

## A CRADLE OF ORTHODOXY:

### ST NICHOLAS ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

#### MELBOURNE, VICTORIA

This article provides an overview of the history of St Nicholas Antiochian Orthodox Church in Melbourne, Australia from its beginnings to its important role in Orthodoxy today. It records the service of St Nicholas over the years to the early Lebanese (then known as Syrian) immigrant families; to refugees from Russia and other Slavonic Orthodox communities; to immigrants from Lebanon in the post-war years and during the Civil War in Lebanon; and its role in introducing Orthodoxy to members of the wider Christian and Australian communities.

#### **The Early Years**

The first Lebanese (then known as Syrian) immigrants began arriving in Australia in the 1880s and 1890s. All of the early families engaged in hawking or peddling in the country areas of the eastern states of Australia. By the early years of the twentieth century, a small colony of Lebanese had settled in Melbourne. These families had maintained contact with each other since their arrival in Melbourne. They often worked together as hawkers, shopkeepers or wholesalers and shared social activities such as visiting each other and meeting on Sundays in the Exhibition Gardens.

The Orthodox among them helped to establish the first Greek Orthodox Church in Melbourne: the Holy Annunciation in East Melbourne in 1902. The services were conducted by an Arabic-speaking priest in both Greek and Arabic. There was also chanting in Arabic as well as Greek and the altar boys included the sons of Lebanese immigrants. Lebanese donated some of the icons and provided the first churchwarden. However, by the 1920s, Holy Annunciation became a predominantly Greek church with a Greek-only speaking priest.

The Lebanese continued to attend the Greek Orthodox Church for special services such as weddings, baptisms and funerals. Some young Orthodox Lebanese would attend Sunday schools at Protestant churches, where they enjoyed the social and sporting activities. However, neither attendance at the Greek Church nor participation in social activities at Protestant churches fully met the spiritual and social needs of the small group of Lebanese families in Melbourne. Despite the fact that these families had been living in Australia without their own place of worship for up to forty years, the desire to establish their own church did not fade over time. By the late 1920s, most families had become established in business and their children were either attending school or had commenced work. Now seemed the right time to found their own Orthodox Church.

# Archimandrite Antonios Mobayed 1931-1943

The first move to establish an Antiochian (then known as Syrian) Orthodox Church took place in 1929 when James Batrouney visited Lebanon where he met the Right Rev. Archimandrite Antonios Mobayed. On his return to Melbourne, James Batrouney recommended Fr Antonios as a suitable priest for the small flock in Melbourne. His Beatitude Patriarch Arsanios of Antioch commissioned Fr Antonios as the first priest of the Antiochian Orthodox Church in Victoria. The fare to bring out Fr Antonios was thirty-eight pounds. The small Lebanese community took up a collection that came to 177 pounds, fourteen shillings and four pence. Of this amount, some Russian families, who had known of the Archimandrite, contributed eleven pounds, eighteen shillings and ten pence. Archimandrite Antonios arrived in Melbourne on the Royal Mail Steamer *Orford* on 12 November 1931.

Fr Antonios was uniquely suited to be the first priest of the second Orthodox Church in Melbourne. A graduate of Balamand Theological Seminary in Lebanon, he obtained a Diploma in Divinity at the Academy in Kiev, Russia and for 15 years represented the Patriarch of Antioch to the Patriarch of Moscow. He spoke fluent Arabic, Slavonic and Greek. Following the Communist Revolution, Fr Antonios was forced to return to his homeland in 1929. On his arrival in Melbourne, Fr Antonios brought with him and donated to the Church everything essential for the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. Some of these items are still to be found at St. Nicholas in East Melbourne to this day.

As the Antiochian Orthodox Community had no church of its own, arrangements were made with the Church of England to have the use of St. George's Mission in Spring Street where the first Antiochian Divine Liturgy was held. This was the beginning of a long and amicable relationship between the Anglicans and Orthodox in Victoria. In March 1932 the community purchased a church on the corner of Victoria Parade and Simpson Street from the Congregational Building Association for the sum of 2000 pounds and the seats for 100 pounds. As the new Church had no money, John Batrouney arranged for himself and three others (Joseph Davis, Walter Davis and Alex Malouly) each to donate 125 pounds to make up the deposit of 500 pounds. These four men became the first trustees of the Church. The iconostas, which was based on that of St Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church in Japan, was completed by Palm Sunday 1932 when the first service was held in the Church.

