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## Becoming Kazakh

Claudia Valbuena never dreamt she would live in a place so far from her native Chile. She arrived in Almaty more than 10 years ago to begin Opus Dei. “Becoming Kazakh” has been a long process, but she already feels half Kazakh...

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“There are people who have an adventurous spirit. Not me. I was very happy living then in Italy when I was asked to go to Kazakhstan. I saw that it was not impossible and I

thought, ‘Great, let’s go.’ ” recalled Claudia.

“Become Kazakh is a real process of cultural, physical and psychological change that demands openness and flexibility. Kazakhstan is a country with nomadic roots where more than 130 ethnic groups live together, with a culture that is both Oriental and Soviet (they were subject to the czars and then to communist rule).”

“For me, everything is different: the food, the climate, the way people communicate, very protective of their privacy and yet open and welcoming.”

The majority of the population is Muslim, although there are also Russian Orthodox. Catholics are a minority and the process of evangelization begins, naturally, through conversion.

“People have little religious culture; there is a fear to talk about these issues, although they see the need for God in their lives,” said Claudia.

“Slowly, the spirituality of St. Josemaria is making itself understood. The key lies in that people feel very free and they come close to the Faith because they freely want to.”

### **At the request of John Paul II**

“The coming of the Work to the country was an explicit wish of Pope John Paul II, who had traveled to Astana, the current capital, in 2001,” says Claudia.

Indeed, on the advice of Pope John Paul II, a bishop of Kazakhstan went to talk to the Prelate of Opus Dei in 1994 because he needed an institution that could focus on education and the work with youth in the country. The request materialized in 1997 when the first

members of Opus Dei arrived in Almaty, the second largest city.

To find a place to live and a job was the first thing that Claudia and her companions did when they arrived in Kazakhstan in 1998. Once she got a job as an English teacher, Claudia began to study the country's two official languages, Russian and Kazakh, which had Turkish origin.

“I started teaching English in KIMEP, a business school in Almaty which was one of the first to prepare young professionals to work in an emerging market economy. Today we all have different jobs and three of the young members will begin their college career here,” says Claudia.

## **Projects and dreams**

The main apostolic project in progress is a training center for hospitality services. “We want to help people understand that service and

the work in the home are something important to society, because during the years of communism they were not given any value, unless they were for special occasions,” she explains. Now they are fund raising and waiting for building permits to begin construction.

In the last 10 years, these faithful of the Prelature have been concerned with the training of women from a human and social standpoint, with openness to all sectors of society, and aiming to transmit good ideas on family values and social initiatives.

As for the apostolate, Claudia explains that “it is through friendship; when people see how we live, they become interested in God and in the work we do. Our friends come to realise that something is missing in their lives and that there can be a transcendent meaning in everything they do.”

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