

COUNTRY REPORTS

FABC 50 GENERAL CONFERENCE

Compiled by the FABC Central Secretariat

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I. Mission of Afghanistan

MISSIO SUI JURIS AFGHANISTANIENSIS Report for FABC 50 General Conference

Christianity in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has not always been a Muslim country. Before the Islamic conquest, there were at least three great religions: Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Christianity. According to tradition, the Holy Magi, belonging to Zarathustra's religion, hailed from this region. Even the apostle Thomas is told to have crossed Afghanistan during his journey to India.

It is historically certain that there were some episcopal sees beginning from the III century. Between the V and the VI century there were established about ten dioceses belonging to the Church of the East (Nestorians). Herat, in the west of the country, was a bishopric since 424 AD (since 585 AD, a metropolitan see) until 1310 AD. Between the VII and the XIV century there were also some dioceses of the Syriac Orthodox Church (*Jacobites*).

In the VII century the Islamic conquest started, but it did not cause an immediate disappearance of Christianity. The Christian presence in Afghanistan was eradicated only in the XIV century, by Timur's (Tamerlane) persecution. Nevertheless, until the end of the XIX century there was an Armenian community in Kabul. Now, in the country, officially, there are no Christian Afghans. Afghanistan is an Islamic country: at present, it is an Islamic Emirate, but even before the seizure of power by the Taliban (August 2021) it was an Islamic Republic. Even though the old Constitution recognized religious freedom, in fact, since the supreme law was Shariah, there was no freedom to change religion. To convert to Christianity was considered apostasy, liable to death penalty.

Mission's Origins

When Afghanistan gained independence (1919), Emir (subsequently, King) Amanullah Khan promoted a modernization of

the country. To that end, many groups of technicians came, with their families, from western countries. Some of them were Catholic. They asked for the presence of a Catholic priest. Amanullah agreed to the request, on condition that the priest lived inside the Italian Embassy (Italy had been the first European country to recognize the Afghan independence). In 1921, an Agreement was signed between Italy and Afghanistan, providing that in the Italian Embassy there could be a Chapel for the spiritual assistance of (foreign) Catholics in Afghanistan. Of course, any kind of proselytism was excluded. The Italian Government turned to the Holy See for the appointment of a Chaplain. On 25 January 1931, the Holy See entrusted to the Order of Clerics Regular of Saint Paul (*Barnabites*) the Chaplaincy of the Italian Embassy in Kabul. As first Chaplain Father Egidio Caspani CRSP, personally known by Pope Pius XI, was appointed. The Chaplain (*Præpositus curis Catholicorum*) was endowed with ordinary faculties for the whole Afghanistan. Father Caspani reached Kabul on Christmas Day of 1932, and on 1 January 1933 the first Holy Mass was celebrated in the Chapel of the Embassy. After Father Caspani, there were other four Chaplains, until 1994, when, during the civil war, Father Giuseppe Moretti CRSP was seriously injured by a rocket fallen onto the Embassy. So, he was forced to leave the country, and the Chaplaincy remained vacant until 2002.

On 16 May 2002, Pope John Paul II established the Mission *sui iuris* of Afghanistan, entrusted it to the Barnabites, and appointed Father Giuseppe Moretti CRSP as its first Ecclesiastical Superior. He continued in office until 2014, when, on 4 November, the undersigned Father Giovanni Scalese CRSP was appointed as his successor. I took canonical possession of the Mission at the beginning of January 2015 and remained in Kabul until August 2021, when the Taliban seized power (15 August). I left the country, along with the Sisters and the children of their orphanage on 25 August, thanks to an airlift arranged by the Italian Government for the Afghan collaborators of the Italian Embassy, Cooperation and Army, and their families. In *Annuario Pontificio* 2022 I still appear as the Ecclesiastical Superior of the Mission.

Overview of the Mission

Essentially, the Mission has always been made up of religious. Its Superior, as mentioned, belongs to the Order of Clerics Regular of Saint Paul—Barnabites. He lives, by himself, in the Rectory next to the Chapel of the Italian Embassy (which is the only church in Afghanistan). He is admitted to Afghanistan by a diplomatic Visa, as an Attaché of the Italian Embassy.

