

## UNLOCKING THE SHACKLES OF OPPRESSION

*“They came at night-time, at one o’clock in the morning, just like in Soviet times,” the priest told me.*

*“There were three uniformed policemen and one plain-clothes policeman. They dragged me off to the police station, where they told me I had broken my residence permit – I had permission to live at the church but not in the flat! I was fined and my passport was stamped – next time they will throw me out.”*

Such is the reality for a priest in Uzbekistan today, where for over fifty years no Catholic priest was allowed. Other priests explained that they have government-appointed parishioners who are there to ‘help with the authorities’.

The Church is determined to come back to life undaunted by the continued police checks, red-tape protocols and other irritations. Despite sometimes severe clampdowns on religious activity, Catholic missionaries have been able to reach out to a post-Soviet society trying to find a new identity for itself independent of Russia.

Uzbekistan is at the crossroads of cultures, religions and political power brokering. Sandwiched between Kazakhstan and Afghanistan, this former Soviet Central Asian republic has some stunning Islamic architecture and a fascinating history, along the old Silk Road.

Yet the country has not emerged from the clutches of Soviet power with much freedom.

The average minimum monthly wage is \$7.50 – and poverty is rife.

Islam Karimov is a former communist who became President of Uzbekistan in 1990. After winning 90% of the vote in



**Transformation: Fr Krzysztof shows pictures of how the old church in Tashkent was restored over the past 10 years.**

an opposed election in 2000, his term of office was extended by a parliament, which sits for only 12 days a year.

As President he is trying to control the rise of many fundamentalist Islamic movements in this country, which is on the frontiers of Islamic extremism; cloaked under the need for security, there are arrests, imprisonment without trial, torture, ‘disappearances’ and press censorship. Political opposition parties are banned.

Under President Karimov’s authoritarian control, the Muslim call to prayer has been banned and beards are discouraged. A religious Affairs Bureau now controls all Islamic institutes. All religious activity is monitored because of a fear of foreign influence. In the bizarre world of Uzbekistan, the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Baptists have found their activities suspended – they are perceived to be almost as much of a threat as Islamic fundamentalists. Yet the Catholic Church has managed to re-establish a presence and to begin some activities in this land on the frontiers of Islam.

## FAITH IN THE FERGANA VALLEY

DISASTER struck the Christian faithful in one small Uzbek town when their old church was seized by the Soviets and converted into a store for secret KGB documents.

But there is no secret about the growth of the Church there today. Now – with the help of Aid to the Church in Need – the Franciscans in the predominantly Muslim town of Fergana have adapted a house and are now using it as a friary. Nearly 40 youngsters come to the children’s



**Enkindling friendship and faith: young girls outside the Children’s Centre in Fergana**

## THE STONES WHICH THE AGGRESSOR REJECTED

IN Samarkand, on the old Silk Road in central Uzbekistan, the Church of St John the Baptist was lost to the community of faith when it was seized and converted into a sports hall.

An act of sacrilege, typical of the Soviet aggression, the Communists added insult to injury by sitting the toilets around what was the High Altar.

Looking at the church now – an oasis of calm in the midst of people’s busy lives – it is hard to conjure up a vision of its traumatic past. Memories of this are still vivid among many of the church-goers who gather Sunday by Sunday to offer a prayer of thanksgiving and a plea for the community to be spared such sufferings in the years to come.

centre the Polish friars have opened – at least 30 of them come to Mass each day. Somehow, the tiny chapel squeezes in about 70 children and 35 adults at two Masses on Sunday.

Despite many of them not being Christians themselves, most parents are happy for their children to attend the centre. There, the youngsters learn some English, enjoy guitar lessons and take part in prayer groups with catechism on a Sunday.

The children have a meal each day. Nina cooks for them. She said: “The more love you have in your heart, the more joy you have.” But she added: “Until people realise they need Christ, there will be no change.”

Despite the huge challenges, Franciscans from their Krakow province, in eastern Poland, have made this their home and a second home for needy children.

Little Dyura, who likes helping to wash the dishes, said: “We became friends when we came here – we look after each other.”



**Samarkand – Fr Krzysztof saying Mass. The altar is where the toilet block was sited when the church was seized by the Soviets and converted into a sports hall.**

## RESPONSE FORM



### Aid to the Church in Need

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BLOCK LETTERS PLEASE

Mr/Mrs/Ms/Sr/Rev: .....

Address: .....

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Tel No: ..... Email: .....

