

Pope In Central Asia: 'Civilization of Love'

by Marianna Wertz

Pope John Paul II's 95th international apostolic trip, which brought him to Central Asia from Sept. 22-26, for the first time in his 23-year papacy, could not have been more important had it actually been planned to occur at this time of great tension. Indeed, the Pope had to repulse advice not to take the long-planned trip to Kazakstan and Armenia, because of the possible danger of terrorist assault, or even that American planes might be launching bombing raids into neighboring Afghanistan while the Pontiff was in Kazakstan.

The visit took John Paul II to two countries which have witnessed war and violence throughout most of the 20th Century, and where ecumenicism is crucial to their very survival. In Kazakstan, with more than 100 different nationalities and ethnic groups, Muslims comprise more than half the 15 million population, while Catholics number merely 200-400,000. Many of the nation's Christians were victims of Stalin's gulags during the Soviet occupation until 1991. Armenia, with a population of 3.3 million, is also a former Soviet republic. It was the first country in the world to proclaim Christianity its official religion, 1,700 years ago. The Pope's trip was planned, in part, to celebrate this.

- Call for Peace and Dialogue-

From the moment he arrived in Astana, the capital of Kazakstan, on Sept. 22, until he departed Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, five days later, Pope John Paul devoted his visit to the urgent message of achieving a peaceful solution to the global crisis sparked by the Sept. 11 events in the United States, and pointing the way to what he called "a civilization of love."

As he was welcomed to Astana by President Nursultan A. Nazarbayev, the Pope told his Kazak hosts, and the world media covering his trip, that "controversies must not be resolved by recourse to arms, but by the peaceful means of negotiation and dialogue." The President thanked the Pope for his courageous decision to undertake the trip: "Muslims and Christians must create a society based on love," said Nazarbayev, the former leader of the Soviet Communist Party in Kazakstan. He called the dialogue among believers of different religions a weapon for the struggle against terrorism.

Following a Mass celebrated at Astana's Square of the Motherland on Sept. 23, before more than 50,000 people, the majority of whom were Muslims, the Pope called on this special nation to set an example for the world: "From this

city, from Kazakstan, a country that is an example of harmony between men and women of different origins and beliefs, I wish to make an earnest call to everyone, Christians and the followers of other religions, to work together to build a world without violence, a world that loves life, and grows in justice and solidarity. We must not let what has happened lead to a deepening of divisions. Religion must never be used as a reason for conflict. From this place I invite Christians and Muslims to pray in common to God, whose sons we all are, so that the Supreme Good and Peace reign in the world. That all people who are illuminated by the wisdom of God, work in favor of a 'civilization of love' in which there is no room for hatred or violence."

On the 'Great Silk Road'

As Pope John Paul departed Kazakstan on Sept. 25 for Armenia, he pointed to the nation's key location in the world, "on the great Silk Road." This reference certainly resonated with the leaders of such nations as Russia and China, who, in accord with Lyndon LaRouche's idea, are working to bring a "New Silk Road" into existence to restart the world economy. Of course, the outbreak of war in Central Asia, resulting from the Sept. 11 attack, would spell the end to these development efforts—the precise intent of those behind the attack.

"The quest for harmony has characterized relations between Christianity and Islam here ever since the formation of the Turkish Khanate in the endless spaces of your steppes, and this has enabled your country to become a junction between East and West on the great Silk Road. The younger generations too should follow this path with renewed commitment," said the Pope.

In Armenia, the Holy Father also focussed on the importance of peace, linking it to the fight for "the common good." "Everyone, especially those responsible for public life, is called today to be genuinely committed to the common good, in justice and solidarity, putting the progress of the people ahead of any partial interests. This is also true of the urgent search for peace at the regional level. Peace will only be built on the solid foundations of mutual respect, justice in inter-community relations, and magnanimity on the part of the strong."

Counters Western 'Hedonism'

In dialogue with religious, scientific, artistic, and youth leaders during his trip, the Pope made clear that the Christian ideas he represents are not the "hedonism" of the West. This is particularly important, because it is opposition to American "materialist culture" that breeds recruitment of fundamentalist extremists from among Muslim youth.

"The long Winter of Communist domination," John Paul II told a group of religious leaders in Kazakstan, has led to "a scarcity of ideals, which makes people particularly vulnerable to the myths of consumerism and hedonism imported from the West." During his last public appearance in the country,



A frail but powerful voice for the civilization of love against the “clash of civilizations”: Pope John Paul II with the President of Armenia, Robert Kocharian, and Mrs. Kocharian.

he repeated the theme, warning that “Western models are enticing and alluring because of their remarkable scientific and technical cast, but regrettably there is growing evidence of their deepening human, spiritual, and moral impoverishment.”

At the same time, John Paul II warned that “hatred, fanaticism, and terrorism profane the name of God and disfigure the true image of man.”

The Pope addressed students at Eurasian University in Astana—established in 1996 by President Nazarbayev, to make possible student exchanges between Kazaks and Europeans. He spoke to an audience of scientists and intellectuals of Kazakhstan, whom he called, “seekers after truth.” With them, he discussed the deeper basis for ecumenical dialogue: “One of your country’s great thinkers, the teacher Abai Kunanbai, put it this way: ‘A man cannot be a man unless he perceives the evident and the hidden mysteries of the universe, unless he seeks an explanation for everything. Anyone who fails to do this is no different from the animals. God distinguished man from the animals by giving him a soul.’”

While encouraging this bridge between Europe and Asia, the Pope pointedly recalled his “Message for the World Day of Peace on the first of January 2001, when I spoke of the danger of a ‘slavish conformity’ to Western culture. . . . In this context, and precisely here in this land of encounter and dialogue,” the Pope stressed, “I wish to affirm the Catholic

Church’s respect for Islam, for authentic Islam: the Islam that prays, that is concerned for those in need. Recalling the errors of the past, including the most recent past, all believers ought to unite their efforts to ensure that God is never made the hostage of human ambitions.”

Contrast With Fundamentalism

The entirety of Pope John Paul’s trip, emphatically including the warm reception he received from the Muslim leadership in Kazakstan—both President Nazarbayev and the religious leaders who welcomed him with open arms—stands in stark contrast with the actions of the fundamentalists on both sides of the fight.

The Taliban in Afghanistan, willing to sacrifice the country’s population to carry out its warped view of Islam, is in essence no different than the raving of American televangelist Pat Robertson in this crisis, who calls for the elimination of seven Muslim-run nations in an American “crusade.” On Sept. 18, Robertson, in a savage interview with Lee Webb on the Christian Broadcasting Network, called on the United States to “repent,” and then carry out what he called orders to eliminate seven Islamic states, and prepare for war against a billion Muslims: “And if you see a comment by Paul Wolfowitz, who is the Deputy Secretary of Defense, he says we’ve got to basically eliminate—I’m paraphrasing his words—crush, do away with, states that sponsor terrorism. That puts us against Iran, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Libya, and the Palestinian Authority. . . . And Sudan. That’s seven of them. And you’re looking at a billion Muslims around the world who sooner or later are going to say, ‘We are brothers of these people. They’re our heroes, and Allah is great,’ and all that. . . . And yes, we need to go do what Mr. Wolfowitz . . . said. I don’t want us to, in any way, stop the resolution of this nation to pursue terrorism as far as it takes us, and to eliminate those states that sponsor terrorism.”

The choice between a “Civilization of Love,” a “Dialogue of Civilizations,” or a “Civilization of Hate,” a new Dark Age, is clear.

Some of the material for this article is from Vatican News Service and Zenit News Agency.