



Together

The Newsletter of St Michael's Community Services

Issue 1

2023

Dear esteemed readers of Together,

As we look back on 2022, we want to thank you for helping St Michael's Community Services (SMCS) in our work to make a difference in people's lives, particularly those without permanent accommodation or experiencing food insecurity. Over the course of 2022, we prepared more than 47,200 meals and our volunteers donated over 5,300 hours in food preparation. Our team in Liverpool, which started small with only one person in 2022, now feeds over 60 people, knowing most of them by name. The Board of Directors, in conjunction with the Editorial Team, thank you immensely for your continued help to share the love of Jesus, enrich lives and strengthen our community. We wish you peace and joy throughout the New Year.

With your sincere support, we will continue our mission of spreading the good news and the unconditional love while reaching out to the youth, to the vulnerable in our society, our elderly and those who sleep rough on the streets. SMCS has started 2023 on a great high – on 18 February, we set up our second stall at the Glebe Markets, selling new clothes, kindly donated by the Mosaic Group, with 100% of the proceeds going towards the homeless. We had a wonderful turn out and shared a spirit of joy among committed volunteers. Moreover, as a result of the Annual General Meeting, we proudly welcome and present our Board of Directors for 2023-2024, consisting of: George Ayoub, Jack Bettar, Charbel El-Haddad, Norma Ghattas, Roda Kanawati, Jane Karame, Nevine William and Randa Zakarian. We hope you enjoy this issue of Together, full of beautiful photos of our past activities and uplifting articles.

Happy reading!

The Editors

FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH : UPDATE FROM LIVERPOOL

Our homeless food drive in the Liverpool outreach has been nothing short of a success! What started out as a "homeless" food drive has now turned into a "community" food drive. We serve over 60 individuals every fortnight. Not every individual is homeless as we have come to learn. Some individuals have special needs or a disability and are unable to cook. Others simply cannot afford to buy groceries due to the rising costs of living. We also cater for single parents, widows and those who live alone. We have over 15 volunteers (with the youngest volunteer aged only 6 years) who are rostered on a fortnightly basis. Some of the volunteers cook homemade meals, others bring perishable items and some assist with distribution of the food. We are always looking for more volunteers to help with the cooking and preparation of the meals! What we have found is that our presence has had the biggest impact on these individuals. They not only have a friendly person to speak to and confide in, but they appreciate what we do and always say, "thank you, God bless you".

Rania Shashati



IN THIS ISSUE

1. Welcome; Strength to Strength : update from Liverpool
- 2.-3 My Melkite Memories; Jordan : land of contrasts
4. Are you being persecuted enough? Only the Lonely
5. Getting to know one another. The Power of Volunteerism : Fouad Nakhle
6. Recognition when it's due
7. An example of generosity
8. Spiritual Corner. And when you Fast
9. Lasting Impressions : volunteering at SMCS
10. Kitchen Corner. Alice Chehab : Petit Four Recipe; A Letter from Lebanon
11. In Loving Memory ...
12. Responding to Tragedy : aid for Syria; Our Mission Statement; Our Vision; Our Story; Contact Us



MY MELKITE MEMORIES

My memories of the Melkite faith date back to when I was a child. As one of 5 children my parents would religiously take us to mass on a Sunday. As Melkites we originally attended mass in Waterloo. Here, as a child, I recall the steep ascent of stairs leading to the church, the church kitchen which was always abuzz with activity and then the church itself where you needed to arrive early in order to find a place to sit. From Waterloo, the Cathedral moved to Darlington, where we continued to attend weekly liturgy. As a child I never really understood why the liturgy would go for as long as it did or why most of the liturgy would be sung. Although as children having parents who spoke to us in Arabic, many of the words in the liturgy were foreign to me and whilst I did not comprehend them, I knew enough to know they were special.

In reflecting on my early experiences, I have come to realise and value that my Melkite faith and in particular St Michael's Cathedral is more than mortar and brick; it holds the stories and experiences of a generation, their fervent respect for the faith, their connection to a community and their serving others as Christ instructed us all to do. The older generation of Melkites exemplify people of faith, devotion and deeds. These words I

know sum up my late father Salim or Sam as everyone knew him. He was a man dedicated to his family and to his church.

St Michael's Cathedral was where Dad, his faith and deeds came together. Dad gave his all, even to the point of losing the tip of one of his fingers, when the crown of the Bishop's seat which is now fixed in the Cathedral fell as it was being installed and severed the tip of his finger, to driving Fr. Faisal (RIP) all the way from Sydney to Brisbane where he was to serve as Parish Priest. Dad spent two weeks there fixing up his home to ensure that it was habitable.

It was my mother who taught me the power that is found in prayer. Having started the Ladies Fraternity at St Michael's Cathedral my mother is devout in her faith and someone whom I would describe as a prayer warrior. She taught me that solace and strength come through prayer, that nothing was too great or too little to offer in prayer. As children and as young adults, each month of May, our family would gather to pray the rosary, listen to Bible readings and sing hymns to Our Lady.

As an adult my memories and now my experiences are filled with the



JULIE WITH HER MOTHER, JEANNETTE, AT ST MICHAEL'S CATHEDRAL FOR GOOD FRIDAY.

sweet smell of incense, the melodic and spiritually uplifting chanting and the sense of community connection. I realise the importance of parents in instilling in their children a love of God and a reliance on God for everything. I understand that we are nothing without each other and we are lifeless without Christ. Dr Julie Maakrun

