

Father Joseph E. Saba, M.DIV.

Blessed...blessed is a person who's filled with God's grace. Blessed is the person filled with Jesus' obedience to God. Blessed is the person who lives by the will of the Holy Spirit. Blessed is all of Bisbee to have such a person living amongst us, our own "native son" Father Joseph E. Saba, now living back in Bisbee in his retirement years. Born on August 19, 1948, at the Copper Queen Hospital, though not delivered by his father Dr. Joseph Saba, he grew up in the home his parents had built prior to World War II, in the Warren area of Bisbee. Today Fr. Saba remains living in that same beautiful home, surrounded by the blessing of his journey with Christ and journeys with his family. Growing up with two older brothers and a younger sister, Father Joe remembers all the many children living in Bisbee and all the fun times he has been blessed with.

Father Saba's parents, Dr. Joseph Saba and Elaine Saba were movers and shakers in the Bisbee Community from the first day each came to Bisbee. Dr. Saba was of Lebanese descent, born in Guaymas, Mexico, then growing up in Nogales Arizona, but American through and through. He received his medical degree from the University of St. Louis and moved to Bisbee in the early thirties and began his medical practice at the Copper Queen Hospital. He had previously spent 38 months with a Mash Unit in New Guinea during the war. Elaine Saba, was born in Nebraska and went to college in Nebraska to earn her degree in social work. Something drew her to the Southwest, and she settled in Bisbee and began her career helping migrant workers and families in Douglas and the Sulphur Springs Valley. Dr. Saba and Elaine met and eventually began dating. Once married they began a marriage filled with many blessings and for over 50 years they both so unselfishly shared their blessings with the Bisbee community.

Life was filled with picnics in the Chiricahua Mountains. Even some of the nuns from St. Patrick School would join the family for picnics. On one such occasion, while hiking around, one nun's veil was caught on a branch and came off her, revealing a full head of hair. Young Joseph was a little shocked to see that nuns did indeed have hair! There were hunting and fishing trips to Mexico and those sweet trucks selling wonderful Carnation Dairy popsicles. Mrs. Saba was a Scout Den Mother and Joseph earned the rank of an Eagle Scout, even going to Valley Forge for one of the National Jamborees. Richard Graeme was the Scout Master and taught all the young boys a lot. Richard's daughter Annie Graeme Larkins is the Executive Director of the Bisbee Mining and Historical Museum, which Father Saba is very much involved with today, especially at the Mulheim House.

At St. Patrick School, Joseph and two friends were fortunate to be "teacher's pets," which helped because they were a bit mischievous. One day, the boys were sent to the top-floor attic of the St. Patrick School building to retrieve some books. While up there, they noticed several large fire extinguishers and, as young boys often do, began examining them. Joseph decided to demonstrate how one worked and sprayed foam everywhere, startling all three boys by how much noise the extinguisher made. Soon they heard someone climbing the ladder to investigate. The nun who appeared was not pleased, and the other two boys quickly pointed out that Joseph had set off the extinguisher. After a stern scolding and being required to pay for a replacement, another nun later told Joseph in confidence that she would have done the same thing. Joseph also remembered the monthly "all-you-can-eat" pancake breakfasts, mentioned in a previous Archive Story on Kathy Phillips, where he enjoyed many pancakes and glasses of chocolate milk—fortunately, neither is a regular part of his diet today. He recalled the May Day parade and enjoyed decorating his bicycle with crepe paper. He said he was blessed with wonderful teachers and Father Howard, who helped keep the mischievous young Joseph in line. On another occasion, while taking a bank deposit to the bank on Main Street with his friends, they chose to walk in the wash running down

Tombstone Canyon instead of the sidewalk and realized they had lost the money bag. Joseph ran to Central Pharmacy to borrow a flashlight from Mr. Dominguez, making him promise not to tell anyone why. Fortunately, they found the deposit bag, and everything ended well. Today, Father Saba admits that he was sometimes mischievous on purpose so he would be sent to the church to pray—the nun’s version of time-out. He loved the stained-glass windows and could look at them for hours. One day, when Sister Cecilia Loretto Smith, then principal of St. Patrick School, unexpectedly entered the church, Joseph quickly knelt and pretended to pray. When Sister Cecilia asked whether he was praying, he replied, “Sort of,” and then expressed his admiration for the windows. Then Sister took the time to explain the story each window represented, deepening Father Saba’s respect and love for the stained-glass windows of St. Patrick Church. This proved meaningful many years later when Father Saba chaired the Window Restoration Project. Its success is evident in the beautifully restored windows of St. Patrick Church, a blessing that helps make St. Patrick the “Crown Jewel” of Bisbee.

Father Saba remembers that there was always a fundraiser going on for St. Patrick Church and for the school.

One of his favorites was selling the Worlds Famous Chocolate Bars. The one who sold the most bars would receive a 5-pound chocolate bar. He chuckled shyly when admitting that they often approached his father’s patients to buy a bar or two, how could they say no! He was also an altar server and became exceptionally good at pretending to be saying the prayers in Latin while just mumbling away trying to sound like Latin. Later in High School his Latin became much more fluent when he joined the Latin Club, *Latinam Libenter Discimus*, (We Gladly Learn Latin.) Father Saba also remembers giving the priest a



a smaller amount of wine in the chalice so that the altar servers could finish off the remaining wine. Chocolate and wine, he is blessed to be so healthy today.

