POPE FRANCIS: "THE CHURCHES AND MONASTERIES OF NAGORNO-KARABAKH MUST BE RESPECTED AND PROTECTED"

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By Delphine Allaire and Christopher Wells, Vatican News, 20 October 2023

Armenia was the first kingdom to adopt Christianity as its state religion. Its two-thousand-year-old religious, spiritual, and architectural heritage bears witness to the importance of keeping the Christian presence alive and rooted in the Caucasus.

“The churches and monasteries of Nagorno-Karabakh must be respected and protected”, Pope Francis said after the Angelus on Sunday, 15 October, expressing his concern for the humanitarian situation of displaced persons. The Armenian enclave has been emptied of 100,000 of its inhabitants since Azerbaijan launched its military aggression a month ago, on 19 September.

The two-thousand-year-old Christian religious heritage of this land, the spiritual cradle of Armenia, is now in the hands of the Azerbaijanis. According to a count by the Armenian Rights Defender, almost 1,500 Armenian monuments have already passed into Azerbaijani control since the 2020 war. These included 161 monasteries and churches. The existential issue of maintaining the Christian presence and preserving its religious heritage dates back to the earliest centuries. Traditionally believed to be the resting place of Noah's Ark, Armenia adopted Christianity as its state religion a few years before Rome.

In an interview with Delphine Allaire of Vatican News, French orientalist **Jean-Pierre Mahé**, a specialist in Armenian Christianity and Director of Studies at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études,* traced the origins and particularities of this martyred church back through the centuries.

He explained that Armenia traditionally dates Christianity back to the Apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus in the decades following the death and resurrection of Christ. Later, the Roman-appointed King Tiridates was converted by St Gregory the Illuminator – known as the Apostle of Armenia – and declared the country Christian, making it the first Christian country in the world.

The mountain region of Nagorno Karabakh became Christian in the fifth century, in large part due to the actions of the ruler Vatchagan III the Pious. He created a number of Christian shrines and monuments that stand to this day.

Armenian Christians, said Mahé, have suffered numerous persecutions throughout the centuries, beginning with the persecution by the Zoroastrians. Later, misunderstandings with Byzantine Christians led to further persecution. He notes, too, that there were numerous Armenian martyrs under Islamic rulers; while the decomposition of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century led to “the first projects of mass destruction, massacres, and total elimination of the Armenian people.”

In his interview, Mahé looked to the Second Vatican Council, which acknowledged “that there are treasures of the origins of Christianity preserved by the Churches of the East, both those attached to Rome and those which are independent”.

He likewise noted Pope Francis' consecration of "the great Armenian mystic poet and theologian Saint Gregory of Narek", as a doctor of the universal Church.

"For the preservation of the memory of Christian thought, this is very important", he said. "And it should be noted that Armenia and Georgia constitute islands of Christianity in the ocean of Islam. Armenian and Nagorno Karabakh Christians are a witness to this memory."

You can find the full interview (in French) with Jean-Pierre Mahé on our French website.

There are no comments yet.