I/We enclose \$..... to help the work of Aid to the Church in Need in **Uzbekistan and Central Asia.**

I enclose a cheque/money order payable to Aid to the Church in Need

OR please debit my Bankcard, Visa or Mastercard:



Expiry date: ...../.....

Signature: .....

**A beautiful Rosary from the Holy Land will be sent out free of charge to all those who give a donation of \$20.00 or more and tick this box.**

**Simple in design and yet profound in its symbolic significance, this rosary is made by Christian families who have carefully crafted olive wood grown in the Holy Land. Many Christians in Bethlehem live by making these rosaries.**



Confident of your support we have purchased thousands of rosaries from them. The Christians in Bethlehem ask you to join them in prayer for peace in the Holy Land. The rosary is your invitation to pray for the suffering Church. Full length of rosary: 33cm (13 1/2”)

A05/5/2/10



Fr Krzysztof with a young catechist

**A Message from Fr Krzysztof:**

“I would like to express my thanks to the benefactors of Aid to the Church in Need. We are firstly and most importantly united in daily prayer, heart to heart, in Masses and in our own individual prayers. Please assure these, our friends, of continuing prayers. We welcome your commitment to the faithful here, where the Catholic Church was closed down and there was no Catholic priest here for so many long and difficult years. Now we need your continuing help to build up our important pastoral work. Please continue to be with us in prayer.”

**POPE'S PILGRIMAGE TO KAZAZHSTAN**

2001 is a year to remember for Kazakhstan's Catholic community.

Pope John Paul II made history yet again when in September of that year he visited the large country.

Aid to the Church in Need marked the occasion with its new edition of its Child's Bible, freshly translated into Kazak, one of more than 140 languages in which the little book appears.



ACN continues to promise one million Child's Bibles every year and has now distributed over 40 million throughout the world.

**A SIGN OF HOPE TO THE WORLD**

IN a world fearful of religious fanaticism, parts of Central Asia are a testimony to the good relations that are possible between Christians and other faiths in troubled parts of the globe.

After the 9/11 attacks on America, religious intolerance increased in Afghanistan and Pakistan and other countries on the fringes of Central Asia.

And yet, Aid to the Church in Need has received encouraging reports showing that in countries such as Kazakhstan, Christianity is accepted and in some parts, the Church's evangelising mission has started anew.

Father Janusz Kaleta PhD, who heads the Church's mission in Kazakhstan, told Aid to the Church in Need in an exclusive interview that the country was a showcase of tolerance, which should send a signal of hope to the world.

At a time when neighbouring countries have lurched towards extremism, religious tolerance in Kazakhstan has progressed. This is attributed to Pope John Paul II's visit, which coincided with the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath.

Reporting on a country of 14 million with a Catholic population of 200,000, Fr Janusz Kaleta said: "Even though there are Muslim extremists in Kazakhstan, the missionary work of the Church is possible and out in the oil fields there are always foreign visitors who are Catholic."

The Polish priest, who heads the Apostolic Administration in Atyrau, west Kazakhstan, said the country's government was committed to promoting dialogue and harmony in a very multi-religious society.



The favourable conditions mean Fr Kaleta is planning to expand the Church's pastoral work in the country.

With the willing support of Aid to the Church in Need, Fr Kaleta hopes to develop the Catholic presence with new churches, including one urgently required in Uralsk, in the north west of the country.



Fr Janusz Kaleta



Building a community of faith in Central Asia



**Aid to the Church in Need**

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The **Frontiers** of Faith  
Catholics in Uzbekistan  
and Central Asia



*Aid to the Church in Need*



Looking through the gateway of the Kalon Mosque

*THE long shadow of political oppression and religious extremism lingers over minority groups in many parts of central Asia – and yet even here the light of faith is a witness to hope for all the world.*

The complex social, political and religious make-up of Central Asia represents a minefield for emerging Catholic communities trying to rebuild a Church in lands where the Faith was wiped out or hardly existed.

In the little-known circle of countries centring on Uzbekistan – spreading north from Iran, Pakistan and China – the Church is re-emerging as a force for tolerance and moderation in a region

rattled by the tensions of the world post 9/11.

Focusing particularly on Uzbekistan, in this report we present the people who are the unknown heroes of the Christian faith, helping the Church to arise anew in lands where no priest was allowed for 50 years.

And yet despite the signs of change, the Church still faces huge challenges as it looks to the future.

The mission of the Church is unmistakable. As one priest put it: "It is as the Pope said – people want to see Jesus through you."

There is encouraging new life in many Christian communities, born out of centuries of suffering and from the prayers of the saints and the witness of the martyrs.

The support of Aid to the Church in Need is vital to the existence of the Church.