

# Hope In War Torn Kyrgyzstan

**In the midst of a bloody conflict in Kyrgyzstan, two nations have lived for years beside each other, harbouring grudges and victims of government structures that failed after the April revolution. Brother Damian Wojciechowski SJ, whose work is supported by JM, says the most important thing the Church can do there is to bring the good news about God's love and forgiveness.**

When I go and visit the Uzbeks (whose homes were burned down and who lost family members) I always introduce myself as follows: I'm Brother Damian, I work for the Catholic Church. We obtain our financial help from Europe, from people who heard about your tragedy.

In one home the widow, whose husband was shot, interrupted me and said "I've met you before; I work for the Home for the disabled". Since they cover their heads with scarves, it took me a while to recognise her. Walking around from one burned out home to another and having had contact with poverty for many years, you start to withdraw emotionally and only when you meet a familiar person who has met with tragedy, does your heart recognise the scale of the suffering that people are living through.

The other thing that I noticed was

that there were thousands of SOS signs written on the streets of Osh. The S was written in reverse, because the the Uzbeks don't know the Roman Alphabet. They believed that if they wrote SOS some helicopters would come and evacuate them.

The hatred and tragedy touched everyone across all social strata and wealth. The attackers did not differentiate between anyone; invalids, widows or children. In one village a woman with six children rushed out to protect her small shop. The bandits shot her, then they raided the shop and torched it to the ground. The kids were left with just the clothes they were wearing. Whilst I was visiting them some representatives from the bank were there informing them that they could no longer have the loan they had requested because their house was burned down. We gave them some aid

in terms of money, clothing, food and mattresses for the kids to sleep on. This type of raid by bandits was typical of what was happening to everyone. They saw an opportunity for gains and so they took it.

Our possibilities of helping are limited, but whatever we received we donated. The most beautiful work was carried out by the Sisters of Charity, together with Fr Krzysstof, our parish priest. They visited over 1100 families during the week and gave assistance to over 5500 people. It wasn't so much the aid that was important, but the fact that someone had time for the people. They felt that someone remembers them and that God cares for them in this way. Surprisingly, I noticed that most of the people who were touched by tragedy are not filled with thoughts of revenge. The Uzbeks, who were often a proud people who looked down on others, now have to realize they need help, that they are weak, that the high walls did not protect them and at the moment God is their only hope.

What were the causes of such a bloody conflict? Two nations living for years beside each other, however always harbouring some grudges; to this was added the total failure of government structures after the April revolution, including the police and army. Of course, you needed some agitators, who managed to create arguments between the two groups and to start a spark which created a fire.



Violence and immorality are the long-term aftermath of ethnic conflicts.

After the conflict, one of our parishioners was mugged and died. A couple of days later a neighbour hit another parishioner with a rock because he was collecting nuts from his tree. And some children took our car to pieces.

What else can we do? I think that the most important thing we can do is to bring the Good news about God's love

and forgiveness.

The upbringing of young people is so important. Despite the difficult situation in our country, we managed to organise several camps for children: for disabled children and widows. We were able to do this work because of the newly built Spirituality and Rehabilitation Centre on the shores of Lake Issy Kul. It is progress, but we still have some work to complete on this centre once we obtain more funds.

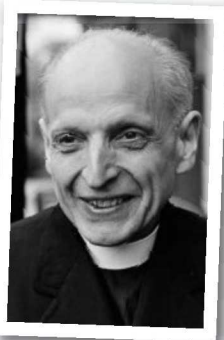
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Brother Damian Wojciechowski SJ will be visiting the UK in the New Year. He will be speaking at all Masses at the Church of the Immaculate Conception, Farm Street, London W1 on Sunday 16 January and will be showing slides of the work in the Parish of St Klara, near Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan.

# Deeper Spiritual Proximity

## Sr Rosemary Howarth, SSND

**I**n an address to the 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus in 2008, Pope Benedict XVI said "Taking up one of the latest intuitions of Father Arrupe (right), your Society continues to engage in a meritorious way in the service of refugees, who are often the poorest among the poor and need not only material help but also the deeper spiritual, human and psychological proximity especially proper to your service." As Sister Rosemary Howarth SSND explains, it is this deeper spiritual proximity that JRS-UK wishes to address.



At this time of tremendous migration of people globally and the unpredictable, unstable political decisions that affect the lives of those caught in the labyrinth of asylum seeking in the UK, JRS strives to accompany, serve and advocate on behalf of more than 1000 men, women and children in the greater London area. Our clients reflect 31 different nationalities and a variety of faith traditions (several Christian, Muslims of various traditions, a few Jews, animists and a few who profess to have no religion at all).

Listening to refugees, their stories and their needs, has always been a vital dimension of JRS. While each programme in JRS-UK seeks to en flesh specific objectives related to service, accompaniment and advocacy,

a new programme of spiritual accompaniment is being inaugurated this autumn. Attention to the faith dimension and the spiritual growth of a human being is as essential as providing nutritious food, appropriate clothing, safe housing and on-going education, as well as just political decisions that affect people's lives. Faith in God and an intimate relationship with God are examples of the rich inner resources that refugees bring with them from their country of origin and frequently carry them through the times of chaos and confusion. The programme aims to help them view life from a spiritual perspective that rarely is even referred to in the midst of interviews, filling out forms and adapting to the laws and customs of a new cultural reality.

### SPIRITUAL GUIDES

Being able to do this in a safe environment with a spiritual guide allows displaced persons not only to tell their stories, but *to share their pain and also their guilt over leaving their homeland or family, or their disappointment that life did not turn out for them as they had hoped. Only then can they move on.* (Mark Raper SJ)

Men and women who avail themselves of this service would be met by a spiritual guide with whom they can share the unfolding of their lives and perhaps be more attentive to

the presence and voice of God in a time of exile. With this conviction in mind, this new project attempts to expand the JRS service of accompaniment to include specifically the opportunity for spiritual companionship. It will provide an opportunity for refugees who come to JRS *to give expression to the rich spirituality underlying the journey in exile.* (God in Exile, toward a shared spirituality with refugees, JRS Publication 2005)

While respecting the main-line faith traditions, this ministry of companionship, consoling and encouraging seeks to meet the deeper spiritual needs of refugees who come to JRS ... facilitating God's grace of healing and reconciliation and frequently opening up new ways of understanding their life experiences in a faith context. It can bring new energies to help them face the on-going challenges of insertion into a new culture and help to gather the courage and strength needed to fully engage in their new reality.

Jesus called disciples to extend his mission to contribute to the building of God's Reign ... one loving gesture at a time, one word of encouragement at a time! Participants and companions alike stand at the threshold of being mutually enriched and transformed, one encounter at a time.

JRS celebrated its 30th anniversary on 14 November. Migrants Day is on 3 December 2010 - the Feast of St Francis Xavier SJ.