



Bishop Robert J. Shaheen prepares to knock on the outside door of St. Therese of the Child Jesus Mission April 15, seeking entrance to dedicate and consecrate the walls of the church and the altar of what was about to become the first Maronite Eastern Rite parish in Oklahoma. Behind him, Bishop Slattery and retired Archbishop Francis Zayek looks to the top of the door frame.

## 'Born of sacrifices'

### Tulsa Maronites find their identity in new parish

Lebanese people have lived in Oklahoma since before statehood, but until April 15 the Maronite Catholics never had a church to call their own.

That morning, Bishop Robert Shaheen knocked on the door of St. Therese of the Child Jesus Mission in Tulsa, announcing that he had "come to consecrate this holy church named after Saint Therese in the city of Tulsa, beloved of Christ."

But Bishop Shaheen was denied entrance. "Go in peace. I do not know who you are," he was told from behind the church's closed door by Father Denis Casey, representing a "young priest."

The bishop made the sign of the cross on the door with holy oil, said a prayer, and the people gathered in the vestibule with him – including Bishop of Tulsa Edward J. Slattery – answered, "Amen."

Bishop Shaheen then incensed the outside walls of the church and again knocked on the door. Again he was told, "Go in peace. I do not know who you are." Father Gregory Crier delivered this

refusal from "a middle-aged priest."

When Bishop Shaheen announced for a third time who he was and why he had come, the "elder priest" on the other side of the door, Father Elias Abi-Sarkas, replied, "Come in peace, O father. Come in peace, our shepherd and steward," and Bishop Shaheen unlocked the door.

Thus began the consecration and dedication of the church that was "born in sacrifices," in the words of its pastor, Father Elias. The Mass concelebrated by visiting Maronite bishops, Bishop Slattery, Msgr. Gier and Father Casey was celebrated in Aramaic – the language Jesus spoke – English, even French. "You have worked a wonder here in Tulsa," Bishop Shaheen said in his homily. "A small handful of people worked together to be able to build this beautiful, beautiful church."

Father Elias was assigned to Tulsa in 2002, and under his leadership the Maronites' dream became what Bishop Shaheen called "a day of joy" at the April 15 Mass.

Afterwards, the filled-to-capacity crowd further celebrated

over brunch, which concluded a three-day extravaganza that left Father Elias exhausted but exuberant.

"Everything went perfectly, perfectly!" he said April 18, by which time his fatigue had lifted and his usual high spirits were restored – and then some. "The women of this parish are magnificent!" he declared.

The women of St. Therese of the Child Jesus Church – with its consecration, it is now a full-fledged parish, not a mission – have labored for years to prepare Lebanese cuisine at countless fundraisers. The proceeds – plus the generosity of the 40 families of the parish and a \$100,000 contribution to finish the parking lot allocated last year by Bishop Slattery on behalf of the Diocese of Tulsa – allowed the \$1.4 million church to open debt-free.

"You have built a beautiful house of God," Bishop Shaheen said, noting that the parish will celebrate baptisms and marriages, reconciliations with one another and God and other sacraments. "This all takes place in this sacred home."



Fouad Dagher was one of the altar servers for the Mass, which despite its elaborate rituals and liturgy lasted an hour and 25 minutes. "Bishop Shaheen wraps it up quickly," Father Elias said, quipping that is one of the reasons "I love our bishop."



Bishop Shaheen rubs the holy Chrism on the center and all four corners of the altar. To his right is Archbishop Zayek, and at his left are St. Therese's pastor, Father Elias Abi-Sarkis and Bishop Slattery.



David Karam pulls on the rope of the new bell - shipped to Tulsa from Lebanon - to celebrate the end of the liturgy. The 360-pound bell was installed in October.

## Who are the Maronites?

The Maronite Catholics of Tulsa are members of one of 22 Eastern Rites, each of which is considered fully equal in dignity to the Latin tradition within the Catholic Church. The Maronites trace their roots to the ritual families of Antioch and are a majority of the Christians in Lebanon, their ancestral home.

At a dinner April 14, Bishop Edward J. Slattery told the sold-out dinner crowd that all Roman Catholics in the Diocese of Tulsa are free to observe the sacraments at St. Therese the Child Jesus, a public show of support that Bishop Shaheen said he had never heard from a Latin Rite Bishop.

Msgr. Mansour Labaky came from Lebanon to coordinate the music for the dedication and consecration of Father Elias' new church because he wanted to help celebrate the achievement of his former student. The monsignor is renowned in Lebanon and with Maronites everywhere for his musical gifts, Father Elias said.