It was decided at the Church meeting of May 1932 that the Church be named St. Anthony's in honour of its first priest. As other members of the community favoured the name St. George's, the Archimandrite placed 12 names in a bag on the Altar and the oldest member of the community, George Facoor, drew out the name St. Nicholas. The Church was consecrated on Sunday 1 October 1933 by Archbishop Timeotheos Evangelinidis, Primate of the Greek Orthodox Church in Australia. Also present were Rev F.E. Maynard, representative of the Anglican Church and the Greek and French consuls. The consecration of St Nicholas was a Pan-Orthodox celebration with the Divine Liturgy being chanted in the Arabic, English, Russian and Greek languages.

The following is an extract of the sermon of the Right Rev. Antonios Mobayed on the occasion of the dedication of St Nicholas on Sunday 1 October 1933:

*I congratulate you, beloved brethren, on the opening and consecration of this Holy Syrian Orthodox Church, which is the only one of its kind in Victoria. I congratulate you also on the fact that this consecration has synchronised with the preparations for the centenary celebrations, and has thus added another beautiful edifice to the many edifices which adorn Melbourne today. I pray that everyone who has laboured and sacrificed for this holy building may have his reward thirty,*

*sixty, and one hundredfold, and at the end, the kingdom of heaven and the happiness with the Father of Light.*

*May this Church ever grow in beauty and influence, and be to you as a loving mother, gathering you within its folds as a hen gathereth its chickens under its wings, and be to you a constant source of inspiration and religious ecstasy!*

*In the name of the Syrian Orthodox Community, I offer my sincere thanks to our venerable pastor, Kiros-Kir Timotheos Evangelinidis, who was kind enough to consecrate the Church and to conduct divine service. May he live long and may his years of office and leadership be many! Our thanks are also due to his Grace the Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne for the permission he gave us, through the devoted Sisters of St George's Mission, to conduct our services in St George's Hall until we were fortunate enough in securing these premises. We thank him also for sending a representative to join in with us in our festivities, and for the encouragement and support he extends to us in many ways. We offer our grateful thanks also to the Greek and French Consuls for honouring us with their presence here today. And, lastly, I want to thank all the friends, clergymen or laymen, who belong to other Christian denominations, but who have kindly accepted our invitation to be with us here today—to one and all I pray for long life and happiness.*

The following Lebanese families founded the Church in 1931 and supported it during the 1930s and beyond: Michael Abourizk, Elia Abourizk, Assad Aboud, Nicholas Antees, Farah Batrouney, James Batrouney, John Batrouney, Spiridon Batrouney, Elias Batrouney, Michael Beshara, Nicholas Beshara, Abraham Bosaid, Mitri Facoory, Alex Malouly, Shakir Mansour, Saba Carey (Facoory), Fred Carey (Facoory), Fred Salamy, Elias Saleeba, Nicholas Saleeba, Eftimos Saleeba, George Saleeba, Sam Saleeba, Toofeek Sedawie, Alice Sedawie, Phillip Sedawie, Nicholas Taweel, Helene Collins (nee Aidouh), and Nicholas Saba (Bejuckly).

The Russian families, who joined the Church in the 1930s, included Trunoff, Naoumoff, Snigroff, Mashall, Ceff, Kolinowski, Birkman, Chonsoff, Yakabliff, and Elsum. These families made a great contribution to the Church. They painted many of the icons and established their own choir that chanted in Slavonic.

St. Nicholas has a proud history of providing a spiritual home for many branches of the Orthodox Church. The small Russian community contributed to bringing out Fr Mobayed, assisted in the conversion of the church to a Byzantine Church, and established its own choir. Every fourth Sunday was Russian Sunday in which Archimandrite Mobayed, together with the Russian Choir, would conduct the whole Liturgy in Slavonic. This took place until the passing of Fr Antonios in 1943.

When the Russians established their first Church in Melbourne in the early 1950s the St. Nicholas Church Committee donated to their Church a Slavonic Bible in memory of the late Archimandrite Antonios Mobayed, who was so beloved by both communities. This is illustrated by the following extract from a letter from the Russian Orthodox Church:

*The Russian Community will always be mindful of all those brotherly gestures and truly Christian relations which your congregation, in the course of many years, has shown to the Orthodox Russian people who have lived many years in Australia, and which you have continued to extend to all of us who have only arrived recently. The Russian Orthodox community will always cherish that cradle of Orthodox life which you have provided, only through the help of which we will be able to commence gradually our own development. The deep reverent memory of the beloved late Rev. Archimandrite Antonios Mobayed, which is so dear to all who knew him, will always be holily preserved by us too.*

