

Orthodox Christians in Muslim Turkey feel ‘crucified,’ patriarch says

WASHINGTON - Orthodox Christians in predominantly Muslim Turkey “don’t feel that we enjoy our full rights as Turkish citizens,” the spiritual head of the world’s 300 million Orthodox told the CBS newsmagazine “60 Minutes” Dec. 20.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople told CBS News correspondent Bob Simon that he and other Christians in Turkey sometimes feel “crucified” by the actions of the Turkish government, which banned all private higher education and closed the nation’s only Orthodox seminary in 1971.

Although only about 4,000 Orthodox Christians remain in Turkey - down from some 2 million at the beginning of the 20th century - “we prefer to stay here, even crucified sometimes,” the Turkish-born patriarch said.

“Because in the Gospel it is written that it is given to us not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for Christ,” he added.

Asked why the small Christian minority did not leave, Patriarch Bartholomew replied: “Because we love our country. We are born here. We want to die here. We feel that our mission is here as it has been for 17 entire centuries.”

He said he wonders “why the authorities of our country do not respect this history.”

Touring the abandoned Halki School of Theology with Simon, the patriarch called it “a pity and a shame” to keep the seminary - where he studied for seven years -

closed.

“This school prepared people who preached peace, preached unity, preached love,” he said. “So not giving the church the possibility to prepare these people, we offend human dignity.”

Asked if he feared sometimes that the Orthodox community might be wiped out, Patriarch Bartholomew said: “Not really. We survived. We do believe in miracles.”

He called Turkey, where it is believed all four Gospels were written, “the continuation of Jerusalem” and said for the Orthodox “it is equally a holy and sacred land.”