

Turkey's Armenians Reconsecrate 16th Century Church Building

Just hours before a deadly 7.2 earthquake struck Turkey's southeast on Oct. 23, well more than 3,000 visitors crowded into an ancient Armenian cathedral in nearby Diyarbakir for Sunday mass.

The mass was the first worship service in decades in the ancient St. Giragos Armenian Apostolic Church, which had fallen into serious disrepair in the early 1980s. Built 350 years ago and still the largest Armenian church building in the Middle East, it once served as the metropolitan cathedral of Diyarbakir.

In a private ceremony the following day, 10 ethnic Armenians who had been raised as Sunni Muslims were baptized as Christians in the restored sanctuary. All from one extended family, the Armenians returning to their faith said that their ancestors had converted to Islam during the Ottoman era (1299-1923).

"We have been ostracized by both Sunni Muslims and Armenians," one of them told Hurriyet Daily News. "It is a very emotional moment for me, and I'm a bit upset, because unfortunately we do not belong to either side."

For security reasons, the baptisms were closed to the press and outside visitors.

According to one source at Istanbul's Armenian Patriarchate, it is estimated that at least 300,000 Armenian and Syriac Christians converted to either Sunni or Alawite Islam after 1915 to avoid forced deportation.

“This means there could be as many as a half million ethnic-background Christians in Turkey today who carry ID cards stating they are Muslims,” the cleric observed.

Over the past decade, both Armenian and Syrian Orthodox church centers in Turkey have quietly baptized individuals and families from the eastern regions of the country who had Muslim IDs but wished to return to their Christian roots.

“I wish this church had always been open,” one of the newly baptized Armenians told the online Massis Post website. “It is unbelievable to be together here with people from all around the world with whom I share the same origins.”

Although political dignitaries representing a number of foreign embassies attended the Oct. 23 mass, along with Armenian spiritual leaders from around the world, most of the congregation consisted of Armenian pilgrims from Armenia, the Netherlands, Germany, Syria, Lebanon and the United States.

“It was like they were returning from exile!” one Diyarbakir resident who attended the Sunday mass told Compass. “Here were these elderly Armenians who used to live here, walking through the streets of Diyarbakir, weeping and looking for their old homes and places they remembered. They all still spoke Turkish and Kurdish, as well as Armenian.”

Anatolia's 'Jerusalem'

Located in the city's Gavur (Turkish for “infidel”) district, the newly restored St. Giragos cathedral is just a few minutes' walk from St. Peter's Chaldean Catholic church (also undergoing restoration), a mosque, the Diyarbakir Protestant Church and a synagogue, with construction plans for places of worship along the same street for Alawite and Yezidi (blending local Kurdish and Sufi Muslim beliefs) adherents.

“This is an historic enterprise,” declared Abdullah Demirtas, Diyarbakir Sur's district mayor. “Diyarbakir will become Anatolia's Jerusalem!”

Complete with seven altars and multiple arched columns in the sanctuary, St. Giragos was virtually abandoned after the massacre and deportation of its congregants in 1915. The building was confiscated during World War I as a headquarters for German army officers, used for a time as a stable, and later turned into a cotton warehouse in the 1960s.

According to Taraf newspaper columnist Markar Esayan, the church building was still intact until 1980, after which “because of hate ... in modern times” it was attacked, looted and fell into disrepair, with just the walls and arched columns remaining.

“When I saw the condition of the church at that time, I thought it would never return to its former state,” Esayan wrote on Oct. 24.

Costing \$3.5 million, the church’s two-year restoration project was funded largely by Armenian donations from Istanbul and abroad, although a third of the costs were donated by the Diyarbakir municipality.

At the conclusion of the Sunday mass, Diyarbakir Mayor Osman Baydemir addressed the congregation, declaring first in Armenian, and then Kurdish, Turkish, English and Arabic: “Welcome to your home. You are not guests here; this is your home.”

“We all know about past events,” he said, pointedly referring to 1915, “and our wish is that our children will celebrate together the coming achievements.”

By raising private funding, the Armenian church has regained this ancient building for its own use as a consecrated sanctuary, rather than a Turkish government-controlled museum like the 10th century Akdamar Church in Van, where only one religious ceremony is permitted annually.

Although no Armenian community still exists in Diyarbakir, a

priest has been named by the Armenian Patriarchate to conduct occasional worship services for visiting clergy and Christian groups within Turkey and from abroad.

According to Vartkes Ergun Ayik, a businessman of Armenian origin who spearheaded the project funding, the restored church property will also be used for classical music concerts and exhibitions in the city.

“Our expectations are good,” the new priest told Compass. “Even though Armenians are not living in the city today, we are praying that God will use our church to bless Diyarbakir in a very positive way.”