JORDAN : LAND OF CONTRASTS

My experience travelling through the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in January this year, was a rich cultural and historical adventure which gave me a wider global perspective and also catalysed deep moments of spiritual reflection as I retraced the footsteps of some of the most central Biblical figures, ranging from Jesus to Moses to John the Baptist. Jordan, extremely varied in its beautiful natural landscapes, whereby I travelled from the snowy mountains of Ajloun to the blue waters of the Red Sea at Aqaba and even the red desert sands of Wadi Rum (which conjure an extra-terrestrial scenery). If I place aside the breathtaking monuments of Jerash, Petra, Qalaat Shobek, Quseir Amra and the Amman Citadel, among others, I want to focus specifically on some of the sites of immense importance to myself, as a Catholic. An interesting, and somewhat amusing, anecdote which emerged early on

in our trip was that I was determined to find a Melkite Church in Amman to attend a Sunday Liturgy. We spent much of the day trying to research place names on GoogleMaps to no avail and even rang Melkite contacts abroad which proved to be ineffective. My travel companion and I decided to explore a lesser-known part of Amman specifically to see Darat El-Funun, a fascinating art space which is spread over a number of early 20th century villas and has Byzantine Christian ruins in the gardens. On our way to leave the gallery, we discovered a Melkite Church right in front of the entrance! Sadly, it was closed so we made the trip by car to the Melkite Greek Catholic Cathedral of St George, located in a gentrified, quiet neighbourhood and built in the Byzantine architectural style. To our luck, and maybe with some Divine intervention, we arrived at the Cathedral at the exact time the evening Divine Liturgy was starting. In

the Homily of Pope Benedict XVI in 2009 at the Cathedral in Amman, he remarked that "Eastern Christians have



JACK IN THE ST GEORGE ORTHODOX CHURCH OF MADABA.

Jordan : land of contrasts (cont.)

contributed so greatly ... [to] ... times of rich cultural revival [in our Church]". In addition to visiting the Melkite Cathedral, we took a car to the ancient city of Madaba where we saw St George's Melkite Greek Catholic Church and also the famous St George's Greek Orthodox Church. What is extremely significant about the latter Church is that part of the floor contains a mosaic depicting part of the Middle East (prior to damage from earthquakes, fire and partial desecration by an Umayyad Caliph in the 8th century, the mosaic comprised of Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan and Palestine). This mosaic dates to the 6th century AD and is the oldest surviving original cartographic depiction of the Holy Land and especially Jerusalem. The map may partially have served to facilitate pilgrims' orientation in the Holy Land, showing the Dead Sea, Mount of Olives, Jericho, Bethlehem and many other locations. This mosaic is used heavily for verification of biblical sites. Excavations in Jerusalem in the late 1960s revealed the Nea Church and the Cardo Maximus in the very locations suggested by the Madaba Map. In February 2010, excavations further substantiated its accuracy with the discovery of a road depicted in the map that runs through the middle of Jerusalem. The Church itself is decorated with sumptuous interiors, elegant colonnades and various mosaics. In an underground crypt, there is an icon of the three-handed Virgin Mary, with a blue hand shooting fire, and a tradition of healing so powerful that her icon needs a glass case with padlocks!

At the end of my trip, I had the gratifying experience of visiting Bethany, said to be the baptismal site of Jesus Christ on the eastern bank of the River Jordan, near the Dead Sea. The whole site features impressive Roman and Byzantine remains including churches from the 4th and 15th centuries, monasteries for different denominations, caves used by hermits and even pools in which ancient baptisms were celebrated. This all greatly testifies to the historicity and importance of the site as a Biblical pilgrimage destination. It was incredible to think that Jesus' baptism, one of the most significant sacraments and the initiation of a person into the Christian faith, was performed on this very spot centuries ago! In addition to 'Al Maghatas' site, I visited Mount Nebo, where Moses looked to the Promised Land. Not only is the spiritual and historical context of the site special, but the view is equally beautiful. I could see the whole West Bank in Palestine, looking across the Jordan River valley as far as Jericho and Jerusalem. I also had the opportunity to view the olive tree planted by Pope Benedict XVI, adjacent to the ancient Byzantine chapel.

Over the course of my trip, I accumulated rich anecdotes and met fascinating individuals which made life-long memories for me. Whenever I visited a historical or natural place of immense splendour, I continued to reflect on a quote from a prominent



A VIEW OF THE 'MADABA MOSAIC' IN MADABA.



JACK AT THE MOSAIC MUSEUM ATOP MOUNT NEBO.

20th century Greek author:

"I said to the almond tree, 'Sister, speak to me of God.' And the almond tree blossomed" (Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*).

I cannot wait to return! Jack Bettar



LOOKING FROM MOUNT NEBO ACROSS THE JORDAN VALLEY

Gracious God, we come before You to ask for Your blessings upon the readers of our newsletter, Together. We pray that as they read these words, they may be filled with hope, joy, and inspiration. May the stories and messages contained within these pages touch their hearts and remind them of Your love and grace. We ask that You bless each reader with good health, strength, and vitality, and that You guide them in all their endeavours. Help us to continue to bring Your light and truth to the world through this newsletter, and may it be a source of encouragement and support to all who read it. Amen.

ARE YOU BEING PERSECUTED ENOUGH?

We often hear criticism of the Christian Faith in the media, by politicians and even private individuals. If you spend any time on social media (especially YouTube and Twitter), the level of anti-Christian sentiment sometimes reaches fever-pitch!

Christians (especially Catholic and Orthodox Christians) are probably the most persecuted people world-wide. In some places (especially in our spiritual home in the Middle East) it is an overt oppression, consisting of murder, torture, rape, economic oppression and legislated discrimination. But, even in Western nations like Australia, the USA, Canada and Europe, Christians are suffering. It's not so obvious, but that's because most so-called Christians are in fact just lapsed (non-practising) Christians. They might call themselves "Christians", but they do not hold the Faith, do not believe or follow the Church's teachings, do not live the tenets of the Faith and make no effort to evangelise their fellow citizens. These so-called "Christians" do not feel any persecution, because they have no "faith" to persecute. The media and politicians do not go after these people, because they don't live the life of a Christian.

