

BAHRAIN'S BLESSED CATHEDRAL BUILDS RELIGIOUS UNITY

DISHAN JOSEPH

The Arabian Gulf's largest Roman Catholic Church has been opened in Bahrain. Our Lady of Arabia Cathedral, which can seat 2,300 people, is located in a desert town about 20 kilometres south of the capital, Manama. The modernist Church with an octagonal dome, several tiers of seating, two chapels and an 800-capacity auditorium is set to become a focal point for Bahrain's 80,000 Catholics and an architectural landmark.

The Holy Bible says in Psalm 133: "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity". Today Bahrain has enriched these words by showing the world, how Muslims and Christians are able to live in peace.

By the 1930s, Bahrain had become the commercial centre of the Arabian Gulf on the success of the oil boom. The Gulf's first Roman Catholic Church - The Sacred Heart Church opened in Manama in 1939 as more workers arrived. The multi-religious atmosphere continued to attract more foreign workers. The new cathedral is established close to Awali, a small town in the centre of the country that has long hosted expatriate workers dating back to the oil days. From the cathedral compound, oil heads can still be seen pumping. Today, Bahrain's Catholic community consists of working migrants from dozens of countries, but mainly the Philippines and India. Bahrain is also one of the few Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to have a local Christian population - largely Roman Catholic - of about 1,000. The majority of them were originally Arab Christians from the Middle East who immigrated to Bahrain from the 1930s to 1950s.

Relations between Bahrain and the Vatican have advanced in recent years. King Hamad presented a model of the cathedral to Pope Francis in 2014 and he has also invited the Pontiff to visit the country. "Tolerance is important but not only tolerance," said Bishop Paul Hinder. "It needs entering into an understanding of each other. That doesn't mean I have to convert to the other religion but I have to have a proper understanding and get rid of all the prejudices. It is an ongoing process."

During the grand opening of this cathedral, Bahrain and papal flags fluttered in the roads, while the sound of hymns drifted out from the cathedral's pews into the desert air ahead of the opening. It would be the end of a journey that began on February 11, 2013, (the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes)

At the consecration, there was one notable figure missing: Bishop Camillo Ballin, who died on April 12, 2020, at the age of 75, before he could see his cherished dream of a cathedral dedicated to Our Lady of Arabia realised in Bahrain. The Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia will be the second cathedral in the Vicariate and will be headed by Cardinal Luis Tagle, Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia. During this yuletide month of December, the King of Bahrain and its people have gifted the world with the important gifts of love, tolerance and brotherhood which go beyond a magnificent cathedral

when the decision to build the cathedral was taken. The land was a kind gift of Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, the King of Bahrain, since 2002. The prudent King personally presented a model of the cathedral to the Pope in 2014. The cathedral is part of a complex of around 95,000 square feet in Awali, which has a population of 1.7 million people and is located to the east of Saudi Arabia and west of Qatar. In the book, *Nehemiah* Chapter 2 (Bible), it says: "Let us arise and build God's house" - and the people of Bahrain supported the Catholics to do this task.



