

## Very Reverend John Saba

Pastor of St. George Orthodox Church of Boston 1928-1930.



John Saba was born in Fia, El Koura, Syria in 1872. He married Anna [family name unknown] in about 1905 in Syria. They immigrated to the United States in 1908. John Saba was ordained a priest by Archbishop Germanos Shehadi of Zahle on Sunday 14 October 1917 at St. Symeon the Stylite Syrian Orthodox Church in Ironwood, Michigan. Fr. John was appointed pastor of the parish that same day.

Fr. John Saba is listed among the Syrian clergy loyal to Metropolitan Germanos Shehadi of Zahle. He served in Ironwood, Michigan from 1917 thru the early 1920's. In 1922 he served as pastor of St. George in Kearney, Nebraska. He is listed as serving at St.

Michael the Archangel Syrian Orthodox Church in Geneva, New York in 1923. Fr. John also served at St. George Syrian Orthodox Church in Vicksburg, Mississippi in 1924 and 1925. In 1926 he is recorded as the priest at St. George Syrian Orthodox Church in Allentown, Pennsylvania.

While in Allentown, Fr. John and the community became embroiled in a legal dispute over property rights motivated by the Russy/Antaky jurisdictional dispute that rocked the Syrian Orthodox community at that time. Organized in 1916 under the jurisdiction of Bishop Raphael Hawaweeny, St. George Syrian Orthodox Church in Allentown quickly grew and, within one year, built a church on Catasauqua Avenue. In the 1920's the community became entangled in the Russian versus Antiochian controversy which divided the parish into two camps. In 1925 the pro Antiochian side selected Fr. John Saba as their pastor and the pro Russian side selected Fr. Sophronius Bashara to serve them. In December that year, the pro Russian's took the Antiochians to court in an effort to retain exclusive rights to the church and its property. Nine months later, in the end of August, 1926, the judge ruled in favor of the Russian faction, claiming that Bishop Aftimios Ofish was the legitimate successor of Bishop Raphael and that the community had affirmed this numerous times. The judge decided that any priest serving the St. George community must be certified by Bishop Aftimios.

Fr. John and the pro Antiochian faction were restrained from using the church or interfering with the pro Russian party and their priest. Fr. John's bishop, Germanos of Zahle, was seen by the court as an interloper with no ecclesial jurisdiction in America. Fr. John continued to

minister to the Antiochian community in Allentown for the next few years before being transferred to Boston, Massachusetts.

Fr. John arrived at St. George Syrian Orthodox Church of Boston in 1928. During his pastorate the parish was reincorporated in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts under the official title "St. George Syrian Orthodox Church Society of Boston". The growth and tranquility of the parish was temporarily challenged during this period by jurisdictional problems related to the national organization of the Syrian Orthodox Church. At one time, five 'Syrian' bishops were vying for influence and recognition by the 'Syrian' Orthodox parishes of North America. Fr. John maintained the parish loyalty to Antioch under the jurisdiction of Metropolitan Germanos. The Metropolitan was well known to many of the parish members who were from the Zahle region. He had been a frequent visitor to St. George, having consecrated the church on Tyler Street in 1924. Fr. John left St. George in 1930 and eventually returned to Allentown.

By the early 1930's the ecclesial landscape for Syrian Orthodox in America had drastically changed; Metropolitan Germanos returned to Lebanon in 1933 and died there the following year, Archbishop Aftimios was deposed in 1933, at the same time Aftimios's assistant Bishop Emmanuel Abou-Hatab released his parishes to the Antiochian Patriarchate, the Antiochian legate to North America Archbishop Victor Abo Assaley died in 1933.

In 1936 Archimandrite Antony Bashir was elected and consecrated in New York as bishop of North America for the Antiochian Patriarchate. The same year, Archimandrite Samuel David was consecrated bishop in Toledo, Ohio.

In Allentown, the Russian vs. Antiochian controversy was over and Fr. John Saba returned to St. George, now under the jurisdiction of Bishop Antony. He remained there throughout the 30's and 40's. Presumably, he died there but no record of his death is available.

*Compiled and submitted by Fr. Timothy J. Ferguson*