



From seed to Tree

Children's Centre in Kyrgyzstan

Girls from high school in Suzak, one of the strongest Islamic centers in Southern Kyrgyzstan, go to the edge of the lake Issyk-Kul, straight from the bus. You can see that such great water makes them feel great. It's actually the sea, long 200 km, not the lake. They are wearing hijabs, so

they can only dip their feet in the water. This is the second year as Father Adam Malinowski SJ from the parish in Jalalabad organizes astronomical camps for Muslim youth. He is running ten astronomical clubs in local schools – in Jalalabad and its surroundings. He also built a small astronomical observatory near the church.

Astronomy is close to theology - whoever looks at the sky, looks in God's direction. In some schools, photo of Father Adam hangs next to Jurij Gagarin. As a reward, the best students go to the camp at Children's Leisure and Rehabilitation Center at Issyk-Kul lake. There is a condition in the agreement of camps organization requested by the parents, that we are not allowed to convert the children attending the camps. However, young Muslims look at everything with great interest – they watch volunteers from Europe, our prayers and Holy Mass.

Difficult Dialogue

- Damian, if you organize this camp again, we'll burn you! - I am threatened by young 'moldo' (Kyrgyz Mullah, Islamic cleric), whom I meet in the sawmill in the neighboring village Dhzenisch (in Kyrgyz it means "victory", but before World War II this village was called



Tschytschkan, meaning "mouse"). Mullah has shaved head, barely there beard and is dressed in a white shirt, knee-length white, wide "Muslim" pants. He is wearing white flat Muslim skullcap hat instead of a pointy Kyrgyz one 'kolpak'.

I'm happy that I finally met him. It was he who organized denunciations to the KGB that in the Children's Rehabilitation Center we were converting Muslim children to Baptists. KGB agents who I know used to come to me and say: Damian, we know that you do not do anything bad, but if it's denounced, we have to come and check. Give us 500 som (Kyrgyzstani currency) for petrol, will you?



We sit on the grass. Moldo does not speak Russian very well, so we are switching to Kyrgyz.

- You should come and check what we do first ... Because if you set us on fire you will never know if we really did something bad – I say to him

I can see that my argument does not convince him. He probably thinks that it would be better to burn the unfaithful as a preventative measure.

How should I talk to him? He lives in the year 1439 (years counted from Hider, Muhammad's escape from Mecca to Medina). We are almost six centuries apart. He would probably have found a common language and understanding with knights from the crusades or Poles fighting with the Turks at Varna.

- “Bajke” (I call him, something of a meaning similar to “sir” or “brother”) do I look like a fool, who converts children without the knowledge of their parents? God would not approve of that ...

Moldo considers my answer in silence ... He does not like the idea of converting to Christianity, but to Islam ... who knows? We part ways in a friendly manner. Next year, he will denounce us again.

How were we denounced as "converting Muslim children to Baptists"? We organized a free camp for orphans and disabled children from Tschytschkan. At the same time, we were running a camp for children from Catholic parishes. Kyrgyz children were curious about the makeshift chapel when they saw us during the Holly Mass. During the evening play, they tried to sing songs with showing: e.g. "All the Saints are smiling ..." We did not want to chase those kids away so they did not feel unwanted. This is how we “proselytize”.

In the service of the weakest

Children with disabilities according to popular opinion among local Muslims are punishment for the sins of parents. Parents are stigmatized. Often, the husband leaves his wife and establishes a second family. So a woman not only has a handicapped child, but she is left alone without support. How do you go to work when you have a disabled child? The child is usually locked in his room. There is no rehabilitation or activity. In particular, disabled children suffer from extreme lack of basic care; they have little or no chances of physiotherapy, external stimulation and are usually housed in conditions which would certainly be regarded as substandard in other countries.

Group of disabled children from Batken (south of Kyrgyzstan) are getting off the bus, on which they were travelling for more as one day. They are interested in everything - people, home, toilets, and canteen and, of course, great water in which they can bathe. Some of them are on crutches, the others on wheelchairs. Children with



Down's syndrome are independent in terms of mobility and always ready for some mischief. Their mothers, thanks to the fact that children are minded by volunteers, can have a few days for themselves. We want to do more for those children: invite therapists, organize hippotherapy, but we lack rooms for co-workers and volunteers. Young people can still live in a yurt, but 60-year-old therapist from Austria cannot. The Centre is crowded - a room of 20 square meters is a bedroom for 7 mothers with handicapped children. It's hard to call it a rest but everyone appreciates it and is happy anyway.

