

## Desert fathers - Biggest Catholic Parish



What is thought to be the biggest Catholic parish in the world is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary next week. It is in Dubai, now a glittering city in the desert built by foreign workers

There is an old area of Dubai close to the city centre that is crowded with people and traffic at weekends. All day, people pour out of the metro station, off buses and out of cars. The large mosque at Oud Metha is one attraction and there is also a popular bakery – but the greatest numbers are heading through the gates of a grey-walled compound next door that stretches over an entire block.

From the outside you might think it is a factory or a sports venue. Even once you walk in it takes a few moments to realise that it is in fact a church.

There are low-rise modern buildings, courtyards with awnings to protect against the fierce sun, an Astroturf football pitch and a basketball court where a jumble sale is underway. But then, you hear a hymn, see the posters of recent popes and then a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, her grotto decorated with brightly coloured Indian garlands. Next to it is a long queue of people waiting to light votive candles in a large tent.

This is St Mary's Catholic Church, dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption and celebrating its fiftieth anniversary next week. Between 50,000 and 60,000 people come to Mass here at weekends. On the Friday afternoon I am there – the Islamic day of rest and often the only day off for parishioners – the vast air-conditioned church is full to bursting. Most worshippers follow the Mass via screens outside. There are 10 priests but lay volunteers are the mainstay of this parish. More than 400 catechists teach 7,000 children; around 250 people recently auditioned to become readers (only 50 or so were chosen); there are 300 altar servers with up to 12 of them on duty at each Mass.

