

Church Tour Information

Welcome to Saint Elias Maronite (catholic) Church. We are glad that you are joining our tour.

Our parish was founded in 1910 and originally was located on 6th Avenue South and 20th Street which currently houses the parking lot across the street from the Kirkland Clinic. I have fond memories of arriving to church on Sunday mornings with my parents to the smell of fresh baked bread as the church was across the street from the Merita Bakery. The church is named after Elijah who is the patron of the Lebanese village where our founders were from.

I would like to begin our tour outside of the church and describe and explain 3 symbols of our heritage:

1st At the very top of the church is a cross which is the symbol of Christianity

Next you see the Messianic star or more commonly known as the Star of David. This symbolizes or reminds us that Jesus, the Messiah descended from the House of David.

Then you see a Cedar Tree –the bible mentions the Cedars of Lebanon and they are a sign of immortality and of undying faith.

Finally above the doors the writing in Syriac translates: this is the Maronite Church of St. Elias the Prophet.

To the right and the left you see the cornerstones of the church. They were laid in 1949 on November 22 – which is Lebanese Independence Day. We celebrated the first liturgy in this building Christmas Eve, 1950.

St. Elias Church was founded in 1910 and in 2010 we celebrated our Centennial. Part of the year-long celebration included placing this memorial on the portico.

As we move inside we have a poster that breaks down the five major centers of churches in the Catholic Faith. The Church of Rome which is sometimes called the Latin Rite – it is the only rite most Catholics know because in the United States there are only about 90 Maronite parishes. Our parish is the only one in Alabama and there is only one parish in Georgia (in Atlanta) and currently there are none in Mississippi or Tennessee or closest neighbors.

The other four major centers of churches are all Eastern Rite churches: Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, and Armenia. We are proud to say that the Maronite Church is the only one that does not have an orthodox counterpart; all other Catholic churches do. In fact there are 23 Eastern Churches and the Roman Church which gives a total of 24 churches all under the auspices of the Pope in Rome. All Catholic churches share the same faith, same 7 sacraments (in the Maronite church we use the term Mysteries instead of sacraments), and are all united under the Pope in Rome. A rite is a community of faith having a distinct tradition, theology, spirituality, liturgy hierarchy and canon law. Maronites are an Eastern rite which evolved from the traditions of the city of Antioch, one of the five great centers of Christianity where the apostles of Jesus Christ preached. St. Peter brought the faith to Antioch. It was the place where the followers of Jesus were first called “Christians”.

The area to the right as you stand in the vestibule is the Baptistry. On the wall are hand carvings of John the Baptist from Italy. It is a very small area and since our celebration of Baptism is almost as big as a wedding, the baptismal font is on wheels. The deacon, priest or a family member will wheel the font to the front so that all the family and guests can share in the ceremony. There is a stained glass window in this area which depicts St. Anne (the mother of Mary) teaching her the scriptures. The area on the left

is used as a “Cry Room”. The stained glass window in that area depicts Mary, Queen of the Universe, one of the oldest titles given to Mary. There is also a beautiful statue of St. Sharbel. He was a Maronite monk and priest who lived in the mountains of Lebanon who lived in the mountains of Lebanon. During his life he obtained a wide reputation for holiness and he has been canonized by the Catholic Church. Many miracles have happened through his intercession. His Feast Day is celebrated on July 23rd.

Now I’d like you to join me inside the church. In the earliest times both Jews and Christians gathered in the synagogue for the Liturgy of the Word (scripture readings). Then the Christians would go to a home to celebrate the Breaking of the Bread patterned after the Last Supper, the way Jesus had taught them. Eventually, Christians were not allowed in temple services ... so they built their own temples which were a Christianized version of a Jewish synagogue.

When Catholics come together for Liturgy, they celebrate 2 things: The Liturgy of the Word at the Bema and the Liturgy of the Eucharist at the Altar. The Maronite Liturgy goes back to James, the Apostle. He was the first Bishop of Jerusalem. Our liturgical Language is Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic (the language that Christ spoke) that eventually developed into a language unto itself. However, most of our liturgical service is now in English although in every liturgy the words of consecration are still chanted in Syriac.