But, if you take a stand in support of Christian morals and ethics, you can expect to be persecuted. It might be subtle – for example, you might be

ignored, told to be "non-judgemental", or told to be more "inclusive" of others. Or it could be more overt – remember that Archbishop Porteus (Latin bishop of Hobart) was threatened with jail when he spoke in defence of sacramental marriage. Doctors in Victoria who refuse to refer for abortion also risk being thrown into prison.

Our Lord warned these persecutions might come to us one day. In Matthew 24:7-9, we read **"For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; ... all these are the beginnings of sorrows. Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall put you to death: and you shall be hated by all nations for my name's sake"**.

But is that all we can look forward to? No! The Good News is that Our Lord promised us the graces of Eternal Life and a rich reward in Heaven! In Chapter 4 of St Paul's 2nd letter to St Timothy (Bishop of Ephesus), the great Apostle says **"I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the Faith. As to the rest, there is laid up for me a crown of justice, which the Lord the just judge will render to me in that day: and not only to me, but to them also that love his coming"**.

That's why Christians are a joyous people! We trust in Our Lord's promises. Persecutions might come to us for living the Faith. Our Lord himself

suffered persecution and death. Each of the Apostles and many of our Fathers in the Faith suffered greatly for their love for Jesus and His Church. Many of our ancestors from Syria, Lebanon, Anatolia and Egypt paid the ultimate price for their fidelity to the orthodox Catholic faith. We should expect no less persecution. One thing we do not want is for Our Lord to say to us on judgment day what he said in the Chapter 3 of the Book of Apocalypse to the Church in Laodicea **"because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold, nor hot, I will begin to vomit thee out of my mouth"**.

So, don't be a "lukewarm" Christian. Don't be a "Christian in name only". Live the fullness of the Catholic faith. Look forward to the coming persecutions – they are a sign that we are on the right path, the path our brave Fathers took. Speak to a friend about the Faith. Pray every day – especially the Rosary. Say no to the modern-day vices, evils and injustices. Care for the poor and needy. Come to church every Sunday – and bring your children and grandchildren! All of our small sufferings and sacrifices help build up the Church, which is the Body of Christ! Be like the brave Apostles (Acts 5:41), who **"rejoiced that they were accounted worthy to suffer reproach for the name of Jesus"**.

Dr John Obeid

ONLY THE LONELY

So many songs have been written about loneliness, usually in terms of unrequited love. What about other types? According to current research, young people are now one of society's loneliest groups. This doesn't fit the stereotype at all: we always imagine young people to have hectic social lives but this is not, in fact, the case. Young people have become more and more isolated as their lives have been disrupted by COVID, lockdowns, and the resulting depression and anxiety. Many complain of feeling lonely.

Another lonely group is the elderly who feel forgotten or ignored by their families. They sit at home, isolated, waiting for a familiar footfall or knock at the door. When younger people constantly have their phones in their hands, what's stopping them from

ringing an elderly grandparent just to say hello?

Two very successful programs on ABC TV have been *Old People's Home for Four Year Olds* and *Old People's Home for Teenagers*. In both programs, the elderly participants benefitted greatly from interacting with the younger group. When tested afterwards by the psychologists who ran the program, they were found to have lower rates of depression, their general health had improved and they felt more engaged in their lives.

In today's society, we think we are connected with others through Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and text messages. This is virtual communication, and researchers are finding that young people, especially, have not developed the art of

conversation. No wonder they feel lonely and disconnected!

I remember my childhood in a NSW country town, where the neighbours would visit one another for a cup of tea and a chat. We watched out for the postman in the hope of a handwritten letter arriving from a distant friend or relative. Admittedly it was a more leisurely lifestyle; few women worked. Could this informal socialising be revived? Perhaps not in today's over-planned world. It probably still exists in country NSW, to a lesser degree than in the past.

On the other side of the world, I admired the way in Lebanon, neighbours in apartment buildings would greet each other from windows and balconies, enquiring about each other's health and that of family members. Some

Only the lonely (cont.)

would visit for a freshly brewed cup of coffee, the Lebanese equivalent of the Aussie "cuppa".

If only we could slow down a little, take the time to know our neighbours again and to connect with each other in a more meaningful way. I feel sad when a bus passes with all its passengers,

faces averted, staring at their phones. Whatever happened to gazing out the window, watching people go about their daily lives, seeing that small child having a tantrum on the pavement, that man struggling with a delivery, that little old lady tottering along with her walking stick?

Let's go back to true connections with people. Let's ring instead of texting. Let's make time to visit one another. Let's help get rid of the depression which is so rampant in our society!

Jane Karame

GETTING TO KNOW ONE ANOTHER

The Power of Volunteerism : a conversation with Fouad Nakhle

Fred (Fouad) Nakhle is a remarkable 82-year-old person whose life story is both inspiring and tragic. Born in Lebanon, he arrived in Sydney in 1968 with the intention of working for a few years to support his family back home. However, fate had other plans for Fred, and the outbreak of civil war in Lebanon in 1975 changed his life forever. Tragically, Fred experienced an unfathomable loss when 23 family members, including his parents, siblings, nieces, and nephews, were killed in a horrific massacre in his village. The weight of his devastating losses left him emotionally and financially shattered, and he even experienced temporary blindness as a result. However, Fred refused to succumb to his circumstances. Instead, like the mythical phoenix, he found the strength to rise from the ashes of his despair and face life with unwavering courage and determination.

Despite the hardships he has endured, Fred is a pleasure to be around. His vast knowledge and influence are immediately apparent, and his gentle and kind nature shines through, despite the bitterness he still feels. His compassionate heart is felt strongly by those around him, making him a true inspiration to all who know him.

Fred's compassion was not merely theoretical, but a way of life that he lived every day. After settling in the city of Parramatta, he immediately began volunteering, and his reputation quickly spread as someone who was always willing to lend a helping hand. Fred's tireless efforts did not go unnoticed, and he has received countless awards, medals, and official letters of congratulation for his exceptional contribution to society.