The achievements of the first priest of St Nicholas were many. He organised the young people of the Church, teaching them the service in Arabic and organising them into a choir, which served the church for many years. Through his great energy and enthusiasm he so inspired the church community that they managed to purchase the present church building situated on the corner of Victoria Parade and Simpson Street, East Melbourne. Father Antonios travelled to Sydney, Adelaide and New Zealand raising funds for his beloved church. Under his direction the church was converted from bare walls into an Eastern Byzantine church with icons, iconostas, chandeliers, crosses, banners, altar cloths, oil lamps—indeed everything necessary for an Orthodox liturgy. Many of these items were donated by the parishioners with Fr Antonios always the first to donate items, brought from Russia, to his beloved church.

His greatest achievement was the inspiration he gave to the young Australian-born children of Lebanese migrants so that so many of them came to know and love their church and serve it for many decades to come. In 1932 the Australian-born children of Lebanese parents established a Junior Society for those under the age of 31 years. The Church constitution outlined its purposes:

“The particular objects of the Society is (sic) to arrange entertainment, including socials, dances, concerts etc for social purposes of the Church.” One of these was of particular interest. This was a social evening held in St Nicholas Church Hall for members of St Peter’s Church of England, the Greek Orthodox Church and St Nicholas Church. The following is an extract from St Peter’s Parish paper: “ The Syrian Archimandrite invited St Peter’s parishioners, and his Greek Orthodox brethren to attend a social in the Syrian Church Hall. It was a happy occasion, when the Greek, Syrian and Anglo-Catholics mingled together freely in a delightful atmosphere of fellowship.”

The significance of the Junior Society cannot be over-emphasised. Participation in the church’s religious, social and sporting activities enabled the young Australian-born children of immigrants to find suitable marriage partners (in terms of religion and ethnicity) and to expand their skills and experiences. Above all, the Church provided an institution within which they could retain their ethnic identity and, at the same time, engage in many of the cultural practices of the host society. In short, within the Church they could be both Lebanese and Australian.

Over the years changes took place in the Junior Society. During the 1930s many members joined the Church Committee and the Junior Society became a Ladies Society. An important development was the establishment of a cricket team in 1934. This team played in the North Suburban competition from 1934 to 1936 and again after the war from 1947-48 to 1962. A major highlight was the premiership in 1951-2. So within the framework of the Church the young Australian-Lebanese were engaging in recreational pursuits similar to other young Australians of the time—dances, picnics, cricket, concerts, table tennis and other sports.

Archimandrite Antonios Mobayad died after a short illness on 9 November 1943. The burial service was conducted by His Grace the Most Reverend Timotheos Evangelidis, Greek Archbishop of Australia and Oceania, assisted by the Right Rev. Archimandrite Theophylactos of the Greek church in Melbourne and the Rev. Ekonomos Michael Shehadie of St George Orthodox Church, Sydney. Each presented moving verbal tributes as well as Fr Maynard from the Anglican Church.

The Archimandrite left instructions to the Church Committee in the event of his death. The last clause reads as follows:

*I owe nobody anything except the brotherly love and affection that I experienced wherever I went.*

*I have never ceased praying to God daily that he would protect my beloved congregation.*

*I beseech the Lord, who has enabled us to establish His Holy Church in Melbourne, which I have served with all my strength and dedicated my life to serve the Syrian, Russian and Slav Orthodox people.*

*That He may protect his Church for ever and ever, and that the Orthodox people may multiply, enjoying happiness and success.*

*I exhort my congregation to look after the Church, pray there every Sunday, worshipping and praising God with clean hearts, diligently teaching their children the Rites of the Orthodox Church. I request the congregation to pray for me and to forgive me if I have unknowingly offended them.*

## **The Father of Migrants: The Rev Exarch George Haydar 1948-1962**

The passing of Archimandrite Antonios during the Second World War left St Nicholas without a priest and with little hope of obtaining one while the war lasted. St Nicholas was closed, the hall was rented to the Postmaster General's Department, and the cricket gear and score books were gathering dust in the hall loft. On 9 June 1945 the Church Hall was largely destroyed by fire and later repaired for a total of 450 pounds.

The only time St Nicholas was opened was when a visiting Orthodox priest came to Melbourne or when Fr Nicholas Shehadie from the sister church of St George in Sydney visited Melbourne to officiate at weddings, baptisms or other special services. Occasionally Archimandrite Theophylactos of the Greek Church would also hold a service at Nicholas.

