

Marian shrine serves as faith beacon for Muslims, Catholics

Interreligious peace and harmony reigns in Indonesian village



A Marian shrine in Central Java, Indonesia, has become a beacon of interreligious peace and understanding for visiting groups of Muslims and Catholics.

Dozens of non-Catholics have been coming to the shrine in Kerep village every day for their own version of contemplative prayer, said Yohanes Aris Widyatmoko, head of the shrine's secretariat. "If there is a magnet for the shrine, it's the garden. Many young Muslims wearing headscarves spend their time walking around the garden. It is not taboo for them," Widyatmoko said.

Among them is Marwiyah, a Muslim who works as an aid for an elderly Catholic woman in Semarang. She usually accompanies her employer to the shrine once a week. "I do wear the headscarf. But I feel comfortable here. It does not matter as long as I keep my own faith. What we have is a mutual respect," she said.

Susilo, a 36-year-old Muslim construction worker, says he visits the shrine every day to "find peace of mind". "I come here and pray according to my own faith. In a way, it's like I'm borrowing the shrine," he told ucanews.com. Susilo, who like many Indonesians uses one name, believes that all wholehearted prayers will be answered. "I pray for my family. I also pray that God gives me a solution to a complicated problem involving my family's good name," he said.

The shrine, administered by the Semarang archdiocese, has been a magnet for religious tourism since it

was inaugurated by Bishop Albertus Soegijapranata of Semarang on Aug. 15, 1954 — the feast of the Assumption. A Marian grotto and other devotional items of interest are spread among the shrine's 5.5 hectares.

'Interfaith dialogue'

Putrimah, a 51-year-old Muslim from Ngampon village, says visiting the grotto makes her "feel at peace". "Mother Mary looks smiling and beautiful, like a goddess," she told ucanews.com. Archbishop Johannes Maria Trilaksyanta Pujasumarta of Semarang said he was pleased that the shrine has enhanced the faith lives of all Indonesians, not just Catholics. "There are ways to bring ourselves closer to the creator. Each religion has its own way of practicing faiths. We should not be exclusive," he said.

The archdiocese is also host to Indonesia's most famous Marian shrine, Sendangsono, which was inaugurated in 1929. The name means "spring that flows under a tree," and was where the first seeds of the Catholic faith in Java were sown more than 100 years ago. On Dec. 14, 1904, Jesuit Father Frans van Lith blessed the spring and used the water to baptize the first 171 Javanese Catholics.

However, geographical reasons prevent many Catholics from visiting the site. More pilgrims now flock to the shrine in Kerep because it is easier to reach, Archbishop Pujasumarta said. On Aug. 15, the archbishop was on hand to bless a 30.7-meter-high Marian statue. The event was attended by some 7,500 pilgrims from across Indonesia and neighboring Malaysia. The three Catholic artists said that the icon is the tallest Marian statue in Southeast Asia. "The statue is our offering," said Nugroho Adi Prabowo, who, along with his brothers Koentjoro Budi Pranoto and Hartanto Agung Yuwono, spent a year creating the silica sand and resin statue.

Mary is a revered figure in Islam as the mother of Jesus, who Muslims regard to be a righteous man but not divine. There are 34 direct and indirect references to Mary in the Quran. Archbishop Pujasumarta said he hopes the statue can be used to improve an interfaith dialogue between Catholics and Muslims. "The presence of the statue of the Assumption of Mary ... will serve as a strong pillar for the improvement of interfaith dialogue," he said. Suhadi Maskur, a local Muslim leader, said the presence of the shrine has improved interfaith harmony in the area. "Interfaith conflicts never happen here. Take and give — this is the form of interfaith harmony in this area, and love is the foundation," the 86-year-old cleric said.