

# Icon of Hope



## *The Damascus Partnership with the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis*

### Partnership Goals

In communion with Christ and one another:

*We* commit to sharing stories of life and faith with, and invite ways to pray for each other during the year.

*We* commit to building relationships by regular correspondence and making visits to each other as is possible.

*We* commit to sharing resources in a spirit of generosity, stewardship and thanksgiving.

*We* commit to annual educational forums that shed light on the situation of Christians in the Middle East and a deeper understanding of Eastern and Latin rite churches.

*We* commit to broadening awareness of the Damascus Partnership and the Church in the Middle East throughout both archdioceses.

*We* welcome all who would journey together with us on roads to and from Damascus!



*"Mission is always the fruit of a life which knows what it is to be found and healed, encountered and forgiven."*  
— Pope Francis



Archeparch Samir Nassar & Archbishop Bernard Hebda

## *Our Partnership with the Maronite Archeparchy of Damascus*

In Fall 2016, U.S. Bishops expressed profound concern for the increasingly difficult situation of Christians living in the Middle East. Civil and religious strife in the homelands of our Christian faith led to human suffering on a vast scale. As an unprecedented humanitarian disaster unfolded, Archbishop Hebda and others determined that our brothers and sisters in the Middle East would not face it alone. A conversation was initiated through the Archdiocese's Center for Mission to identify a partner diocese in the Middle East open to accompanying us in a journey of faith through the challenges of our times. Our conversations led us on the road to Damascus.

On January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017, the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul (the patronal feast day of the Archdiocese of St. Paul & Minneapolis) we formalized our partnership with the Maronite Archeparchy of Damascus. Our Archdiocese Church named for St. Paul, is returning to the Church in Damascus – the faith community that received and baptized St. Paul and sent him forth as Apostle to the Gentiles.

The Damascus Partnership offers a unique opportunity to be received, converted and sent forth, like St. Paul, as witnesses of Good News in our own day. Through a relationship of mutuality and solidarity, we are called to learn from one another; to be inspired and consoled by one another; and to encounter in our midst the presence of Christ.

## Why an Icon?

In “*Deus Caritas Est*, (God is Love),” Pope Benedict XVI wrote, “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” Our Damascus Partnership is an encounter among churches that broadens the horizons of our faith empowering us to see God’s grace in new and unexpected ways.

The spirituality of Eastern Churches teaches us that icons are similarly experienced as encounters with the Divine that impart new grace-filled horizons and directions to those touched by their beauty and power. In this tradition, our partnership commissioned **Debra Korluka of Icon Art Studios (Stillwater, MN)** to journey with us in creating an icon that would portray the meaning and spirit of our partnership – an icon that would draw us deeper into the experience of St. Paul’s encounter with Ananias in Damascus, and our encounter with one another. In its presence, we pray that through bonds of faith and solidarity, we may all be transformed into bearers of Good News.



Deb Korluka at work in her studio.

Learn more about Deb and her work at <https://korlukastudios.com/>



## What is an Icon?

*F*or many in the Western tradition, it’s helpful to begin by clarifying what an icon is not. It is not merely a religious picture or image. It is not a decorative addition to a wall or chapel. It is a profound experience of both prayer and catechesis. It is the theology of Christianity put forth in images and colors.

*A*n Icon is a religious representation (IKON- Greek word meaning “likeness”) that can depict various Christian individuals and images, including Christ, Theotokos (Virgin Mary) and feast days in the Christian Church. St. Theodore the Studite tells us that “in the Sacred Scriptures we have the written word of God, in the Icons we have His word in images.” From as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, holy icons have been handed down to Christians as “sacred doorways” into the spiritual world providing believers with a spiritual connection to the Divine.

*I*cons continue to proclaim the truth of the Incarnation in today’s world. Icon writers, faithful to tradition and iconographical canons, empty themselves to make room for the movement of the Holy Spirit. This inner work makes the writer nameless, and transparent to beauty and mystery. Through prayer and artistic craft, a transcendent reality emerges in the form of the icon. Icons are inseparable from worship and liturgy: believers understand icons as expressing the meaning of faith through art; expressing the incarnation of God in the flesh; expressing the transition from mortality to immortality; and expressing the Truth of the word transformed by God’s grace.

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***An Icon is that place and moment – transfigured by art – where God, Scripture, prayer and person all meet as one.***

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## THE CONVERSION OF SAINT PAUL



### The Image

The baptism by immersion of the undressed Saul, draws the onlooker into humility and vulnerability characteristic of Saul's surrender to Christ's love for him. Saul had a direct revelation of Christ, believed in Him and submitted to baptism in the church.

