

May 3, 1987

THE FIRST LEBANESE AUSTRALIAN PRIEST

Obituaries

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Father John Isaac, the first Lebanese Australian ordained a priest, had come from a home that was such that two priestly vocations from it were not a surprise, Archbishop Rush said in preaching at his Funeral Mass in St Patrick's Cathedral, Toowoomba.

Fr Isaac was a priest of Brisbane archdiocese and retired in 1972. Archbishop Rush preached and presided at the Funeral Mass and Bishop Edward Kelly, MSC, of Toowoomba, celebrated the Mass with Fr Tom Isaac, Fr John's brother, and priests from Brisbane, Toowoomba, and as far as Cairns.

Archbishop Rush said while the poetry of John O'Brien had immortalised the family life of early Irish Australians, a book remained to be written about the home life of Lebanese immigrants bringing up their children as Catholics in Australia.

He said John Isaac Snr and Mary Joseph had known one another in Lebanon and had migrated to Bundaberg and New Zealand respectively.

When John had established his little business, he had sent for Mary and had married in Bundaberg about the turn of the century.

John Jnr, born in 1904, had been the second eldest of eight children, four boys and four girls.

"Mr and Mrs Isaac were devout Catholics of the Maronite Rite, but brought up their children in the Latin Rite," said Archbishop Rush.

"John must have been in his early teens when the family moved to Toowoomba. After living in temporary quarters at the back of a bakery they moved to the house in James Street which has remained the Isaac home since.

"It was a strong, united family whose members were fiercely loyal to one another. It is not surprising that such a home produced two vocations to the priesthood.

"John Isaac attended St Mary's Christian Brothers' College, Toowoomba, before studying for the priesthood at St Columba's Springwood [near Sydney], and St Patrick's, Manly.

"He was the first Lebanese Australian to be ordained. He was ordained for the Archdiocese of Brisbane by Archbishop [Michael] Kelly in St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, on the feast of St Andrew, 1927. He would have celebrated his diamond jubilee at the end of this year.

"Fr Isaac was at a few places during his long years in the Archdiocese of Brisbane. From Bulimba he went to Gayndah for almost 12 years, where he was assistant to Fr John Gleeson, who, as long as he lived, was Fr Isaac's friend and mentor.

"From all accounts it would be hard to find two characters who were less alike. Fr Gleeson was a happy extrovert who enjoyed life and burst into song with little provocation. Fr John Isaac was a usually mild man whose quiet voice reflected an inner peace.

"From assistant in Gayndah, Fr Isaac moved on to become the third parish priest of Murgon. I remember the regret expressed by so many people when Fr Isaac was too ill to attend the golden jubilee of Murgon parish. He was there for more than 14 years.

"While he was there he fell ill, but in spite of indifferent health, he spent another 17 fruitful years at Redcliffe before his retirement in 1972. The beautiful church that was built there in his time remains a monument to his zeal..."

When he retired he went to live with his sister, Mrs Lyla Saide, in the old family home where she and her 10 children accepted him lovingly, said Archbishop Rush.

Gabrielle, the oldest child of the family, even when her mother was alive, was particularly devoted to her uncle and had cared for him with extraordinary generosity.

She had reason to miss him as much as his brothers and sister. When he needed more professional care than could be provided at home, he had gone to live with the Canossian Sisters at *Lourdes Home* (Toowoomba).

"His family would wish me to express their gratitude to the Canossian Sisters and the staff of *Lourdes Home* for all they did for him," said Archbishop Rush.

"His Mass and Breviary were at the centre of his life. On Easter Sunday afternoon one of the Canossians read Evening Prayer for him from his Breviary. He followed her as she said the closing prayer: *On this day Lord God you opened for us the way to eternal life...Grant that as we celebrate the feast of his Resurrection we may be renewed by your Holy Spirit and rise again in the light of life.*

"Within an hour his prayer was answered."

(This document was typed from a photocopy of the original newspaper article supplied by Catholic Archives, Brisbane)