

# VATICAN IN THE ARABIAN GULF

On 3 November 2022, Bahrain welcomes the first visiting Head of the Vatican-based Catholic Church as Pope Francis returns to the Gulf for the third time in three years after the historic visits to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2019 and Iraq in 2021 as part of wider efforts to boost inter-faith dialogue between Christianity and Islam.



## CHRISTIAN CATHOLICS IN THE GULF

Christians represent the **second largest religious community** in the Arab Gulf countries, where Islam is the official state religion. This is largely due to the presence of Christian **expats**, who began to arrive to the Gulf for work after the discovery of oil, although **Bahrain and Kuwait** also have small communities of **native Christians**. The majority of Christians in the Gulf belong to the **Catholic Church**, the world's largest Christian Church, other denominations include the **Orthodox** and **Protestant**, with churches in all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, except in Saudi Arabia, which has no operating churches as of now.

### CATHOLIC POPULATION IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

**3,754,241**  
(4.3% of the 86,863,606 population)

Since 2011, the Arabian Peninsula has been administered by:

Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia	Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia
(Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia)	(UAE, Oman, Yemen)
serves <b>2,752,241</b> Catholics (6.4% of the population)	serves <b>1,002,000</b> Catholics (2.3% of the population)

(According to 2020 figures of the Catholic Church)

## OFFICIAL CATHOLIC CHURCHES IN THE GCC

### KUWAIT

- Church of Our Lady of Arabia, Al-Ahmadi (1956)
- Co-Cathedral of Holy Family, Kuwait City (1961)
- Saint (St) Thérèse, Salmiya (1974)
- St Daniel Comboni, Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh (2010)

### BAHRAIN - Seat of Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia

- Church of the Sacred Heart, Manama (1939)
- Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia, Awali (2021)

### QATAR

- Church of Our Lady of the Rosary, Doha (2008)

### UAE - Seat of Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia

- Cathedral of St Joseph, Abu Dhabi (1965)
- Church of: St Mary, Dubai (1967)
- St Mary, Al-Ain (1969)
- St Michael, Sharjah (1971)
- Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Fujairah (1992)
- St Francis of Assisi, Jebel Ali (2001)
- St Anthony of Padua, Ras Al-Khaimah (2013)
- St Paul, Abu Dhabi (2015)
- St John the Baptist, Ruwais (2021)

### OMAN

- Church of: Sts Peter and Paul, Muscat (1977)
- St Francis Xavier, Salalah (1984)
- Holy Spirit, Muscat (1987)
- St Anthony, Sohar (1994)

### YEMEN

- Proto-Cathedral of St Francis, Aden (1892)
- Church of: Sacred Heart of Jesus, Hodeidah
- Mary Help of Christians, Sanaa
- St Theresa of the Child Jesus, Taiz

## MILESTONES

Excavations in the Arabian Peninsula showed Christian presence from the **4th century** to the **late 9th century**. Bahrain's Muharraq Island was the seat of the East Syriac Church. To this day some villages in the area bear Christian names (Al Dair = Monastery). Ties with the Catholic Church have been strained over the centuries.

**1888:** The Apostolic Vicariate of Aden (later of Arabia), the first one in Arabia, was established in Yemen to serve what is today Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the UAE and Yemen.

**1939:** Bahrain's Emir, Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, donated land to the Apostolic Vicar of Arabia to build the first modern Catholic church in the Gulf, the Sacred Heart Church in Manama (1940). Kuwait opened its first Catholic church in 1956, followed by Abu Dhabi (1965), Dubai (1967), Oman (1977) and Qatar (2008).

**1953:** Due to the growing number of Catholic expats, the Apostolic Prefecture of Kuwait was established and elevated to Vicariate a year later, operating separately from the Vicariate of Arabia in Aden.

**1968:** Kuwait was the first to establish formal diplomatic ties with the Holy See (Vatican). It was followed by Yemen (1998), Bahrain (2000), Qatar (2002) and the UAE (2007).

**1974:** After the Marxist takeover of South Yemen, the seat of the Apostolic Vicariate of Arabia was moved from Aden to Abu Dhabi, UAE, after more than 80 years.

**1993:** Pope John Paul II created the Apostolic Delegation to the Arabian Peninsula, as part of the Apostolic Nunciature of Kuwait, to serve Christian communities in the Gulf countries with which it had no official relations. Today, it concerns only Oman and Saudi Arabia.

**1996:** Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, Holy See's Secretary of the Section for Relations With States (Foreign Minister), was the first Vatican representative to visit Kuwait.

**1999:** Bahrain's Emir Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa made his first official visit to Vatican where he met Pope John Paul II. Then Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah became the first Saudi official to visit Vatican and hold talks with the Pope.

**2000:** The first permanent Apostolic Nunciature (Vatican's diplomatic mission) was established in Kuwait.

**2005:** Alees Samaan, a member of Bahrain's native Christian community, became the first woman and non-Muslim (Christian) Chair of a parliament in the region upon her appointment to Bahrain's Shura Council.

**2007:** Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah and Pope Benedict XVI held a landmark meeting in the Vatican. In 2010 Pope Benedict XVI received Kuwait's Emir Sabah for the first time.

**2009:** Bahrain's King Hamad offered and later donated land in Awali to the Catholic Church to build a new church. The Northern Vicariate seat was later moved from Kuwait to Bahrain. King Hamad met with Pope Francis in 2014 in Vatican.

**2011:** The Arabian Peninsula was divided into: *The Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia* (Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia) with the Bishop's see in Awali, and *The Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia* (UAE, Oman and Yemen) with the see in Abu Dhabi, replacing the Apostolic Vicariates of Kuwait and Arabia.

**2016:** UAE's Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan met with Pope Francis in Vatican, inviting him to the UAE.

**2018:** Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, was the first official to visit Saudi Arabia and meet with King Salman.

**2019:** Pope Francis visited the UAE, marking the first papal visit to the Arabian Peninsula. The Pope and Grand Imam of Al-Azhar signed the Human Fraternity Document.

**3/2021:** Pope Francis made the first papal visit to Iraq and met with the Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani.

**11/2021:** The Gulf's largest Catholic Cathedral, Our Lady of Arabia, opened in Bahrain.

**2/2022:** The Apostolic Nunciature was opened in Abu Dhabi, Vatican's second diplomatic mission to the Gulf.

**11/2022:** Pope Francis' first visit to Bahrain. He was invited by Bahrain's King Hamad to attend the Bahrain Forum for Dialogue and visit the newly opened Cathedral.

