

Seven Saints pilgrimage enlivens Islamo-Christian friendship

Christians and Muslims have gathered at the Seven Saints chapel in the commune of Le Vieux-Marché in the Côtes d'Armor region of France since 1954 to honor the memory of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, a tradition common to both religions.

Delphine Allaire, Le Vieux-Marché (Côtes-d'Armor), *La Croix International*, 25 July 2017



Interreligious prayer period last weekend near the Seven Saints chapel. / Diocèse de Saint-Brieuc

Beside a “sacred fountain” under the yews of the forest surrounding the Seven Saints chapel, imam Mohamed Louselati chants Surah 18 of the Koran.

Following a mass at la Chapelle-Dolmen, one hundred pilgrims have joined an interreligious prayer service combining Celtic, Catholic and Muslim traditions.

Fatima El Gzre came from Paris thanks to Marie-Clarté O’Neill, whose daughter working in Morocco facilitated their meeting.

“Without Marie-Clarté, I would never have suspected the existence of such a place in a lost corner of Brittany,” she explains while distributing dates and milk with orange blossom to the pilgrims.

Nearly 150 locals and holidaymakers from every corner of France, often retired people, are set to take part in one or two days of the pilgrimage program.

The event, which was launched in 1954 by orientalist Louis Massignon, has managed to survive despite recent tragic events.

“Some people don’t come because they are afraid they will find our discussions too intellectual, but it not true,” Marie-Ange Siebrecht, a regular participant at Seven Saints, says with a sigh.

There are few Muslims, notes Mohamed Loueslati, a chaplain who works at two prisons at Rennes and is another regular attendee at this event.

This lack of Muslim participation illustrates a gap in the education of the young people whom he meets “more in the demand than in practice”, he says.

In Loueslati’s view, it is an important issue since it involves nothing less than “faith in God and monotheism”.

“Our great regret is the absence of young people and young parents,” comments Genevière Boisnard, deputy mayor of Vieux Marché.

“A whole generation seems to be missing out on the religious dimension,” she adds.

However, Bishop Jean-Paul Vasco of Oran, Algeria, who is the “pardoner” of this year’s pilgrimage, believes that the number of Muslims or young people hardly matters.

“It is not a pilgrimage that will change the world,” he says. “But look, that’s not what is most important.”

“All the challenges lie ahead of us so there are no old soldiers,” he says.

Meanwhile, Jean-Michel Boulanger, vice-president of the Brittany region, points to the importance of taking small steps in the field of interreligious and secular dynamics, which is “complex, fragile and incandescent”.

He likened pilgrims to “little fireflies that light up the night and which one day will win out against indifference and lukewarmness”.

“We can no longer choose between ignoring each other and tolerating each other.”

“We need to love,” concludes Bishop Vesco at an emotional gathering ending a pilgrimage that brought to life “a little town radiating humanness for the whole planet”.