How was it born?

Our center was created from a simple need. We had already organized camps for children and young people from our parishes scattered throughout Kyrgyzstan. Camps were under tents or in rented, low-cost holiday resorts - often without a bathroom or toilet. Water was taken by a pipe from a nearby river and children were crying that they could not fall asleep because



they were cold in the night. We felt that we had to do something. Several organizations helping children with disabilities were in the same situation. We decided to join forces, but in the fact we joined our needs.

We fundraised from everyone from whom it was possible: large and small. We received a lot of help from the Jesuits in Germany, Austria, England, Poland, Switzerland, Slovakia, from the General Curia in Rome, from Australia. Volunteers from Slovenia built a roof with their own money. I myself drove around various parishes and to different market fairs where I sold my photographs from the Kyrgyz Mountains. At that time, a revolution and a civil war were raging in Kyrgyzstan: when thousands of houses were burning in Jalalabad, we were building our own house at Lake Issyk-Kul.

It took us a year. We had lots of problems to even start the construction, we had to fight with local powers and, of course, corruption ... We had, however, such collaborators, including Muslims, that all the indecipherable for the European obstacles were overcome. When the first group arrived - it was Catholic youth - they were sleeping in the canteen, and instead of resting they painted the walls. These camps are very important for our Catholic children and young people: they normally live amongst Muslims and only during the camps they get to know other Catholics and can strengthen their faith.



Showing the goodness of the Father

We have groups that come to us every year. Such is the orphanage Lotos z Osz. The Russian-Tatar marriage has adopted under its roof almost 20 orphans. For the maintenance of one child they kept on receiving 2-3 Euros a day from the state. When the mother died, the twenty-year-old son took over her responsibility for the house. We obtain money from various groups according to their ability to pay for the stay, but we do not take anything from the orphanages like Lotos - they simply do not have any money. Just like the children from the invalids' house in Jalalabad - when they come to us, they often have no spare clothes with them other than the ones on them, with the flip-flops on the legs, and one plastic bags in their hands.

The parents of the children of invalids from Jalalabad, - all Muslims, from the foundation "Source of love" founded by our help, ask me if the priest can pray over each of their children? They wait eagerly until a priest dressed in an alba and stole approaches each child, puts his hands on their heads and prays quietly. Kyrgyz people are pious by nature and traditionally open to other religions. They are convinced that prayer and God can help their children more than doctors.

Without doubt work of "Children Rehabilitation and Spirituality Center" is the greatest pastoral and charitable

work of the Catholic Church in Kyrgyzstan. The Project seeks to reach mentally, social, physically challenged children across the country. More as 1000 children every year. This is also the biggest Church activity among Muslims. Every camp has its own character :

-Camps for disabled children are the testimony of Christian love for Muslim society.

-Protestant camps are an example of practical ecumenism.

-Astronomical camps are pre-evangelization work with Muslim youth.

-Catechetical camps for catholic youth and children are part of our work for the growing future of Catholic Church in Central Asia.



Our plans

The biggest problem in our Centre is lack of the space. We have not enough rooms for participants, workers, volunteers. Too many children are living in that same room, that's why some of them must sleep in the tents. Due to lack of space we make some camps only for few days what is not reasonable when the children are travelling in one direction two days. Another problem is lack of separated hall for different activities, including therapy for disabled children. It is very dif-

difficult to do it in dining room. More and more Catholics are present in our Centre (or visiting as tourist) and for this reason we serve the Holy Mass every day, but we have no chapel. With the aim of making improvements necessary in the conditions of accommodation, facilitating an increase in the number of participants, and enhancing functionality of the Children's Centre, we have a plan in 2019-20 to construct a second building. Our missionary offices in Austria, Germany, London and Switzerland have supported our work for years. They help us pay fixed costs like: salaries, heating, electricity. They together with FACSI and other foundation will help us by construction of new building.

But much more we need a Jesuits who are not afraid to work in so differs culture as in Europa, rest of Asia or America, where people don't now Jesus and the church is less then mustard seed. Jesuits who can overcome temptation that poor people needs only bread.

I am always wondering how it is possible that such a large tree grows out of a tiny seed at such a rapid pace? How many people from so many countries have been involved in the creation and functioning of this house! Circumstances of the Center and its activities often resemble huge waves, which during winter storms hit the Issyk-kul shore lying just 100 meters away, but still children from all over Kyrgyzstan come to us and undoubtedly those days spent in our Center will remain in their memory for a long time, maybe forever.

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