The St Nicholas committee wrote to Archbishop Antony Bashir, Primate of the Antiochian Orthodox Church of North America requesting that he send the Melbourne flock an English-speaking priest from America. Archbishop Bashir indicated that he had no priest available and he referred the St Nicholas Committee back to the Patriarch of Antioch. It was not until some three years after the end of the war that a second priest was appointed to serve the Antiochian Orthodox people of Melbourne.

The Rev Exarch George Haydar and his family arrived in Sydney aboard the *Partizanca* on 16 January 1948 and in Melbourne on 20 January 1948. Again the small Antiochian flock in Melbourne was blessed with a priest perfectly suited to the challenges facing the Church. A native of Tripoli in Lebanon, Father George had lived in America for seven years helping to establish the St George Orthodox Church in Allington, Pennsylvania. After his ordination in 1934, Father George served in parishes in Tripoli and taught religious instruction in Tripoli's schools.

After four years without a priest Father George and his family were welcomed with open arms by the faithful at St Nicholas, who included the first wave migrants from Lebanon, their married children and young members of the third generation. The arrival of Father George coincided with the beginnings of the second wave of Lebanese migrants who started coming to Australia from the late 1940s until the early 1970s. Father George can truly be called the 'Father of the migrants'. He would meet newcomers on their arrival, take them for their first jobs, usually in the manufacturing industries that started growing up immediately after the war and help them find accommodation. His warmth and kindness ensured that St Nicholas became an important centre for all Lebanese migrants who not only enjoyed hearing their language in the Church but also the fellowship and social activities with other Lebanese migrants and Australian-Lebanese. Among the first of the second wave arrivals to join St Nicholas and start supporting the Church were Abraham Razzouk (1950), Abdul Masseh Aoun (1950), Helen Haydar (1951) and Samir Nasser (1951).

In 1953 a presbytery was built next to the Church for Father George and his family. Together with

the Church, this provided an important community centre for the expanding Lebanese community.

Fr George's efforts on behalf of Lebanese migrants of all religious faiths gained him the Medal of Merit awarded by the Lebanese Government. Fr George Haydar faithfully served St Nicholas and the wider Lebanese Community from 16 January 1948 to his untimely death 26 September 1962.

Father Haydar's funeral service bears testimony to the warm and fraternal relations he enjoyed with other Orthodox and Christian leaders in Melbourne. Bishop Anthony of the Russian Orthodox Church and Fr Anthony Chidiac of St Georges Antiochian Orthodox Church in Sydney celebrated the funeral service. They were assisted by Bishop Chrysostom, Archimandrite Boyazoglu, Archimandrite Kourtesis, Fr Kentrides and Father Griguit of the Greek Orthodox Church; Father Dimitri Simanow, Father Tikhon and Father Komensky of the Russian Orthodox Church; Father Demjanik and Father Slava of the Serbian Orthodox Church; Father Aramais Mirzian of the Armenian Orthodox Church and Father Krestoski of the Macedonian Orthodox Church.

Also in attendance were Canon Thomas and Rev Godfrey Kircher of the Anglican Church, the Rev Frank Byatt of the Australian Council of Churches, and Father Paul El-Khoury of Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Church. Others in attendance were representatives of the Victorian Government and General Motors Holden.

The many hundreds of Lebanese migrants from all sections of the community as well as their children and grandchildren, came to farewell the warm and caring priest whom they all regarded as their special friend. Walter Batrouney, who was a close friend to Father Haydar and his family, summed up the feelings of so many at his friend's passing:

*I shall always treasure the recollection of his manly attitude and bright disposition in all matters in which I was associated with him.*

*His untimely death has shaken the whole structure of the Lebanese community in Melbourne. He will be greatly missed by many of our nationals whom he befriended and assisted in various ways far outside the scope of his duty.*

## **St Nicholas: The Cradle of Orthodoxy in Melbourne**

Although it was established by Lebanese migrants and their children, the doors of St Nicholas Church were always open to Orthodox of other jurisdictions and indeed to Christians of all denominations. We have seen above how the Anglicans supported the fledgling church and the influence of the few Russian Orthodox in Melbourne on the early development of St Nicholas. Indeed, the Russian Community adopted St Nicholas and Archimandrite Mobayed as their very own at least until the establishment of the first Russian Orthodox Church in Melbourne in 1950.

