
MEDIA RELEASE

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Thousands gather to witness historic moment in Western Sydney

Jerusalem, Barcelona, and Rome all boast significant Catholic sites, each steeped in centuries of history and pilgrimage.

That list has welcomed a new addition: the humble Sydney suburb of Punchbowl.

No longer will Australians need to journey overseas to visit their favourite Catholic shrine. Instead, they'll be able to experience a sacred site in their own backyard, without having to travel to Europe or the Holy Land as a new sanctuary (a holy place of prayer, solace and healing) opened in Western Sydney last night, 8 May 2024.

The sanctuary is dedicated to one of the most powerful and most popular saints in the world – St Charbel.

The Maronite Catholic community in Australia hosted the momentous occasion as the newly constructed sanctuary was unveiled, drawing a diverse crowd of believers and dignitaries to commemorate the opening of this significant pilgrimage site.

The evening commenced with a solemn one-kilometre street procession attended by more than 10,000 people. Led by a marching band and more than 70 pallbearers carrying the coffin of St Charbel, the procession was accompanied by hymns of faith, as it made its way through the streets of Punchbowl, culminating in a Mass at the site of the sanctuary. The Mass was celebrated by Bishop Antoine-Charbel Tarabay, Maronite Bishop of Australia.

The Reverend Father Anthony El-Kazzi, Secretary of the Trustees of the Lebanese Maronite Order, spoke about the importance of this momentous occasion, saying, "The unveiling of the sanctuary dedicated to St Charbel in Punchbowl marks a historic milestone for the Maronite Catholic community in Australia. It provides believers with a sacred space for prayer, reflection, and spiritual connection.

"St Charbel holds profound significance within the Catholic Church, revered for his piety, humility, and miraculous intercession. He is considered one of the most famous and 'powerful' saints in the Catholic Church. There are churches and shrines throughout the world dedicated to him; in the United States, China, Africa, India, Italy, Russia and Mexico to name a few.

“It establishes a significant pilgrimage site on Australian shores, sparing pilgrims the need to travel overseas to visit the remains of this miraculous Saint.”

In the wake of recent tragic events, the unveiling of the sanctuary takes on added significance, serving as a beacon of hope and solidarity in the face of adversity. Fr El-Kazzi emphasised, "In light of recent challenges, the unveiling of the sanctuary dedicated to St Charbel offers a source of comfort and strength for the community, reminding us of the power of faith and resilience."

St Charbel's incorrupt body, preserved to this day, stands as a testament to his enduring presence and the countless miracles attributed to his intercession. As believers gathered last night to pay homage to the saint, they found solace and inspiration in his legacy of compassion, humility, and devotion.

As the doors of the sanctuary opened to the public for the first-time last night, attendees expressed their gratitude and reverence for the opportunity to seek St Charbel's intercession in their lives. The sanctuary, a tangible symbol of faith and unity, promises to serve as a sacred haven for believers of all backgrounds for generations to come.

The Maronite community in Australia, estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands, stands as a vibrant and integral part of the broader Australian Catholic community. With parishes established in various cities across the country, including Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth, and Wollongong, the community plays a vital role in the country's religious landscape. Punchbowl's own parish is home to a thriving community of approximately 45,000 parishioners.

VIDEO: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6tYWFDPUU8/?igsh=cHhhMnlubWlueTd6> (file available upon request)