For many years, the only religious presence in Afghanistan was that of the *Little Sisters of Jesus*. They arrived in 1955 and remained, continuously (even during the Taliban period), until 2017. They lived among people (“Afghan among the Afghans”), in a working-class neighborhood, and used to work in hospitals.

In 2004, an intercongregational community was opened, promoted by an Italian NGO, *Pro Bambini di Kabul* (PBK), which managed a “Day Centre for children with non-serious mental disabilities,” a small school with about 40 disabled children, who were prepared for access to public school.

In 2005, from India the Jesuits arrived with their *Jesuit Refugee Service*, engaged in educational work. In 2014, one of them was kidnapped and released only in 2015, thanks to an intervention of the Indian Government. In these years there was a high turnover of priests, brothers, and scholastics.

In 2006, the *Missionaries of Charity* opened a community in Kabul. They ran an orphanage with 14 disabled and abandoned children and assisted around 400 poor families of their neighborhood. Now, all those children are in Italy.

All the religious communities were recognized as NGO by the Ministry of Economy, and the religious were admitted to Afghanistan as social workers.

All the religious communities were recognized as NGO by the Ministry of Economy, and the religious were admitted to Afghanistan as social workers. In August 2021, all of them left the country (the Sisters came to Italy with me; the Jesuits went back to India). Now, as far as I know, one Jesuit should be there.

The Faithful

The Mission is a sui generis particular Church: it is a Church of foreigners, temporarily living in Afghanistan for business purposes. There are no local Catholics; there are only diplomats, clerks of embassies and international organizations, employees of humanitarian agencies, entrepreneurs and workers. But all just for a limited period. Unlike the past, there were no families: it was too dangerous to come to Afghanistan with wife or husband and children. So, the Afghan Church has always been a small and unstable community – a *pusillus grex*.

The Pastoral Activity

The pastoral activity, which had been intense for decades in the last century, these last years gradually decreased to next to nothing. We cannot think that, before the arrival of the Taliban, Afghanistan was a free and peaceful country. When I arrived, in 2015, I found a very difficult situation. In the following years, it became increasingly worse, everyday more unsafe: deadly attacks recurred on a daily basis; many people left the country; the different organizations imposed restrictions on the freedom of movement of their personnel; controls at the check points of the Green Zone became tighter; the Italian Embassy made more difficult the access to its compound. So, I saw the attendance at Sunday Mass diminish little by little until, in March 2020, with the pandemic, the Ambassador placed the Embassy on lockdown, so that, for months, I celebrated Mass by myself. In October 2020, the new Ambassador allowed the Sisters to attend Mass on Sundays, the other faithful only at Christmas and Easter.

The Present Situation

After the pull-out of the American and NATO troops, with the advance of the Taliban on the capital, the staff of all the embassies and the international organizations left Afghanistan. We – the Sisters and I – were the last to leave. It was difficult to arrange our departure. It was a miracle: on the night between 24 and 25 August, a convoy transferred the Sisters and their children to the airport, and a military flight brought us to Italy. On the following day, there were some

bloody explosions at the airport, and the flights were definitively suspended.

Of the Catholic community, only an Italian doctor, in Afghanistan for 30 years, working for the Red Cross, remained. Now, as far as I know, also our friends of the United Nations resumed their job in Kabul.

I have pressed the Secretariat of State to consider a resumption of the activity of the Mission. The problem is that the Italian Embassy is still closed. But I think that other solutions might be found. However few they may be, there are souls who deserve pastoral care.

Rome, 22 July 2022

Rt. Rev. Giovanni Scalese, CRSP
Catholic Ordinary of Afghanistan

II. Apostolic Administration of Kyrgyzstan

Living the Catholic Faith in Kyrgyzstan



The Catholic Church in Kyrgyzstan: Context and Profile

Kyrgyzstan is one of five Central Asian former Soviet republics that gained independence in 1991. The population is approximately six million, with a mix of Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Russian, Uygur, Dungan, Ukrainian, Kurd, Tajik and Turks. Catholics comprise a very small minority in this predominantly Muslim nation. We estimate that there are currently between 600 and 1,500 Catholics in this country. Approximately ninety percent of the population consider themselves to be Muslims. Until recently, the majority of Muslims have been rather moderate; however, there is an increasing trend towards the radicalization of certain elements within the population, most especially among young adults living in rural areas. This dynamic of

radicalization is clearly perceived as being an “imported” ideology; Kyrgyz tend historically to be a people opposed to fanaticism.