It was not uncommon in the 1950s and 1960s for Orthodox faithful from one or other Eastern European countries to attend St Nicholas, either individually or in groups, to celebrate certain saints' days or national days. On some occasions a priest or bishop who may have been visiting their flock or perhaps had just arrived in Melbourne would accompany these groups of Orthodox. So St Nicholas provided a spiritual home to many Orthodox before they were able to establish their own churches. Members of the Greek Orthodox Church of the Holy Annunciation would often attend St Nicholas on St Nicholas Day and likewise some members of St Nicholas would attend the Greek church on the Feast of the Holy Annunciation.

Some Macedonian Orthodox had attended St Nicholas from its early days. However it was not until after the Second World War that St Nicholas was able to help the Macedonians establish their own

church. Fr George assisted the Macedonian Orthodox by agreeing to the request of Bishop Andre to ordain Fr Peter as a priest for the newly built church in Young Street, Fitzroy on 30 September 1959. Fr George was given the honour of blessing the foundation stone.

## **In the footsteps of Father George Haydar**

The third priest to serve St Nicholas was Father Gebrael Fadel, who came from Kafir Hazir in Lebanon. Father Gebrael was commissioned by his Beatitude Patriarch Theodosius to serve the Antiochian Orthodox Church of St Nicholas in Melbourne.

Fr Gebrael was a devoted servant of the Church from 12 April 1963 to 29 October 1967 when he left of his own accord to return to Lebanon. Father Gebrael's period was one of consolidation for St Nicholas with the various committees and social activities continuing to serve the Church and the increasing numbers of immigrants from Lebanon and elsewhere in the Middle East.

The tenure of Father Gebrael was also marked by the development and consolidation of other organisations within the Lebanese Community. These included Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Church, which had been opened in 1956, the Melkite Church of St Joseph's, which was opened in 1977, the blossoming of the Australian Lebanese Association and the opening of the first Lebanese restaurants. No longer was St Nicholas the sole community organisation to serve the Lebanese in Melbourne.

The fourth priest to serve St Nicholas was Father Malatius Hussney who was ordained a deacon on 7 September 1968 and priest on 13 October 1968. He was installed in St Nicholas Church on 24 November 1968. Fr Malatius was the son of Exarch Malatius Hussney who was a former priest of the Antiochian Church of St Georges in Sydney. Father Malatius was the first Antiochian priest in Melbourne who was a native English speaker and completely at home in the Australian culture.

Father Malatius served the Church for almost ten years, leaving to serve as a priest in the United States in 1977. Father Malatius closely identified with the new arrivals who came out in the second wave of Lebanese migration and wanted them to become actively involved in the running of the Church. This led to a split in the Church with older members feeling rejected and finally deciding that they had no option to leave St Nicholas. While this split in the Church was difficult for all concerned, it eventually led to the establishment of a second Antiochian Orthodox Church in Melbourne in 1972—that of St Georges in Thornbury.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of Fr Malatius came during the early years of the Civil War in Lebanon. Fr Malatius went to Lebanon and Cyprus where he met many refugees from the Civil War, helped them obtain visas and brought them to Melbourne in a chartered flight. Other Lebanese religious and lay leaders also made similar expeditions.

The fifth priest to serve St Nicholas was Fr Emile Assaf, who had previously been a priest in Brazil and Africa for about 25 years. Following the departure of Fr Malatius, Father Assaf became the priest of St Nicholas from 1977 until 1990, during which time he continued the work of serving newly arrived migrants. Perhaps the major achievement during this period was the extensive renovation and redecoration of St Nicholas. This included rendering the external walls, erecting a fence, replacing the floor, purchasing new pews and painting the walls with icons. Towards the end of this period the presbytery was also extensively renovated in preparation for the next priest. This represented the first extensive physical renewal of St Nicholas since its purchase back in 1931.

## The Renaissance of St Nicholas

After a relatively quiescent period during the 1970s and early 1980s, a number of events took place during the 1990s which rejuvenated St Nicholas and enabled it to resume its historical role of reaching out to people beyond the Lebanese community and Orthodox communities. The first of these was the appointment of Father Dimitri Baroudi as priest of St Nicholas. Fr Dimitri had been well educated in Lebanon and had an extensive career as a secondary school teacher and inspector of education. As a member of the Orthodox Youth Movement, he had been an active layman before being ordained by Metropolitan George Khodr in 1983. Fr Dimitri had served parishes in and around Beirut before his arrival to serve St Nicholas in 1990.

