

# Pope encourages Iran's Catholics to persevere patiently

VATICAN CITY - Pope Benedict XVI encouraged Iran's tiny Catholic communities to be patient and persistent as they try to improve relations with the government and ensure a continued Christian presence in the Islamic republic.

He also called on the "vast and beautiful country" to contribute to "the common good and peace among nations," particularly in the Middle East.

Iran's four Armenian, Chaldean and Latin-rite Catholic bishops met the pope Jan. 16 at the end of their "ad limina" visits to report on the status of their dioceses.

Pope Benedict said that in order to overcome some of the concrete difficulties Iranian Catholics face, including providing enough priests to minister to the country's scattered Catholic communities, "the establishment of a bilateral commission with your government is being considered."

Such a commission, he said, also could be a channel "to develop relations and mutual understanding between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Catholic Church."

Cultural dialogue and charity are the two best paths for improving mutual understanding and relations with Iran's Muslim majority because they are opportunities to demonstrate the fact that Christianity has been part of Iran's rich culture for almost 2,000 years and is motivated by love, the pope said.

In a nation of about 70 million people, there are about 100,000 Christians in Iran, the vast majority of whom are Armenian Orthodox. According to Vatican statistics, Catholics number about 17,000.

Chaldean Archbishop Ramzi Garmou of Tehran told Vatican Radio that while Christians are a small minority the Iranian Constitution recognizes their right to worship and to educate their members in the faith.

“Our churches are open for worship and for Christian formation,” he said.

Pope Benedict said Iran’s Catholic community made him think of the Gospel story about the leaven: just a small amount “makes bread rise, gives flavor and consistency.”

“I would like to thank all of them (the country’s Catholics) for their constancy and perseverance and encourage them to remain true to the faith of their fathers and to remain attached to their country in order to collaborate for the development of the nation,” the pope said.

Archbishop Garmou told Vatican Radio Jan. 15 that emigration is the biggest challenge the Catholic communities in Iran are facing.

“Over the last 30 years, a large part of our faithful have left the country and, unfortunately, emigration continues. Only God knows what the future of the church in our country will be, but we believe that if we remain faithful to the Christian vocation, we will have a bright future,” the archbishop said.

Pope Benedict said the desire of Catholics to seek a better life for themselves and their families is natural, but it also places pressure on the Catholics who remain in Iran.

“As shepherds of your flocks, you must help the faithful who remain in Iran and encourage them to stay in touch with members of their families who have chosen a different fate,” the pope told the bishops.

Both those who emigrate and those who stay need support in maintaining their cultural and religious identities, the pope said.