

## **ARISE 2026: A Generation of Maronite Youth Rediscovered Its Light in Christ**

The 2026 Australian Maronite Convention, *Arise*, organised by Maronite Youth Australia (MYA), brought together young Catholics from across Australia and New Zealand from 6–8 February at the Tops Conference Centre for three days of faith, dialogue and fellowship. Marked by keynote addresses, engaging activities and meaningful conversations, the gathering culminated in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy led by His Excellency Bishop Antoine-Charbel Tarabay, Bishop of the Maronite Eparchy of Australia, New Zealand and Oceania. It was not merely a convention, but a moment of renewal — an invitation for a generation to rediscover its identity within the Church and respond courageously to Christ’s call to “Arise with Light,” this year’s theme.

The theme echoed the words of the prophet Isaiah: “Arise, shine, for your light has come” (Isaiah 60:1). In a culture shaped by distraction and uncertainty, the convention challenged young people not to remain passive observers of their faith, but to consider how their beliefs shape daily decisions and relationships. The call to arise with light also reflected Christ’s words, “Let your light shine before others” (Matthew 5:16), encouraging authentic faith in family life, parishes, universities and workplaces.

From the opening Divine Office on Friday evening to the final Mass on Sunday, the program balanced spiritual depth with thoughtful engagement. Father Youssef Elias, Director of the Youth Office, welcomed participants and encouraged them to recognise their role in the life of the Church as its present strength and joy. The opening keynote by Bishop Tony Percy invited attendees to examine how faith can remain visible and grounded within contemporary society, setting the tone for a weekend of reflection and honest dialogue. The dedication of the MYA Executive Committee was instrumental in bringing the convention to life, reflecting months of preparation and commitment to youth formation.

Saturday formed the heart of the convention. Sessions addressed issues that resonate deeply with young adults, including identity, mental health and the growing influence of artificial intelligence. In their keynote, Ms Monica Assaf and Ms Monica Doumit explored the question “Is AI the New Light?”, inviting participants to discern how technology shapes perception, truth and human dignity. Fr Ben Saliba challenged attendees to embrace their originality in Christ, while Ms Debbie Draybi navigated the realities of mental health with honesty and depth. Fr Elish Abboud reflected on the richness of the Maronite liturgical tradition, centred on Christ as the true light. In a particularly striking keynote, Fr Greg Morgan spoke on the importance of embracing struggle as a defining mark of Catholic identity, reminding participants that suffering, united to Christ, becomes redemptive. Rather than avoiding complex questions, speakers engaged them with clarity, drawing from Catholic teaching while acknowledging the realities experienced by young people today.

The evening, however, shifted tone. A night of singing, shared meals and dancing brought energy and celebration to the retreat centre, reflecting something of the distinctive Lebanese

spirit that marks the Maronite tradition. It was a reminder that faith is lived not only in discussion, but in joyful community.

For many, however, the most significant moments came during Eucharistic Adoration, as the fast pace of the weekend gave way to stillness and prayer. Therese Nakad shared, “During this beautiful weekend at Arise, I rediscovered the beauty of silence and listening to God’s voice while I adored Him in the Eucharist. I was truly amazed at how His voice brings peace and hope into my troubled and chaotic mind.” Her words captured a renewed awareness that the light Christians are called to share begins with an encounter with Christ.

The convention also demonstrated the strength of the Maronite community across Australia and New Zealand. Young people travelled from various states, including a group of 66 from Melbourne led by Father Richard Jabbour. Despite geographical distance, participants were united by shared faith and tradition. Michael Farah described the gathering as “a fantastic opportunity to meet other young adults of the faith from across different states and countries, all coming together and joined together by One Person — Christ.” Celebrating the Mass and Adoration reinforced a sense of belonging that transcended state borders.

As the convention came to an end and participants returned home, the message of *Arise* remained clear. The invitation to live with light continues beyond the retreat setting, expressed in everyday responsibilities and relationships. More than a temporary experience, the convention offered renewed clarity — a reminder that to arise with light is to receive it from Christ, the true light, and carry that light into the world.

Bio:

Tony El-Ghossein serves in youth ministry at St John the Beloved Maronite Catholic Church in Mount Druitt, Sydney