

Bishop Crispian Hollis reflects on his recent visit to Iran

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'Although I was ordained a bishop some twenty years ago with a specific mandate within a particular diocese – at that time, the diocese of Birmingham and only subsequently, eighteen months later, the diocese of Portsmouth, it was impressed on me by the rite of ordination, that I was being ordained for the whole church. The question was put: "Are you resolved to build up the Church as the body of Christ and remain united to it within the order of bishops under the authority of the successor of the Apostle Peter". I answered 'yes' and one of the consequences of that response has been that I have been involved with Catholic communities in different ways all over the world. My current role in the Bishops' Conference as chairman of the department for International Affairs has added new dimensions to that vowed commitment to the support of the life of the world-wide Church.

Just one week ago, I was celebrating Mass for the English speaking community in the church of the Sacred Heart in Tehran in Iran. We have had links with the Catholic community in Iran for a number of years and this was my second visit to the Archbishop of Isfahan and to his diocese, which encompasses the whole of the country. I was spending a few days there with no particular purpose other than to provide solidarity and support to a community of Catholics who find themselves in a unique and demanding situation.

There are all sorts of stories in the press about life in Iran but I have to say that the greatest danger that I found to life and limb was in coping with the chaotic traffic in the city. There is no way that I would ever dare to touch the steering wheel of a car there!

There is a small community of Iranian Catholics who are Latins, Chaldeans and Armenians. There are also orthodox Armenians, a few Anglicans and Pentecostals. There is quite a considerable community of expatriates too who are Christians. I celebrated, for instance, a Mass on All Souls Day which culminated in a visit to the Christian cemetery to bless the graves of the French, Italian, English and Polish communities. It is a big occasion which is attended by representatives of all those nationalities and there are, as it happens, hundreds of Poles buried there who were refugees from Siberia during the Second World War

In Itsfahan, which is the most beautiful of cities about 5 hours drive from Tehran and one of the former capitals of Iran, I said Mass – in French – for a sister and a few other Catholic Christians, for whom the celebration of Mass is a rare luxury.

I also met with Sisters in Tehran who look after Christian old people. On a previous visit, I went to a leper colony in the north of the country which is a community of men and women suffering from that terrible disease and in which a small number of religious have helped for many years.

The Archbishop, who is an Italian Salesian, has about a dozen priests working with him. The work is hard and often the results are hard to assess but, as he says – and he's been there for forty years – it is keeping alive the presence of the Church and the Gospel in Iran. I hope our visit was some comfort and encouragement for them and I ask you all to keep the Iranian people and the Christian community in the forefront of your prayers.'

Bishop Crispian Hollis