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"The Church is the True Hope of Asia"

On May 8, José Luis Mumbiela, member of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, was ordained as bishop of Almaty, Kazakhstan. An interview published in "Catalunya Cristiana."

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On May 8, just a week after John Paul II was raised to the altars, a young priest from Monzón, Spain, José Luis Mumbiela, was ordained as bishop of Almaty, Kazakhstan. Up till then he

had been serving as rector of the interdiocesan seminary in Karaganda.

He chose as his episcopal motto the new Blessed's first words as Pope, "Open wide the doors to Christ!" This will be his great pastoral challenge on the steppes of Kazakhstan, a country he has grown to love over the past 13 years.

At the young age of 41, how has the new bishop of Almaty—one of Kazakhstan's principal cities—reacted to this appointment? What is in your mind and in your heart?

When the rumors first leaked out about the appointment, I have to admit that I didn't react with great enthusiasm. But when the Church asks someone to serve, he can hardly refuse, even if it may be difficult to accept. Over time, one learns to accept what God asks, even if it may not have been very attractive at first.

Besides, as time passes, one realizes that God was right. It's always that way: the road to happiness lies in doing God's will.

What are your expectations as you confront the pastoral challenge the Pope has placed before you?

I am convinced that only with God's help can I successfully take on this mission. It also makes me happy to realize that God will provide all the helpers needed (priests, religious, and lay people), so that the work will be completely his and accomplished as he wishes. All we have to do is try, as best we can, not to put "obstacles" in his way.

How does it feel to be called to serve as the shepherd of a diocese?

It's hard to say, since I'm just setting out. Nevertheless, I'll try to summarize it in the words of a well-known prayer: "Make me, O Lord, an

instrument of thy peace,” bringing forgiveness, reconciliation, life, hope, optimism, faith. In short, “putting love where there is no love.”

Many will ask: What is a priest from Monzón (a town in Aragon, near Barbastro) doing on the steppes of central Asia? Could you give a brief summary of your “love story” with a country where you have lived for more than 13 years, and that is so different from your own?

Although it was never my intention to go to the missions, it was clear that as a diocesan priest my ministry was not confined to the geographical boundaries of my own diocese, but that I would need a heart and availability as wide as the horizons of the Church’s needs. So the “love story” begins with my very vocation—loving these people before ever meeting them, wanting to serve them

before knowing that one day I would be with them. And once I arrived it was beautiful to discover the great human qualities of these people, their profound respect for the sacred. The international seminary where I lived during my preparation for the priesthood was certainly a good “training ground” for learning to live with people from quite diverse cultures and backgrounds. Still, I think the ability to get along with people who are very different is, or ought to be, in the soul of every priest, of every pastor.

What can you tell us about the Church and the people you take care of now as their pastor? In the context of the religious pluralism that characterizes this country, how well integrated are they in society?

At present, Catholics are accorded a freedom of worship that could only

be dreamt of several decades ago. Officially, the Catholic Church is considered one of the country's "traditional" religions, along with Islam and Russian Orthodoxy. Considering the small number of Catholics in comparison with the others, this is very important.

The Catholic Church is currently undergoing a period of transformation. Even as regards the nationalities of the people one sees, the appearance of the Church is becoming more varied than it was in the Soviet epoch and the '90s. The mentality of the people is also changing in the socio-political sphere. With respect to that, the outlook for the future is still uncertain, due to the constant movement of people and all the uncertainties about the current system, which for the moment is producing good results. But no one can tell how long that will last.

You will be the bishop of Almaty....

In the diocese of Almaty, in the south of the country, the Kazakh majority tends to adhere zealously to its traditional ways, including the Islamic religion. The people of Almaty (the economic capital of Kazakhstan with a population of two million) have a distinctive mentality in comparison with the rest of the country. They are usually more open and cosmopolitan.

So as pastor of a minority Church, what will your priorities be for the diocese?

Above all, to put great care into looking after the “little flock” entrusted to me—in first place the clergy and religious. The “salt,” even if a small ingredient in the meal, has to have that special savor that makes it indispensable. The Kazakh society needs this small “minority” to provide all the seasoning it can. The

beauty of our faith is attractive because of the joyful testimony we give. And non-Catholics expect (consciously or unconsciously) to see us live in accord with Christ's message; they are looking for a life that can free them from the chains that so often seem to bind them with no hope of escape: the chains of selfishness, vengeance, corruption, despair.

But the "apple of my eye" will be vocations. After five years working in Central Asia's only seminary, one sees even more clearly the Church's urgent need for priests who have been born here, as well as for religious and lay people who dedicate their lives to God.

How does the inhospitable image of the steppes of Kazakhstan correspond to the situation of the Church in a country strongly impacted by its communist past?

As I contemplate the immensity of the steppes on my many trips, it gives me great serenity; its broad horizons help to expand the soul, as does the closeness of the sky to the land. It seems to me a reminder that heaven is very close to the earth. But yes, communism certainly left a deep imprint on the spirit of the people—sometimes for the better, but often not. In any case, the rapid political, social and cultural changes that this country has experienced since the end of the Soviet era makes the future very hard to predict.

How is the faith lived in Kazakhstan?

The faith, in Kazakhstan? Well, I suppose it is lived as it is everywhere: amid the world's persecutions and God's consolations. Here we Catholics are a young minority, who need to open up a path and grow, without being able to rely

on the great “human” supports of the social, cultural, and even family traditions that the Christian, and specifically the Catholic faith has available elsewhere to receive and transmit the faith in an almost connatural way. Perhaps that’s why God gives us a special joy and assistance in our faith. The very lack of these “social” resources somehow makes the faith more “simple” for us, going more easily to what is essential, to personal contact with Him, and not getting caught up in cultural or social concerns—although these features are important aspects of a life of faith, and should never be renounced.

Do you look at contemporary Asia with great hope for the universal Church?

It might be better to say that the Church herself is the true hope for Asia. At the moment, this continent is

a great challenge for evangelization. And for the Asian peoples who are undergoing a period of rapid development (China or India, for example), evangelization is an opportunity to discover the values that are truly human, and to learn that wealth is not simply a matter of oil or commerce, but also requires the integral development of every human person in the light of the Gospel. So at the moment Asia has a great need for missionaries.

What is the special challenge of evangelization in a county like yours with so many Muslims and Orthodox?

We don't see anyone as an "opponent." First of all, we need to strive to develop fully the immense "hidden treasure" that we possess—making the best possible use of all the "talents" of our faith. The rest, as Jesus said, will be given in addition.

The work of evangelization has to be the consequence of the superabundance of our personal effort, with the help of God's grace, to live our Christian vocation to the full. Then (as John Paul liked to say) the truth will spread by itself.

When you first came to Kazakhstan in 1998, you thought it would be for three years. But now it seems your stay is going to be longer. How has your experience here contributed to your own life of faith?

The meaning of my life lies in the vocation God called me to as a diocesan priest in the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross. And he asked me to carry out this vocation in these lands, among these people. So it's easy to understand why to live and serve in Kazakhstan is precisely the meaning of my life. I'm very grateful,

both to God and to this new country
of mine.

Catalunya Cristiana // 15 May
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