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The History of the Catholic Church in Kyrgyzstan

Christianity's presence in the territory of Central Asia is noted during the early centuries of its existence.¹ Evidence of the presence of Nestorian Christians in the area of present-day Kyrgyzstan² and surrounding regions is well established by several sources, including

¹ Some research has been done concerning the presence of smaller groups of Christians in the territory. From an article summarizing a report, published in *L'Osservatore Romano*, one finds the following:

The Catholic Church has deep roots in Kazakhstan. Historians at Tashkent University say that as early as the second century AD in the town of Merv, today known as Mary, (on the Uzbekistan border in southern Kazakhstan) there were Christians among Roman soldiers taken prisoners after a battle they lost against the Persians. A bishop's see existed there in the year 334. In the same place, at the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth centuries, there was a Melkite monastery. Cited in "History of the Catholic Church in Kazakhstan," *L'Osservatore Romano* (Weekly Edition in English), 26 September 2001, 10. <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/history-of-catholic-church-in-kazakhstan-1670>

² The modern demarcation of the territory of current day Kyrgyzstan comes, of course, as a result of a long process involving the presence of various groups of people in the region. It is not possible to determine with exactness the dynamic of the early period in the process of consolidation of peoples into the "Kyrgyz," as a distinct ethnic group. Among historians and other experts, there is no definitive answer to several important questions concerning the genesis of the current Kyrgyz as a people. Further complicating the demarcation is the fact that apparently there were two different groups, or tribes, that were called "Kyrgyz." One group refers to a people who migrated from Southern Siberia sometime before the thirteenth century. The other group referred to as "Kyrgyz" inhabited "the eastern part of Central Asia, the Tian Shan and Pamir-Alai Mountains since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries." O. Dj. Osmonov, *Istoriya Kyrgyzstana* (Bishkek, 2008), cited in Cholpan Chotaeva, *History of Kyrgyzstan* (Bishkek: n.p., 2016), 68. A disputable position claims that Kyrgyz are the descendant of a people previously, "...known as the Kara [black] Kyrgyz to distinguish them from the Kazakhs (at one time called Kirghiz or Kyrgyz), the Kyrgyz migrated to Kyrgyzstan from the region of the upper Yenisei, where they had lived from the 7th to the 17th cent..."

(http://umich.edu/~turkish/links/turkic_indrep_kg_brhist.html).

In any event, these people moved into an area that had been previously occupied by a number of different groups:

"The Scythians were the first recorded residents of the region, living in the territory from the 6th century B.C. to the 5th century A.D. Their empire stretched to the Black Sea and they were known for military prowess, horsemanship, and the ability to work fabulously detailed artifacts from gold. Afterwards came various Turkic-speaking groups, who roamed along the Altai, Xinjiang, and eastern Tian Shan mountain ranges. These nomadic groups eventually took up herding and formed the Kyrgyz ancestral tribes. Later arrivals (10-13th C.) include Turkic [peoples forming the] Karakhanid [dynasty] and Yenisei Kyrgyz. While there is some historical dispute about their legacies, historians agree that the Kyrgyz occupied the territory of modern Kyrgyzstan for several centuries."

<https://geohistory.today/kyrgyzstan/>.

Modern Kyrgyz historians write of the eventual unification of different tribes in this region. "During the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, Kyrgyz were under the domination of the Jungars, who in the mid eighteenth century were destroyed by the Chinese. After [sic] Chinese destroyed Jungar Khanate, it ceased to exist and its population was massacred. Later Chinese began claiming the territory of the Kyrgyz and only after decisive resistance of Kyrgyz put an end to the expansionist policy of Chinese. In the early nineteenth

records attesting to the participation of representatives from the local community at Merv³ in a larger church synod, dating from as early as 424 A.D.⁴ Written fragments of liturgical and biblical resources from this era from Christian communities dwelling in the territory that is currently a part of northeastern China, although not comprehensive in nature or length, likewise exist.⁵ More numerous are archeological artifacts and grave markers,⁶ discovered over the past three centuries.⁷ Remnants of formerly functioning church

century, Kyrgyz appeared under the domination of another state of Central Asia—the Koqand Khanate. Thanks to its expansionist policy Koqand became the most powerful and large state of Central Asia. The hegemony of the Koqand lasted over the Kyrgyz until the 1880's...." Chotaeva, 67.

³ Located in the territory of modern-day Turkmenistan.

⁴ J.B. Chabot (ed.), *Synodicon Orientale ou Recueil de Synodes Nestoriens*, Paris 1902, 285. Cited by Pier Giorgio Borbone, "Nestorianstvo v Kyrgyzstane i Srednei Asii v srednieveka" ["Nestorianism in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia in the Middle Ages"], (paper presented at the International Conference, "Christianity in Kyrgyzstan: History and Modernity," Slavic University, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 13-14 May, 2019), 1.

⁵ B.A. Litvinski, "Vostochnyj Turkestan v drevnosti i rannem srednevekov'e, Etnos, Yazyki, Religii" ["Eastern Turkestan in antiquity and early Middle Ages, Ethnicity. Languages. Religions" (n.p., Moscow, 1992), 544-548. [P. Zieme, «Zu den nestorianisch-türkischen Turfantexten», in G. Hazai, P. Zieme (ed.), *Sprache, Geschichte und Kultur der altaischen Völker. Protokollband der XII. Tagung der Permanent International Altaistic Conference 1969 in Berlin*, Berlin 1974, c. 661-668; J. Asmussen, «The Sogdian and Uighur-Turkish Christian Literature in Central Asia before the Real Rise of Islam. A Survey», in L.A. Hercus (ed.), *Indological and Buddhist Studies. Volume in Honour of Professor J.W. de Jong on His Sixtieth Birthday*, Canberra 1982, 11-29 and N. Sims-Williams, «Sogdian and Turkish Christians in the Turfan and Tunhuang Manuscripts», in A. Cadonna (ed.), *Turfan and Tunhuang. The Texts. Encounter of Civilizations on the Silk Route*, Firenze 1992, 43-61; see. M. Dickens, «The Syriac Bible in Central Asia», in E.C. Hunter (ed.), *The Christian Heritage of Iraq. Collected papers from the Christianity of Iraq I-V Seminar Days*, Piscataway (NJ 2009), 92-120. For multi-lingual texts see M. Dickens, «Multilingual Christian Manuscripts from Turfan», *Journal of the Canadian Society of Syriac Studies* 9 (2009) 22-42.] Cited by Borbone, 6.

⁶ Special mention should be made of the enormous contribution to this area by Ch. Dzumagulov, distinguished Kyrgyz professor, who devoted much of his extensive academic career to research these artifacts and to attempt to formulate hypotheses related to the meaning of their existence. Among several, key questions related to the topic of the presence of Nestorian Christians in the territory of contemporary Kyrgyzstan, he proposes discerning the significance of the following question, based upon his research:

"Sogdian Epigraphy from Kulan-Sai Gorge and Terek-Sai, related to eleventh century, testify to the existence in that period of Turkic-Sogdian bilingualism in Semireche. [See among others V.A. Livshits, *Sogdijcy v Semirech'e: lingvisticheskie i epigraficheskie svidetel'stva*, in *Pis'mennje pamjatniki i problemi istorii kul'tury narodov Vostoka. XV godichnaja nauchnaja sessija, Leningradskoe otdelenie, Institut vostokovedenija, AN s.s.s.r., dekabr 1979, I [2], Moskva 1981, 76-86]. A set of Uighur written memorial markers have been found. Of special interest among these are Nestorian inscriptions. Why did these appear in the territory of contemporary Kyrgyzstan; what does this represent?"*

In Dzumagulov, "Nestoriankie Epigraphicheskie Pamjatniki Kyrgyzstana," [Nestorian Epigraphic markers of Kyrgyzstan] (paper presented at the International Conference, "Christianity in Kyrgyzstan: History and Modernity," Slavic University, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 13-14 May, 2019), 1.

