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## Catholic missionaries ready to work in Bhutan

by Sara Angle by Catholic News Service



A statue of Buddha is pictured after a snowfall in Thimphu, Bhutan, in early January. Three-quarters of Bhutan's people are Buddhists. (CNS photo/Singye Wangchuk, Reuters)

**VATICAN CITY** -- Catholic missionaries are ready to set up faith communities in Bhutan after the country announced it would accept the registration of Christians for the first time, a Vatican news agency reported.

The Fides missionary news agency said Jan. 27 that two Catholic religious orders in India were prepared to go to Bhutan as soon as the government permits registration. The population of the small South Asian country, which has a tiny Christian minority, is predominantly Buddhist and Hindu.

"We are ready to open communities of men and women in Bhutan. We do not know the territory well, but if the authorities permit it, and we have the necessary conditions, we will willingly start our activities," Fr. Arul Raj, a missionary from the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, told Fides.

Details of how the registration process would take place for Christians were discussed in December at a meeting of the group that regulates religious organizations. In the past, the country has banned open

practice of non-Buddhist and non-Hindu religions, but officials said that would change under the new policy.

There are an estimated 6,000 Christians in Bhutan, and about 1,000 of them are Catholic, according to Vatican statistics.

Raj has founded two religious orders in India, the Society of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate and the Society of the Missionaries of Mary Immaculate, and he said he was confident the two communities could do successful work in Bhutan.

The two orders work in northern India, which borders Bhutan. They have created self-help groups for poor and indigenous women in the most remote areas, and work with young people through college education programs. They clearly manifest their Christian identity through their work and prayer, rather than performing open conversions, Father Raj said.

He said their approach to missionary work is based on witness and dialogue, and that "many among the women and youth who partake in our programs spontaneously ask to embrace the Christian faith."

He said this style of evangelization would be well-suited for Bhutan.

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