The presence of Christian Faith within this territory dates from the early centuries of Christianity. Spread mostly from Nestorian churches located primarily in the Middle East, the vibrant presence of Christian communities over a period of several generations is attested to by archeological and other historical remains discovered over the past 150 years. In the late Middle Ages, Franciscan missions were established over a territory which now encompasses parts of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and China.

During the period of Soviet persecution, various ethnic groups were forcibly resettled into areas of Siberia and Central Asia. A significant number of Catholics came to live here by these means. These people gathered secretly and prayed, with lay men and women leading the prayers, encouraging one another and, in some cases, baptizing. When priests were released from gulags and prisons, they made their way to serve these communities. In the years following World War II, there were tens of thousands of Catholics in the territory of the Republic. The collapse of the Soviet Union saw the massive emigration of many of these people out of the area. Today, a “faithful remnant” of Catholics exists here. The long-term effects of the absence of church structure during the extended period of systemic persecution experienced in the Soviet Union is important for understanding the character of our communities.

The contemporary Apostolic Administration of Kyrgyzstan is one of smallest Catholic Church entities in the world and one very much located at the *frontiers* in several ways. Many of the Catholics here have German, Polish, or Ukrainian roots; however, recently people of other ethnic backgrounds are attending Holy Mass, including Russians and some Kyrgyz, and Uzbek.

Current Events:

Kyrgyzstan finds itself at the crossroads of major events transpiring in the region and world. The economic and social influences of China, Russia, and the Islamic world strongly impact the local society. The current war in Ukraine has further compounded economic difficulties and stands to exacerbate the tensions within the region. Unfortunately, the negative impact of these events on the economy

and, consequentially, on society are expected to worsen over the next few weeks and months. Most of our Catholics live poorly. They are continuously preoccupied with the challenge of caring for their families. Many have family members or other relatives who travel out of the country in order to earn money to send back to support and sustain their families here. All are increasingly anxious about the potential effect of current events on their ability to provide for their families.

Specific particularities of the make-up of local Catholic communities:

Concerns about family life and about economic problems dominate much of the energy of our people. These concerns are correlatively brought into most conversations and comprise an ongoing part of discourse in parish life.

Moreover, *ecumenism and inter-religious interaction* is always a salient topic, since the majority of our families are comprised of mixed Catholic-Russian Orthodox; Catholic—atheistic; or, Catholic—Muslim members. (It is perhaps worth mentioning here that some from the previous generation of Catholic “exiles” recalled with profound gratitude the critical assistance provided by the local [Muslim] populations who offered the concrete assistance that saved these Christians arriving in desperation amidst abject poverty and hunger.)

Unfortunately, *the scarcity of solid “family” structures* is particularly critical in this area. Few of our parishioners enjoy a more integral traditional and comprehensive family structure. In addition to a prevalence of poverty, rampant instances of addiction, and the lack of examples in living out a Christian family vocation result in often seemingly insurmountable obstacles to building healthy, holy lives as individuals and as families and, consequently, as parish communities.

It is also significant that *religion in this area of the world is inextricably linked to ethnic identity*. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, Russians are presumed to be Orthodox; Kyrgyz and Uzbek nationals (comprising together 89% of the population) are expected to be Muslims; and the smaller ethnic groups, such as people of German or Polish heritage, are considered Catholics or Protestants. There is still

a general openness to the existence of different religious groups; nevertheless, this openness should not be mistaken as an acceptance for a member of one of these ethnic groups to embrace a faith different than that which their particular group traditionally professes. In some cases, this dynamic results in what might be described as a dual negative effect that reflects a comparative shallowness in *faith experience* (in distinction to *religious observance*) and in a refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy or right for a member from one ethnic group to convert and integrate fully into the faith community historically associated with another people. Unfortunately, the war in Ukraine has only exacerbated this oversimplistic tendency to align political ideology and ethnicity with religious identification.