⁷ Indeed, within the current territory of Kyrgyzstan alone, there are more than 600 gravestones "with Turkic and Syriac inscriptions, written in Syriac script, the majority of which were discovered between 1885-1907 in three cemeteries in Kyrgyzstan and near the sites of Guldja/Almaligh (now a part Xinjiang, RPC). The main collection is now kept in St.-Petersburg (State Hermitage Museum). Several gravestones are kept in Museums in Bishkek and Almaty" (Borbone). These are undeniably linked to Nestorian churches and church life. In Borbone, 7. Again, the work of Professor Dzhumagulov should be mentioned here: *Kyrgyzstandagy Nestorian-Türkzhazuuestelikteri (XIII-XIV kylymdar [Nestorian-Turk written memorials in Kyrgyzstan])*, Bishkek 2014.

buildings and other Christian sites can be found in the Ak-Besim and other regions of Kyrgyzstan and in neighboring Uzbekistan.⁸

It is clear that this region was designated as an arena for assertive missionary activity, as suggested in the enthusiastically pious correspondence from Patriarch Timothy I (780-823) who wrote:

In those times, the King of the Turks with almost all of his people rejected the old error of godlessness and converted to Christianity, thanks to the action of the great virtue of Christ, to Whom all are subject. By letter, he asked us to send a metropolitan to the territory of his kingdom, and we did this with God's assistance.⁹

This ambitious mission included territories stretching far eastward from the Middle East, encompassing the region comprising current day Kyrgyzstan and beyond:

In all of the regions of Babylon, Persia and Athor, and also in all regions of the East, even among Indians, Chinese, Tibetan and Turks, and in all territories under the tutelage of the Patriarch...that is in various regions comprised of various peoples and languages.¹⁰

The efforts of these missionaries seem to have met with some success. Various individuals and groups of different peoples in this area (or, arriving to it) converted to Christianity, including some of those inhabiting the territory of Kyrgyzstan.¹¹ Communities continued to exist in different places within the territory with a fluctuating number of believers for several centuries. Christians are mentioned in the epic of *Manas*, a poetic narrative of paramount importance for Kyrgyz historical and cultural identity. Although it

⁸ Governmental Hermitage (Russia) – The Institute of History AN Kyrgyzstan, Suyab, Ak-Beshim, Saint Petersburg, *Zhournal eastern-christian research* 56 (2004) 25-47. See also, V.D. Goryacheva, *Gorodskaya kul'tura tyurkish kagnatovna Tyan'-Shane (Middle VI-Beginning XIII centuries)*, Bishkek, 2010. Cited by Borbone, 5.

⁹ [R Bidawid, *Les lettres du patriarche nestorien Thimotée I. Étude critique avec en appendice la lettre de Timothée I aux moines du Couvent de Mār Marōn*, Roma, 1956, 124.] Cited by Borbone, 2.

¹⁰ Bidawid, 117. Cited by Borbone, 2.

¹¹ From a later source one reads of the earlier presence of Christians in this territory: "Per quanto riguarda le religioni citate nella *Historia Mongalorum*, descrivendo l'origine dell'impero dei Tartari durante le numerose guerre di Chinggis Khan per il predominio del territorio, Giovanni parla della popolazione detta "Huyur" cioè degli Uiguri, una popolazione turca della Mongolia occidentale e della *Zungaria che si estendeva nell'odierno Kirghizistan* [nel 2014 risultano essere presenti nel territorio con il 0,9%]: secondo Giovanni «sono cristiano della seta dei Nestoriani»¹¹, che i Mongoli hanno vinto in guerra e dai quali hanno appreso la scrittura, che viene chiamata in seguito mongola. Gli uiguri verso l'860 occuparono la parte orientale dell'attuale Turkestan cinese, fondandovi un regno, con capitale la città di Beshbaliq, fino all'invasione mongola del XIII secolo; la popolazione a seconda delle vicende storiche ha assunto varie religioni nel corso del tempo, come quella manichea, buddista e infine islamica." (Highlight mine.) Lorenzo Turchi, *La missione dei francescani tra i nomadi dell'Asia centrale nel Medioevo: Giovanni da Pian del Carpine e Guglielmo di Rubruck*, (Paper and Power Point presented at the International Conference, "Christianity in Kyrgyzstan: History and Modernity" Slavic University, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 13-14 May, 2019), 9.

is not possible to assign dates with exactness,¹² it has been posited that artifacts discovered could date from as early as the seventh or eighth centuries in at least one of these areas¹³ There is written indication as late as the twelfth or thirteenth century of the influx of newer Christian arrivals from the east/northeast to Kyrgyzstan; nevertheless, various factors simultaneously led to the decline and eventual disappearance of these Nestorian Christian communities. The appearance of epidemics¹⁴ and the attenuation of cities¹⁵ resulted in the dispersion of Christian communities as well as other inhabitants.¹⁶ The eventual ascendancy of Islam also contributed to the gradual fading of Christian communities from the territory. Archeological discoveries from vestiges of these communities prompt speculation as to the level of influence that Christianity exercised among the local populations here.¹⁷ Although it is not possible to ascertain the extent of the impact of these communities, if any, on the larger society and culture, it is clear that Christians resided among the local population long enough to establish centers for worship and to establish cemeteries. Findings in at least seven or eight places throughout the territory of northern Kyrgyzstan alone confirm these believers' activity.¹⁸

At no time since this vibrant episode of missionary activity and subsequent establishment of ecclesiastical structure has Christianity been as efficacious in fulfilling its intention to become inserted within the lives of the peoples who inhabit this region. Although the location of contemporary Kyrgyzstan along the Silk Road¹⁹ must also have brought Christian traders and others into (or at least, through), its territory, there is no

¹² V.A. Kol'chenko, "Srednevekovoe Christianstvo Kyrgyzstana po dannym arkhologicheskikh istochnikov" ("Middle Ages' Christianity of Kyrgyzstan from Information of Archeological Sources"), in *Religii Tzentralnoi Azii i Azerbaidzhana, vol. IV: Khristianstvo [Religion of Central Asia and Azerbaijan VI Volume: Christianity]*, International Institute of Central Asian Research (Samarkand, MITAI, 2018), 100-101.

¹³ This date, although impossible to fix with certitude, would have been feasible in light of the existence at that time of a metropolitan in nearby Samarkand. Mark Dickens, "Patriarch Timothy I and the Metropolitan of the Turks," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, Vol. 20, No. 2 (April 2010), 123.

¹⁴ Borbone, 8.

¹⁵ Chotaeva, 57-58.

¹⁶ Kol'chenko, 103.

¹⁷ The fact that a number of the inscriptions discovered on Christian gravestones were written in Syriac alphabet, partly in Syriac and partly in Turkic language, might provide some insight into the tribal/ethnic identity of some of these believers. Ibid.,50.

¹⁸ Kol'chenko, 96-98.

¹⁹ This route, named in the late nineteenth century, refers to the great pathway, along the "bridge between east and west that great metropolises were established nearly 5,000 years ago...." the "world's central nervous system, connecting peoples and places together...." Peter Frankoran, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London, Bloomsbury, 2015), xv-xvi.

evidence to suggest that the Christian religion played a marked role in the ongoing lives or formation of members of society after the disappearance of the Nestorian communities. This initial “chapter” in the history of Christian activity could be seen as a sort of prologue for ensuing eras involving Catholic presence. In many cases, it was the existence of these Nestorians that introduced the notion of Christianity and provided local inhabitants with the example of professing a pan-tribal (ethnic) religion. When Catholic missionaries and travelers later began to arrive, certain essential characteristics of their Christian convictions were already recognizable to some of the local peoples.²⁰

Since that preliminary chapter, or period, the presence of Christians in this territory has largely been associated with the arrival from outside and eventual incorporation of its members into the local society, which generally comprised various tribal (ethnic) groups.²¹ This is not to say, however, that Christianity was primarily a religion of “foreigners.” Based on the accounts of travelers through the area and, especially, gravestone inscriptions written in Turkic, it is correct to claim that Christianity was practiced among/by some local inhabitants. Armenian Christians had already been found among these inhabitants,²² as were later arrivals of people from the enormously vast region that makes up current-day Russia and Ukraine. Some of these people remained faithful to their ancestral religion and occasionally must have sought to disseminate these religions in their new homeland. It is reasonable to assume that at least some of the arriving merchants and travelers to this territory, including Catholics, likewise sought to practice their respective religious traditions.²³

²⁰ It is important to note that there were still existing Nestorian communities in some of these areas when the Catholic missions were initiated, as evidenced by recorded episodes of the interaction between these two Christian groups (see below). For the sake of a clearer presentation of the particular character of these different groups, the activity of Nestorian Christians, the movement of people—some of whom were Catholics—along the Silk Road, and the erection of Roman Catholic missions in the area are separated into different accounts; nevertheless, from a chronological point of view, these activities overlapped.

²¹ An exception to this is found in the rather brief, but not insignificant, foundation of Catholic missions by members of the Franciscan order in the 13th and 14th Centuries (see below).

²² The “Catalan Atlas” (c.1375) and other, oral traditional sources claim the existence of an Armenian monastery on the shores of Lake Issyk-Kul and hold that this monastery possessed “the body of the Evangelist-Apostle Saint Matthew.” See V. Klein, “Central Asian Religious Geography between Fact and Fiction in the Catalan Atlas (1375).” *Hallesche Beiträge zur Orientwissenschaft* 35 (2003),377-403.] Cited in Borbone, 9. This version is still held by some in the region to be true.

²³ There is no established evidence, however, of merchants or others from the Silk Road settling and establishing “Christian communities” in this area.

There is much to be gleaned from the comprehensive research recently undertaken regarding the fascinatingly unique dynamic that emerged as a result of the confluence of vastly varied social, economic, and religious influences along the Silk Road.²⁴ Among other themes, this research highlights evidence of striking instances both of an exceptional level of tolerance in interaction as well as of occasional tensions that erupted among the myriad of peoples that traveled and/or settled along this route²⁵.²⁶ The frequent interaction of different religious convictions would have certainly factored prominently in defining the breadth and depth of accommodation in this exchange.

