

Orthodox Flock to Once-Banned Holy Site

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Orthodox worshippers attending a liturgy led by Patriarch Bartholomew I at the Sumela Monastery on Sunday. **Umit Bektas**

SUMELA MONASTERY, Turkey — Orthodox Christians held the first Divine Liturgy in almost 90 years at an ancient monastery on the side of a Turkish mountain on Sunday, after the government allowed worship there in a gesture toward religious minorities.

At least 1,500 pilgrims, including from Russia and Greece, traveled to the Byzantine-era Sumela Monastery for the service led by Patriarch Bartholomew I, spiritual leader of the world's Orthodox Christians.

The Islamic-oriented government, which is aiming to expand freedoms as part of its bid to join the European Union, has said worship can take place at the monastery once a year. Services were previously banned.

Sumela, a spectacular structure cut into the side of a mountain, was abandoned around the time of Turkey's foundation in 1923. Last year, authorities prevented Russians and Greeks

from praying at Sumela, located at a remote site near the southern coast of the Black Sea often referred to by Orthodox believers as Pontus, its historical Greek name.

"In our family, we always kept Pontus alive," said Fotiy Exizov, 62, whose family settled in Sochi after leaving in 1864. "We speak the language; we pass on the stories. We are like the birds who must return to the nest."

The patriarch, who is based in Istanbul, wore a white robe with golden lace, and carried a staff. Priests sang hymns and spread incense amid faded frescoes. Visitors who could not fit into the crowded monastery watched on a giant television screen several hundred meters below the building.

Bartholomew sought to deliver a message of inclusion across faiths, including Islam.

"We would also like to take this opportunity to celebrate the arrival of the holy month of Ramadan," he said. "We wish for you to live this meaningful month with peace, patience and prayer."

(AP, Reuters)

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