

ALL THINGS CATHOLIC | JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

Catholicism growing in heart of Muslim world

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By John L. Allen Jr. Globe Staff, March 8, 2014, 11:05 p.m.

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King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifah of Bahrain has recently agreed to donate land for the construction of a Catholic church. EPA/FILE

From the “not what you might expect” files, here’s a fact about Catholicism in the early 21st century that flies in the face of conventional wisdom: It’s growing by leaps and bounds in the heart of the Muslim world.

Many Americans have heard or read reports about an exodus of Christians out of the Middle East, and in terms of the indigenous Arab Christian population that’s all too real. Christians now make up only 5 percent of the region’s population, down from 20 percent a century ago. In places like Iraq, whole Christian communities are on the brink of extinction.

Yet the Arabian Peninsula today is also, improbably, seeing one of the most dramatic Catholic growth rates anywhere in the world. The expansion is being driven not by Arab converts, but by foreign ex-pats whom the region increasingly relies on for manual labor and domestic service.

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