The Genesis of Catholic Missionary Activity in this Territory during The Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

²⁴ Although it is impossible to define the exact dates of the activity of the Silk Road, it is generally understood as beginning with the Han Dynasty's efforts to facilitate trade between distant points (130 BC) and continuing, in various degrees of activity, until events surrounding the fall of Constantinople (1453 AD) and the subsequent rejection of trade with China by the ascending Ottoman Empire caused its halt. <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-middle-east/silk-road>

²⁵ The theory of this impact of this dynamic on the evolution of culture and society in Kyrgyzstan is summarized in the following: "The geopolitical and cultural uniqueness of Kyrgyzstan (as part of the super-region of Central Asia) is largely determined by the fact that its territory, despite the difficult climatic conditions, a lively dialogue of cultures always took place. This is not only a meeting place for civilizations and cultures, but also an original socio-political space that had its own history and culture. As the philosopher, K. Leontief noted, only where different types of worldviews, spiritual, aesthetic and national traditions are adjacent, 'flowering of cultures' arises, and monotonous societies are doomed to stagnation and withering...

...Awareness of the particular and unique social conditions of this geographic region—both influencing as well as being influenced by the unusual dynamic operating in segments along the Silk Road is especially useful in tracing the character of this region:" "...Moreover, the essential parameters of the identity of today's residents of Kyrgyzstan should be sought in the dialectical unity of the past and present, the continuity of the development of the region and the interaction (holistic interpretation of history) of many groups...Living in the same geographical space, representatives of different worldviews had, for the most part, the desire for joint coexistence. Moreover, there was a tendency towards interference of cultures - the same *kairaks* included words and phrases from other languages...

...It is important to assess the specifics of the region and the mentality of the population. The low population of the territory's nomads, the discreteness and inconstancy of political, economic, social and communicative ties, including those caused by natural features, determined the mental level and prevented the creation of full-fledged control systems....." Cited by Aleksandr Yarkov, "About Christianity in Kyrgyzstan during the Silk Road," (paper presented at the International Conference, "Christianity in Kyrgyzstan: History and Modernity" Slavic University, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 13-14 May, 2019), 2.

²⁶ I am especially indebted to Peter Frankoran for his extensive work and fascinating presentation of not only life and social, economic, and political aspects related to the phenomenon of the Silk Road, but also of its critical and ongoing impact on world events throughout modern history. *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, cited above.

Other sources that examine religion in this context are: Richard Folz, *Religions of the Silk Road. Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century* (New York 1999); W. Klein, *Das nestorianische Christentum an den Handelswegen durch Kyrgyzstan bis zum 14. Jh.* (Turnhout 2000).

The first well-documented attempt by the Roman Catholic Church to establish missionary activity (and diplomatic interaction) in this area was initiated by the assignment of a group of Franciscans and Dominicans by Pope Innocent the Fourth (c. 1195 – 1254). The primary task of these emissaries was to deliver papal missives to the ruler of the Mongolian tribes.²⁷ This initiative emerged with an evident sense of urgency during the time of the Council of Lyon (1245) in context of the panic resulting from the recent incursions by Mongolian warriors into the heart of Christian Europe (1236/7-1242).²⁸ Innocent IV entrusted these papal legates with three letters, each formulated with a particular and correlative objective: *Dei patris immensa* (5 March 1245) – in which the Pope outlined the most basic convictions of the Christian Faith (i.e., the dogmas of the Incarnation and Redemption) and included a call for the conversion and baptism of the Mongol ruler and his people with the aim of attaining their eternal salvation; the Papal Bull, *Cum non solum homines* (13 March 1245) urging the Mongolian ruler to desist from waging war upon European peoples; and, *Cum simus super* (25 March 1245), in which the Pontiff addressed prelates of non-Latin churches with an appeal for them to unite with Rome and underscored the need of effecting the conversion of Muslims.²⁹

The mission was essentially a diplomatic failure. The Mongol ruler not only rejected this overture, but responded by pointing to what he perceived as divine approbation to conquer and rule over other peoples.³⁰ This conviction entailed complete submission by all

²⁷ *Storia della Chiesa*, vol. X. *La cristianità romana (1198-1274)*, Torino 1997, p. 368-371. Cited by Lorenzo Turchi, *La missione dei francescani tra i nomadi dell'Asia centrale nel Medioevo: Giovanni da Pian del Carpine e Guglielmo di Rubruck*, (Paper and Power Point presented at the International Conference, "Christianity in Kyrgyzstan: History and Modernity" Slavic University, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 13-14 May, 2019), 3.

²⁸ Turchi, 3.

²⁹ Cfr. P. Messa, *Un francescano alla corte dei Mongoli: Fra Giovanni da Pian del Carpine*, in: *I Francescani e la Cina, 800 anni di storia*. Atti della giornata di studio in preparazione della Canonizzazione dei Martiri Cinesi (Santa Maria degli Angeli-Assisi, 9 settembre 2000), a cura di P. Messa, Santa Maria degli Angeli 2001, p. 15-16. Cited by Turchi, 3-4.

³⁰ Indeed, Mongol rule marked the period between roughly 1200 and 1500 in the territory of current day Kyrgyzstan. The invasion and subsequent destruction of the local culture is seen as a catastrophic social event:

"The 13th century marked one of the most tragic pages in the history of the Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia. It was the destructive Mongol invasion. The Mongol army created by Genghis Kahn conquered the territory of Central Asia and destroyed the developed Turkic culture. The prospering cities were ruined and turned into pastures..." Chotaeva, 55.

others to this elect people.³¹ The reply by the Kahn to these proposals was delivered in a stark tone, insisting upon the compliance of the Pope himself, along with other Christian princes, and expressing surprise at the Pontiff's invitation for him to receive Baptism.³² Obviously, this diplomatic venture was likewise unsuccessful in achieving the greater goal of converting this leader and his people to Christianity.

In his work, *Historia Mongalorum*, Franciscan Giovanni da Pian del Carpine (c. 1185-1252) provided a unique and valuable insight into the society and culture of the Mongolian people, whose rule during this epoch stretched to Europe and encompassed, among many other tribes and peoples, the territory of current day Kyrgyzstan.³³ It is appropriate to mention this remarkable work here (the *Historia*), as it sheds light on what must have been an extremely complex context in which both evangelization and even diplomacy could be conducted.³⁴ The document is not only a travel journal describing the various geographic and other elements of this hitherto unknown terrain, but depicts the unabashedly bellicose intentions of the Mongolian rulers. In recounting various aspects of this dynamic, the author both fulfills his assignment from the Pope as well as manages to penetrate the culture of the enigmatic Mongols, providing Europeans with a rare and extremely informative look into a part of the world that had previously remained largely unknown.³⁵ In summary, da Pian del Carpine's work, fascinating and invaluable, does not offer a particularly optimistic evaluation of the potential for missionary activity among these people, and must surely have alarmed Europeans regarding the unambiguous intentions of the Mongols to invade and conquer the European continent.³⁶

Catholic Missions in Central Asia during the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

³¹ Turchi, 7.

³² Il testo della lettera è riportato da: BENEDICTUS POLONUS, *Relatio*, in: *Sinica Franciscana*, I, p. 142; e anche da SALIMBENE DE ADAM, *Cronica*, I, testo latino a cura di G. Scalia, traduzione di B. Rossi, prefazione di L. Malerba, Bologna 2007, n. 874-878, p. 575. L'originale si conserva nell'Archivio Segreto Vaticano ed è stato pubblicato da P. PELLIS, *La lettre du Grand Khan Güyük à Innocent IV (1216)*, in: *Revue de L'Orient Chrétien*, 23/3 (1922), p. 3-30. Turchi, 7-8.

³³ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

³⁴ «Bisogna sapere che non trattano la pace con nessuno, se non dopo la sottomissione, perché, come già si è detto, hanno avuto ordine da Chinggis Khan di sottomettere, se possibile, i popoli tutti». GIOVANNI DI PIAN DI CARPINE, *Storia dei Mongoli*, VII, 2, p. 284-285. Turchi, 7.

³⁵ Turchi, 6, 7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

At a certain moment during the travels of Gulelmo from the camp Batu in the village of Kinchak, he catches sight of very high mountains which today mark the border between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, or Kyrgyzskyy Khrebet (Kyrgyz Range), the high mountain chain "Tien-Shanya," once called "the mountains of Alexander"; those mountains which today witness to the great Itinerarium traveled by Franciscan legates and missionaries, together with other religious, merchants, guards and translators, more or less prepared for the endeavor—as exemplary as it was risky—to finally open the way to the East.³⁷

Early interaction between Roman Catholic diplomats and the great leaders of the Mongolian empire offered the European world a unique insight into the workings of the culture and society created by the Mongols. As described above, visiting European diplomats depict the bald hubris of the Mongol rulers with regard to their perception of their role in the world: They held an unambiguous opinion of themselves as powerful rulers destined to conquer and subject. Perhaps paradoxically, one also reads in the writings of these and others who visited this area about the relative tolerance of the Mongolians towards their subjects with regard to religion: peoples living under Mongolian rule were generally permitted to continue the practice of their own religions.³⁸ It was within this paradoxical context that the Catholic Church endeavored to launch more concerted missionary activity.³⁹ The most fruitful of these attempts was undertaken by Franciscan missionaries in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Initially, these missions were linked with political efforts to establish and strengthen ties between Europe and the Mongolians, at least partially with the aim of forging an alliance to undermine the rapidly expanding Muslim religion.⁴⁰

The appearance of mendicant monastic Orders marks the beginning of Catholic missions to the Far East. One example of missionary activity was the journey undertaken by Flemish Franciscan William of Rubroek (1253-1255), who travelled 9,940 miles in two years, from Constantinople to Karakorum, capital of the steppe land empire....