The second event was the ordination of Nabil Kachab, a former president of St Nicholas' Parish Council, first to the Diaconate in 1993 and then to the priesthood in 1997. Father Nabil's subsequent elevation to the rank of Archimandrite in 1998 enabled him to serve not only St Nicholas but also the wider Antiochian Orthodox Church throughout Australia. Fr Nabil has the distinction of being the first Antiochian priest to be elevated to the rank of Archimandrite in Australia.

The combined efforts of Archimandrite Nabil and Fr Dimitri produced a spiritual renaissance at St Nicholas. The Sunday school was reinvigorated, a Youth Group established, and a Senior Citizen's Group established. Future plans include the establishment of a Convent of St Anna for Orthodox nuns and converting two houses adjacent to the church for a multi-purpose church facility.

The combined activities of Archimandrite Nabil and Father Dimitri ensured strong representation of the Antiochian Orthodox in a number of inter-faith forums and bodies. Archimandrite Nabil is currently serving as President of the Victorian Council of Churches (1999-), the first Orthodox person to hold this position. St Nicholas has also hosted visits of theological and other students as well as other groups interested to learn about Orthodoxy. Thus St Nicholas is performing a significant representational role for the Antiochian and other Orthodox churches to the wider Australian community.

The third event was the attraction experienced by some other Christians towards Orthodoxy and the welcoming home they found in St Nicholas. St Nicholas prepared itself by purchasing Orthodox literature in English from the United States, offering an English Divine Liturgy and other services as well as Catechumens' classes every Wednesday evening. St Nicholas also established *Orthodox Contact*, a periodical containing articles and news of interest to all Orthodox and, perhaps, of particular interest to non-cradle Orthodox.

This interest in Orthodoxy was manifest in 1993 when Archbishop Gibran, Primate of the Antiochian Orthodox Church in Australasia and the clergy of St Nicholas organised a Forum at St Nicholas for a large gathering of Anglicans, most of whom were priests. This Forum provided a catalyst for a number of conversions, the first of which was that of Virginia Hutchinson, who was a well-known Anglican layperson, member of the Anglican Synod and wife to an Anglican priest. Virginia subsequently became the editor of *Orthodox Contact* and a guide and support to others in their quest for Orthodoxy.

These activities resulted in a small but significant number of men and women who were sufficiently attracted to Orthodoxy that they embraced the faith and St Nicholas as their spiritual home. In the years following the Forum a number of Anglican priests converted to Orthodoxy and, after training, became ordained as Orthodox priests. These included:

- Fr Raymond Smith, parish priest of St Barnabas, Southport, Queensland, together with his

flock of some 50 families.

- Father Ted Doncaster, parish priest of St Anthony the Great, Perth, Western Australia.
- Father George Robinson, parish priest of St Ignatius, Canberra, ACT.
- Father Geoffrey Harvey, mission priest of St Paul's, Wheeler's Hill, Victoria.
- Father Colomba Radford, priest of St Cuthbert, Iona, Victoria.

These and other convert priests are having a significant impact on the culture of the Antiochian Orthodox Church in Australia.

## **Overview**

St Nicholas Antiochian Orthodox Church has served the Antiochian and other Orthodox in Melbourne for just on seventy years. The significance of St Nicholas lies in the fact that, from its inception until the mid-1950s, St Nicholas occupied a special place in Lebanese community life. Not only was it the only church for Lebanese but also the most enduring of the Lebanese community organisations. As such, it provided a religious and community centre for many first, second and third wave immigrants from Lebanon and elsewhere in the Middle East

Its second major contribution lies in the fact that over the years St. Nicholas extended a welcoming arm to other newly arrived Orthodox communities, such as the Russian, Ukrainian, Macedonian and Serbian communities. They would worship at St. Nicholas, individually or in groups, sometimes with their own priests, until they were able eventually to establish their own churches. In this way St. Nicholas could truly be described as providing "the cradle of Orthodox life" in Melbourne. In recognition of its special role, St Nicholas has been honoured to welcome three Patriarchs who have visited Australia at various times: His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV of Antioch, His Beatitude Patriarch Maximos V of the Melkite Church and His Beatitude Patriarch Zaccha of the Syrian Orthodox Church.

The third contribution of St Nicholas is that it is continuing to represent Orthodoxy to the wider Christian and Australian communities. As such, St Nicholas is providing a pathway for people to learn about Orthodoxy and to enter the Orthodox Church. In this way St Nicholas is extending and broadening the mission of Orthodoxy in Australia.

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I am also indebted to my own family, whose active involvement in St Nicholas gave me the motivation to tell this story and the insights to interpret it.

Dr Trevor Batrouney

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