Youth: Children are undeniably the wealth of Kyrgyzstan, which is blessed with a vibrancy and a young population. As they grow, youth here are nevertheless bombarded by many contradictory and sometimes alienating influences, most of which are witnessed elsewhere throughout the world. With sadness we Catholics observe a tendency for children to drift from the community as they enter late teen years and, especially among young women, as they meet and interact with men from different religions. Keeping youth engaged in our parish communities proves a difficult challenge.

The meaning of the Church in our people's lives:

With gratitude, we can claim without exaggeration that the vast majority of our Catholics experience the presence of the Church as being a significant influence in their own lives and in the lives of some others in the local community. It is, moreover, fair to claim that, indeed, for many of these Christians, the Church is in fact the single most positive presence in their lives – in spite of the many challenges the Church faces and our own evident inadequacies. The simple structures and limited resources of the Church are devoted to serving the pastoral needs of these people and to provide ongoing programs for children and youth of these communities and for others. As well, the Church is a key provider of assistance in various charitable undertakings.

Charitable/humanitarian works:

In addition to frequent instances of material assistance at the parish level—involving both our own parishioners and their

neighbors—the Church continues to exercise charity, especially through the works of *Caritas* and through the Children’s rehabilitation Center on the southern shores of the great Issyk Kul Lake. Likewise, endeavors to ease some of the harsh consequences produced by the Covid-19 pandemic were undertaken in concert with humanitarian and civic groups in various joint projects.

- *Caritas*, which received full official registration in 2019, offers courses for students from disadvantaged families in preparation for entrance into college. Current as well as former students repeatedly express their deep appreciation for making available that training necessary for them to engage in further studies. As with our other projects, these students and teachers are comprised of Christians as well as other people from different religious backgrounds.

The Church supports science clubs for children at several schools in the southern part of the country. In addition to witnessing to the inextricable link between *Faith and Reason* within our own religion to these students, their parents and teachers, ongoing astronomy clubs and annual camps invigorate schoolchildren to apply themselves with enthusiasm to their studies. Girls and boys study together, along with children from different ethnic and religious groups. Collaboration offers a remarkable opportunity for bringing families from a variety of backgrounds together. This exchange provides a truly unique opportunity for all involved to engage in a common endeavor and in the sincere search for truth through a quest for knowledge and mutual understanding.

The highly-valued programs offered through the children’s center in Issyk-Kul provide many kids with a unique opportunity for rehabilitation, recreation, study, and interaction with others: https://issykcenter.kg/?page_id=39&lang=en. More than 1000 kids participate in programs at this center each summer. Many of these children come from orphanages and from centers for children with special needs. In addition, therapeutic-rehabilitative sessions are offered when needed, such as occurred last year when officials turned to us for assistance in helping a group of children from villages located at the front lines of the recent conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tadzhikistan.

This year saw the blessing of a new corpus at this center which also provides resources for youth gatherings, for Christian-formation

and recreation camps, for giving the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, and for other activities.

Pastoral Work

Our small Catholic communities gather in various cities, towns, and villages throughout the country. Two of the three key apostolic priorities defined by the local Church include further development of communities in the south as well as in the north. In the northern part of the country, where the capital of Bishkek is located, parishioners pray in the small church built by their parents—many of whom, as mentioned above, were exiled here immediately preceding or during the Second World War.

Priests and Sisters likewise serve in numerous villages close to the capital. During this past year, a diocesan priest from Slovakia was able to renovate the little church in the neighboring town of Ivanovka and to obtain a space to launch more focused pastoral service to the east, based in a city at the mouth of Lake Issyk-Kul. This was undertaken with the goal of providing a place for worship and classes—as well as a space for youth and others from surrounding villages.

In the southern city of Osh, the second city in size and importance for the country, the endeavor to strengthen the pastoral and social activities of the Church were significantly enhanced in 2021 with the long-awaited arrival of three sisters from the Congregation of the *Consolata* Missionaries and with appearance of another young Jesuit priest from Poland. The task of these new missionaries is to begin a focused insertion into the region, becoming more deeply acquainted with local population and with the “unmet needs” of concrete people. After this initial phase, these sisters and local priests will propose the best means for engaging in more dynamic evangelization—even as they will have already begun serving.

