

St. Sharbel, miracle worker of Lebanon — a saint with universal appeal

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In 2017, the Family of St. Sharbel USA installed a statue of the Lebanese saint the National Grotto Shrine in Emmitsburg. COURTESY THE FAMILY OF SAINT SHARBEL USA

A handful of worshippers chanted in Arabic as the smell of incense wafted through the sanctuary. The yellow walls of the church were windowless, but the dark sky could be seen through the glass dome above the altar. Beneath a golden crucifix stood a portrait of a

white-bearded, black-hooded monk — St. Sharbel, the miracle worker of Lebanon.

At the conclusion of the Tuesday night Divine Liturgy Nov. 19, the Massgoers talked with one another in the chilly autumn air outside Our Lady of Lebanon Church in Washington. Different things bring these individuals together every week, some from more than an hour away. Afif Khoury comes because at a time when he felt all was lost for his homeland, St. Sharbel helped him regain his faith in God.

‘An assurance’ in troubled times

Lebanon is a country nearly the size of Connecticut, a land praised in Scriptures for its towering cedars and snow-capped mountains, and one that has been beset by conflict for decades. In the 20th century, the country was marred by invasions, occupations, bombings, assassinations and struggles between people of different religions, ethnicities and visions for Lebanon.

Khoury arrived in the United States in 1993 after the end of the 15 year Lebanese Civil War. It wasn't until he left the deeply spiritual Lebanon and came to the secular United States that his faith life changed. Khoury was always a Maronite Catholic and was encouraged by the faith of his devoted mother. During the war, Khoury would visit St. Sharbel's monastery and attend Mass on Sundays. "But I wasn't living a real Christian life," he said.

Maronite Catholics venerate a picture of St. Sharbel during Mass at Our Lady of Lebanon Church in Washington Nov. 19. ZOEY MARAIST | CATHOLIC HERALD



In 1994, something incredible happened to a friend of his from Lebanon, Raymond Nader. While praying late at night at St. Sharbel's monastery, Nader felt a supernatural presence. After coming out of a reverie, he noticed a tingling on his forearm. He lifted up his sleeve to see a handprint burned into his arm. A doctor confirmed it was a second-degree

burn but couldn't explain how it got there. Since then, Nader says St. Sharbel has appeared to him several times, giving him uplifting and faith-filled messages to share with the world. Nader speaks with the patriarch — the spiritual leader of the Maronite rite — before relaying the messages to others.

“I was amazed by what happened to him,” said Khoury, who attends both St. Michael Church in Annandale and Our Lady of Lebanon. “Instead of being depressed, it was a (turning point) in my life.” The miracle felt like a sign in the midst of troubling times, he said. “Sometimes a miracle is like a stamp, an assurance of things because we are human and we are weak and we sometimes doubt things. What happened to Raymond, it was like an assurance.”

A quiet life and a miraculous afterlife

Most everyone in Lebanon knows and loves St. Sharbel, said Khoury. He's beloved by Christians, but Druze and Muslim people have reported being healed by him, too.

The sainted monk of Annaya was born Youssef Antoun Makhoul in 1828, during the Ottoman occupation of Lebanon. Growing up, he was inspired by the lives of two of his uncles who were monks. In his 20s, he left his home to join the monastery.

His fellow monks reported miraculous things happening in his presence. Once, snakes were attacking the monks as they worked in the fields. Sharbel blessed the snakes and they went away. Another time, a swarm

of locusts destroyed all the crops of the surrounding area except the monastery fields that Sharbel had blessed.

After some 20 years as a monk, he requested permission to become a hermit. Hours of his day were spent in preparation for Mass, and then in thanksgiving for Mass. He wore worn clothing, used a wooden log as a pillow and ate little.

Since his death in 1898, he's been known as a miracle worker. For many years, his body was incorruptible and oozed blood and water. He was canonized by Pope Paul VI in 1977 and is the first Maronite saint included in the Latin-rite calendar. His feast day is July 24.

The St. Maron Monastery where he lived and died receives 4.5 million pilgrims a year. The monks there have recorded the thousands of medically documented unexplained healings that came about through his intercession. Khoury believes he is one of them. As a baby, his mother brought her sick son to the saint's tomb and he was healed the next day. Many people who pray to St. Sharbel for healing report seeing him in a dream operating on them, and then wake up healed.

The Family of St. Sharbel

After his mystical encounter with the saint, Nader and his friends began going to the monastery every Friday for Mass, which many Eastern Catholics call the Divine Liturgy. The group eventually called themselves the [Family of St. Sharbel](#). In 1998, a group of Lebanese immigrants began the Friends of St. Sharbel USA. Since then, Washington area

members have come together for Mass at Our Lady of Lebanon every Tuesday and go on retreat three times a year.

The stateside contingent is led by Ghassan Touma, who attends both Our Lady of Lebanon and St. John the Apostle Church in Leesburg. Like Khoury, he arrived in the United States in the early 1990s and had known Nader while in Lebanon. The linguist hopes to spread the news of how God is working through St. Sharbel to Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

In 2017, the organization worked with the National Grotto Shrine in Emmitsburg to install a statue of their namesake. Touma runs the group's YouTube channel, adding English subtitles to Catholic television videos where Arabic-speakers explain the ways St. Sharbel has changed their lives.

Touma doesn't know why God is performing so many miracles and signs through St. Sharbel, but he believes there's a purpose to it all. "St. Therese of Lisieux told them before she died that she was going to spend her eternity in heaven doing good on earth," he said. "We cannot fathom how saints act from heaven, but they are God's helpers somehow."

Just as remarkable as the attention-grabbing miracles worked through St. Shabel's intercession is his humble way of life. Touma says St. Sharbel is an example even for those not called to the monastic life. "St. Sharbel represents total detachment, devotion and dedication. We're not going to become like him — I cannot prepare for Mass for two or four hours every day, but at least he is setting the standards," he said. "Depending on your situation, you can make the effort and strive little by little to live, relatively speaking, as he lived."

St. Sharbel has worked miracles and inspired people all around the world, but he holds a special place in the hearts of his countrymen. For Khoury, the saint is a literal piece of Lebanon. His mother's picture of St. Sharbel now rests by his bedside in the United States.