



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT IN KAZAKHSTAN MEETING WITH THE ORDINARIES OF CENTRAL ASIA

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER

Astana (Apostolic Nunciature)

Sunday, 23 September 2001

*Dear Brother Bishops, Apostolic Administrators
and Superiors of the Missions sui iuris of Central Asia,*

1. It is with deep joy that I meet you again, following this morning's solemn Eucharistic celebration in the great Square of the Motherland. I greet each one of you with affection and I thank you for your zeal and sacrifice in contributing to the rebirth of the Church in these vast regions, situated on the border between two continents.

Here, the Catholic Church is only a little plant, but she is full of hope because of her trust in the power of divine grace. The long years of the Communist dictatorship, during which so many of the faithful were deported to the gulags set up in these lands, caused much suffering and bereavement. How many priests, religious and laity paid for their faithfulness to Christ *with unimaginable suffering, and even the sacrifice of their lives!* The Lord has heard the cry of these martyrs, whose blood has drenched the soil of your land. Yet again "the blood of martyrs has been the seed of Christians" (cf. Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 50, 13). From this blood your Christian communities have sprung up like seedlings, and now they look to the future with confidence.

Christ, the Good Shepherd, reminds you and the people entrusted to your pastoral care: "*Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom*" (Lk 12:32). And again, just as he said to Peter, he says to you: "*Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch*" (Lk 5:4). He is talking about the catch of evangelization, to which we are all called. He commands us, just as he commanded the Apostles after his resurrection: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations*" (Mt 28:19).

2. The experiences of the small Christian communities of Central Asia after communism and its present strongly minority situation call to mind the Gospel parable of the leaven which causes the dough to rise (cf. Mt 13:33). The leaven seems insignificant, but it has the power to transform the whole loaf. This is the conviction which ought to underlie your pastoral activity and sustain the difficult and noble task of the *plantatio Ecclesiae* in these territories, newly open to the Gospel.

The priority pastoral aims of your apostolic mission should be the spreading, with all your energies, *of the Gospel proclamation* and the *continuing consolidation of the Church's organization*.

The recent establishment of the Apostolic Administrations and the Missions *sui iuris*, by means of which the Church has gained a visible and solid structure, heralds the beginning of a *promising time of evangelization*. I therefore wish to express my gratitude and admiration for your efforts, dear Ordinaries. I also thank the priests and religious men and women who have left their native countries to offer themselves for the missionary task in these lands, in a spirit of genuine ecclesial solidarity. My hope is that the generous commitment of all will be rewarded by an abundant harvest of good. May you never lose sight of being a *sign of God's love* among these peoples, who are rich in their centuries-old cultural and religious traditions.

3. "*Love one another*" is the theme of my pastoral visit. In the name of our common Master and Lord, I address this invitation to you today: "*Love one another*". May it be your concern always to preserve among yourselves the unity that Christ left us as his testament (cf. *Jn 17:21, 23*).

Just as when the Gospel first began to be preached, the Church will enter people's hearts if she is seen as a *welcoming home, marked by fraternal communion*. In the first place, be united among yourselves, dear Pastors of these Churches. Although you are not yet an Episcopal Conference in the full sense, try to develop forms of effective collaboration with every means, in order to make the best possible use of pastoral resources.

In this precious work the universal Church is supporting you with her solidarity. The Successor of Peter, who embraces you today with emotion, accompanies you with affection. Although you are geographically far away, you are in the heart of the Pope who appreciates your untiring apostolate.

4. It is ten years since Kazakhstan obtained the independence it had longed for. But the climate of a weakening of values which it inherited from the previous regime still needs attention. The long winter of communist domination, with its claim to eradicate God from the human heart, often reduced the spiritual content of these peoples' cultures. For this reason there is a scarcity of ideals which makes people particularly vulnerable to the myths of consumerism and hedonism imported from the West. These are social and spiritual challenges which call for a *courageous missionary impulse*.

As my venerable Predecessor, the Servant of God Paul VI, used to say, the Church called to evangelize "begins by evangelizing herself". As a community of hope which is lived and shared, she "needs to listen unceasingly ... to her reasons for hoping". The Church needs to be continually evangelized "if she wishes to retain freshness, vigour and strength in order to proclaim the Gospel..." In addition, there is need for a "Church which is evangelized by constant conversion and renewal, in order to evangelize the world with credibility" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 15).

Missionary activity must be prepared and accompanied by a well-focused work of formation, by a solid experience of prayer, by actions marked by fraternity and service. Great apostolic efforts are required in order to evangelize the different settings with their local traditions, giving particular attention to the university world and the means of social communication. Have confidence in Christ! May his presence reassure you. May his promise fill you with strength and enthusiasm: "*I am with you always, to the close of the age*" (*Mt 28:20*)

5. In order to fulfil the mission which he entrusts to you, pay close attention to *the formation of candidates to the priesthood and religious life*. Dedicate yourselves with love to the priests, who are your principal collaborators, by helping them and being close to them with a fatherly heart.

In this regard, I wish to express my great pleasure at the completion of the *Seminary at Karaganda*, which offers much promise for the future. As the seminary for all of Central Asia, it is a sign of effective cooperation between your Churches. Make every effort to ensure that within its walls a solid human and spiritual formation, as well as a serious theological and pastoral training, is given to candidates to the priesthood. I express the heartfelt hope that you will be able to count on good formators who are expert teachers and exemplary witnesses to the Gospel.

6. Give special attention *to the training and apostolate of the laity*, and welcome with discernment and openness of heart both the older Associations and that gift of the Spirit to the Church in the post-Conciliar period which are the ecclesial Movements and new Communities.

Their presence, spirit of initiative and specific charisms are a source of wealth to be valued. The Ordinary should direct and guide their activity with pastoral wisdom, inviting them to assist the ecclesial communities while respecting existing structures and their established operation. In turn, members of Movements and Associations should, with openness of spirit and docile readiness, renew their commitment to work in harmony with the Pastors of these young Churches. Their efforts in serving the new evangelization will thus become a sign of the love which flows from faithful commitment to the one Lord of all.

7. Dear Brothers, I wish to end by encouraging you to promote *ecumenical dialogue*. Your pastoral activity is carried out in close contact with the members of the Orthodox Church, who share the same faith in Christ and the richness of a large part of the same ecclesial tradition. May your mutual relations be characterized by warmth and respect, in fidelity to the Lord's words: "*Love one another*". At the dawn of the new millennium, let us harbour the hope that Christ's disciples, even if not fully united, will be at least closer to one another, also as a result of the experience of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000.

Respect and dialogue should also be fostered in relation to the *Muslim community*, with *those who belong to other religions* and with those who profess themselves to be *non-believers*. May everyone be able to appreciate the gift of your faith lived in charity and may they open their hearts to the most profound dimensions of life.

I entrust your pastoral mission to Mary, Star of Evangelization and Queen of Peace. In the Cathedral of Astana you venerate her as the Mother of Perpetual Help. Into her maternal hands I place your endless work, your expectations and your plans; may she guide and sustain you every step of the way.

With these sentiments, I cordially impart to you my special Apostolic Blessing, as a pledge of apostolic zeal and graces for you and for those entrusted to your pastoral care.

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