Two local priests minister in the city of Talas, in western Kyrgyzstan. As well, one of these priests acts as a traveling missionary—visiting towns and villages in that area and several surrounding the great Lake-Issyk Kul region.

Building for the future: Another of the fundamental priorities being inaugurated involves plans to construct a primary apostolic center and modest cathedral church in the Capital city. We are convinced

that this bold step is necessary at this time and will make much more accessible to the wider population the considerable pastoral, spiritual, humanitarian, and intellectual resources of the Church. The project is designed, in fact, to serve as the *de facto* “face” of the Catholic Church throughout this whole region. Last year we were able to acquire a very suitable segment of property and are currently in the process of obtaining definitive permissions from the appropriate government officials. We will need the support and prayers of many to accomplish this small miracle.

Education and Formation of Youth: In 2021, we also continued to investigate the possibility of beginning a Catholic school in this country at some point in the not-too-distant future. Educational resources are sorely needed in this country and city and other officials warmly welcome the initiative. The formation of children, which make up a significant segment of the population in Kyrgyzstan, is indisputably an area in which the Catholic Church excels elsewhere and would undoubtedly provide a great service to this country. Even if we are still only in the initial stages of discussion about this, it is our hope that the Society of Jesus will eventually agree to undertake this endeavor—one which would certainly provide a fruitful and essential apostolic activity.

Topics and themes which are of particular interest in our small communities throughout Kyrgyzstan:

First, it is important to reiterate that parishioners emphasize the *importance of the presence of the Church* in their lives and in their small communities. For a considerable percent of our faithful, the Church really is one of the most positive, helpful, and encouraging influences in their lives. Their identity is often strongly tied to their belonging to the Church.

Secondly, it is fair to claim that our Church, although tiny in relation to larger Catholic communities in other countries, is comprised of a relatively young congregation. The laity is also rather active in serving the good of their small communities. When summarizing the recent synodal process, we notice with some consolation that our people tend to have a natural, un-self-conscious

“synodal” approach to the Church: they are not hesitant to express their needs as well as, when needed, their disapproval of certain aspects of our communities while most often articulating clearly their deep gratitude for the activity and care of the Church.

Thirdly, our communities are interested in comprehending the significance, as well as possibilities and limits of *ecumenical interaction*. As stated above, this interest emerges from their own experience as members of “mixed” families. In many of our communities, it is common to have Russian Orthodox Christians who participate in the parish. In fact, sometimes the lines of identification appear rather “fluid.” They seem to accept this reality. Moreover, interreligious engagement is a part of daily life in all facets of daily life within society. With almost 90% of the population claiming to be Muslim and some of our parishioners living in almost exclusively Muslim villages and towns, interaction must mean much more than mere peaceful coexistence.

Fourthly, the challenge to determine what the role—and responsibility—of Christians to engage in *evangelization* entails is especially salient here. What the form of this evangelization should look like is of particular interest to us who are called to lead. In Kyrgyzstan there are strongly divergent notions of what is meant by evangelization: Catholics are generally overly hesitant to invite neighbors or others to join in prayer and interaction with the community; conversely, fundamentalist Protestant groups and Muslims tend to be much more likely to assertively encourage conversion. In sum, there is still no clear consensus as to what the nature of evangelization in our communities should look like. For our little Church, this is perhaps the most important discernment for our generation.

In conclusion, we can attest to a living faith in our small communities. There is no need to exaggerate to ourselves or others our ability to impact the larger society. Truly, we everywhere experience our limitedness and scarcity of resources. We do recognize, however, the wonderful and continuous faithfulness of God to our community and feel the urgency of the call to live within this challenging environment as witnesses to the active presence and desire of Jesus Christ to bring light and life in abundance to those here, in this time and within this special territory.



