



Reuters/CNS

This 175-foot-tall ancient statue of Buddha in the town of Bamiyan in central Afghanistan was among demolition targets of Taliban rulers.

Statue destruction 'deeply tragic'

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — Vatican officials expressed dismay in the wake of the Taliban's destruction of ancient relics in Afghanistan.

Mullah Mohammad Omar, the Taliban's supreme leader, issued the decree ordering the destruction of all statues and shrines in the country that the Taliban deems un-Islamic and idolatrous. By March 5, the deed was completed, according to news accounts.

Among the statues marked for demolition were two 1,500-year-old Buddhas in central Bamiyan in sandstone cliff-side niches. One stood 175 feet high.

"This is the largest statue (of Buddha) ever made," Archbishop Francesco Marchisano, president of the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Goods of the Church, told Catholic News Service March 5. "I hope (the Taliban) come to under-

stand that they destroy with their hands what is not theirs — it belongs to the whole world."

The Vatican's newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, in an editorial in the March 5-6 edition, condemned the Taliban's order for statue destruction as a manifestation of "fanatical extremism."

The Taliban attitude "foolishly does not perceive that the multiple inculturations ... among diverse civilizations are a stupefying testimony to encounters experienced not only as necessary to art but also to a tolerance which leads to discussion," said the editorial's author, Father Franco Patrino, an occasional art critic for the paper.

Lorenzo Nigro, an Eastern antiquities expert at the Vatican Museums, said the statues are "particularly rare" representations of Buddha, and, as such, are of immeasurable cultural and artistic value.

While the statues are evidence of the spread of Buddhism in Afghanistan in the sixth century, their survival through the centuries also testifies to a history of coexistence among the region's different religious believers, Nigro told CNS.

"In the whole Near East, there was always a coexistence of cultures and religions. It is in the modern epoch that unfortunately there has been a rise of extremisms," he said, pointing to the Taliban's religious justification for destroying the statues.

Nigro said the Vatican Museums house a number of Buddha statues, most of which were brought to Rome by the great missionaries over the centuries.

The Taliban's decision sparked a series of international pleas to spare the giant Buddhas. They included one by the Group of Eight industrialized nations, which called it a "deeply tragic decision."



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MOUNT SAVIOUR MONASTERY:

'Making music to our God'

Ascending Monastery Road, which leads to Mount Saviour Monastery between Elmira and Corning, the spiritual immediately makes its acquaintance. Not so much in symbols of faith like the crucifix that marks the beginning of monastery property or the chapel's cross in the distance, but in the delight of the landscape.

Atop this Appalachian foothill, the silence extends an invitation to listen. Hedgerows of brushwood and stone divide fields of dried grass. Draping old oaks line narrow, winding dirt roads and paths. There are meadows of wildflowers whose hue and shape are tailored to the season; patches of pine, maple and birch, sewn into a multicolored Afghan come fall. Scottish Blackface sheep and white-tailed deer graze on sloping pastures. Nature and Mount Saviour combine to offer

for a setting conducive to prayer and conversion of heart.

For 50 years, this hilltop and the 1,500-year-old Rule of St. Benedict have allowed the monks of Mount Saviour to be led by, and respond to, God's love. It has never been about reclusion or denial of the senses. Nor martyrdom or super-piety. It is about limiting distractions to live life to its fullest in God's presence. As Father Martin Boler, the prior of Mount Saviour for 32 years, explains, "Our whole life is oriented toward God through the harmonious balance of prayer, study, work and hospitality ... We want to be open, appreciative and grateful for what is.

To see that being human is a blessing, not a curse." In an age of cynicism and anxiety, it is this search for spiritual meaning that draws thousands to this mount.

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