

TEACHING THE FAITH AND SUPPORTING THE POOR

Jesuit Brother from Kyrgyzstan thanks London church for their 'Helping Hand'



Brother Damian Wojciechowski SJ

The parishioners of the Church of the Immaculate Conception, London, welcomed a special visitor last month. Brother Damian Wojciechowski SJ visited Farm Street Church to thank supporters and explain in detail the work in which he and his colleagues were involved in Kyrgyzstan. The parish of Santa Klara in the former Soviet country is twinned with the Jesuit parish in London through Jesuit Missions.

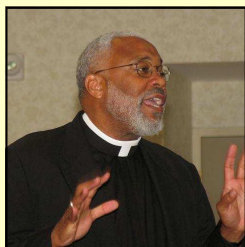
“In our community, we have predominantly ethnic groups of European descent which include Germans, Russian, Polish (most of whose ancestors were forcefully resettled there during Stalin’s time) and also German/Uzbek families,” explained Br Damian. “Most of them have very basic experience of the Church and even less knowledge about basic Catholic teaching.” This is because the Catholic Church was persecuted and forced underground during the Communist regime.

The area that Father Jerzy, the Parish Priest of St Klara, serves covers numerous disparate villages, each of which contains a few Catholics. He is only able to visit some communities once every few weeks to celebrate Mass. In winter the conditions are treacherous and it makes it difficult to visit the isolated communities.

There is a high rate of unemployment amongst the Catholic population, which is a minority group, and Brother Damian said that “Probably the most important part of the activity of the Catholic Church here will be charity work.”

Father William Pearsall SJ, the parish priest at Farm Street explained about the ethos of the Helping Hand project which is run from their Parish. He insists that their support should never be a case of hand-outs or patronising donations. “We would never want our help to be one-sided, the rich assisting the poor. We have much to learn from them,” he says. “Our ‘Helping Hand’ project is about supporting projects both at home and overseas, especially those Christian communities which are in the minority, as in Kyrgyzstan. It’s an opportunity to bring the two communities – the Muslims and the Christians – together.”

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Cyclists and runners prepare to raise thousands
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Deacon's ordination at Stamford Hill
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Rwandan genocide is focus for Holocaust Day

This year the Lauriston Jesuit Centre in Edinburgh once again marked Holocaust Memorial Day by way of a joint project with St Thomas of Aquin's school in Edinburgh.

Says the Director of the Lauriston Centre, Fr Chris Boles SJ: "Last year in the school we had a very moving evening focussed on Auschwitz, with testimonials from pupils who had visited, followed by a screening of 'God on Trial'. That was followed by a question and answer session with Frank Cottrell Boyce, the screenwriter of the film.

"Our focus for this year's Holocaust Memorial Day was Rwanda, and the horrific genocide that took place there in 1994. We centred our evening around the film, 'Shooting Dogs', and followed it with a short presentation from Jackie Calder, founder of the Edinburgh based charity 'Wish For Rwanda'. Jackie told us about the situation in present day Rwanda, the signs of hope that are there, and the reasons for optimism that now exist."

'Shooting Dogs' stars John Hurt, who plays Fr Christopher, director of the École Technique Officielle in Kigali, and forges a friendship with Joe

(Hugh Dancy), a young gap-year teacher. Together they have to confront the limits of their courage as they decide whether to stay or leave in the face of the brutal violence. In the film we see the impotence and ineffectiveness of the United Nations peacekeepers, who get permission to shoot the dogs which are eating corpses but are not allowed to fire to protect human lives.

"It was a most appropriate film to show on Holocaust Memorial Day", says Fr Boles. "In the film we see in a powerful way the story of the ordinary people of Rwanda caught up in the terror. And through it all we encounter the strains placed on faith and hope, and the extraordinary courage and love that overcome fear.

'Shooting Dogs' was filmed on location in the very school in Rwanda where the genocide took place, and most of the cast are local survivors of the genocide.

"It is a powerful film, from Scottish Director Michael Caton-Jones," says Fr Boles. "And it is an important reminder that Holocaust Memorial Day has a relevance beyond even the horror of the Nazi death camps."

Kyrgyzstan and Farm Street

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Brother Damian concurs. "We are now starting pastoral work with our Catholics and also with Muslim students," he explains. We already have regular meetings with children and a cinema club for the youth; we visit two houses for handicapped people, one house for old people and a prison. We have also set up an inter-faith summer camp for Muslims where we discuss matters of faith as well as organising sporting activities."

The Jesuits' work in Kyrgyzstan had small beginnings. "We started almost from zero," said Brother Damian. "We bought a little home to sleep in which also contained a room for a chapel." Fr Pearsall compares their origins with the early Church. "They share a communal life – a life based on their faith," he says. "The celebration of Mass began in their homes before they could move into a chapel. And the fact that the lay people are actively involved in passing on and sharing their Christian faith is an inspiration to us."

Farm Street's support will enable the Christians of Kyrgyzstan to build a chapel in a village, about an hour's drive from Bishkek which will provide a place of worship, as well as developing more joint initiatives with their Muslim neighbours. It is hoped that some of the London parishioners will be able to visit the country at some point.

For more information about the 'Helping Hand' project and the parish's twinning with Kyrgyzstan, phone 020 7493 7811 or e-mail farmstreet@rcdow.org.uk. You can also visit the web site of the Jesuits in Kyrgyzstan:

www.catholic-kyrgyzstan.org