³⁷ Ibid., *Conclusion*, 17.

³⁸ "Nel suo resoconto, il francescano indica i Mongoli come sostanzialmente tolleranti con le religioni dei popoli conquistati, non hanno delle leggi precise sul culto divino e non obbligano a rinnegare la propria fede....". Turchi, 8.

³⁹ The paradoxical nature of the relationship of Christian missions in Central Asia to Mongolian rulers should not be underestimated. On the one hand, the diminishment of Christian communities in the territory of contemporary Kyrgyzstan was caused, in part, by effects wrought by the conquest of the territory by the Mongols; on the other hand, both Nestorian Christian communities and those founded and served by the Franciscans in the wider region were afforded a level of protection by the Mongol leaders and were left vulnerable to the ramifications of strong opposition and eventual dissolution after the demise of the Mongolian dynasty.

⁴⁰ Turchi, 7.

At the end of his journey, Rubroeck met the Great Khan Munke (who later became a Christian). The Franciscan sought to illuminate Khan Sartac, the son of Batu-Khan, grandchild of Genghis Khan. Towards the middle of 1254, Khan Sartac converted to Christianity and Pope Innocent IV was informed.⁴¹

Catholic missions were soon established in various places throughout the territory. In 1278 ecclesiastical structures were created.⁴² With the arrival and fervent activity of Franciscan Giovanni da Montecorvino (1247-1328) in 1294, these communities began to expand. The relationship between these missionaries and the area's rulers varied widely. As well, their interaction with the existing Nestorian Christians in the region ranged from one of suspicion to episodes of more benign interaction.⁴³ Unfortunately, much remains a mystery concerning the scope and nature of the missionary endeavor. These missions were apparently centered in Franciscan residences ("custodies"). It is not possible to ascertain with certitude clarification regarding the following salient issues: Was there noteworthy success in converting local populations—or, were these priests mostly ministering to foreign individuals and groups in the region? Did these Franciscans attract local inhabitants to join their community, i.e., how large was their religious community and the community of believers (laity)? Although it is generally not feasible to assign exact locations of many of these communities in relation to specific modern political boundaries, the activity of some of these missions occurred in the region that borders part of present-day Kyrgyzstan.⁴⁴ Their presence in the territory of the Mongolian Empire is uncontested.

⁴¹ Taken from *L'Osservatore Romano* (Weekly Edition in English), 26 September 2001, 10. History of the Catholic Church in Kazakhstan.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ In fact, the property on which the Franciscans built the church in Almaliq was obtained from Nestorian Christians. In V. Barthol'd, "History of Semirechye," *Four Studies on the History of Central Asia, Vol. I: a Short History of Turkestan, and a History of the Semireche* (Leiden: Brill, 1956), 135-136.

⁴⁴ Certainly not all of the historical details described are undisputed; nevertheless, it is worth quoting in length the account of some of the activities ascribed to these fervent missionaries by zealous writers:

"One of the greatest missionary-diplomats of the 13th and 14th centuries was the Italian, Giovanni da Montecorvino (1247-1328 or 1333). Sent to Asia by Pope Nicholas IV in 1289 like other Franciscans including Arnold of Cologne and Odorico of Pordenone, Friar Giovanni reached Kamablik in 1294, where he soon won the esteem of the Khan who ruled the region of Tenduk (part of Mongolia and what is today Manchuria, north of Beijing). The Khan had already been baptized by the Nestorians with the Christian name of George, Kirghiz in Turkic. The name of this Khan was later given to ethnic groups known as the Kirghiz, literally people of St George. Under the influence of Montecorvino, Khan Kirghiz became a member of the Catholic Church and even received Minor Orders from the Franciscan. It is said that the Khan himself served Giovanni at the altar during Mass.

...In a letter to Nicholas IV in 1306, Montecorvino asked the Pope for more missionaries. But a group of Dominicans only reached as far as Kiptchak. In 1307 Pope Clement V appointed Montecorvino as

The further development of mission activity was bluntly reversed with the conversion of the Kahn Ali Sultan to Islam. In 1339, Ali Sultan ordered the dissolution of the mission, destruction of churches and monastery and the forced renunciation by these Christians of their Catholic Faith.⁴⁵ Regardless of the fact that several of the Franciscans were brutally martyred and some followers converted to Islam, remaining Christians sought to continue the mission under the guidance of their courageous pastors:

We purchased land, built a church, prepared a baptismal font, served Mass and baptized many, preaching freely and publicly, despite [the fact that] the bishop and six other religious were ceremoniously murdered for Christ in this very place one year earlier.⁴⁶

Persecution and other severely debilitating events worked against the continued long-term viability of these Christian communities. Although details of the fate of Catholics living in this era remain mostly unknown, the diminishment of these communities ultimately became definitive.⁴⁷ The region was not the center of a resident Catholic bishop for the

Archbishop in the city of Kambalik and Patriarch of the Far East. He then called seven Franciscans for mission in China. They were ordained bishops and were instructed to ordain Montecorvino Archbishop of Kambalik on their arrival. Six of them set out on the journey but three soon died shortly after. One of the remaining three, Gerard Albuini, stopped at Zayton or Kaitong a port on the Fu-jianriver, today Quanzhou, to tend to the many Catholics there. The other two, one of whom was Bishop Andrea of Perugia, continued the journey. In 1311 they reached Peking and at last Archbishop Giovanni Montecorvino received Episcopal ordination. It was Pope John XXII who created the Archdiocese of Kambalik (Beijing) in 1318. The missionary activity of Montecorvino, he had the Bible translated into Mongolian, led to hundreds of thousands of conversions. Dioceses were established at Almalik and Urghenc. Altogether, 31 missionary dioceses were set up in the Far East...." *From History of the Catholic Church in Kazakhstan*.

⁴⁵ Turchi, 13.

⁴⁶ Cfr. IOHANNES DE MARIGNOLLI, *Relatio*, cap. De Creatione, in: *Sinica Franciscana*, I, p. 527-528. Rispetto alla *Chronica XXIV Generalium* nell'elenco dei martiri riportato da Giovanni ci sono alcune differenze: ad esempio, Lorenzo è detto di Ancona, mentre nella *Chronica*, di Alessandria; frate Pietro nella *Chronica* è detto Pietro Martelli di Provenza; il mercante genovese Gillottus, nella *Chronica* è chiamato espressamente Guglielmo. Invece il nome di Giovanni per l'interprete si apprende da Bartolomeo da Pisa: cfr. BARTHOLOMAEUS DE PISA, *De Conformitate vitae beati Francisci ad vitam Domini Iesu* (*Analecta Franciscana IV*), Quaracchi 1906, p. 334. Anche in Mariano da Firenze: cfr. A. Van Den Wyngaert, *De Sanctis et Beatis Tertii Ordinis iuxta codicem Fr. Mariani Florentini*, in *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum*, 14 (1921), p. 26. Cited in Turchi, 16.

⁴⁷ Although the fate of these Catholic communities remains largely obscure, one might find convincing arguments in research done in the middle of the twentieth century concerning the reasons for the gradual disappearance of Christian communities, including those served by Franciscans, in the adjacent territory (later, China) ruled by the Mongols. One historian summarizes his understanding of this question in the following words:

"...Nestorians in China are known to have remained unmolested until the sixteenth century, when a general persecution instigated by the Saracens caused them to be scattered or extirpated; and it is not improbable that the Catholic converts of the early Franciscan missionaries fared in the same manner...."

The premise revolves around intensification of persecution as well as the consequential lack of new missionaries to serve these believers after the downfall of the Mongol dynasty in 1368: "The dangers and obstacles which they encountered included many hardships of primitive ways of travel on land, the insecurity

ensuing 600 years, when Pope John Paul appointed Jan Pavel Lenga Apostolic Administrator of Karaganda, Kazakhstan (1991).⁴⁸

The Reappearance of Catholicism during the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries

Throughout the twentieth century, the Catholic Church in Kyrgyzstan⁴⁹ was inextricably linked with foreign immigrants and with deported peoples from traditionally “Catholic” homelands. At the end of the nineteenth century, ethnic Poles, Lithuanians and Germans increasingly appeared in the country. Most came as merchants, entrepreneurs, engineers, as officers in the Russian army or as civil servants for the Tsar’s extensive state bureaucratic structure.⁵⁰ In the southern city of Osh, for example, fifteen percent of “European” settlers were Catholics.⁵¹ At that time, there were no Catholic parishes in the country; rather, these Catholics were served by priests occasionally visiting from Tashkent.⁵² The ecclesiastical structure of the region was linked with the Turkestan Deanery, a part of the Apostolic Vicariate of Siberia.⁵³ The 1920’s and 1930’s saw the

of ships by which they crossed the seas, the attacks of pirates and robbers, and, above all, the relentless opposition of the Saracens or Mohammedans who were dispersed throughout Asia....