The Churches in Central Asia can be seen as God's germogli (little sprouts/seedlings) ... Be bold and be assured that God loves specially to act in and through the very small"

--Pope Francis to the leaders of the Churches in Central Asia during the *ad limina* visit to Rome, 2019

Reverend Anthony Corcoran
Apostolic Administrator of Catholic in Kyrgyzstan

III. Apostolic Administration of Uzbekistan

COUNTRY REPORT - UZBEKISTAN

1. Situation – what are the realities you face, what are the signs of the times, what is the social, economic, political, religious situation? Any particular cultural or ecological challenges?

Uzbekistan is a country in Central Asia. Total area is 448 978 sq.m. Population is about 34 million people:

- 89% of population are Muslims (Sunnis).
 - 11% of population are non-Muslims. Christians are about 7% of population mostly from Russian Orthodox Church but also from Armenian Apostolic Church, Protestant Churches and also from Rome-Catholic Church.

Uzbekistan is a secular state. There is a local law about religious organizations which prohibits the public religious propaganda, missionary work and proselytism for all confessions including the confession of religious majority. The state language is Uzbek and the second language for communications (including within the Church communion and homily) is Russian language which is common for all former Soviet Union's Republics. The government is making serious efforts to achieve interreligious peace and harmony through constant interfaith dialogue.

Uzbekistan is one of the former Soviet Union's republics and the neighbor countries are the other former Soviet Republics (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) and also Afghanistan. The most difficult ecological problems are drying Aral Sea and overuse of water resources.

The population of the country is represented by more than 100 nationalities. The distinctive national characteristics (like native language, arts and traditions) are preserved privately within the family and diaspora. Some of the nationalities have their cultural centers opened with the support of the Mother Nation.

2. Analysis -- are there causes that you can identify for the above?

Uzbekistan is growing nation as since 2005 the population has increased by about 7 million people. And it is so called "young nation" as the average age of population is 25 years. It causes the

common troubles with education and job for young people. Uzbekistan is developing country with predominant agriculture and the unemployment rate is around 9-13%. This causes the problem of labor immigration. Part of youth prefer to receive high education outside of country to stay there for permanent residence later.

In foreign policy Uzbekistan builds good relations with all countries (especially neighbor countries, Russia, China, European Union and USA) adhering to the policy of neutrality and non-bloc status. The most sensitive issues in foreign policy with neighbors are the transboundary waters and situation in Afghanistan.

3. Church response - what has been the Church's response to these realities?

The Catholic community is the smallest from all Christian communities here. We started our service in in 1998. There are about 1,000 Catholics here and the actively practicing are about 500 members around the country. We have 5 parishes and 2 more are in process of registration. We feel respect to ourselves from government and people because of importance of the Catholic Church in the world but as a small community we don't have influence to public and social processes inside the country.

So, as the Church we can't work at the institutional level (schools, hospices, prisons, hospitals, orphanage etc.) as the Church is separated from the state and there are many cases which are the subject for punishment from the State side. CARITAS doesn't have official permission for operation in Uzbekistan. Only the Missionaries of Charity (*Congregatio Missionariorum a Caritate*) work here with the most disadvantage and most needy people. There are kind of hostels organized by police for homeless people. The management of these hostels ask for help from MC on regular basis.

4. Challenges - keeping in mind the situation and the Church's response, what are the challenges you are facing both internal and external? In the midst of these challenges what are your immediate concerns? What are the strengths?

Mostly our efforts are focused on our parishioners. Most of them are first generation Catholics and their faith is poor. The lay people mostly expect the help from Church than give it to Church.

They are only on the way to realize their role in the growth of the Church and we hope that thanks to Synodal Process it will go faster.

5. New Paths - how do you perceive a new way of being Church in your situation? How can the Church contribute more to a better Asia?

A new Catholic Bishops' Conference in Central Asia (for 5 countries: Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan) has been approved in 2021 and we do not know yet how the work will be organized. Our first meeting will take place in April 2022 and I hope we will develop common principles of cooperation and work plans.

The most important thing for us at the moment is to help the local lay people grow in faith and help them become the true Christians as living witnesses of Jesus Christ Our Lord so that the laity become more active and aware that a lot depends on them and not just on clergy only.

IV. Prefecture Apostolic of Ulaanbaatar - Mongolia

Compilers Note: The following was not written as a country report but it gives insight into "one of the youngest churches in the world."

