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Pope remembers heroes, some he knew

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

ASTANA, Kazakstan — Pope John Paul II's visit to Kazakstan gave him a chance to honor some long-remembered personal heroes.

Among them were the priests and bishops of Polish descent who suffered and died in Soviet gulags after being deported from their homeland in the 1930s.

At a Mass in the Astana cathedral Sept. 24, the pope recalled several martyr-pastors whom he has long admired and some that he knew personally.

"In heart and spirit I relive the unspeakable trials of all those who suffered not only physical exile and imprisonment, but public ridicule and violence because they chose not to renounce the faith," he said in a sermon before some 350 priests, nuns, seminarians and lay missionaries.

The pope's connection with the Kazak martyrs goes back to his youth and helps explain his determination to visit the former Soviet republic in Central Asia, where almost all of the 180,000 Catholics are descendants of deported families from Germany, Ukraine and Poland.

When growing up in southern Poland, one of the future pope's spiritual directors was Father Tadeusz Federowicz. Father Federowicz was assigned to the Archdiocese of Lviv in what is now Ukraine, and when he learned that a group of his parishioners was being deported to Central Asia, he obtained permission to share their plight.

He invented a new type of pastoral care for deportees, the pope recalled with pride at the Mass.

The pope also remembered Father Wladislaw Bukowinski, whom he also had known personally in Krakow. The priest ended up in a gulag in Kazakstan and, when offered his freedom, he chose to remain among the prisoners. Eventually he secretly founded a congregation of nuns that is still active today in numerous former Soviet territories.

The pope recalled the "unshakable confidence in God's power" demonstrated in a diary entry by Father Bukowinski, who wrote: "We have been ordered not to spare ourselves but, if necessary, to give our lives for the flock of Christ."



Reuters/CNS

The emblem of his pontificate serves as a backdrop as Pope John Paul II presides at Mass in Astana, the capital of Kazakstan, Sept. 23. Begging God to keep humanity at peace, the pope issued a dramatic appeal that the world not be allowed to slide into war following the attacks on the United States.

While evoking the trials under the "long winter" of communism in Kazakstan, on several occasions the pope said the pastoral challenges today are somewhat different.

The spiritual void left by the atheistic regime makes people "vulnerable to the myths of consumerism and hedonism imported from the West," he told the region's bishops.

For that reason, he said, evangelization should start with an effort to educate people in the faith and help restore their spiritual ideals.

The pope also encouraged the local church to look beyond its traditional ethnic borders in announcing the Gospel. The number of Catholics has shrunk in Kazakstan in recent years, as ethnic Germans and Ukrainians have gone back to their ancestors' homeland.

The local pastor at the Astana cathedral, Father Otto Messmer, said his congregation used to be half German but now has just two or three German families.

He also said that, in 12 years as pastor, he had baptized one native Kazak.

Pope

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of the 8 million Muslims and the 6 million Orthodox Christians do not practice their faith. The pope sees that as a shameful result of communism, but also as an opportunity for the church.

To religious and cultural leaders, the pope defended the right to evangelize, saying religious experience cannot be restricted to the private sphere. Those who have met the truth of Christ feel the need to share their faith, though always respecting the beliefs of others, he explained.

In modern terms, the pope was "thinking outside the box." The "box" in Kazakstan is long-standing ethnic identity with religion: Kazaks are Muslim, Russians are Orthodox, and the descendants of many German, Ukrainian and Polish deportees are Christian.

The pope challenged that status quo, convinced that the Gospel really does have a universal appeal. As he told the bishops of Central Asia, the tiny Catholic community there is like leaven that can "transform the whole loaf."

"The priority pastoral aims of your apostolic mission should be the spreading, with all your energies, of the Gospel proclamation and the continuing consolidation of the church's organization," he said.

That's a tall order. The Catholic Church in Kazakstan has lost more than 25 percent of its membership in recent years as ethnic Germans and Ukrainians have returned to their homeland.

But the pope sees this as a transitional moment, when the church turns its attention to "those who belong to no religion and to those who are searching for the truth," as he said in a sermon.

It's a rapidly changing world, and when the pope looks at Kazakstan he does not see just a shrinking number of Catholics spread out on the steppes of Asia, but the potential for exponential growth.

Perhaps that's one reason that, on this trip, the cardinals who deal with interreligious dialogue and ecumenism were not on the papal plane — unusual in countries where Catholics are a small minority. But the pope made sure he brought along his top evangelization official.

Pope John Paul II reached Armenia Sept. 25 to help celebrate 1,700 years of Christianity there. It was the first visit by any pope to Armenia.

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