“...the Mongol khans were no longer able to offer protection and assistance to traveling missionaries....Furthermore, the conquests of the Turks and the rise of the Ottoman Empire in western Asia and Eastern Europe effectively closed the routes to the Far East as far as missionaries were concerned.” Marion A. Habig, “Marignolli and the Decline of Medieval Missions in China”, *Franciscan Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1 (March 1945), 30-32.

⁴⁸ “History of the Catholic Church in Kazakhstan.”

⁴⁹ The name of the country changed from Kirghizia (Kirghiz Soviet Socialist Republic) to the Kyrgyz Republic (Kyrgyzstan) upon receiving independence in 1991. In historical accounts of this territory, both names are found.

⁵⁰ Russian control over the area of Kyrgyzstan was gradually achieved in the second part of the 19th century. There are diverging opinions concerning the degree to which this period of Russian sovereignty was beneficial to the local population, as well as about the level of acceptance of this rule by Kyrgyz. There was, on the one hand, recognition by some Kyrgyz leaders of the perceived advantages of Russian protection: Stability in the region was greatly undermined both by lack of internal unity among certain groups and by ongoing threats of invasion from foreign forces to the north and east. At the same time, other Kyrgyz vehemently rejected the notion of domination by the Russian Empire. Eventual incorporation of most of this territory was accomplished by the late 1860’s. Uprisings were common, the most dramatic taking place in 1898 and 1916, and were ignited primarily by policy of the Empire towards the local population. Chotaeva, 76-85.

⁵¹ Notes from the editor, #1, in Rubleva, “Istoria Katolikov v Kyrgyzstane” [“History of Catholics in Kyrgyzstan”], (Paper presented at the International Conference, “Christianity in Kyrgyzstan: History and Modernity” Slavic University, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 13-14 May, 2019)

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Rubleva, 1.

further growth in the number of Catholics in Kyrgyzstan, due in part to voluntary immigration and increasingly, to deportations from areas of Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. By 1928, the first consolidated community of Catholics was formed in the city of Luxemburg.⁵⁴ Perhaps ironically, it was the policies of the new and avidly anti-religious Soviet regime that resulted in the most intensely rapid growth of the Catholic population.

Growth in the midst of Persecution: The Catholic Church during the Soviet Era

With varying degrees of severity, the Soviet Regime systematically worked to undermine and, at times, even to annihilate religious groups during its seventy-four year reign. Wide scale assault on religious institutions and their faithful are well-documented. Catholics in Kyrgyzstan were not exempt from this persecution and were by no means alone in suffering the hatred and derision of Soviet ideology.⁵⁵ Paradoxically, the Church in the Kirghiz Soviet Socialist Republic grew to its highest number of adherents during the Soviet regime. This increase was due mostly to the consequences of the relentlessly inhumane policies of imprisonment and/or exile of ethnic groups that traditionally professed Catholicism.

Soviet policy towards religious practice is often divided into different stages, each reflecting varied intensity in the level of active repression on the part of its leaders. Most commonly, the Soviet regime's approach to religion, especially with regard to Christianity, is categorized by historians into two periods: the period after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 to the Nazi invasion in the early years of the Second World War and, subsequently, the period from this traumatic event to the disbanding of the Soviet Union in 1991. A third category might include the reanimation of strong anti-religious policy under the direction of Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971). Although this division is somewhat artificial (i.e., anti-religious policy was a fundamental and pervasive conviction of Marxist Leninism throughout the Soviet Union's existence and policy emerging from this ideology was

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ For a detailed presentation of the persecution of the Russian Orthodox Church in Central Asia during the very first years of anti-religious policy, refer to E.E. Ozmitel, "Start of Soviet Power's Repression of the Orthodox Church in Central Asia: Semirech'e, 1918-1919". (Paper presented at the International Conference, "Christianity in Kyrgyzstan: History and Modernity", Slavic University, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 13-14 May, 2019)

implemented with fluctuating degrees of animosity), the advent of World War II resulted in partial modification of the approach by Soviet leadership to religion.

The Communist Revolution of 1917 to the Invasion of the Soviet Union

From the genesis of the Soviet State, atheist ideology espoused in Marxism defined the government's disdain, even fear, for what was understood to be an obstinate obstacle to fully realizing communism's ideals. Early Bolshevik ideology, although consistent with its underlying Marxist principles concerning the need to inaugurate an atheistic society, initially advocated a relatively tolerant approach to religion that viewed religious practice as a personal matter of the individual.⁵⁶ With Vladimir Lenin's (1870-1924) ascendancy to head the new Soviet government, anti-religious policies were progressively consolidated and ever more aggressively implemented throughout the vast territory of the new state. Viewed as the primary competing ideological threat to capturing and funneling the incentive of the masses, religious institutions were denied juridical status as early as 1918, thus hindering dissemination of views that were perceived as opposed to state-promulgated ideology. Under the pretext of equalization of all religions, churches were forbidden to operate schools and were otherwise prohibited from engaging in an array of functions deemed to be solely the realm of authority belonging to the all-encompassing state. In effect, from the earliest months in the communist reign religious organizations were blocked in their ability to function at the civil level and increasingly limited in undertaking any activity that could be viewed as promoting "religious" propaganda.⁵⁷ It was not long before citizens who publicly displayed religious convictions were branded as "anti-revolutionary" agitators.

The target audience of legislation on religious organizations was the whole society, which was brought up in the spirit of militant atheism. Anti-religious influence extended to the party and government, state institutions (security agencies), public organizations, the media, educational and upbringing institutions, leisure organizations, scientific, cultural, entertainment and entertainment institutions, etc.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Nosova, Elena Vladimirovna, "Gosudarstvenno-religioznye otnoshenie v Kirgizii v Sovetskii Period" ["Government-Religious relationship in Kirgizia in the Soviet Period"]. (Paper presented at the International Conference, "Christianity in Kyrgyzstan: History and Modernity", Slavic University, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 13-14 May, 2019)), 1.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 1-2.

News and other mass media sources persistently portrayed followers of religious conviction not only as psychologically unsound individuals, but as posing a very real threat to the hard-won progress achieved through atheistic communism:

Believers and the clergy appeared in newspapers in various "guises": as a class enemy, a wrecker; "seducer" of youth; lascivious, drunkards; obscurantists and fanatics; the ubiquitous enemy (schools, etc.); and temples and houses of worship are the headquarters of the counter-revolution. The newspaper was not only a propagandist, agitator, but also an organizer of the mass movement of atheists. The fight against religion was closely linked to fundamental changes in all areas of life. The atheist was seen not just as a person who rejected religion. It was a "militant atheist" - a person who penetrates life, takes possession of knowledge, helps others, and fights against the surviving "forces of the old world".⁵⁹

The hostile trajectory of early Soviet anti-religious ideology eventually descended into the extensively-documented era of repression and terror targeted against persons closely associated with religious organizations—clergy as well as ordinary believers.⁶⁰ Disdain and fear of religiosity morphed into political strategy justifying the incrimination, punishment, and even murder of numerous adherents.⁶¹

Catholics and members of other religions in Soviet Kirghizia were not immune from the consequences of the downward spiral instigated by anti-religious hysteria.⁶² The vast majority of the Catholics in Central Asia had been exiled to this area (or arrived later from other areas of exile) as a result of Soviet policy directed against their particular ethnic groups. These were people of Volga or Odessa German, Polish, Ukrainian, Lithuanian and Koran ethnic heritage. They begin to arrive in Soviet Kirghizia already in the 1920's and 1930's, partly as a result of unbending Soviet policy regarding the collectivization of peoples. In addition to their rather precarious social and political status (they were often *a priori* presumed to be enemies of the Soviet people), these repressed people were likewise subject to continual assaults on their religious beliefs. Priests and some of the most active

⁵⁹ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ USSR anti-religious campaign of 1928-1941 launched the strategy for fighting religion in a highly systematic manner. This strategy included both limitation of rights or religious organizations to operate, as well as proactive dissemination of anti-religious propaganda.

⁶² The Roman Catholic Church continued to be viewed with suspicion, even up to the collapse of the communist Regime, because of their "subordination to an international religious center outside of Soviet control." All the more was the existence of the Greek Catholic Church feared and remained illegal. Bohdan R. Bociurkiw, "The Formation of Religious Policy in the Soviet Union," *Journal of Church and State*, vol. 28, no. 3 (Autumn 1986), 423-428.

laity from their home parishioners had already been arrested and sent to camps, from where many never returned. Catholics were abandoned, in exile, without the possibility of openly practicing their faith.