30th anniversary of the Catholic Church in Mongolia

This past 10th July, in Ulaanbaatar, with a solemn Eucharistic celebration, presided by the Apostolic Prefect, Msgr. Giorgio Marengo, I.M.C., the small Catholic community present in Mongolia celebrated the 30th anniversary of the arrival of the first missionaries in Mongolia. The celebration, the central one of the many events in program, has seen the participation of the Apostolic Nuncio residing in Seoul, His Excellency Archbishop Alfred Xuereb, Rev. Fr. Gilbert Sales, CICM, one of the members of the first group of missionaries, superiors and members of the general councils of religious congregations present in Mongolia, a number of diplomatic delegations in Ulaanbaatar, members of the two major Buddhist temples of the capital, representatives of other Christian denominations, together with the majority of the Mongolian Catholic believers.

With its 30 years of age, the Apostolic Prefecture of Ulaanbaatar remains one of the youngest churches in the world.

This interesting modern missionary adventure has seen its beginnings in the nineties of the XX century, in a particular historical moment of this great nation, when the communist regime fell apart and the Mongolian political system underwent a drastic change of direction from radical socialism regime to a tentative form of democratic government, social organization and initial opening to the global market.

It wasn't an easy passage after 70 years of heavy Soviet presence in the nation with all the economic support deriving from it.

It happened in this transitory moment that the first contacts between the Mongolian Government and the Holy See were made through the representatives of the Mongolian embassies present in Europe.

These mostly verbal contacts gave rise to a mutual understanding between the two states, with the exchange of diplomatic representations and with the acceptance from the Mongolian Government to receive some missionaries for social and cultural activities.

It was then that Propaganda Fide, as it was called in those days - that is the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples - requested the CICM society to send the first group of missionaries to open this new presence in Mongolia. The choice of CICM was motivated by the fact that they were already present in Inner Mongolia (Northern China) for many years.

On the 10th of July 1992 the first missionaries put their feet in Ulaanbaatar: Fr. Wenceslao Selga Padilla, head of mission and later Apostolic prefect and Bishop, Fr. Robert Goessens and Fr. Gilbert Sales, practically the founders of the Catholic mission in this nation.

Living first in hotels and later in rented apartments, they started to look around at the particular situation of those years, trying to find ways and means to make their presence responding to the requests of the government, without forgetting their missionary aims. Learning the Mongolian language and culture and helping the many street children who were populating the capital were their first tasks. As the years passed by, other religious congregations were called in and the presences and activities of the church rapidly expanded in the capital and in other cities. In August 2003 Fr. Wenceslao (Wens) Padilla was consecrated as the first Bishop of the just erected Apostolic Prefecture of Ulaanbaatar. He would remain in Mongolia as the pastor of this church until his sudden death, on the 25th of September 2018.

Bishop Wens remains a central actor for the life and history of this mission. Good socializer, he had the capacity to create good relations with many local authorities of the time. Courageous intrapreneur, he built or acquired the first structures, including the big cathedral and the ground around it, the central office and residence of the apostolic nuncio, securing other lands for future activities of the church. A man of long missionary experience and open mind, from the beginning he associated Mongolian personnel to the task of the Catholic church mission and he never refused any request coming from missionaries or Mongolian faithful.

Geographical presences, missionary style, missionary presences, structures of our church in Mongolia have surely much of the mark of this pastor who founded and guided this church from "ground zero", as he used to say, along 26 years until 2018.

Ordained bishop on the 8th of August 2020, his successor and present Apostolic Prefect is Msgr. Giorgio Marengo, a member of the Consolata Missionaries. With his 19 years of presence in Mongolia and different responsibilities in the church and in the Consolata congregation, just recently Msgr. Giorgio has been appointed cardinal (the youngest, with his 48 years of age) by Pope Francis for the consistory of this coming August 27.

Bishop Giorgio, presenting the program for the 30th anniversary, did underline the importance of celebrating this occurrence not in a single event, but in a series of occasions or steps, uniting all the constituents of the Catholic church.

