

Armenian Catholics in Iraq get new archbishop

VATICAN CITY - For the first time in more than five years, the tiny Armenian Catholic community in Iraq has its own archbishop.

The Vatican announced Jan. 26 that Pope Benedict XVI had given his assent to the Armenian Catholic bishops' election of Father Emmanuel Dabbaghian, 73, as the Armenian Catholic archbishop of Baghdad.

The post had been vacant since the October 2001 retirement of Archbishop Paul Coussa at the age of 84.

The Armenian Catholic Archdiocese of Baghdad covers all of Iraq, and since 2001 Vatican statistics have given the Armenian Catholic population of the country as 2,000 faithful.

But Deacon Michel Jeangey, head of the Armenian program at Vatican Radio, told Catholic News Service Jan. 26 that "probably more than half" the Armenian Catholics have moved, at least temporarily, to Armenia or Syria.

"They will return if there is peace," he said.

Still, Deacon Jeangey said, one Armenian Catholic priest and a group of Armenian Catholic nuns continue ministering at the church's parishes in Baghdad, Mosul and Kirkuk as well as running a social center and two schools in Baghdad.

Archbishop-elect Dabbaghian was born Dec. 26, 1933, in Aleppo, Syria. After studying philosophy and theology at Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University, he was ordained to the priesthood in 1967.

He has served as director of an orphanage in Lebanon, as a seminary rector and as pastor of Armenian parishes in Lebanon and in Georgia.

At the time of his election, he was pastor of the Armenian Catholic parish in Tbilisi, Georgia, and director of the seminary there.