

## **Saudis May Soon Allow First Catholic Church**

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Staff Writer

(March 19, 2008) Thanks to a discussion with Pope Benedict XVI during a recent visit to the Vatican, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia is lending his support to a plan to build the first Catholic church in Saudi Arabia.

At present, the Saudi government does not allow any religion other than Islam to hold public services. It is the only country on the Arabian Peninsula without a Catholic church, although an estimated e 800,000 Catholics live there, most of whom are foreign workers. In that country, even the possession of bibles, rosaries, and crucifixes is forbidden.

The breakthrough is believed to have come about as a result of the November, 2007 meeting between King Abdullah and Pope Benedict. Although Saudi Arabia does not have formal diplomatic relations with the Holy See, the November meeting made King Abdullah the first reigning Saudi monarch to visit the Vatican.

After the meeting, Vatican officials confirmed the Pope pressed for permission to open a Catholic church in the kingdom.

The most recent news came after the first Catholic church in Doha, Qatar was consecrated by a senior Vatican official. Archbishop Paul-Mounged El-Hachem, the Papal Nuncio to Qatar, Kuwait, the UAE, Yemen and Bahrain, who attended the Doha consecration, is reportedly serving as the lead Vatican negotiator with Saudi Arabia. He confirmed that negotiations for the building of churches in Saudi Arabia were part of that country's move toward establishing diplomatic ties with the Vatican.

Another Vatican official, Holy See spokesman Father Federico Lombardi, while not confirming the negotiations, said, "If, as we hope, we reach an agreement authorizing the construction of the first church in Saudi Arabia, it will be a step of historic importance."

The move would amount to a "potential revolution in Christian-Muslim relations" said Richard Owen, Rome correspondent for the London *TimesOnLine*.

"Saudi Arabia adheres to a hardline Wahhabi version of Sunni Islam and is home to Mecca and Medina, the most holy sites of the religion. No faith other than Islam may be practiced."

Saudi Arabia is 94 percent Muslim and less than 4 percent non-Muslim, with nearly all of the Christian population being foreign workers.

However, the country's guests are expected to adhere to its strict policies. Saudi religious police regularly search the homes of Christians. Even private prayer services are forbidden. Foreign workers must observe Ramadan and are not allowed to celebrate Christmas or Easter.

Saudi law makes no provision for freedom of religion. Missionaries are banned and face imprisonment if caught.

Many believe these the talks would have been unthinkable until recently, when the way was paved by King Abdullah's talks with the Pope and by the Vatican's recent establishment of a permanent Catholic-Muslim forum to further develop relations between the two faiths.

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