

St. Mary Antiochian installs stone from Holy Land

BY RENÉE SNOGLUND
STAFF WRITER

St. Mary Antiochian Orthodox Church in Livonia is a church that announces its presence through art.

From its elevated site on Merriman Road to the classic arches of its interior, the gold-domed church is a celebration of spiritual beauty. And currently, the focal point of that beauty, an elaborately carved altar stone from the Holy Land that separates the inner sanctuary - or altar - from the rest of the church, is being installed by four artisans from Damascus, Syria.

The stone, better defined as a wall, runs the width of the altar and weighs approximately 17 tons. It is carved from a beige, richly veined limestone whose grain resembles that of white maple. It is an ancient stone, said the Rev. George Shalhoub, St. Mary's pastor, not only in terms of geology but historically.

"This is a stone that not only Alexander the Great walked upon, but Jesus and St. Peter,"

Principal artisan Soleiman Shalhoub leads his team in assembling portions of wall, which will house the sacred icons, and carving out the last finishing touches.

"I am carrying on the tradi-

tion of my grandfather and father in keeping this art alive since so few people are alive who can do it," he said through Father George, who acted as an interpreter. "This is my glory."

Soleiman Shalhoub personified his sense of glory through the wall's carved lilies (which appeared on the tomb of Christ, said Father George); the 12 pillars crowned with a cross and stalks of wheat, representing the 12 apostles; and the intricate niches for the icons, all of which are thematically intertwined by a grapevine - symbolizing the church, the people and the clergy.

There is purpose in such beauty, said Father George. "In the world, you can only relate to images, and this is the reason God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, so you can see his living face."

Father George Shalhoub, who has the heart of a poet, said it is appropriate that the artisans, who took two years to carve the stone, should come from Syria. After all, Damascus was the birthplace of the church since it is the site of St. Paul's conversion.

The altar stone is the crowning glory for an ancient church whose members experience God through their senses. Every where you look, St. Mary's cross-

shaped interior reflects the spiritual and the aesthetic. The five symbols of the Antiochian Orthodox Church - an angel, a dove, a censer (which contains incense), a hand and a grapevine - are etched on a series of colonnade windows. When sunlight filters through shortly after noon, these symbols seem to float ethereally on the marble floor.

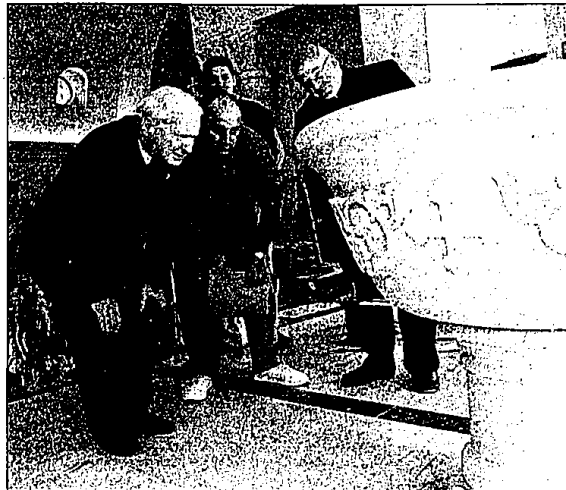
During the day, the church is filled with natural lighting.

"Mood is very essential to place yourself in the hands of God," said Father George.

Father George is proud of the accomplishments of his parish. St. Mary Antiochian Orthodox Church, as it stands today, was a mere dream when he arrived from Syria in 1972 with the dictate of starting a mission in western Wayne County. The following year, he bought a farm on the existing property and began his first parish.

"The rest is history," he said. "I started a parish with seven families and now there are 700 families. I came here 30 years ago and I had nothing, only hands and feet. I am now able to give my adoptive land one of the most beautiful landscapes in the community."

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JIM JACOBELLO/OBSERVER

Livonia Mayor Jack Kirksey, left, examines the baptismal font with, left to right, Soleiman Shalhoub, Wafi Barshini and Father George Shalhoub.



Ilmer-Rockwood

Sarah Jeannette Ilmer and Frederick Ian Rockwood Jr. will be married Saturday, Oct. 26 in Farmington Hills.

The bride-to-be is the daughter of Steven and Constance Ilmer of Farmington Hills. She is a graduate of Harrison High School and Michigan State University.

Her fiancé is the son of Frederick Rockwood Sr. and Sandra Rockwood of Livonia. He is a graduate of Livonia Stevenson High School and Wayne State University.

Area Jaycees plan cider mill tour

The Farmington Area Jaycees is hosting the following upcoming events. Guests are welcome to attend.

■ Cider Mill Tour, Sunday, Oct. 27 - Carpool from the Tile Shop at 1:30 p.m. to the Franklin Cider Mill, 7450 Franklin Rd., Bloomfield Hills (14 Mile/Franklin Road). See how cider and fresh doughnuts are made and then taste them! Contact Christine Ruiz, 586-264-1416 or FarmIDVP2002@aol.com.

■ General membership meeting: Tuesday, Nov. 12, 7 p.m. at Drake's Apartments Clubhouse (Grand River and Drake). Find out about upcoming projects and events. Bring your pop tabs for the Ronald McDonald House and pennies for Operation Smile.

Victorian crafts to be shown Nov. 2

The Victorian Ladies from Warner Mansion will be at the Home for the Holidays craft show, Saturday, Nov. 2 at Farmington High School.

The ladies will exhibit their "thank you notes" and Christmas cards depicting the Governor Farmington landmarks and other interesting articles for early holiday shopping.

Christmas volunteers are also needed for the many events planned at the Warner Mansion. Call (248) 478-1015.

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