I’d like to share some interesting facts about the sanctuary. First you should notice the sunburst with 7 rays emanating from it. They represent the seven mysteries or sacraments. The pillars of the sanctuary are the windows of St. Peter on the right, and St. Paul on the left. The next window on each side depict the passion of Christ – The Agony in the Garden on the right and the Crucifixion on the left. Then you see windows of the two great archangels, Gabriel on the left bring the announcement of Jesus to Mary and Michael on the right casting the devil out of Paradise. Finally, the

center window is of St. Elias holding a fiery sword and a scroll. Elias is the Latin form of the Hebrew name Elijah from the Old Testament.

Hanging in front of the main altar is the Sanctuary Lamp which signifies the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. It is lit all year long except Good Friday when Jesus was crucified and Holy Saturday when Jesus was in the tomb.

The top slab of the front altar was donated by a former bishop of the Birmingham diocese when they sold Archbishop Toolen's home in Birmingham that was located behind the old John Carroll High School. It was the altar in his chapel. The base of the altar is part of the altar rails that were removed when the church was remodeled.

You also notice several statues in the sanctuary. To the left of the altar is a statue of St. Elias, the patron of our church. On the right is a statue of St. Jude. There are also two large statues – on the left, St. Joseph, the foster father of Jesus and the blessed mother on the right. Technically, statues are not part of our monastic tradition. For the first 300 years, many followers of St. Maron lived in caves. Our tradition is very simplistic, consisting of paintings and murals. Some early examples of Maronite art are the illustrations in the Rabboula gospels. Several years ago while remodeling an old church, they discovered a beautiful painting of what is known as Our Lady of Elige. You can see a picture of the painting hanging here on the lecturn.

Of all the windows inside the church, the window of the good Shepherd is the only other Arabic inscribed in the church. During our most recent construction in 2009-2010 two smaller stained glass windows were added just inside the portico doors on the north side of the church. These windows are of St. Rafka and St. Nimtullah Hardini. St. Rafka lived in Lebanon and became a nun at an early age. She taught school and she and another nun established a school for girls where she taught for 7 years. She later joined the Lebanese Maronite a community devoted to prayer, silence, and sacrifice. She died in 1914, and Pope St. John Paul II named her a saint in 2001. St. Nimtullah Hardini was a Lebanese monk, priest

and scholar of the Maronite Church who gave himself completely to his brother monks and neighbors during a time of suffering in his Land and difficulty within his Order. He died in 1858 at the age of 50 and was named a saint in 2004.

Another new addition to our complex is the beautiful mosaic of St. Elias.

Explanation of the Mosaic of St. Elias

The mosaic was made in Lebanon by Andre Nammour, the same man who designed the 16 foot mosaic for the back of the Grotto, the mosaic with the name of Deacon Joe Stephens, and the marble pulpits in the church.

The mosaic of St. Elias is between the rectory steps and the south side entrance to the church. Winged angels are in the 4 corners. At the bottom it shows the cave of St. Elias where he hid after slaying the 450 prophets of Baal. (1 Kings 19: 1-10). Elias feared for his life from Ahab and Jezebel.

The black raven is above the cave. The raven provided food for Elias when he predicted a drought in the land. He gave him bread in the morning and meat in the evening.

(1 Kings 17:3-6)

Cedar trees are along the bottom. Cedar trees represent eternal life and they are a predominant symbol of Lebanon.

As you follow the mosaic upward you see the chariot and the fiery wheelstand the winged horses that lifted Elias up to heaven. You will not see St. Elias but you will see what he has left us- his cloak. (2 Kings 2:11-12).

Above the chariot is the seal of Mount Carmel. The rays radiating from the seal represent the rays of the sun. Mount Carmel is situated in Haifa in Israel. In the 9th century BC the prophet Elias lived there. Mount Carmel is the place of origin for the Carmelites. On the seal you will see the mountain

which refers to Mount Carmel, three 6-pointed stars and a crown. The lower star represents the Carmelites still on the way to the top of Mount Carmel, while the other two stars higher up represent Carmelites who have ended their journey. The crown represents the Kingdom of God.

At the very top of the mosaic, in English, is the motto of St. Elias "I have been most zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts." (1 Kings 19:10) This motto can also be seen in our stained glass window of St. Elias behind the altar in the church.

At the entrance of our St. Elias Church you will feel the presence of the saint as the Liturgy of the day or week-end will inspire you.