Prior to this celebration of last July 10, on April 4th 2022, the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Mongolia and the Holy See was celebrated at the presence of representatives from the Mongolian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, members of the diplomatic corps and the Catholic missionaries. In that occasion, participants were reminded of the historic links between Christianity and Mongolians dating back to centuries through the missionaries of the Eastern Churches and in particular the historic exchange of messages between the Holy See and the emperors of those times (XIII century), with especially the two names of Giovanni di Pian del Carpine and Wilhelm of Rubruck, the Franciscan friars who travelled all through the Eurasian plateau to reach the capital city of the Mongolian empire.

Last June, following the indications of Pope Francis who invites the church to exercise a more synodal method of pastoral approach, our church has gone through a week of pastoral consultations, during which all the sectors of Catholic community were invited to express their views on the present and future presence of the church in this nation. From the synthesis of these reflections, clear indications for the pastoral planning will derive.

Celebrating the 30th anniversary of the presence of the Catholic Church can't remain confined only to events and celebrations. Our thoughts and views have to look to what will happen tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. What will be the road map for this church of about 1400 faithful, 9 parishes, 2 local priests, with nearly 60 missionaries coming from all over the world, and with 15 major social projects?

Our Cardinal-elect Giorgio Marengo seems to have already traced the basic lines of the journey to walk in.

In his pastoral letter of December 08, 2021, he underlined three main basics of pastoral action of our church in Mongolia.

- a. *Depth: "How much time and what resources do we dedicate to reflect together, missionaries and faithful, on the meaning of the faith we have received? How does this faith manage to express itself in the cultural categories of our Mongolian people? How much space do we give to in-depth study, training, mutual listening? What is our prayer life like? How important is it for us to stop in adoration of the Lord in the Eucharist and pray the Word, meditating on it daily? These questions, as you can see, all have to do with what we call "depth", they are its concrete articulation".*
- b. *Fraternity: "We too have been constituted as one body by the proclamation of the Gospel; by choosing to follow the Lord Jesus, we have become his brothers and sisters and constitute a single flock, even though we belong to different parishes. This also applies to our dear Missionaries, who, though they may come from different Congregations, dioceses and countries, form a single evangelizing body, together with the brothers and sisters of Mongolia with whom they have decided to spend their lives".*
- c. *Proclamation: "The Church teaches us that even in a minority context, in which we are mostly confronted with other religious traditions with which we engage in a profound dialogue of respect and friendship, the way of proclamation is always possible, as well as necessary. We feel called to do everything possible so that, thanks to our words and our actions, people may meet personally with the risen Lord, experience the depth of his consolations, love him more and more, because they are reached by his love which always comes first ".*

In conclusion, while celebrating this 30th anniversary we are forced to unite our voices in a great Magnificat because also in Mongolia, in this land of Chinggis Khaan, through the work and witness of many people of good will, the seed of the Gospel has been planted and the fruits are already growing and visible.

Fr. Ernesto Viscardi, I.M.C.

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FABC Papers:

- 165 FABC 50 General Conference Guide Document 29 November 2020, *Theme: FABC 50: Journeying together as peoples of Asia "...and they went a different way."* (Mt 2:12), edited by the FABC 50 General Conference Core Group, July 2021
166. Responses to the Guide Document for the FABC 50 General Conference, 29 November 2020, *Theme: FABC 50: Journeying together as peoples of Asia "...and they went a different way."* (Mt 2:12), submitted by the Episcopal Conferences / Countries of the FABC, Central, East and South Asia, August 2021
167. Responses to the Guide Document for the FABC 50 General Conference, 29 November 2020, *Theme: FABC 50: Journeying together as peoples of Asia "...and they went a different way."* (Mt 2:12), submitted by the Episcopal Conferences / Countries of the FABC, South-East Asia, August 2021
168. The Body of Christ in the Pandemic: Theological Reflections from Asian Perspectives, submitted by FABC-Office of Theological Concerns (OTC), edited by Estela Padilla, Executive Secretary, OTC, August 2022
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172. Country Reports: FABC 50 General Conference, submitted by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Indonesia (KWI), Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei (CBCMSB). a. Malaysia, b. Archdiocese of Singapore, c. Apostolic Vicariate of Brunei, Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar (CBCM), Catholic Bishops' Conference of Philippines (CBCP), compiled by the FABC Central Secretariat, September 2022
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