Pepe, as many friends called him, played the coronet in the school band. A favorite band memory was when the band teacher began dating a certain woman. The band members would tease the band teacher about dating, so to get back at them, he would make the band march and march around the field for hours. Joseph loved the band trips on the busses, painting the “B” for Freshman Initiation, enjoying all his friends and teachers and is still thankful for the blessing of wonderful high school teachers and friends, many of whom he is still close to today. In fact, his high school class is celebrating their 60th Reunion and Fr. Pepe was involved with all the planning. While he knew that the Catholic community in Bisbee was separated between St. Patrick and Sacred Heart Church, he never was affected by any prejudice. His parents would take them to Mass at both churches and instilled in all their children that everyone is a child of God and to love and respect everyone, at church, in your home, at your job, everywhere.

After High School Joseph went off to college at St. Louis University , a premedical student. Around his junior

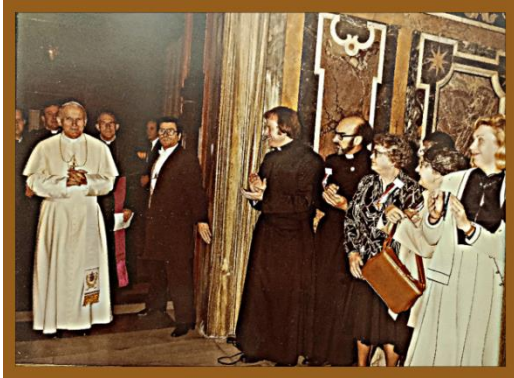


year he became close to several of the Jesuits and the Spirit moved him to enroll in the Jesuit School of Theology. He was ordained on January 5, 1974, for the Diocese of Juneau, Alaska, at St. Patrick Church in Bisbee, under the leadership of Bishop Francis Hurley, becoming



one of nine priests in the entire Diocese of Alaska.

Within three months he was assigned as the Rector of the Cathedral in Ketchikan. When the parishioners asked



the young Father Saba what he wanted them to do, he replied, "I am working for you, what can I do for you?" This is the ethical and spiritual standard that has been his way all through his ministry. He does not believe in favoritism, no matter how much a person might donate to the church. To Father Saba, we are all children of God. One of his memorable experiences in Alaska was being chosen to celebrate Mass with Pope John Paul II in 1984. The choir from that Mass was then asked to sing at the Sistine Chapel the following year and Father Saba went with them. Just before the Mass was to begin,

Father Saba was asked to walk the Pope over to the Sistine Chapel and he had to fanatically find a cassock to wear while escorting the Pope. It all worked out and again Father Saba admits again emphasizes that he has been blessed to have so many happy memories.

During his 18 years of ministry in Southeast Alaska, Fr. Joe developed a deep interest in hospitals and health care ministry. He pursued further study in pastoral care and bioethics at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. and then Father Saba would return to St. Louis University for more training in Medical Ethics and Clinical/Pastoral Education. This training was presented by several different educators , each of different religion affiliations. The Mother House for the Sisters of Carondelet happened to be in St. Louis, and he already knew several of the nuns from their visits to Alaska. They convinced him to come to Tucson, which he did and stayed for almost 30 years at Hospital Chaplain at St. Mary's Hospital. He says he was so blessed to be back and close to Bisbee, which he was able to visit often.

Making the journey back to Bisbee to visit family and friends became routine. However sometimes even routines can go astray. For a brief period of time there was not a priest assigned to St. Patrick and so Father Saba was asked to drive down from Tucson to celebrate Mass each weekend at St. Patrick. Sometimes though, he would not be finished with his duties at St. Mary's Hospital until after three in the afternoon and so he had to jump in his car, rush down to Bisbee and be ready for the 5:15 Mass on Saturdays. The parishioners always prayed he would make it on time to celebrate Mass. Finally retiring in the Fall of 2018, Father Saba settle back into life in Bisbee, but hardly a quiet retirement. We are blessed to have him celebrate Masses on certain occasions and grateful he is never late now. He does many home visits each week and very much involved with St. Patrick Church, still in awe of the stained-glass windows. He has done extensive landscaping on his property, preserving the natural beauty and topography of the land. He is a board member of the Bisbee Council of the Arts and Humanities, which governs the Bisbee Mining and Historical Museum and the Mulheim House. He is passionate about promoting and fundraising for the Mulheim House and promoting Bisbee's history, which is only natural for him, being such a part of Bisbee's history.

Today he strongly feels that there needs to be more "laity involvement" with the running of the parishes. While the "buck stops with us," he knows that lay people are needed to assist in the running of a parish. This is something he is glad to see happening a lot in Bisbee. And he cannot get over how blessed this parish is to have Deacon Tony Underwood, Pastoral Administrator. Father Saba said he once told Bishop Kicanas that he wished Deacon Tony could be ordained, he said Bishop Kicanas replied, "So do I!"

Finally, when Father Saba was asked what he would ask Pope Leo upon meeting him, Father said I would ask him how he became such a loving and understanding Sheppard of the Church. Then he would like to know all about the Pope's experiences in Peru. Experiences that must have been similar to Father Saba's experiences in Alaska and Tucson which have made him into a loving and understanding priest of the Church and to all people. God Bless you Father Saba.

Written by Tom Schelling

Photos courtesy of the Bisbee Mining and Historical Museum, St. Patrick Church Archive Collection and the Saba Family Collection