
Pope in Kazakhstan. Mgr. Mumbiela Sierra (Central Asia bishops): “Along the Silk Road, called to be a solid bridge connecting Europe and Asia”

“We act as a bridge between Europe and Asia. And bridges must not fall, for the sake of both shores. Solid bridges ensure good communication between peoples. The ancient Silk Road may now be called to be not only a crossroads for the encounter of different cultures, but also an instrument of support for them.” Speaking to SIR, Msgr. **José Luis Mumbiela Sierra**, bishop of Almaty, President of the Bishops' Conference of Central Asia as of April 29, described the "vocation" of these countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Mongolia and Afghanistan. Tomorrow - September 13 - they will welcome Pope Francis. The Holy Father will arrive in Nur-Sultan and on September 14 he will attend the "VII Congress of Leaders of World and traditional Religions", joining 108 delegations from 50 countries, spiritual leaders of world and traditional religions of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, Shintoism. The theme of the event will be "The Role of Leaders of World and Traditional Faiths in the Socio-Spiritual Development of Humanity after the Pandemic." The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed al-Tayyeb, and the Chief Rabbi of Israel, David Lau, are also scheduled to attend. In addition to attending the Congress, Pope Francis will be visiting small Catholic communities in this land. The journey will be marked by the motto "Messengers of peace and unity." The Holy Mass on Wednesday, September 14, in the Expo area, will be the highlight of the visit. About 3,000 pilgrims from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and other countries are expected to attend. **Msgr. Mumbiela, what is the meaning of Pope Francis' visit to Nur Sultan and his attendance at the Congress of World Religious Leaders for Kazakhstan?** His presence unquestionably serves to highlight the country's vocation as a champion of peaceful coexistence between different ethnic groups and religions. In its 30 years of independence, Kazakhstan wished to mark this milestone in its new historical journey. This is a courageous project that has faced and is bound to face many challenges, but lofty values are worth abiding by, even when they may lead to misunderstanding, indifference or rejection. The goals for the future are well worth all our sacrifices. In particular, the presence of the Holy Father confers upon the World Congress of Religious Leaders its highest standing and recognition. I believe that with the visit of the Holy Father, the Congress stands as a leading platform for dialogue on a global level. Let us pray that the works of this Congress will extend beyond spoken or written words, but that it may be realised in history, that it may truly serve to guide and govern the changes needed worldwide for better social and global coexistence. **What message does Kazakhstan and the countries of Central Asia expect from Pope Francis today? What are the most pressing challenges facing these regions and which hopes can these peoples offer to Europe and to a world that is sadly at war?** Like the rest of the world today, our countries need words of encouragement and hope, brave words that touch the hearts of decision-makers, words on the destiny of peoples and families, words that help us proceed with joy in spite of difficulties, words that encourage us to remain steadfast in believing in the power of Love, words that strengthen our friendship with Jesus Christ. Many peoples here are struggling under the pressure of insecurity about the future. At the same time, in our simplicity we can offer a model of peaceful coexistence among different nationalities and religions. **Both the visit and this congress are taking place while a war is raging in Ukraine. How can world religious leaders reach out to the powerful of the earth who hold the power and destiny of peoples?** In Chapter 8 of the encyclical *Brothers All*, the Holy Father explains in very clear terms that religions are called to be at the service of fraternity in the world. I believe that this encyclical constitutes a very prophetic sign, given the times in which we live. Rather than expressing my opinion, I think we should all “eagerly” look forward to the Pope's speeches over the next few days. I believe that the coming days will provide the right framework for sending out a clear message in this regard, for making a proposal that fills with hope all those of us

who are suffering from the generalised instability caused by a conflict that extends far beyond the tragic circumstances in Ukraine. **What is the meaning of the Pope's visit for the small Catholic communities in Central Asia? What role do they play in this part of the world situated between Europe and Asia?** The Pope's visit is always an incentive so that the salt and light we Catholics are called to radiate in this country are not lost or extinguished. His visit will be a moment of grace for us disciples of Jesus Christ to renew our faith, charity and hope. Through our humble witness, the whole country will thus receive a greater blessing, for true witness to the faith is a blessing for all those living among us. Much depends on our personal faithfulness to the Gospel. It is perhaps the mere fact that the Catholics of Kazakhstan (and of Central Asia in general) are mostly of European origin that helps us appreciate our vocation as a "bridge" connecting different cultures, which, through our shared Christian faith, are enriched with a spirit of communion that extends deeper than the simple fact of belonging to an ethnic or linguistic group. **Why did Pope Francis finally decide to visit Nur Sultan, despite his health issues? What would you like to say to him when you see him?** In his telephone conversation with the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym Khomart Tokayev, a few weeks ago, Pope Francis said he greatly appreciates the value of this Congress in fostering both inter-religious dialogue and bringing governments together, especially in the light of the current situation at global level. It is indeed a providential opportunity not to be missed: a special appeal for unity and dialogue will be heard in the geographic heart of Eurasia, an appeal underpinned by the world faith leaders. The Pope continues to do everything possible, despite his health issues, to build bridges of peace and dialogue, to resolve the existing conflicts and lay the foundations that will serve to avert an even darker future. What can I say to him? I would like to express and convey to him all the love and support of the Catholics of this country, our gratitude for his testimony and his closeness, and our commitment to continue fulfilling the great mission that Christ has entrusted to us all, even though we are a small minority.

M. Chiara Biagioni