

## **Kazakhstan, land of peaceful co-existence between Catholics and Muslims**

*Accounts of peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims. The Bishop of Karaganda, Adelio Dell'Oro and the chief Imam of the regional mosque, Omirzhak Bekkoza discuss relations between faithful of the two religions*



*Clockwise from the far left: the Imam Omirzhak Bekkoza, Bishop Adelio Dell'Oro and the Vicar General Evgenij Zinkowski.*

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**“Here in Kazakhstan, relations between Muslims and Catholics are not just good, relations are very cordial and friendly: religious affiliation is not a cause of division; we all live together in what I would define a spirit of harmony”.** These are the words of the 68-year-old Bishop of Karaganda, Fr. Adelio Dell'Oro. Karaganda is a densely populated city in the centre of the country. The diocese, which covers an area two and a half times the size of Italy, includes twenty parishes (the two remotest ones are 1700 km apart), 18 priests, nine of whom were born in Kazakhstan. Fr. Adelio knows the country well : he has lived in Karaganda for more than 10 years – from 1997 to 2009 – and in Astana, as a fidei donum priest from the Italian diocese of Milan. He returned in 2013 after he was nominated bishop, first as the Apostolic Administrator of Atyrau and then as a pastor in Karaganda.

### **Small flock**

**Kazakhstan is home to 17 million people from 130 different nationalities: Muslims (Sunnis) make up 70-75% of the population, while the Orthodox account for 20-25%. There are also Protestants and Buddhists, as well as a small flock of Catholics.** “I often say jokingly that we owe our presence here in Kazakhstan to Stalin,” says Fr. Adelio. “It was him who deported tens of thousands of Catholics – most of them Polish, German, Ukrainian and Lithuanian – to Kazakh concentration camps: most of them died, but those who survived (including some priests) passed on the faith to young generations. In the long winter of the communist regime, it was mostly grandmothers who baptised their grandchildren”. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were 300,000 Catholics in the country but over the years, a large number left the country and returned to their native countries. Now, there are around 50,000 left: a few thousand live in the diocese and city of Karaganda, around which many concentration camps had once stood.

## Friendship with the Imam

The bond between Fr. Adelio and the chief Imam of the regional mosque in Karaganda, is more than just formal cordiality, it is friendship. “The Imam is a very open, cordial, generous and giving man; He and I meet often. He is eager to maintain and build good relations with us Catholics and always attends celebrations and meetings I invite him to,” Fr. Adelio remarks. “There are many examples I could give you: I will limit myself to two. Last year I went to meet him at the end of Ramadan: we spoke for a while and before bidding each other farewell he offered me a sip of holy water from Mecca (where he had been on a pilgrimage), inviting me to make a wish. Allah, he said, would surely fulfil it. On September 11th this year, I invited him to the beatification of Fr. Wladyslaw Bukowinski: not only did he attend but the next day he invited me to the mosque on the occasion of the Kurban-Ait feast (the sacrifice of Abraham) and asked me to express my wishes and address a brief speech to faithful.”

### The meeting at the mosque

58-year-old Imam Omirzhak Bekkoza, who is married with eight children, says: “Relations between Muslims and Catholics in the city, as in the rest of the country, are really good: there are no tensions or misunderstandings and there have never been any conflicts. Muslim faithful are fond of Catholics, who are attentive towards us and come to visit us. Kazakhstan is our common home”. He praises Fr. Adelio, saying: “I met him when he joined the diocese and invited me. Since then, a strong friendship has grown between us. It happened spontaneously: Fr. Adelio exudes kindness, he is always cordial and has a look of benevolence about him. When a person is friendly, people tend to approach them: his personality attracts everyone. He is not arrogant, despite being older than me. And he always responds to my invitations: on the occasion of the Kurban-Ait, he also delivered a brief sermon to 4000 Muslims, reflecting on Abraham and on sacrifice. Aside from Fr. Adelio, my dearest Catholic friends include the vicar general Evgenij Zinkowski and Sister Alma Dzamova, whom I met a long time ago when they came to introduce themselves and pay me a visit.”

### The Spirit of Assisi

Fr. Adelio and Imam Omirzhak are both keen to underline **the important role the state plays in fostering and encouraging good relations between all citizens**. “I think President Nursultan Abishevich Nazarbayev, who signed an Agreement with the Holy See in 1998, had a great deal of respect for John Paul II, who visited in 2001: I believe this is the reason why he decided to organise a meeting similar to the one in Assisi, every three years, which was attended by Muslims, Orthodox, Catholics and representatives of other religions. It is a beautiful moment of fraternity that helps strengthen bonds between faithful,” says Fr. Adelio. Imam Omirzhak adds: “**All leaders in the region, starting with the president, work to nurture understanding between different national communities as well**. A house of friendship was built in Karaganda, where presidents of all these communities have an office of their own and meet regularly. This initiative was also aimed at strengthening the bonds of friendship between those of us living in Kazakhstan.

### Diocese life

Parish life in the diocese of Karaganda unfolds as it does in every Catholic community around in the world: “In this specific moment in history,” remarks Fr. Adelio, “I believe it is important to take great care in transmitting the faith to younger generations, as it is no longer passed down

automatically from parents to children as it once was. We priests pay particular attention to the catechesis of young people and adults, with a view to increasing people's awareness. Also, **we encourage everyone to testify the faith in all areas of life: at work, at school, approaching everyone without fear. For me, it is paramount to take care of the poor, of the disadvantaged and the suffering, regardless of their faith or nationality.** The motto I chose for my episcopal ordination is "unum loquuntur omnia", all things proceed from one: in the heart of each man dwells a desire for truth and beauty and this is the common ground we share with everyone."

### **The role of religious people**

**The bishop and imam are both adamant that genuinely religious people living together in peace can offer the world a fertile testimony.** "Religion derives from God, it is a powerful thing," the imam says. "In this country, there are Muslims and Christians of different nationalities, with different traditions, customs and cultures: **Religion plays a special role in leading everyone towards peace, love and mutual respect.** The friendship I share with Fr. Adelio has a positive impact on people and society, sustaining and consolidating peace. If there is friendship between all religions then there will also be friendship between people of different nationalities". **Addressing Omirzhak, Fr. Adelio adds: "We could even launch common charity initiatives to assist the neediest, this is important". The imam nods saying: "yes, it is a step we could take".**