The new Catholic cathedral



Bishop Camillo Ballin



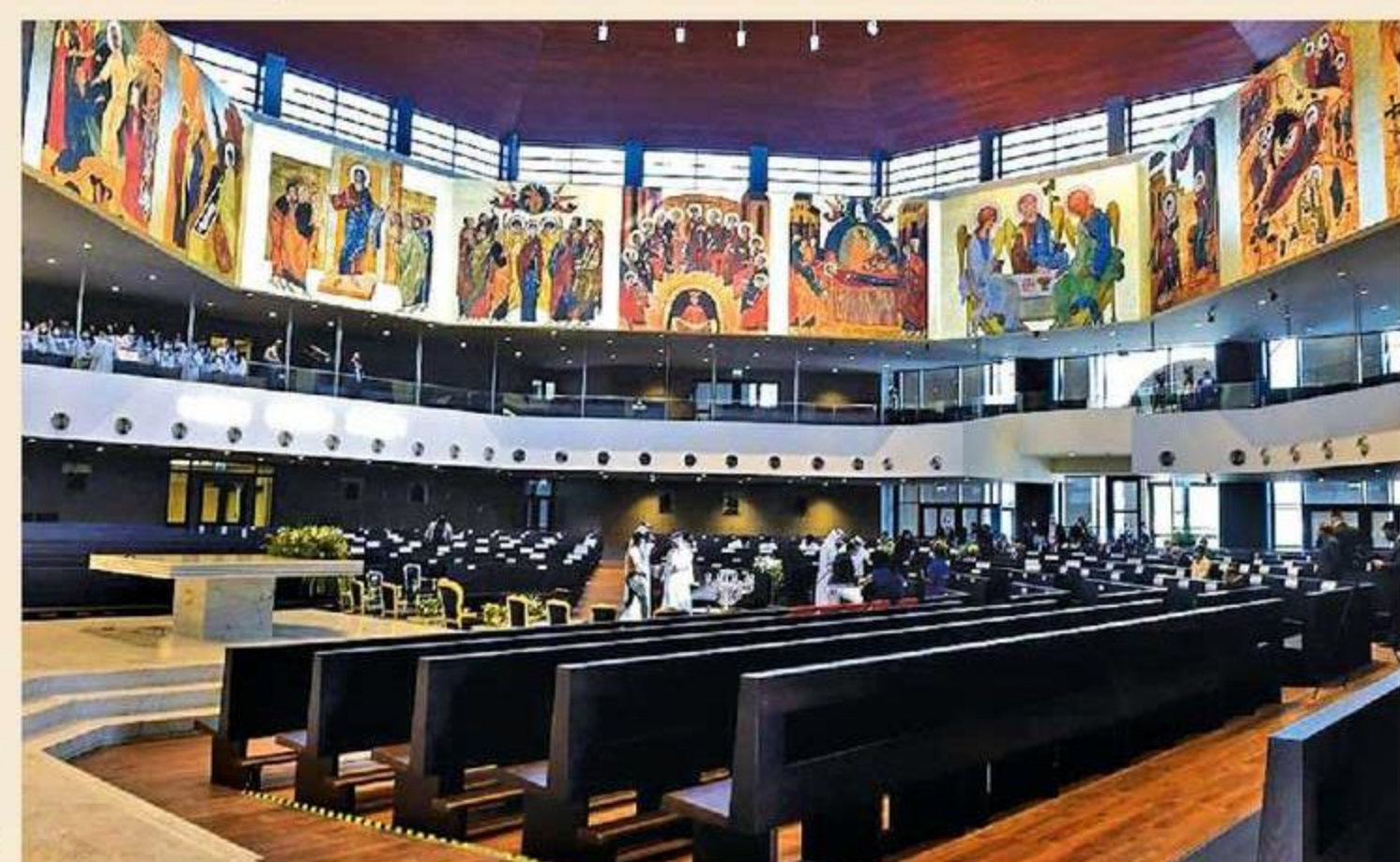
Our Lady of Arabia



Inside the cathedral



Cardinal Luis Tagle and Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad at the inauguration



Inside the modern cathedral

A focal point of the cathedral is a statue of Our Lady of Arabia. The title of Our Lady of Arabia was approved in 1948. A small chapel in Ahmadi, Kuwait, was dedicated in her honour on December 8 that year. In 1957, Pope Pius XII issued a decree proclaiming Our Lady of Arabia the main patron saint of the territory and the Apostolic Vicariate of Kuwait. In 2011, the Vatican officially proclaimed Our Lady of Arabia the patron saint of the vicariates of Kuwait and Arabia. Later that year, the Holy See reorganised the Vicariate of Kuwait, giving it the new name of the Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia and including the territories of Qatar, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia.

"It is a wonderful feeling," said Bishop Paul Hinder, who oversees the Catholic Vicariate, or jurisdiction, of Northern Arabia that encompasses Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. "We are happy to have such a wonderful and extraordinary building that will be an architectural highlight in Bahrain," said Bishop Hinder. Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, the King of Bahrain, granted the 9,000 square metre plot of land eight years ago and his representative, Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad Al Khalifa, inaugurated the church on Thursday.

It is the culmination of years of work involving the country's rulers, Church figures, the wider Roman Catholic community in Bahrain and scores of others from architects to builders. It also speaks to a rich history of tolerance in

Bahrain for other religions that date back centuries. Our Lady of Arabia - named after the patroness of the Vicariate of Northern Arabia - can be seen for kilometres around, and its design is striking. It resembles a tent in which the Prophet Moses met his people, as described in the Old Testament, and is topped with an octagonal dome under which most of the congregation will sit for mass.

The cathedral's grey walls are made with pietra serena stone that is only produced in Florence. On the walls are a series of beautiful icons portraying scenes such as the death and resurrection of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, crafted with materials including

24-carat gold shipped from Italy. Light constantly floods the church from different angles. Foreign media quoted the Italian Architect Mattia Del Prete saying: "I feel joy and full of emotion. The most fundamental aspect of the whole project is the light. At every time during the day, it changes the colour and atmosphere."

The opening was indeed a moment of celebration for Bahrain's Catholics, but also one to express deep gratitude to their host country. Arabia is a place where, for centuries, Islam was the predominant religion. But Bahrain has long allowed people of other faiths, from Judaism to Hinduism, to worship in peace and brotherhood. A Hindu temple was established in Bahrain about 200 years ago, while in the 19th Century, an American mission was allowed to open a church there.

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Dignitaries at the opening ceremony