### The Setting

St. Paul's baptism took place in what is now the present day Church of St. Ananias on the Street called Straight. The gates into the courtyard leading to the church are depicted in the icon.

The area behind the gates is painted in 23 kt. diluted gold representing the eternal divine space bathed in the infinite love of God.

The two cathedrals — Damascus (left) and Saint Paul (right) — are positioned above and behind the site of Paul's baptism. A white veil, draped across the top and connecting the two cathedrals, is symbolic of a royal yet sacrificial event taking place within a structure and deep within the temples of our bodies through the interior stirrings of our hearts.

### The Baptismal Font

Saul is positioned in a stone baptismal font deferential to Ananias, who is dressed as a simple disciple of Christ. The font has 12 sides: St. Paul was the 12<sup>th</sup> apostle of Christ. From this humble setting, St. Paul emerged as the most influential person in Christendom after Jesus and Mary.

### Water

Water is a symbol of renewal, cleansing and purification. It is also symbolic of The Way as a source of life and vitality. And yet, like water, The Way flows to life's lowest points, suffering and death, represented by crosses seen throughout the icon. The three early Christian crosses on the baptismal font recall the Holy Trinity, Jesus' three days in the tomb before His Resurrection and Saul's three days of blindness before his sight was restored through Ananias' faith.

### Perspective

Because icons are theological in nature, linear perspective is set aside so we can encounter the image anew, free of routine and convention. The focal point is now the human heart. We gaze toward more intimate, timeless dimensions. Icons do not depict as much as they illuminate; we come to see the world and ourselves by the light of Christ.

### Our Icon: The Conversion of St. Paul

On the road to Damascus to oppress those "living according to the new way," Saul heard the voice of Jesus call out, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Left blind by the encounter, Saul was helped into Damascus. There, he was welcomed by St. Ananias who, laying hands upon him, enabled Saul to see anew. Most of all, St. Ananias baptized him into the Church of those he originally sought to oppress — the Church he would soon transform as Paul, apostle to the Gentiles. The Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, celebrated on January 25<sup>th</sup>, is one of the patronal feast days of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

*Read Acts 9:1-19, Acts 22:3-16 & Acts 26:2-18 for three accounts of St. Paul's conversion*



## Damascus Profile

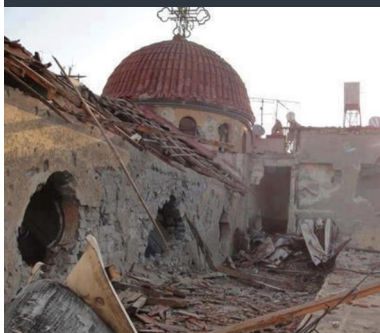
Damascus, capital of Syria, is one of the oldest continuously inhabited areas in the world. Its name, derived from more ancient languages, means "a well-watered land."

Historically, Damascus has also been considered one of the world's most beautiful cities. It is said when the Prophet Muhammed approached the city, he refused to enter saying that man should come into paradise only once.

The City of Damascus is the center of a larger metropolitan area that encompassed close to 5 million people before civil war broke out in 2011.

Since then, the city and its people, Damascenes, have suffered greatly. In June 2021, the London-based *Economist* Intelligence Unit (EIU) ranked Damascus the least livable of 140 world cities.

And yet, Damascenes persevere with faith in God and one another. The Maronite Catholic Archeparchy of Damascus invites us to journey with them, to share in their hospitality, and to break bread with them in thanksgiving for life.



# A Prayer for Our Partnership

**E**ternal God, source of compassion,

You called St. Paul to conversion on the road to Damascus.

You opened his eyes to faith through the witness and ministry of Ananias and the church in Damascus.

May this partnership open our eyes to your Gospel of love for all people.

**Y**ou chose Paul to bring The Gospel to the Gentiles.

Together, may we give witness to your Good News by what we say and do.

Form us in that same missionary spirit to go forth and give witness to your love in the world.

**M**ay this partnership of faith and solidarity give witness to unity in a time of conflict and division.

May it awaken us to those who continue to be persecuted for their faith, especially in the Middle East.

May our sharing help bring compassion and comfort to those who suffer and struggle to find hope.

May this partnership renew in us the same spirit of kinship that made Paul and Ananias brothers in Christ and partners in your saving mission.

May our prayer for one another sustain us and draw us close.

**S**end your Holy Spirit upon us to choose the path of peace and justice.

Let there be peace in our hearts, in our language and in our actions.

Let us walk together in faith and in peace.

**W**e ask this in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with you in the communion of the Holy Spirit; one God forever and ever. Amen

*St. Ananías... Pray for us! St. Paul... Pray for us!*



Learn more about our Damascus Partnership & other opportunities in mission, or to support this partnership: <https://centerformission.org/>

Or scan the code below:



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