It is no surprise that the editors of Together, a publication that celebrates

community service and volunteering, chose to interview Fred. His story serves as a reminder of the importance of giving back to one's community. In our interview with him, Fred shared his thoughts on the nature and importance of volunteering, providing insights and perspectives that are both valuable and thought-provoking.

Fred's example serves as a shining example of the power of volunteerism to make a positive impact on society.

During the interview, Fred shared his story about how he first became involved in volunteering. He explained that after he arrived in Australia, he was given the opportunity to create a good life for himself and help support his family back home in Lebanon. However, Fred also felt a strong sense of duty to give back to the society that had welcomed him without discrimination, and he saw volunteering as a way to do just that. Fred went on to explain that volunteering provided him with a sense of purpose and fulfillment, especially when he used to see the great smile of those people he used to serve. Volunteering was a way for him to connect with his community and make a positive impact on the lives of others. He shared stories of some of his most memorable volunteer experiences, including times when he was able to help people who were struggling and in need of support.

Esther, a remarkable 94-year-old woman, used to attend drawing classes organized by Parramatta City Council, where she met Fred. When Esther fell ill and could no longer attend the classes, she asked for Fred's phone number. From that day on, Fred made it a habit to call her twice a day, in the morning and in the evening. As time went by, Esther's health declined, and she eventually moved into a nursing



FOUAD NAKHLE AND HIS WIFE, 2023.

home where she lost her eyesight. When Fred learned about it, he rushed to visit her where they spent an hour catching up, despite the fact she could not remember whom she was talking with. As they said their goodbyes, she asked him to greet Fred on her behalf. Throughout the interview, Fred emphasised that everyone has the ability to make a difference, regardless of their background or circumstances. His words served as a powerful reminder that even small acts of kindness and volunteerism can have a significant impact on us and the world around us.

This interview was conducted and prepared by Fr Gerges Al Butros

RECOGNITION WHEN IT'S DUE

The last monthly gathering of the year for St Michael's Friendship Group is usually a special occasion where we all celebrate the end of the year in a happy and festive atmosphere. This year the occasion was extra special as it was used to acknowledge, honour and pay tribute to three very special persons, in fact to three pillars of our Melkite church. These are Louis and Omaira Bettar and Gaston Vitali whose many years of support and dedication to our church made a significant difference in its growth and strength.

The celebratory mass on Friday the 9th of December was well attended with almost 50 people present, including many of the Bettar and Chahoud families. After the Holy Liturgy, celebrated by Fr Gerges Al Butros, Jack Bettar, Louis and Omaira's grandson, gave a beautiful speech summarising his grandparents' long association and great contribution to the Melkite Church. In his speech, Jack outlined information about their early migratory experiences and the importance of faith for their family. From the time Louis arrived in Australia, aged 11, and unaccompanied by his parents, the first true place he called home was St Michael's Melkite Church at Waterloo. Like his uncle Issa Chahoud before him, who was a critical father-figure, Louis lived in the Presbytery of

the Church with Malatios Chahoud, his great-uncle and a Melkite Monsignor. Jack recalled that each morning, Louis would wake up, get into his vestments as an Altar server and offer the Liturgy with Monsignor Chahoud. It was these formative experiences over many years which would blossom into a life-long, inter-generational connection with the Melkite Church. For 7 decades, Louis assisted in all facets of Church life, ranging from the Liturgy to the construction works at St John the Beloved Church in Greenacre, where he built the pews and ceiling, assisted with tiling and the assembly of the altar and façade. In acknowledging his grandmother's contribution, Jack read about how Omaira joined the Ladies' Fraternity at Greenacre and also served as Chair of the Melkite Eparchy's Social Committee under Archbishop Issam John Darwish. She was a very active member involved in organising functions and fundraising. Both are now members of the Seniors and Friends' Group at St Michael's Melkite Cathedral and regularly enjoy the monthly get-together with their friends.

Gaston Vitali was also recognised for his long-time dedication to St Michael's Cathedral and his enormous help to St Michael's Community Services. For all the regular attendees at the Cathedral

and Wednesday volunteers, we all can vouch that Gaston is the first to arrive and the last to leave. His welcoming face is one of the most consistent threads in the life of the Cathedral and he so selflessly gives his time to assist Abouna Gerges and parishioners with any projects or maintenance tasks. Gaston's firm belief in supporting the homeless in Sydney has manifested with him being one of the first members of our Charity in 2016. Thank you, Gaston, for your witty sense of humour, great smile, sense of charisma and faith! Two beautiful plaques were presented which expressed to Louis, Omaira and Gaston our heartfelt thanks for all they have done and continue to do for our Melkite Church and wider community.

Following the mass, the whole group drove to the Rockdale Tennis Club where we enjoyed a delicious lunch and played a number of social games with lots of presents to win. The group made a presentation to Fr Gerges to thank him and the Khouriya, Hiam, for their tireless work for the congregation and the community in general. The day ended by the celebration of the happy occasion of the birthday of Nazira, mother of our friend Antoinette Ajaka. The whole day was a great success enjoyed by all present.

Naguib Kanawati



LOUIS AND OMAIRA BETTAR RECEIVING THEIR AWARD FROM ABOUNA GERGES.



RONI SIKH PRESENTING GASTON VITALI WITH HIS AWARD



ANTOINETTE AJAKA AND HER MOTHER, NAZIRA CELEBRATING NAZIRA'S BIRTHDAY

WHY BE A VOLUNTEER?

It's not for money, it's not for fame.
It's not for any personal gain.
It's just for the love of your fellowmen.
It's just to offer a helping hand.

It's just to give a tithe of self.
That's something you can't buy with wealth.
It's not medals won with pride.
It's for that feeling deep inside.
It's that reward down in your heart.

