

# Kazakhstan



The Republic of Kazakhstan is located in central Asia, northwest of China. A small part of the country lies in Eastern Europe, making it one of five countries that occupy land on these two continents (Can you find the other four countries?). The name “Kazakh” comes from a Turkic word that means “to wander” and the suffix “stan” comes from the Persian word for



Steppe, or grassy plains, make up a large part of Kazakhstan.

“land”. The country’s name literally means “Land of the Wanderers” because the original Kazakhs were nomads.

Kazakhstan is the ninth largest country in the

world—about four times the size of Texas. The country is very sparsely populated, however, with an average of only fifteen people per square mile. Most Kazakhs live in the far northern and southern parts of the country. The capital city of Kazakhstan is Astana. While Kazakh is the official spoken language, Russian is the language used in business and education. This is because up until 1991, Kazakhstan was part of the former Soviet Union. It was the last of the Soviet bloc countries to declare its independence.

Religious freedoms are guaranteed under the Kazakh Constitution, although faith leaders who publicly disagree with the government may find their churches or mosques closed unexpectedly. Most Kazakhs—about 70% are Muslim. Of the 26% of the population that self-identify as Christian, only about 1.7% are Roman Catholic.—about 250,000 people in the whole country.

In 2003, Saint John Paul II became the first pope to visit Kazakhstan. In 2006, local men were ordained as Catholic priests there for the first time. There are now 93 Catholic churches in the country.

## MCA in Kazakhstan

Kapchagay is a city in south eastern Kazakhstan in the Almaty region. Located on the Illi River, Almaty is thought to be the area in which apples originated—the name “Almaty” translates to mean “rich with apples”!

Father Artur Zaras is a Polish priest who has been serving as a missionary in this area since 2013. His parish is called the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Eucharist Church. He says, “In the early 1990s, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the population of Kazakhstan remained without social and welfare guarantees. Many children ended up on the street or in the orphanage, while some could not afford to attend school. In the face of this situation, we asked our Lady to embrace, in her name, these helpless children.”

Father has welcomed close to seventy children of different ages, nationalities, and religions into six different homes. Almost all of them come from families that have been torn apart by alcoholism or unemployment and poverty. Many of them grew up in the steppe area of the country—a flat unforested grassland—where education is not readily available. They also lacked access to regular health care in the areas in which they were living. Father is making sure that, through the ministries of the Church, the children are cared for in all these ways and more. “We take care of them, bring them to school, buy clothes, and games,” says Father.

Father Artur counts on the help of Sisters Vera, Samuela and Rita from Poland, a Franciscan Sister, Emilia, and a local lay volunteer named Eve to teach faith formation

and to help prepare the children for the sacraments



Eve teaches faith formation

Recently, Father Artur received a grant of \$3,000 from the sacrifices of members of the Missionary Childhood Association around the world to improve the facilities where the children of the parish are learning how much God loves them.

Father is grateful for the opportunity to improve the programs for the children he is serving in Kapchagay. It gives him more time to focus on another faith lesson for all of the cities’ 50,000 citizens—that of peaceful co-existence and religious tolerance between his faith community and the Muslims, Russian Orthodox, and Protestant Koreans with whom they live. “We often meet and sit at the same table with the aim of helping people to live according to the values of brotherhood, to build peace”, concludes Fr. Artur in his interview with Fides, the news agency of the Pontifical Mission Societies at the Vatican.

Last year, the children of Kazakhstan sacrificed \$200 for the General Solidarity Fund of the Missionary Childhood Association.