Soviet involvement in the Second World War and shift in Soviet approach to religion

With the Nazi invasion and occupation of large areas of Soviet territory, Stalin sought to exploit the state's relationship towards religious citizens. He was aware of the persistence of religious belief in many parts of Soviet territory and grasped the need to circumvent the potential for believers to perceive an invading army as potentially offering liberation from religious repression. (One of the topics arising in discussions concerning the period of Nazi invasion is the suggestion that segments of the population in Soviet territory were not committed to defend the harsh atheistic regime. Some churches were, in fact, reopened by occupying Nazi forces.)⁶³ Stalin realized that offended religious sentiment might figure in anti-Soviet sentiment, easily evolving into a serious threat to unity in the desperate fight against the enemy's onslaught. In any event, there was already a tendency on the part of Soviet leaders to mitigate punishment of religions in the months leading up to the invasion. Relative tolerance of religious organizations developed further into overtures for patriotic cooperation between religion and the state, as Stalin likewise undertook to tap into religion's unique ability to rouse and unite members of society.⁶⁴

It should be understood, however, that this more tolerant approach to religion was not universal in application.⁶⁵ The largest wave of exiles to Central Asia in the fall of 1941 were ethnic Germans who had been systematically round up and sent to Central Asian republics or to Siberia as a result of the panic that Stalin experienced in the face of the stunningly rapid advancement of German troops through western parts of the Soviet Union

⁶³ Although this occurred in many places during the Nazi presence in western and northern Soviet territory, one example of the effect of this episode of the reanimation of church life in occupied territory can be found in Dimitry V. Pospelovsky. *A History of Soviet Atheism in Theory, and Practice, and the Believer*, vol 2: *Soviet Antireligious Campaigns and Persecutions*, St Martin's Press, New York (1988), 92-94.

⁶⁴ Haskins, Ekaterina V. "Russia's postcommunist past: the Cathedral of Christ the Savior and the reimagining of national identity." *History and Memory: Studies in Representation of the Past* 21.1 (2009)

⁶⁵ In 1941, Catholic members of the Army of General Anders, temporarily staying in the city of Dzalal-Abad, opened a church. Almost all of these soldiers with their dependents left Kirghizia during or immediately after the War. The building used as a church still exists, although it does not belong to the Catholic Church. (Editor's notes #2, Rubleva,)

(where the ancestors of many of these people had settled more than 150 years previously).⁶⁶ There was fear that these Germans would sympathize with the advancing Nazi troops, providing a disastrous threat to fragile inter-ethnic relations at the Soviet Union's most vulnerable moment in its brief history. For these and other prisoners arriving to the barren steppes of Siberia or Kazakhstan during the onset of harsh winter months, there was no relaxing of the regime's harsh policy regarding religion. The few surviving Catholic priests were at this time still in prisons and gulags. Religious practice within families was sharply criticized, and believers were denied the possibility of gathering with other believers in liturgical or communal prayer.

Devout Catholics in Kirghizia and elsewhere in the Soviet Union nonetheless sought ways of expressing their faith, often in the face of great opposition and personal danger as well as the very real possibility of placing their families and communities at risk of harsh reprisal. Priests who serve in post-Soviet Central Asia and Russia hear stories of countless acts of courage, of the service and informal ministry of laymen and women to each other, and of creative means designed for mutually encouraging one another to keep the faith. Baptisms, some times performed by grandmothers, were the only Sacrament that some younger Catholics living in this area had received by the end of the Soviet regime. As in different eras of persecution of the Church, funerals (again, overseen by laymen or women in the absence of priests) were rare opportunities to pray with others and to affirm each other's hope in faith. Accounts of intrepid laity leading prayer services and reassuring fellow Christians are numerous.⁶⁷ Doubtlessly, some Catholics and other believers did compromise or lose their faith; however, episodes attesting to the sheer depth of faithfulness among the remnant of believers at each period during this terrible persecution rival those of any chapter of Christian witness throughout history for their ability to inspire and edify.

⁶⁶ The arrival of German immigrants to Russia began in earnest with the Manifest of Empress Ekaterina II (1763). Mass deportation of these communities was ordered in an official act of August 26, 1941: "Concerning the relocation of Germans of the Volga, Saratov, and Stalingrad Regions." Burghardt, 1-8.

⁶⁷ Of the numerous examples of these heroic believers, mention might be made of Gertrude Detzer, whose case for promotion to beatification was recently opened at the diocesan level in Saratov, Russia by Bishop Clemens Pickel. For an interesting and informative presentation of her life, see <https://es.catholic.net/op/articulos/6115/cat/171/gertrud-detzel.html>.

Upon the death of Joseph Stalin in the spring of 1953 many prisoners emerged from prisons or from work camps. Among these former political prisoners were priests who had survived years of wretched conditions as victims of Soviet anti-religious policy. Among the first to arrive in Kirghizia was Lithuanian Jesuit Anthony Sheshkyavichus (1914-2002). He encountered enthusiastic Catholics who had impatiently awaited the opportunity to practice their faith. These Catholics were mostly ethnic Germans, whose number swelled in part because of the arrival of others from their places of exile in Siberia and Kazakhstan. At the end of the decade, there were an estimated 40,000 ethnic Germans living in the Republic, a number that comprised approximately two percent of the overall population. By 1970, there were almost 90,000 ethnic Germans in Soviet Kirghizia, of which 22,000 identified as Roman Catholics.⁶⁸ There were also people of Polish, Ukrainian, Korean and Lithuanian heritage living in Soviet Kirghizia. Father Sheshkyavichus largely focused his efforts in pastoral duties in the northern part of the country, since the largest percent of Catholics (87%) lived in one region near to the capital city of Frunze.⁶⁹ Besides Frunze and nearby Kant and Luxemburg, there were also communities of Catholics in the towns of Tokmak, Dzalal Abad, Oktyaberskoe, Vinsovkhos, as well as in various smaller towns and villages.⁷⁰

Even before the arrival of Fr. Sheshkyavichus, devout Catholics of the region had tried unsuccessfully to officially register their community.⁷¹ Despite the perceptible easing of harsh repression experienced by most of society after the death of Stalin, the Khrushchev era saw a renewal of persecution (although without the mass executions of pre-War Stalinist policy), articulated in the Anti-Religious Campaign (1958-1964). Some priests were rearrested and juridical registration, necessary for the normal functioning of any association of citizens, remained an unrealistic aspiration for Catholics.⁷² The presence of

⁶⁸ Rubleva, 2.

⁶⁹ Frunze, the capital of the Kirghiz Soviet Republic, was renamed to Bishkek when the nation gained independence. The city, originally named Pishpek, was established as a fortress by the Khanate of Kokand in 1825.

⁷⁰ Rubleva (editor's notes), 54.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² At the beginning of Khrushchev's push to further repress religious activity, there were only eighty registered associations in the Republic, seventy-nine of which were Russian Orthodox (32), Muslim (34), or Baptist (13) communities. By independence, there were approximately fifty registered associations. John

an active pastor in the second half of the decade further galvanized the Catholic community in northern Kirghizia. The faithful felt increasingly emboldened, and in 1961 parishioners again attempted to register their parish in the town of Luxemburg. When this second application was denied, some of the more exasperated parishioners threatened the authorities with “marching” to Bishkek in a tone perceived by Soviet officials as belligerent. The government representatives reacted swiftly and decisively: Fr. Sheshkyavichus was arrested again, the chapel used by the community for prayer was destroyed, and several of the most active parishioners were banished to the southern part of the country.⁷³

Bishop Athanasius Schneider, born in Tokmak, Kirgizia during this period (1961) summarizes his understanding of the intention of enduring Soviet anti-religious propaganda and policy aimed particularly at removing priestly presence from the lives of Catholics:

The Communist regime of the Soviet Union, continuing more than seventy years (1917-1991), made the goal of building its paradise on this earth. However, this kingdom could not stand, as it was erected on lies, neglect of human dignity, on the rejection of God, resulting in hatred to God and His Church. This was a kingdom in which God and spiritual values could not and must not have a place. Each sign which could remind people about God, Christ and the Church, was eliminated from social life and from the field of vision of the human. And, yet, there was a reality that more than everything reminded people of God: the priest. For this reason, the priest must not be visible; moreover, he must not even exist... The priest was a dangerous personage for the persecutors of Christ and His Church. Perhaps, they unconsciously saw a reason, why the priest was a dangerous person. The reason was the following: Only the priest could give people God, could give Christ in the consecrated form and immediate manner, this means in the Eucharist and Holy Communion; therefore, Mass was forbidden. However, no human power was capable of conquering the strength of God, active in the mystery of the Church and, above all, in the Sacraments.⁷⁴

Many Catholics living in this and other areas where this unremitting interference persisted were, nevertheless, not dissuaded from attempting to realize their goal of being able to gather in prayer. Left again without a resident priest after the arrest of Father Sheshkyavichus, Catholics continued to find ways to practice their faith and to reassure others in doing so. Other priests who had been recently released from prison would occasionally visit these communities. These pastors celebrated Masses, officiated at

Anderson, “Religion, State, and Society in the New Kyrgyzstan”, *Journal of Church and State*, vol. 41, no. 1 (Winter 1999), 99, 102.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Schneider, Athanasius, “This Lord” (translation from German). Manuscript, p 3. Original publication: Dominus est. Riflessioni di un vescovo dell’Asia Centrale sulla sacra Comunione, 2008 – *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*, 9-10. In Burkhardt, 10.