It's that feeling you've been a part,
Of helping others far and near,
That makes you a Volunteer!
author unknown, adapted
by the Editorial Board of Together

ST MICHAEL'S DAY 2022

On the 8th of November of each year, the whole Melkite community celebrates the important feast of St Michael, patron of our cathedral at Darlington. A good number of parishioners attended the Holy Liturgy which was celebrated by Bishop Robert Rabbat, Fr Ibrahim Sultan, Fr Gerges Al Butros, Fr Tony Abouchaaya, Fr Chawki Ibrahim, Deacon Michael Suliman and Subdeacons Magdi Zarzour and George Gargour. A beautiful and emotional surprise took place at the end of the Mass, when Fr Gerges asked Bishop Robert to bless a new icon of St Michael, which we all thought would be placed in the Cathedral. But after the blessing, Fr Gerges presented it to Fr Shawki as a memento of his recent ordination to priesthood, with all the best wishes from St Michael's congregation. The evening ended in a community gathering at the church hall, where a special cake, sweets and fruits were served.



A VIEW OF THE GROUP GATHERED FOR THE ST MICHAEL'S DAY 2022 COMMUNITY LUNCH

St Michael's feast is usually celebrated with a special function, but due to limitations on big gatherings during the Covid pandemic, no such celebration has taken place for the last two years. With some uncertainty still existing, it was decided to hold a special community lunch in the church hall. This was after the Holy Liturgy on Sunday, 13th of November. It was a delight to see the Cathedral packed with worshippers. In addition to the regular parishioners, many other Melkites who live at a distance also attended the service. The church hall looked spectacular, with a perfect arrangement of the seating and with flowers and balloons adding a happy and festive atmosphere. The special lunch started at 12.30pm, attended by 120 parishioners, the full capacity of the hall. A delicious and rich variety of cold and hot food was prepared by Tony Saad, supplemented by mezza provided by members of the Ladies Fraternity and other volunteers.

The function was well organised and most successful and enjoyable. It was also an opportunity to recognize the hard work and dedication of Fr Gerges and Hiam over the years. A special presentation was made to them by our wonderful MC, Dr Julie Maakrun, on behalf of the entire congregation. Following the beautiful lunch, which was accompanied by live music by our musician friend Bill Bougoukas, it was time to draw the winners of the community raffle. A large number of prizes were won in a very happy atmosphere. The whole occasion was memorable and we look forward to similar gatherings in the near future.

The Editors

AN EXAMPLE OF GENEROSITY

Lian Yun and Wong are two elderly ladies of Asian appearance who are almost totally incapable of communicating in English. As such, it is very difficult to know any details about their background and circumstances, yet they are visibly of extremely limited means, pushing a small trolley probably containing all their possessions. I see them every Wednesday at Central Station queuing to receive the food St Michael's Community Services prepares and distributes. With angelic, radiant smiles, they greet me and occasionally get out of the queue to give me a hug. With no words, I understand that they want to say, 'we've missed you', and the truth is that I've missed them too. Although they are presumably a few years older than I am, they call me 'Mama', perhaps the only word that we all can understand. I look forward to seeing them every week and get worried when they do not appear.

On two occasions after receiving their share from our table, they came towards me with a huge smile and lots of pride and gave me a plastic bag. When I enquired about its contents, they kept gesturing as if saying 'it is for you, open it' and just uttering the word 'dumplings'. True enough, the bag contained two plastic boxes of delicious dumplings. I do not know if they made them or received them from another charity organisation, but in either case it was an incredibly generous gesture that I had to accept with tears in my eyes.

The words of Luke 21:1-4 came to my mind: "while Jesus was in the Temple, he watched the rich people dropping their gifts in the collection box. Then a poor widow came by and dropped in two small coins. I tell you the truth,



RODA WITH HER FRIENDS AT CENTRAL STATION

Jesus said, this poor widow has given more than all the rest of them. For they have given a tiny part of their surplus, but she, poor as she is, has given everything she has."

Roda Kanawati

SPIRITUAL CORNER

And when you Fast...

Fasting, charity and praying are considered required practices for every Christian – as keyways to grow in one's faith and their personal relationship with God. In this article, I will focus on fasting and draw insights from the book "Fasting" by Derek Prince.

Prince's book dives into the spiritual practice of fasting through a discussion of its purpose and benefits. He defines fasting and uses Biblical examples to support his points, highlighting how it can promote humility and transform individuals and even impact history. He concludes the book by offering strong Biblical references which demonstrate how God can accept our prayers and fasting and pour His Spirit on all mankind. The book is recommended for those looking to explore fasting and its potential benefits.

- **What is fasting?**

Fasting involves abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. Jesus set an example for his followers by fasting for 40 days in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. Fasting can help individuals grow spiritually, develop discipline, and deepen their relationship with God.

- **Humility**

Fasting and humility are linked in the Bible, as seen in Ezra 8:21, *"Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might deny ourselves before our God"* and Psalm 35:13, *"But as for me, when they were sick, I wore sackcloth; I afflicted myself with fasting"*. The Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16) is another example of how fasting expresses humility and seeks God's forgiveness. Fasting is not just abstaining from food, but also a spiritual act of surrender, allowing us to focus on our spiritual dimension and seek God's guidance.

- **Fasting in the New Testament**

Jesus' forty-day fast in the desert demonstrates the importance of fasting in the Christian life. The Apostles and early Church also fasted regularly, using it to seek guidance and make important decisions. When Jesus said, *"but when you fast"* (Mt 6:17), he was not suggesting that fasting was optional. He assumed that fasting was part of our normal religious life and wanted us to change the reasons for

and quality of our fasting. Fasting is a spiritual discipline that helps us draw closer to God, develop self-discipline, and seek divine guidance. Thus, it is an important part of our faith and should be a subconscious regular practice in our Christian life, as demonstrated by Jesus and the early Church.

- **How does fasting change us?**

In Galatians 5:16-17, St Paul urges believers saying: *"walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh"*. However, this is not an easy task, as the Spirit and the flesh *"are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want"*. Therefore, to achieve victory over our carnal nature, we must discipline our bodies striving to *"get a crown that will last forever"* (1 Cor 9: 25).

