

What it's like to be a Catholic in the Arabian Gulf

(Picture: St Mary's Church)



Sunday Mass in Dubai is surprisingly exuberant

Most Christians living in Dubai - one of the seven emirates that form part of the United Arab Emirates - who attend mass, work in the hotels, luxury villas and giant skyscrapers and apartments owned by rich local families. These faithful are mostly Filipinos and Asians. They are joined by European and American citizens who have temporary contracts with large companies or working on big events. One Italian worker who organises sporting events tells Vatican Insider about her experience of how Christians practice their faith in a predominantly Islamic country. On the only day they have off work each week, aside from spending time with their families, playing sports and going for other types of entertainment (the few that are actually available to foreigners), Christians also attend mass, but a type of celebration that is quite unique.

The popular neighbourhood of Bur Dubai is home to Saint Mary's Church. Faithful arrive just before 19:00. One would expect them to receive a sober welcome. But they would be wrong. Mass celebrations in this church are the fruit of meticulous and painstaking organisation. All services follow the Roman Rite, respecting its doctrine, but are enriched with special effects and "technology" plays an important part in the ritual. When all faithful have entered the church – punctuality is essential – the doors are closed and the mass begins. Those outside can watch the celebration on two big screens in the square enclosed inside the church walls. It is essential that the celebration does not disturb anyone in the surrounding area.



This huge temple of worship is always filled to the brim: It's always "packed" says the young Italian woman, who is helping organise an international sporting event in Dubai. The priest usually celebrates mass in English but the mass is shown live on two screens, along with the texts from the various passages read out: readings and hymns. It's almost karaoke-like, but very respectful and well-organised. Showing the texts on big screens is a great idea; it makes it possible for everyone, elderly, young people and people of different nationalities and cultures to follow the mass and participate.

The vast majority of the congregation is Asian, with some local Christians and very few white people. The celebrant's homily is very rich and engaging, with him explaining the Gospel, trying to bring Jesus' message into the real lives of faithful. There are many references to modernity. The parish priest explains how important it is to use technology as an instrument for evangelisation. The priest has even made references to an application for smartphones (which includes a game) which children are familiar with. The congregation actively participates and one can really witness a genuine faith. For many, mass is the only moment of freedom they experience during the whole week.

At the end of the mass, people greet one another and the whole community finds itself immersed in fraternity through the Word of God and in the presence of the Eucharist. Then everyone goes home and to their jobs, in peace.

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