waves of immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, more than thirty national parishes were created in our archdiocese for German, French, Polish, Czech, Slovak, Italian, and African-American congregations. Many have since been merged into local territorial parishes, but new national parishes, reflective of more recent immigration trends, have been created for Spanish, Vietnamese, Hmong, Korean and Native American groups.

Eastern Rite Catholic churches comprise another group of private parishes in the archdiocese. Centuries ago, as differences in culture, language, liturgy and doctrinal expression became more pronounced between the western or Roman and eastern Catholic churches, a division occurred. Many eastern churches separated to form independent Orthodox denominations, but Catholics in some regions chose to remain united with Rome. While recognizing Catholic doctrine and the authority of the pope, these churches are autonomous, retaining their own traditions and rites for the celebration of Mass and sacraments. There are five such churches in the Twin Cities representing the Byzantine, Ukrainian and Maronite Rites.

With Venezuela being settled almost exclusively by immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries, there was no need for national parishes. The development of Ciudad Guayana from a fishing village into an industrial city in the 1960s created a new wave of immigrants, many being Maronite Rite Catholics from Lebanon. Being united with Rome, they could attend Mass and receive sacraments at existing parishes, but they longed to have their own parish to gather and celebrate Mass in their own rite. In 2005 that dream became a reality. San Charbel Maronite Catholic Church became the first eastern rite parish in this diocese and the first private parish as well, home to an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 Lebanese immigrants and their descendants.



Following the explosions in Beirut on August 4th, I asked some folks from San Charbel if any relatives or friends of parishioners had died or been affected in any way. In such a close-knit community, such news would have spread quickly, but they weren't aware of any. Lebanon's coastal plain, where Beirut is situated, is primarily inhabited and controlled by Sunni and Hezbollah Shiite Muslims. Maronite Christians center in the mountains where they fled from Muslim advancement in the 7th century. There they remained over the ensuing centuries despite religious persecution and conflicts with Muslims...but not all. Around two-thirds of the approximately three million Maronites are part of the diaspora, those who have left Lebanon to find a home in foreign lands.

Although not directly affected by the explosions, many at San Charbel were already being impacted by another disaster of catastrophic proportions occurring in their homeland. Lebanon has competed with Switzerland as a world banking center. With low inflation and high interest rates, many Lebanese in the diaspora deposited their money there...a safe haven for Lebanese affected by Venezuela's plummeting economy. Little did they know that Lebanon was becoming the new Venezuela. The Banque du Liban, similar to the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank but with more government involvement, offered Lebanese banks good investment rates to attract capital to service huge loans it had taken out to finance the faltering government, cover bad investment decisions, and hide billions of dollars believed to have been siphoned off by Hezbollah. As everything began to unravel, the government defaulted on billions of dollars of loan payments and quit providing basic services. Inflation surged from 2.9% in 2019 to 89.7% in June 2020. In just eight months the Lebanese pound lost 80% of its value. The very day the explosion took place banks were closed as depositors, unable to make withdrawals, protested.

Still, the people at San Charbel are thankful for their parish where they gather, support one another, celebrate their faith, and pray not just for one but two nations in crisis, their beloved Lebanon and adopted Venezuela.

Points to ponder

What other parishes are close to yours? Do you know which ones are territorial and which are personal?

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These "Did you know?" papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org or 651-368-7324.