St Paul emphasises the need for self-discipline, saying that he *"beats his body and makes it his slave"* (1 Cor 9:27) to avoid being disqualified from the prize. This means that we must resist the urge to gratify our physical desires and take control of our bodies, making them our servants rather than our masters. One practical way to practice this self-discipline is through regular fasting as the Scriptures urge us that *"this kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting"* (Mk 9: 29).

In summary, fasting is not only a practical way to exercise self-control and mastery over our bodies, but it also has the potential to please God, as demonstrated in the book of Jonah. Through the power of fasting, the wicked inhabitants of Nineveh underwent a profound transformation, turning from their sinful ways and embracing repentance. Their sincere contrition was so profound that it even moved God to alter his plans to punish them severely (Jonah 3).

- **Looking at the big picture**

The Book of Joel in the Bible presents a prophetic warning about the devastation, sadness and hopelessness that the people (the Church) may experience. However, amidst the chaos, God provides a solution to the impending disaster, saying, *"Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly"* (Joel 1:14). God promises that if we follow the Biblical conditions of prayer, fasting and repentance, everything will work in our favour, saying, *"And*



ABOUNA GERGES OUTSIDE ST MICHAEL'S CATHEDRAL

afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people" (Joel 2:28).

God desires to work in partnership with us on our earthly journey, but this requires us to abide by His rules. As it is written in 2 Chronicles 7:14, *"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land."*

Therefore, in times of trouble and uncertainty, we must turn to God and seek His guidance. By doing so, we can receive the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit and be assured of God's forgiveness, healing, and restoration.

In Christ,
Fr Gerages Al Butros

Lord God, as we come before You, we ask for Your grace and wisdom to illuminate our minds and hearts. Open our eyes to see the truth, our ears to hear Your voice, and our spirits to receive Your guidance. May Your light shine upon us and reveal Your perfect will for our lives. We acknowledge that we cannot understand Your ways on our own, and so we humbly seek Your divine help. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour and through the intercession of the Theotokos. Amen.

LASTING IMPRESSIONS : VOLUNTEERING AT SMCS

My name is Evangelos Papadopoulos and I am an 18 year old Greek Orthodox Christian living in the Georges River area. You may ask: *Evangelos, why does all the above matter?* Well, as someone who is new to the St Michael's community, and is not necessarily part of the Melkite Parish, I have been helping SMCS each Wednesday for the past 3 months while finishing my Year 12. My introduction to St Michael's Community Services was through my best school friend, Jack Bettar, who was expressing to me what great charitable work the program is involved in and I wanted to be a part of it. On my first time volunteering on a hot Summer day in December, I felt at home. Abouna Gerges, Roda, Gaston, David, and others, were so hospitable, making me feel welcome within the group from the moment I walked into those gates. Having completed the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IB), it was an inherent requirement for all candidates to undertake a community service. After finishing the Diploma, this service is something I wanted to continue in my life.

It was not long before I was boasting to my family about how noble the experience was, that it inspired my brother, Stelios, to join. After three consecutive weeks of both of us attending, my brother and I quickly developed an understanding of how intensive the work is in preparing over 120 meals for the homeless and needy across two locations. From heating up rice, making meals in the kitchen, lifting heavy fresh produce in and out of vans, individually processing bulk foods into single portions and much more, we developed an admiration for all volunteers who participate regularly. It was their hard work and dedication in selflessly giving to those less fortunate which impressed us most.

Personally, the most fulfilling and touching experience of the program thus far was the Christmas Party in 2022. It was great to see everybody come together, in addition to some new faces, to prepare hundreds of meals and hampers for the homeless. Christmas Carols were sung, and the program aimed at making the homeless feel valued during the festive time and giving them plenty of food and resources to sustain the start of the year. In my interactions with some of the

homeless that night, it became apparent how grateful we should all be that we have shelter, food, essential products and family and friends to support us through life. It was the common story with almost all of them that they felt lonely, bored, undervalued and looked down upon in society and that, despite only being held once a week, SMCS offered them services and, more importantly, an opportunity to converse and communicate with someone about their life or, generally, their amazing, complicated and often confronting experiences.

I am proud to say that the short time of 3 months has allowed me to make new friends that I would have never met outside of this. For example, Gaston, who constantly pushes me to use my Greek and offers comedic elements and classic music to the afternoon; David and Patrick for their sage advice and guidance through tough life situations that have come up during my time volunteering; Rajaa, for teaching me to improve my skills in the kitchen in becoming more efficient and improving my technique (keep your back straight when scooping rice, being slouched is not good for your posture!); Roda, for being a great mentor to me and tapping into my softer, more affectionate side; and, last but not least, Abouna, who has always offered me his ear, challenged me on ideological and philosophical concepts and presented insights into how to become a good Samaritan and make a difference in the world. I look up to Abouna for his ability to lead and unite a team to make a difference. He is truly at the helm of everything! I have been lucky enough to observe him and have taken some notes down personally about how to have empathy, forgiveness, unconditional love, understanding, perseverance and the useful skill of communication – ensuring that whom you are speaking to understands you. Sometimes you will need to speak informally, formally, academically: it all varies depending



EVANGELOS (LEFT) WITH SOME OF OUR OTHER YOUNG VOLUNTEERS

to whom you are speaking and their understanding your message – a skill I find very useful and important in my tertiary studies and future workplace.

I am glad I have been able to make a difference to the community during my 3 months off after finishing school. I would highly recommend people of all ages to participate in the program. Due to the older demographic of the community, the majority of the regular individuals find it difficult to lift a full box of produce in and out of a van. Thus, I strongly encourage younger individuals to volunteer their time to help. And, if you are from another community (religious, cultural etc.), it doesn't matter, look at me! It is a rewarding experience that will allow you to meet and understand other people's experiences, while making a difference in the community and also improving skills in all aspects.

