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For the first time, Christians in Qatar worship in church

By Caryle Murphy

The Christian Science Monitor (09.02.2008)/ HRWF (10.02.2008) Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - When the Rev. Tomasito Veneracion arrived in this Muslim nation seven years ago, his Roman Catholic parishioners prayed in small groups scattered in apartments, schools, and one tiny makeshift chapel. At Easter, Indian Catholics gathered in one place, Filipinos in another, Arabs in yet another.

But with last year's opening of Our Lady of the Rosary Church, his congregants for the first time had a recognized, central place to worship. On Christmas Eve, 15,000 attended a midnight mass, with those who couldn't cram into the 2,700-seat church watching on video screens outside.

"When I first came here, the church was not recognized. But now we are enjoying this gift," Father Veneracion says. "It's a tremendous feeling of relief that we can breathe, worship, and pray in a place without fear and without disturbance."

The decision to permit church building is widely seen as part of an effort by Qatar's leader, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, to modernize the tiny emirate, made wealthy by its natural-gas reserves, and demonstrate traditional Islam's flexibility and tolerance.

"It's showing the world they are open to new ideas, and I guess it's part of growing up as a nation," said Veneracion.

Our Lady of the Rosary will soon be joined by several churches under construction in what is informally known as "Church City," a 99-acre site leased to Christian denominations by the Qatar government.

Qatar's Christians, estimated at 70,000 to 80,000, are almost entirely expatriate workers, principally from India and the Philippines.

The move gave Qatar its first church since Islam took root here in the 7th century. It also brought Qatar into line with most of its Gulf neighbors, which have all had at least one church for decades. The one exception is Saudi Arabia, whose inflexible strain of Islam still bans worship of another faith.

Diplomats in Riyadh say, however, that a more relaxed atmosphere has emerged in recent years. Private services in homes are disrupted far less often, and fewer Christians are arrested, diplomats report. Customs agents no longer confiscate Bibles and crucifixes from arriving foreigners.

Though Qatar is not a pioneer in permitting an open Christian presence in the Gulf, it is bucking a massive ultraconservative drift in contemporary Islam around the world that rejects cooperation with other faiths. Al Qaeda spokesmen have berated Qatar for authorizing church construction.

Qatar's 200,000 citizens, who enjoyed the world's highest per capita income as of 2007, adhere to the same Islamic legal tradition as Saudi Arabians. But they differ in practice, being far more relaxed about publicly enforcing a strict social and moral code.

Most Qataris "are happy with what we're doing because they are devout Muslims and they want their Christian employees to be able to pray," said the Rev. Canon Bill Schwartz, Anglican rector of Doha's Church of the Epiphany.

Mr. Schwartz is overseeing construction of the Anglican church complex going up next door to the Catholic compound. Under an agreement with the government, the facility will also be used by several other Protestant and Evangelical denominations. Schwartz anticipates that it will serve 20,000 worshipers in any given week.

The complex, likely to cost around \$12 million and take years to complete, is being built in stages. Schwartz is hopeful the first phase can be ready for use by the end of 2009. "We're asking for money from anybody who'll give it to us," he says. "It is very much a work of faith, including on the part of the contractor."

Schwartz ministers to a dispersed congregation of about 30 nationalities. On Fridays, the day of worship for all faiths in Qatar, he presides at services in a school gym. But scores of other services are held in villas, hotels, and restaurants, he says.

Besides the Anglican and Roman Catholic compounds, buildings are also under construction for Copts, Greek Orthodox, and Indian Protestants at the leased site about eight miles from downtown Doha.

The government's move to permit church building, which began to surface after it established diplomatic relations with the Vatican in 2002, was controversial among Qataris. A final decision was taken only after a 2003 referendum approving the country's new Constitution, which guarantees freedom of worship.

Also, Qatar-based Muslim cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who has wide influence in the Middle East, ruled that Christians have a right to build a church in Muslim lands, just as Muslims are permitted to construct mosques in non-Muslim countries.

Both Schwartz and Veneracion, who wear their clerical collars when visiting government offices, but not elsewhere, say that they have not encountered hostility.

"The government asks us to be discreet," says Schwartz, which is why none of the churches have exterior bells or crosses. Christian proselytizing is forbidden.

Veneracion said that Qatar's prime minister attended last March's ribbon-cutting ceremony at his church, whose \$15 million cost was financed mostly by Catholics living in the Gulf states.

The next day's consecration of the building was attended by six bishops, 40 priests, and congregants from 67 nations, who carried their flags in a parade.

"We have 16 masses on Friday alone" with an average attendance of about 8,000, said Veneracion, who is Filipino and has a staff of five other priests. Masses are said in Konkani, English, Tagalog, Sinhala, Arabic, Malayalan, Urdu, Tamil, French, and Italian.

During a recent visit to the church, a police car was stationed outside. It is there 24 hours a day, Veneracion says, to protect against any untoward incident.

A group of young Lebanese Catholics socializing in the sun-filled plaza said they were thrilled to have a worship place of their own.

"You know, the church is first a community before being a stone place," said Maroun Nassar, an electrical engineer who runs the Arabic catechism classes. "But now, we can gather officially without offending the Qataris."

The next day, Indonesian Catholics gathered in one of the small church halls for a belated Christmas service. There were two decorated trees, and the choir, accompanied by an electric keyboard, sang "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear."

"You cannot imagine," said engineer Adi Dwinanto when asked how he felt about the new church. "It's just amazing, that here in this country we can do this freely.... All of us are happy, for sure."