copious baptisms and weddings, heard confessions, catechized, and endeavored to generally hearten the Catholics amidst their trials. Among the priests who served here at this time was Father Georg “Gottleib” Todavchic.⁷⁵ It was Father Mikhael Keler⁷⁶ (1897-1983), however, who eventually settled in Kirghizia and assumed the role of pastor to these Catholics. Fr. Keler had been arrested and condemned of “anti-Soviet activities” in 1934. After serving his sentence in prison, he devoted himself to tireless pastoral service throughout Siberia and Central Asia.⁷⁷

With the renewed presence of a more permanent pastor, the Catholic community grew and was consolidated. Catholics from distant regions in Siberia and Kazakhstan, learning that there was the possibility of receiving the Sacraments, traveled to Frunze. The community in the capital attempted to register their parish and, perhaps rather astonishingly, received permission in early 1969. St. Mikhail the Archangel Church became one of the earliest Catholic parishes in Central Asia to be granted government registration. With the level of relative juridical solidity that registration provided, the community continued to grow. The appearance of a small church building in the outskirts of Frunze provided a center where the faithful could finally gather, pray, form the younger generations in the Catholic Faith, and from where these people could at long last draw immeasurable spiritual and communal sustenance. There were more than 100 baptisms a year at the new church. The significance of this rather remarkable occurrence had implications for not just local Catholics but, rather, for believers throughout the entire region. The following excerpt from the memoirs of one of the Catholic women from neighboring Kazakhstan could have been echoed by numerous others:

From 1965 it became known that Catholic Churches were beginning to open... It was already not so strict. It was no longer so strict when the church was built in Frunze. Then my husband and I began to go there every year ... There was an elderly priest who was also in prison for 10 years. In Frunze we got married. Every year we went to this new church. The road was a long one, but for us it was a great joy, for many years we did not see either the church or the priest ...I had many acquaintances in the church when I was there, they trusted me with the keys to the church building, and I could spend the night there. In the morning I opened the church, and in the evening I closed the doors of the

⁷⁵ Father Georg Todavchic was born in 1923 in the Zakarpattia Region of Ukraine. He entered the Order of St. Basil in 1944 and was ordained a priest in Lvov in 1958. He served as a priest in Frunze from 1973-1990. He died in 1992 in Ukraine.

⁷⁶ Recollections of Pater Keler can be found in *Vospominaniya prelate Mikhaela Kelera* [Recollections of Prelate Mikhail Keler] (Biskhek, Triada Print, 2019).

⁷⁷ Burkhardt, 11.

church. I wiped the dust, washed the floors. When I was in church alone and did something, I could not believe it, it seemed to me like a dream. I looked at the altar, at the Tabernacle, I could not even think that someday I would stand so close to the Tabernacle... The priest went to the sick every morning after the Holy Mass and took me and another woman with me ... I sang in the choir, and took Holy Communion every day. After the death of my husband, I went to church in Frunze for another 10 years. Each time, the priest gave me Holy Communion for the elderly, who could no longer go to church. The Heart of Jesus, all through You and for You!"⁷⁸

Persistent atheistic, anti-religious policy and propaganda did, of course, have an effect on some members of the larger society. Long after the abolishment of mass executions, extended prison terms in forsaken camps and mines, terror gave way to the perhaps no less eroding effect of perpetual disinformation about religion and its adherents. This message was persistently promoted in schools and in other social institutions. Father Wladyslaw Bukowiński⁷⁹ (1904-1974), a remarkably zealous pastor who served in Central Asia during the years between and after his numerous arrests, articulated the clear intent of Soviet policy with regard to religion: "In the Soviet Union propaganda promotes the ideal of an atheistic state, in which the citizen, without exception, will be convinced by atheism, fully liberated from so-called religious superstition."⁸⁰ If the testimony of one of the regular visitors to the church (above) articulated the joy experienced by many Catholics resulting from the establishment of the church in Frunze and underscored the long-awaited fulfillment of the yearning to openly practice one's faith—which seemed "like a dream"—there were others who had assimilated into the larger society, internalizing Soviet ideology, which unambiguously hailed the advent of atheism as a sign of inevitable progress. Paradoxically, the end of Soviet domination of Kirghizia and other former Republics in 1991 ushered in an era of unprecedented religious freedom within the context of a society that had largely become secularized.

⁷⁸ *Stang Anna. Erinnerungen. Рукопись. Архив прихода Пресвятой Девы Марии Святого Розария г. Усть-Каменогорска.* Cited in Burkardt, L.A., 12.

⁷⁹ Father Bukowiński was declared Blessed in 2016. A description of his fascinating service and tireless commitment to his parishioners in very difficult times can be found in the book, Aleksander Posacki, *Apostol Kazachstana i svidetel Evangeliya [Apostle of Kazakhstan and Witness of the Gospel]* (Karaganda: Rimsko-Katolicheskaya Tzerkov Kredo, 2016).

⁸⁰ Burkardt, L.A., "Pater Mikhail Keler – Dyshe pastyr Nemetzkikh Katolikov Sovietskovo Soyuzo: Istoricheskie Vremena i Uslovia Sluzhenija" ["Pater Mikhail Keler—Pastor of German Catholics of the Soviet Union: Historical times and Conditions of Service"] (paper presented at the International Conference, Christianity in Kyrgyzstan: History and Modernity", Slavic University, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 13-14 May, 2019), 12.

The Catholic Church in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan

*Physicists know that you can move from one order of things
to another only by passing through a state of chaos.*

- Askar Akayev, Scientist and Former President of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan

The collapse of the Soviet Union generated a period of tumultuous social, political and economic change throughout all of the former republics. In the midst of this change, the newly independent state of Kyrgyzstan immediately selected a path of tolerance in relation to religious practice. Compared to almost all of the neighboring former Soviet republics, it has remained rather faithful to its general commitment to strive for achieving a complex balance between upholding religious freedom and, at the same time, guaranteeing a satisfactory level of security as the country and region confront rather serious challenges:

Kyrgyz society is unique in its own way among the states of Central Asia, combining both Islamic and Christian traditions that go back centuries. The development of the mission of various churches is also facilitated by the openness of Kyrgyzstan to dialogue with Western countries, as well as the special political situation associated with the democratic transition of the republic, which is proceeding with varied success.⁸¹

As unflinching pastor, Pope Saint John Paul kept the people of these and other churches in the former Soviet Union very much in his vision for the Church and in his heart. He worked to assure the pastoral care of this flock while undertaking with acute prudence the progressive development of necessary church structure to assure solidity in this endeavor. Local Jesuit priest Nikolai Messmer,⁸² who arrived to Frunze in 1989, was for a few years the only priest to serve in the country.⁸³ In 1991, the Holy See established the Apostolic Administration in Karaganda, Kazakhstan, to which the parish in Bishkek was attached. Pope John Paul II entrusted the Society of Jesus with the responsibility for pastoral care and direction of the Church in this country.⁸⁴ In August of 1992, the Holy See established diplomatic relations with the Independent country of Kyrgyzstan.⁸⁵ In 1997, Jesuit Father

⁸¹ Roman Nikolaevich Lunkin, "Christianstvo v sovremennom Kyrgyzstane: ozmozhnosti missii v otkrytom obshestve" ["Christianity in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan: Possibilities of Mission in an Open Society"] (paper presented at the International Conference, "Christianity in Kyrgyzstan: History and Modernity", Slavic University, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 13-14 May, 2019), 1.

⁸² Nikolai Messmer (1954-2016) was born in Karaganda, Kazakhstan, to parents of ethnic German descent. He studied at the seminary in Riga, Latvia and was ordained a priest in 1989.

⁸³ Pater M. Keler died in 1983.

⁸⁴ Decree published from the Congregations for the Propagation of Faith, PROT. N. 75/98 (22 December 1997).

⁸⁵ The Papal Nuncio soon established a cultural center in the capital. Monsignor Rudolph Michael Schmitz (b. 1957) was appointed as cultural attaché to the Nunciature in Kyrgyzstan in 1995 and resided in Bishkek.

Aleksandr Kahn⁸⁶ began his assignment as Superior of the newly created *Missio sui iuris*, under the direct jurisdiction of the Holy See. A year later, the School Sisters of Saint Francis⁸⁷ arrived from Slovakia and began to serve the Church in Bishkek and in the city of Talas.⁸⁸ In 2005, Polish Father Krzysztof Korolczuk and Brother Damian Wojciechowski moved to Dzalal-Abad, in southern Kyrgyzstan, where a parish was opened in that city and in nearby Osh. Father Kahn undertook the pastoral service of the faithful in the western part of the country and a parish was founded there in 2004 among the remnant of Catholics from various ethnic groups. In 2006, Pope Benedict IV established the Apostolic Administration of Kyrgyzstan with Nikolai Messmer as its first Bishop.⁸⁹ In 2017, Father Anthony Corcoran⁹⁰ was appointed as Apostolic Administrator. There are currently seven Jesuits⁹¹ and one diocesan priest ministering in the country. In addition to parishes with resident priests (listed above), Mass and catechetical activities are regularly undertaken in dozens of villages and smaller towns which are attached to these larger parish centers. The Catholic Church in Kyrgyzstan collaborates closely with local Churches in neighboring

Monsignor Schmitz undertook various academic and cultural activities, including the establishment of the Religious Studies Department at the Kyrgyz Russian Slavic University in 1998. The current Nuncio, Archbishop Francis Chullikatt, represents the countries of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tadjikistan and resides in Nur Sultan, Kazakhstan.