I would like to thank all of the SMCS team for accepting me and being hospitable, whilst also offering unique advice and experiences, all of which have made and will continue to make me a better person. I am happy to talk to anyone interested in my experience, or wanting to find out more about the program from my perspective.

EPapadopoulos.2004@gmail.com

How you can be a part of St Michael's Meals

- Pray for us
- Become a member
- Prepare meals
- Join the team in distributing food and clothing
- Donate money (donations of \$2 and above are tax deductible)

KITCHEN CORNER

Alice Chehab : Petit Four Recipe

Alice Chehab has been a part of the St Michael's community for many years. She is a much-loved parishioner, friend and member of the Ladies' Fraternity and Seniors and Friends' Group where she is always ready to offer her assistance where it is needed.

Petit four are a staple biscuit in France and many Middle Eastern countries, including Lebanon, Egypt and Syria. There is an interesting story as to their origin! In 18th and 19th century France, gas ovens were non-existent. Large brick ovens were commonplace, which would take a long time to heat up in order to bake bread, but also to cool down. So, French bakers would take advantage of the stored heat in the cooling process to bake pastries. This was called baking à petit four (literally "at small oven"). This lower temperature cooked the biscuits to perfection! This buttery, crumbly and delicious cookie is perfect alongside a cup of coffee or tea.

This is Alice's favourite recipe.



ALICE CHEHAB BAKING HER PETIT FOURS

Ingredients:

2 kg self raising flour
8 eggs
1 vanilla sugar (65g)
500g soft mix icing sugar
4 packets unsalted butter (250g each)
Jam - whatever flavour is preferred

Method:

1. Mix the eggs, vanilla sugar and icing sugar until combined.
2. Slightly melt the butter and pour slowly over the combined ingredients whilst mixing.
3. Place the self-raising flour in small amounts at a time and continue to combine till it becomes a dough like mixture
4. Portion out the dough-like mixture and roll into a cylindrical shape and place into the biscuit shaper (Marcato Biscuits) using any shape you like, then place onto the baking tray approx. 1/2 cm apart.
5. Repeat above step until the tray is covered and place into the fan forced oven baking them at 230 degrees celsius until they are golden brown.
6. Repeat until there is no more mixture left. Allow the biscuits to cool for approx. 10-15 mins and then place a small teaspoon of your preferred jam on one side of the biscuit and then cover with another one so looks like a sandwich.

Bon appétit!

LETTER FROM LEBANON

Jabbouleh 13/03/2023

Dear Esteemed Benefactors of St Michael's Community Services,
I am writing to express my deepest gratitude for your outstanding donation of \$3200 USD, which was graciously received through Mr. Simon Hajjar on 11/03/2023. Your contribution has made an incredible impact on the life of Rachelle, a young girl who underwent a life-changing operation. I am thrilled to report that, thanks to your kindness, Rachelle can now walk normally without any difficulties.

I cannot express enough how grateful Rachelle's parents are for your generosity and support during this challenging time. They are truly humbled by your willingness to lend a helping hand and provide the necessary resources to help their daughter recover. Your charitable act has not only transformed Rachelle's life but has also provided hope and encouragement to her family.

Please be assured that your contribution has made a significant difference in Rachelle's life, and she and her family will always remember your kindness. They have asked me to convey their sincerest thanks to you, and they will keep you in their prayers always.

Once again, I want to express my gratitude for your remarkable donation and your unwavering support of our community services. Your kindness has touched the hearts of many, and we are forever grateful.

May God bless you always.


Sincerely,

Mother Jocelyne Joumaah

Superior-General

(Order of Our Lady of Good Service)

Religieuses
de N.-D. du Bon Service



راهبات سيدة الخمرى الصالحى

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Mother Jocelyne Joumaah
Superior-General



IN LOVING MEMORY ...

Forever in our hearts

Elias Abdul-Massih (1938-2022)



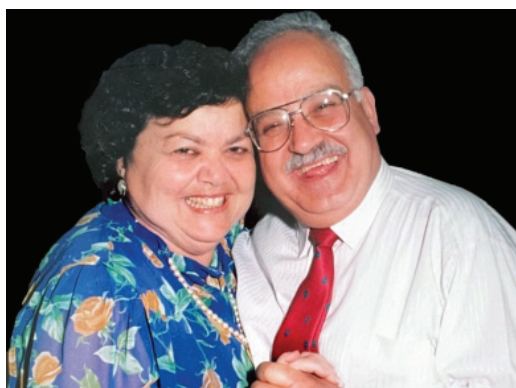
My father came to Australia in 1972. His strong faith immediately propelled him to seek community at our parish, and, through his dedication, he became a pillar of the church. He dedicated his life to serving the Melkite Catholic Eparchy in various parishes, as a cantor. His resounding and euphonious voice, a divine gift, was given back to the church. Our memories of Dad will always be intertwined with the church, and we, his children, were raised to walk in the light and commit ourselves to the Lord.

By God's design, dad's passing happened on 1 October, 2022, the Feast Day of St Romanos the Melodist, the patron Saint of Sacred Byzantine music. A fitting sign perhaps, that he was being called to deliver the gift of his voice in eternal life.

Whilst he has left his earthly body, his soul delivered to everlasting life with our Father in Heaven, he remains with us in spirit and memory.

Abdul-Massih family

John and Mary Bahari – Commitment to Faith and Community



I emigrated with my parents, John and Mary, from Egypt to Australia in the late 1960s. I do not remember this as I was a baby, but I am pretty sure attending St Michael's Melkite Catholic Church at Waterloo would have been one of the first places we went on our arrival. My parents were very involved with their church in Cairo Egypt, and they brought that commitment with them. St Michael's became an extension to family; Sunday was a day for faith, but also a day for community connection with others who had also recently arrived in Australia, especially the growing Egyptian community. St Michael's became a community hub and we made lifelong friends, including the Bahari and Griplas families, many of whom are still in our lives and they are my aunts, uncles and cousins.

