

# Answering the Call of Pope Francis

By Thomas Simisky, SJ

## S ummer Oasis Along the Silk Road



Thomas Simisky, SJ, with friends in Kyrgyzstan

It's nighttime, I'm lying in bed unable to sleep with the heat, and I can't believe that I'm alone in our parish of Jalal-Abad, Kyrgyzstan. Polish volunteers who have been with me for a month have just left, as have the two Jesuit priests who needed to do work on the opposite end of the country.

The various muezzin are calling everyone to prayer. Since so many mosques have been constructed in the past decade, the exotic Arabic melodies overlap in complex ways. I don't speak Arabic, but then neither do the Muslim people of Kyrgyzstan. Here, faith and devotion clearly transcend language. God must be pleased to hear this many people stopping to pray. I am also grateful to have a peaceful night after an intense five weeks at the camps. Life in this little city is much quieter than from

where I just came. There is much to pray about.

Having worked in the Russian region for the past two summers, I had heard a lot about our work here. Pope John Paul II designated Kyrgyzstan a special papal mission of the Society of Jesus in 1997. The number of Catholics is small and continues to diminish due to the political instability and ethnic violence; the Society of Jesus has devoted its efforts to serving the poorest residents of this country—orphans and children with disabilities.

In 2010 with the help of generous benefactors, a house that would serve as a summer camp was built on the shore of Lake Issyk-Kul, a saltwater lake nestled in

the northeast corner of Kyrgyzstan. This summer was my opportunity to experience the Church and the Society living out Catholic social teachings in a unique way.

The setting is stunning, surrounded as it is by the snowcapped mountains of Kazakhstan and China. At an altitude of 1,600 meters, the temperature in the summer is also quite comfortable. For four months each year, this "Children's Leisure and Rehabilitation Center" provides free summer camps to children and their families or caregivers living in poverty. Last year, over 700 people passed through the camps.

These kids and families have tough lives, especially since Kyrgyzstan is one of the poorest countries in Central Asia. The adults, parents and caregivers often expressed their gratitude. Most had been here previous summers and said there is no way the government could provide

Jesuits from the Maryland, New England and New York Provinces answer Pope Francis' call to serve "the poorest, the weakest, the least important" at home and around the world.

Over the past summer, Jesuits in formation served disabled youth in Kyrgyzstan, indigenous people in the Philippines, pilgrims at MAGIS and World Youth Day in Rio and studied Spanish in Bolivia. Two Jesuits in formation share their reflections.

such a service. These nine-day camps gave them a much needed break from their usual routines.

The house has a small staff, but relies heavily on volunteers. My role was that of activities director. The days were long, exhausting and very rewarding. Sports, games and English classes for the older children filled the hours. Fortunately, after a couple of weeks, a group of five university students from Poland arrived to volunteer for the month of July. Another group would replace them in August. Still others came from England and Belgium.

We volunteers were Catholic; those we served were generally Muslim. Religion was almost never discussed, yet our faith could be expressed through our presence. Every evening we had a volunteers' meeting to plan the next day's activities and to do faith sharing. We spoke about our gratitude for different moments in the course of the day, about how we had seen God's image in those we encountered, and about how Christ's call brought us together to strive for greater love and understanding of our neighbors.

The Issyk-Kul camp is a work of the Society, and therefore, is a work of the Church. For me, it was a tremendous grace to see both in such a different context. Here was a building that was not a church and was not filled with Christians. However, it was the Church, filled with the Holy Spirit, sharing in Jesus' mission of reconciliation.

At the end of July, the Polish volunteers and I traveled south to Jalal-Abad, where we taught English classes. A week later they would head home and I was left to continue teaching while awaiting the new arrivals. Every day, young people from the city would knock on the door asking about classes. Most had no idea that the building was a church (despite the sign and the cross on top). They just knew the Jesuits as the good guys who offer free language classes. Hopefully, they will know we are Christians by our love for them.

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## Encountering God in the Eyes of an Eight-Year-Old

By Timothy Casey, SJ

This summer I had the opportunity to travel to South America to study Spanish for nearly two months at the Maryknoll Institute in Cochabamba, Bolivia. The Maryknoll Institute is a wonderful place where individualized instruction is tailored to fit the needs of the student. The Institute, founded in the 1960s as a missionary training center, not only functions as a language learning center, but places much emphasis on Andean culture and history, and the devastating impacts of colonization in Latin America."

The strength of the Institute lies in the fact that when a student leaves, he/she is trained to engage the complex and harsh realities of poverty, inequality and injustice which plague many Central and South American countries.

women, many of whom are nuns, who take them from the street and place them in orphanages. Visiting these orphanages was challenging and required much energy and stamina. But in the challenge is always latent grace, waiting to be revealed and unleashed. I found this to be true when one young orphaned girl told me, "Saludos a sus padres." "Greetings to your parents." The impact of that statement defined my summer.

Some people who have lost so much, in this case a child, remind us of how blessed we are; how much we have been given. As Pope Francis said in a recent interview, "God is to be encountered in the world of today." St. Ignatius of Loyola taught the Pope that lesson; that God can be found actively



Timothy Casey, SJ, in Bolivia

Although language acquisition was the primary reason why I was missioned to study Spanish in Bolivia, I find that this reason was ultimately secondary. What was primary, and what remains primary, is the encounter with people who have been the victims of great societal injustices. What first comes to mind is the great number of orphans in Bolivia, boys and girls on the streets, who have been abandoned and discarded by their caregivers. They roam the streets, and, if they are lucky, are saved from street life by saintly

at work in our world, laboring, if only we have the courage and discipline to open our eyes and see Him. And if we see Him, do we allow ourselves to be transformed? Sometimes God uses the little ones, in my case, an eight-year-old girl, to break into our lives. For this, I am grateful. Although I learned some Spanish this summer, I learned more from this orphan than I had either bargained for or expected. And what a gift.

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