



Kyrgyzstan - A Call to Walk on the Silk Route

The land of snow clapped mountains and shepherds – Kyrgyzstan – was a huge and pleasant surprise for me. Civilizational movements happened along this route and its traits are still alive in this people. Manas the hero of the region, stands tall in the cities of Bishkek and Osh, with imposing statues. Cultures and civilizations do not die; this is very true of Kirgizstan. The welcoming smiles of the children on the streets, the caring attitude of beautiful and sturdy women in the markets - Uzbis, Kyrgys and Russians, speak volumes of the inter-cultural ethos of the people.

The region proudly retained its independent character in spite of and even after the Soviet occupation. Six Jesuits spread over a landmass of 198,500 sq km, inhabited by a population of 6 million bear witness to the courage and resilience of the Society to be present in this part of Central Asia with a tiny Catholic community scattered over the land. We have had South Asian Jesuit presence in Russia, through the ministries of Paul Chemparathy (NEP), late Fr. Victor (MDU) and recently Anil Macwan (GUJ) in Armenia. Thomaz Kot, Regional Assistant (Central Europe) and Tony Corcoran (UCS) Apostolic Administrator jointly invited me to visit Kyrgyzstan to explore possibilities of collaboration from South Asia. Late Fr. Leitner as Regional Assistant had initiated similar conversation. Possibly he is continuing that conversation from above! Our journey took us to Bishkek (Capital City), to Zalalabad in the outskirts of the capital city and to Osh (the other major city). We journeyed together, celebrated Eucharist together and interacted with the people around. At the State University in Osh there are several hundreds of students from India, studying medicine. From the Letter of Fr. Anthony Corcoran, SJ, the Apostolic Administrator: “As a Papal Mission entrusted to the Society, the Church in this country has been served well by the members of the Society, both local men and members from other provinces. ... As Apostolic Administrator, it is my intention to further develop

this bond between the Society and Church. The Regional Superior of the Russian Region, Fr. Boguslaw Steezek, has graciously agreed to help to assist in this process of requesting Jesuits from India arrive to engage in ministry here. The reasons for engaging Jesuits from your provinces are many. Most fundamentally, these are found in the quality and generosity of your Jesuits – and your unique experience of serving in the multi-ethnic and interreligious environments. We could learn from you in these matters.”



The following note from the Superior of Russian Region, Boguslaw Steezek, SJ:

“I am writing to you, with the desire to pursue further the Russian and the Indian Provinces concerning the possibility of Indian Jesuits serving in the country of Kyrgyzstan. As you are aware, the Russian Region has been in contact with the Conference of South Asia since August of 2010. My predecessor was able to visit India and speak with the Provincials during their Conference meeting in Goa in 2012. In subsequent years, the Region has continued this discussion with individuals and with Fr General, *With this letter*, I would like to reiterate our invitation/request. I will provide a brief overview of the situation in Kyrgyzstan,. In addition, I will propose a possible process for advancing this conversation.

Kyrgyzstan is a Papal mission entrusted to the

Society of Jesus. It is a former Soviet Republic where a small remnant of Catholic population remains. Approximately 87% of the population are Sunni Muslims. Most of these people are moderate, with a smaller percent practicing a more strict form of Islam. There is considerable openness on the part of both government and society regarding education and concerning questions of civil liberties. The country is rather im-

poverished; nevertheless, it is not without significant cultural assets. Although the Catholic population is a very small minority and the character of Catholicism of these faithful tends to be quite "traditional," there is evident potential for developing our Jesuit presence. The Kyrgyz people tend to be accepting of foreigners. I am very confident that the presence of Indian Jesuit priests, brothers and scholastics would provide a profound enrichment to our apostolate endeavor."



At the end of a short (four days) but very engaging visit of the Region, I am pleasantly surprised to learn how the Society valiantly continued its presence in this country through many vicissitudes; perhaps the providential continuation of the Society through its presence in Russia during the suppression years, is indirectly challenging us to enter into renewed mission in this region. South Asia is well placed to engage this mission, through the educational apostolate, inter-religious dialogue and the social engagement in this multiethnic, pluri-religious and civilizational context of Kyrgyzstan.

I am grateful to Fr. Thomaz Kot, Regional Assistant for Central Europe for taking the initiative to arrange for a visit, with the generous support from Fr. Tony Corcoran, the Apostolic Administrator for Kyrgyzstan. Let us discern the ways of the Lord and listen to the call of the Lord through these invitations extended to us in South Asia. I am inviting our men in South Asia to take this 'call' into their prayer and pursue the interior movements of the Spirit. May be the Lord has surprises for us.

George Pattery, SJ
Provincial of South Asia.