As St Michael's was the only Melkite Church, we travelled from Blacktown to Waterloo/Darlington by train or by car – rain, hail or shine. Through the years,

Dad volunteered on the Parish Council, and supported many of the fundraising activities. With Mum as his support, they assisted in church activities e.g., cooking falafel, frying lokmat el kadi (loukoumades), arranging BBQs and Haflas (parties). Mum and Dad were often the last ones to leave Church after tidying up the Hall and farewelling everyone on their way for the week. But what I remember most is Dad's involvement in the Church Choir; Dad had a beautiful voice and the way he would chant the prayers was so powerful!

They were fierce defenders of the clergy. Abouna Haddad was like a member of the family; when he visited the Blacktown area, we all got together to welcome him and share a meal. Mum and Dad encouraged and supported the growth of the Melkite community in greater Sydney from the monthly Byzantine services at St Patrick's Catholic Church in Blacktown to the planning and purchasing of a church in the Blacktown area.

In 1973, His Beatitude Maximos V Hakim came to Australia. There were celebrations and great pride amongst the Egyptian community as he was from Egypt and many people knew His Beatitude before he was Ordained as Patriarch. Our home in Mt Druitt was always open to Bishops, Clergy and Deacons but also for choir practice, important meetings and many other things. My parents supported the new clergy as they arrived from overseas, including Bishop Issam and Abouna Hassan, taking them around Sydney to help them navigate in Australia.

Now that I am a Khouriya within the Antiochian Orthodox Church, my parents, Mary and John Bahari, and my upbringing in the Melkite Church were and are my inspiration. They instilled in my two sisters, Nancy and Michele, and myself, a reverence for our faith and prepared me for my role and life in supporting Abouna Nektarios (Fadi) Nemme in his vocation in serving God.

God bless you all,
Kh. Myriam Bahari

Gracious God, we come before You with heavy hearts and deep sadness over the passing of our loved one. In the time of grief, we ask that You comfort us with Your presence and surround us with Your love. We know that our loved one is now with You in Your Eternal Kingdom, and we take comfort in the hope that we will one day be reunited with them. Help us to hold on to this hope and to trust in Your goodness, even in the midst of our sorrow. Give us strength to carry on and to honour the memory of our loved one through our words and deeds. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

Amen.

RESPONDING TO TRAGEDY : AID FOR SYRIA

On February 6, 2023, at 4.17am (local time), Syrians were violently awakened by the deadly force of a 7.8 magnitude earthquake. Already beset by political instability, crumbling infrastructure and rampant food shortages, Syria's war-ravaged and brutalised population was unprepared to cope with a tragedy of this scale. The major commercial and urban centres of Latakia and Aleppo were left in ruins. Over 5,800 Syrians died and there are more than 10,000 recorded injuries. Many were trapped for days under rubble of collapsed buildings, amid freezing temperatures with limited or no available rescue resources.

SMCS responded to this natural disaster with an immediate call to action and through the consistent generosity of our community, we were able to raise significant funds to be distributed to those Syrians in desperate need. Our Charity also contributed an additional \$4,000 of urgent medications to be included as part of a shipping container of essential goods organised by the Syrian Consulate in Sydney destined for the Port of Latakia. A team of volunteers from SMCS assisted in the sorting and packing of the container. We are also arranging to dispatch a further shipment of goods, including 603kg of new clothing.



THE SHIPPING CONTAINER THAT WAS SENT TO SYRIA

The Editors

www.smcs.org.au

Our Mission Statement

Members of St Michael's Community Services treat others with unconditional positive regard, listen to them with care and empathy, and are genuine in offering their services. This special care is also offered to the elderly as well as the youth in the community.

Our Story:

St Michael's Community Services is a core group of dedicated parishioners, led by Fr Gerges, Parish Priest and Dean of St Michael's Melkite Catholic Cathedral.

The group splits on Wednesday nights at 7.00 pm to feed the homeless at Central Station and Martin Place. Another team goes fortnightly, on Thursday night, to Liverpool Park. Our aim is to build a trusting relationship with our friends, the needy, so that we not only feed their bodies, but also their souls. The relief, gratitude and friendship of the people we reach is our reward. No-one chooses to be on the street, we look into their eyes and see the person inside. Each has a story, we know the regulars by name and even know their likes and dislikes. So many have an intellectual disability, who are we to

Our Vision

- Feed the Hungry with God's love.
- Offer the Homeless weekly nutritious meals and genuine friendship.
- Increase our reach by adding locations or increasing the number of days of our meal service.
- Reach out to the elderly, the sick and those with special needs.
- Involve the youth in our activities and prepare them for future leadership.
- Aim to open a centre to feed, house and clothe people on a regular basis.
- Create a mobile team to reach out and help the less fortunate.
- Extend our meal services to those in homes who are experiencing food insecurity.

judge the circumstances that pushed them onto the street? The church asks us to imitate the life of the saints: so let's listen to their words: St Mother Teresa cautions us "If you judge people, you have no time to love them." St Mary MacKillop encourages us to "Never see a need without doing something about it". It is so true that when we give, we receive so much more. Not only do we feel that we have made a difference to the lives of the people we feed, but it has also created a real affection and camaraderie between the people, who show up every week to serve, and the regular disadvantaged on the streets of Sydney.

The disadvantaged are not only our brothers and sisters who live on the street but also many of the elderly, who suffer from loneliness, isolation

and frequently experience difficulties in communication. Our aim is to establish regular contact with them and lend them a hand whenever needed.

With the youth being the future of our society, their involvement in our activities is essential in preparing them to carry the flag and build a better, happier world for everyone.

Our motivation is simple and can be found in the Gospel: Matthew 25: 35-40 "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. The righteous will ask: Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? The King will reply: Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

Design and layout by Leonie Donovan



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