

Iraq: The bells in Islam's holy city toll once again 17 centuries of silence



Mass was celebrated for the first time in a long time, in an old Christian church in Al-Hirah, in the heart of Shi'ite Islam. The ceremony was presided over by the Pope's envoy, Mgr. Lingua

After a silence which lasted 17 centuries, the bells in a Christian church in the holy city of Najaf, in Iraq, have sounded once again. Saudi satellite television company Al Arabiya reported on this special event today. The ancient site of worship, located inside the "Abdal Massih" (from the Arabic "Servant of God") convent, is in Al-Hirah, an ancient Christian city recently discovered near Najaf. — —

The Arab television company said Pope Benedict XVI sent Apostolic Nuncio Mgr. Giorgio Lingua as his envoy to the Middle East. A large delegation of Christian priests and bishops attended the religious ceremony, including Armenian Catholic bishop Emmanuel Dabbaghian and Raad Kachachi, head of the government bureau for Christians and other religions. The delegation was received by the highest religious authority in Shi'ite Islam, the great Ayatollah Ali al Sistani.

During the meeting, Christians and Muslims were eager to stress that the former two are an integral and ancient part of Iraq's social fabric. In a statement broadcast on Al Arabiya's website, Mgr. Lingua said "the aim of the visit to Najaf was to visit Christian sites that were discovered in that city."

In answer to a question about the special event which is seen as evidence of the peaceful co-existence of religions, the director of the Department of Antiquities in Najaf, Mohammed Hadi al Maiyali, stated that Al-Hirah was once the Vatican of Christian antiquities so it is not surprising that over 33 convents,

places of worship and churches were discovered by archaeologists in Najaf soil.

Al-Hirah was an important urban centre during the pre-Islamic Arab era. Originally a military camp (hirta), it became the capital of the Arab Lakhmidi dynasty in the 5th and 6th centuries. According to historian Hassan al Hakim, in the fourth century after Christ, the city was Christian or strongly influenced by Christianity: and this was because in 420 AD, al-Numaan al-Mundhir I, Lakhmid prince of Al-Hirah had embraced the Christian faith.

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