



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 21 September 2022

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Catechesis - *The Apostolic Journey in Kazakhstan*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Last week, from Tuesday to Thursday, I traveled to Kazakhstan, a vast country in Central Asia, for the Seventh Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. I renew my gratitude to the President of the Republic and the other Authorities of Kazakhstan for the cordial welcome I was given and for the generous efforts in organizing it. I also sincerely thank the Bishops and all the collaborators for the great work they have done, and especially for the joy they have given me in being able to meet and see them all together.

As I said, the main reason for the trip was to take part in the *Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions*. This initiative has been carried out for 20 years by the Authorities of the country, which presents itself to the world as a place of meeting and dialogue — in this case at the religious level — and thus, as a leading player in promoting peace and human brotherhood. It was the seventh edition of this congress. A country that has been independent for 30 years has already had seven editions of these congresses, one every three years. This means putting religions at the centre of efforts to build a world where we listen to each other and respect each other in diversity. And this is not relativism, no; it is listening and respecting. And credit for this must be given to the Kazakh government, which, having freed itself from the yoke of the atheistic regime, now proposes a path of civilization, clearly condemning fundamentalism and extremism. It is a balanced position

and one of unity.

The Congress discussed and approved the *Final Declaration*, which stands in continuity with the one signed in Abu Dhabi in February 2019 on human fraternity. I like to interpret this step forward as the fruit of a journey that starts from afar: I am thinking, of course, of the historic Interfaith Meeting for Peace convened by St. John Paul II in Assisi in 1986, much criticized by people who lacked vision; I am thinking of the far-sighted gaze of Saint John XXIII and Saint Paul VI; and also that of great souls of other religions — I limit myself to recalling Mahatma Gandhi. But how can we not remember so many martyrs, men and women of all ages, languages and nations, who paid with their lives for their fidelity to the God of peace and fraternity? We know: solemn moments are important, but then it is the daily commitment, it is the concrete witness that builds a better world for all.

In addition to the Congress, this trip gave me the opportunity to meet the Authorities of Kazakhstan and the Church living there.

After visiting the President of the Republic — whom I thank again for his kindness — we went to the new Concert Hall, where I was able to speak to the political Leaders, representatives of civil society, and the Diplomatic Corps. I emphasized Kazakhstan's vocation to be a *country of encounter*: in fact, about 150 ethnic groups — 150 ethnic groups! — coexist there and more than 80 languages are spoken. This vocation, which is due to its geographical characteristics and history — this vocation of being a country of encounter, of culture, of language — has been welcomed and embraced as a path, which deserves to be encouraged and supported. I hoped as well that the construction of an increasingly mature democracy, capable of effectively responding to the needs of society as a whole, could continue. This is an arduous task, which takes time, but already it must be acknowledged that Kazakhstan has made very positive choices, such as saying “no” to nuclear weapons and making good energy and environmental policies. This was courageous. At a time when this tragic war brings us to the point where some people are thinking of nuclear weapons — that madness — this country says “no” to nuclear weapons from the very beginning.

As for the Church, I was so glad to meet a community of happy, joyful people filled with enthusiasm. Catholics are few in that vast country. But this condition, if lived with faith, can bring evangelical fruits: first of all, the *blessedness of littleness*, of being leaven, salt, and light relying solely on the Lord and not on some form of human relevance. Moreover, numerical scarcity invites the development of *relationships with Christians of other denominations*, and also fraternity with all. So a small flock, yes, but open, not closed, not defensive; open and trusting in the action of the Holy Spirit, who blows freely where and how He wills. We also remembered that grey part, the martyrs, the martyrs of that holy People of God, because they suffered decades of atheistic oppression, until liberation 30 years ago — men and women who suffered so much for the faith during the long period of persecution. Murdered, tortured, imprisoned for the faith.

With this small but joyful flock, we celebrated the Eucharist, also at Nur Sultan, in the Expo 2017 plaza, surrounded by ultra-modern architecture. It was the feast of the Holy Cross. And this leads us to reflect: in a world in which progress and regression are intertwined, the Cross of Christ remains the anchor of salvation: a sign of hope that does not disappoint because it is founded on the love of God, merciful and faithful. Our gratitude goes out to Him for this journey, as does our prayer that it will be rich in fruit for the future of Kazakhstan and for the life of the pilgrim Church in that land. Thank you.

APPEALS

Today is World Alzheimer's Day, a disease that affects so many people, who are often pushed to the margins of society because of this condition. Let us pray for those suffering from Alzheimer's, for their families, and for those who lovingly care for them, that they may be increasingly supported and helped. In this prayer I also associate the men and women dealing with haemodialysis, dialysis, and transplantation who are represented here.

And I would also like to mention the terrible situation in martyred Ukraine. Cardinal Krajewski went there for the fourth time. Yesterday he telephoned me, he is spending time there, helping in the area of Odessa and bringing closeness. He told me about the pain of this people, the savagery, the monstrosities, the tortured corpses they find. Let us unite ourselves to this people who are so noble and martyred.

Special Greetings

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, especially the groups from England, Denmark, Norway, Jerusalem and the United States of America. In a particular way my greeting goes to the new seminarians of the Venerable English College as they begin their priestly formation here in Rome. I invoke upon each of you, and your families, joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Lastly, my thoughts as usual turn to *young people*, to *the sick*, to *the elderly* and to *newlyweds*, who are many — getting married is beautiful! The feast of Saint Matthew the Evangelist, whom the Universal Church celebrates today, gives me a starting point to encourage everyone to place themselves in the school of the Gospel. You will find in Christ's words light and support for your journey. Thank you.

Summary of the Holy Father's words

Dear Brothers and Sisters: Following my recent Apostolic Journey to Kazakhstan, I once more express my gratitude to the President of the Republic, the civil authorities, Bishops and lay faithful, and the many volunteers for their warm welcome. The primary purpose of my visit was to attend the Seventh Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, whose aim is to promote peace and human fraternity in our world. This gathering, together with its Final Declaration, is one more step forward on the path of interreligious dialogue, and continues a journey that began with the historic meeting in Assisi in 1986. This path also includes the Document on Human Fraternity signed in Abu Dhabi in 2019. When speaking of these noble efforts, we must also remember the many martyrs of diverse nationalities and backgrounds who have borne faithful witness in their daily lives to God's desire for peace and fraternity among his children. In addition to encouraging the nation in its vocation as a *Country of Encounter*, I was able to meet members of the local Church. This small yet faithful flock, fortified by the example of its saints, especially during the years of persecution, is open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, it was fitting that we could celebrate Mass together on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, an instrument of suffering and death turned into the ultimate sign of hope and salvation. Let us pray that God will abundantly bless the people of Kazakhstan and the life of the pilgrim Church in that land.