⁸⁶Aleksandr Kahn (b. 1963) was likewise born in Karaganda, Kazakhstan to parents of the German diaspora. He studied in the seminary in Riga, Latvia and was ordained to the priesthood in 1988. Both he and Bishop Messmer (along with Father Josef Shmidtlyain, who currently serves in Dzalal-Abad) went through an underground Jesuit novitiate experience in their home city under the guidance of Jesuit parish priest Father Albinas Dumbliauskas.

⁸⁷ There are currently six Franciscan Sisters serving in Kyrgyzstan. The work of these Sisters includes the catechetical and spiritual preparation and formation of Catholics as well as humanitarian work. In the fall of 2020, Consolata Missionary Sisters are expected to arrive to serve in the southern part of the country.

⁸⁸ A church building—the first to be built in the country expressly as a church—was consecrated by Kyrgyz native Bishop Athanasius Schneider in October of 2019.

⁸⁹ After the untimely death of Bishop Messmer in 2016, Jesuit Father Janez Mihelčič temporarily served as ordinary of the local Church. Father Mihelčič (b. 1942) was born in Slovenia. He undertook seminary studies in Slovenia and Rome before entering the Society of Jesus in 1966. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1975 and continued to serve in Japan until 1997, when he came to the Russian Region. In 1998 he arrived to serve in Kyrgyzstan. He currently teaches Japanese language at the Kyrgyz Russian Slavic University in Bishkek.

⁹⁰ Anthony Corcoran (b. 1963) was born in southern Arizona, entered the Society of Jesus in 1985, and completed his studies in the United States. In 1997, he came to work in the former Soviet Union. He served as Vicar General to Bishop Joseph Werth in Novosibirsk, Russia from 1998-2007 and later as Superior of the Independent Russian Region of the Society of Jesus (2008-2017).

⁹¹ Father Remigiusz Kalski (b. 1967) arrived to work in the parishes in Dzalal Abad and Osh in 2010. He currently serves as director of Caritas Kyrgyzstan and pastor of parishes in towns near to Bishkek – in addition to being the local Superior of Jesuits in Kyrgyzstan. Father Adam Malinowski (b. 1963), arriving in 2012, serves in parishes in the southern part of the country. He also organizes Astronomy clubs at local schools and oversees camps for these students in Issyk-Kul.

countries and participates in regular gatherings with bishops and ordinaries from Kazakhstan and other Central Asian nations. The fiftieth anniversary of the registration of the parish in Bishkek (Frunze), celebrated in 2019, provided the Catholic community the opportunity to reflect more deeply on various aspects of Divine Providence's often mysterious activity in the lives of believers in this land throughout many generations. One of the key events connected with the celebration of this anniversary was an academic conference jointly sponsored with the Kyrgyz Russian Slavic University focusing on the theme of "Christianity in Kyrgyzstan: History and Modernity."

For a small community, the Catholic Church in Kyrgyzstan remains involved in a number of social and educational activities. These projects include ongoing works with children from Christian as well as Muslim families (many who have special needs); supplementing academic preparation of students from families of limited resources; assistance to families in crisis; as well as engagement in short-term crisis assistance, such as during the period of serious ethnic conflict in 2010. The Church operates a health and rehabilitation center on the shores of Lake Issyk-Kul. The mission of the center is two-fold: It offers programs for children from Christian families to interact and to recreate while providing them with the possibility to deepen in knowledge and experience of their faith. It is likewise committed to offering children from economically disadvantaged settings access to physical and emotional/social rehabilitation programs. These children derive from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Some of these participants are physically or mentally challenged and are able to utilize the facilities at the center accompanied by their teachers and trainers. Each summer, approximately 1000 children participate in the camps organized by the center.

The changes emerging from the fall of the Soviet Union produced a dramatic shift in the religious profile of newly independent nations. It would have been impossible for anyone at the time of *perestroika* to envision the impact of these changes on the Catholic community in Kyrgyzstan. Most momentous has been the emigration of the vast majority

of Catholics to Germany, Russia, or elsewhere.⁹² With the departure of ethnic Germans, Poles, Ukrainians and Lithuanians, the number of Catholics greatly decreased. It is estimated that as many as 90-95% of Catholics left the country in the past thirty years. There are currently somewhere between 550 and 1,500 Catholics in the entire country, down from tens of thousands in previous decades. The Mass and other pastoral activities are conducted in Russian. Many parishioners still originate from families with at least some German or Polish ancestry; however, this too is changing. There are a few newer parishioners who are from Kyrgyz or Uzbek families; however, these instances are rather rare and converts to Christianity from traditionally “Muslim” ethnic groups frequently encounter strong opposition from their families and from Muslim neighbors.⁹³

Islam now accounts for as much as ninety percent of the overall population of Kyrgyzstan. Many, if not most, of these citizens are moderate. Members of the older generation of Kyrgyz had often been influenced by the Soviet Union’s unrelenting endeavor to secularize its citizens during its more than seven decades of rule. There is a smaller, yet growing, presence of a more radical form of Islam, mostly imported by foreign influences or brought home by workers or students who have lived or studied abroad. This phenomenon will certainly prove increasingly challenging for society. Moreover, the presence of a more rigid manifestation of Islam among various pockets of young and rural citizens will certainly test the government in its commitment to permit unfettered religious practice. This menace already tends to cause tension within and among communities, especially in rural areas. Catholics and members of other minority religious groups will find themselves in an increasingly vulnerable position within these communities. It remains unclear as to what effect steps taken by government officials in the endeavor to

⁹² This wave of emigration including many persons of “non-Asian, non-Muslim populations,” which decreased from 36% percent of the overall population to 8.5% --“ almost all of them concentrated in the capital of Bishkek” – in the twenty-year period between 1989 to 2009. Andrew Wachtel, “A Tale of Two Heroes: Kyrgyzstan in Search of National Role Models,” *Region*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2016), 7.

⁹³ It should be noted that there has been a sizeable number of converts from “traditionally” Muslim individuals to evangelical Christianity since the end of the communist era. Estimates of this number vary greatly, from 10,000 to 100,000. “...conversions has in certain locations become a phenomenon that is both socially visible and threatening to many Kyrgyz.” Mathijs Pelkmans, “«Culture» as a Tool and Obstacle: Missionary Encounters in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan”, *The Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 13, no. 4 (December 2007), 883.

curb this potentially destructive religious activity will have on the ability of the Church and other religious organizations to continue to operate freely.

The Catholic Church in Kyrgyzstan is clearly at the threshold of a new and exceptional era. The Church faces substantial difficulties, as it does elsewhere. At the same time, potentially beneficial challenges to the previous perception of its role in society emerge as a result of the very dynamic that has caused the vast diminishment of the number of Catholics in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere in Central Asia. The Church will now need to consciously choose to pursue a more truly indigenous identity if it is to survive as anything more than a sort of chaplaincy for foreigners and for those local citizens who are attracted to the exotic character of an “alien” religious entity. Indeed, some within the Catholic community recognize this period as a moment of “*kairos*” for the Church in this region. Unique to this era are the following favorable characteristics: an environment of relative political freedom in which to operate; a rather moderate religious culture and a society with a long history of being generally unopposed to the presence of different cultures and faith traditions; an overall positive reputation enjoyed by the Church among those who know of its charitable work among people of different religions;⁹⁴ unparalleled access by the local Church to the wider Church’s vast spiritual, pastoral, educational, and other resources; and, a community of believers that is better poised to perceive the “catholic” nature of the Church as one that in its very essence remains open to encompass various ethnic groups and perspectives.

Certainly, no one can predict with precision the trajectory of present social, religious and political trends in the country. The Church continues to grapple to comprehend the significance of these rapid and profound changes occurring within the larger society for its manner of operating. Questions of missiology, of inter-religious dialogue, and of discernment about the meaning (and, consequently, of the form) of evangelization in this evolving context are matters of primary importance – along with the perennially fundamental interior tasks of pastoral and spiritual care for its scattered and diminished flock. There is much about the current situation in which the Catholic Church finds itself that is without parallel in its long history in this area of the world. The most essential task

⁹⁴ See a description of some of these works (above).

of the Church, however, remains: living as followers of Jesus Christ at this time, here in Central Asia, within the particular social, political, religious and cultural context in which we find ourselves. Future generations of Christians will evaluate the quality of our faithfulness in living out those convictions passed down by generations of our predecessors who inhabited this decidedly unique and challenging territory. They will, moreover, be in a better position to appraise the extent of fruitfulness emerging from our community's commitment to these convictions precisely within and for the contemporary Kyrgyz society.