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ASIA/KAZAKHSTAN - "Visas" for missionaries and religious freedom: the expectations of the local Church

Astana (Agenzia Fides) - The Catholic Church in Kazakhstan, a small minority, expects that the visit of Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone "will achieve some progress" on two key issues: "The issue of visas granted to foreign missionaries and limitations on religious freedom," revealed the missionary Franciscan Father Guido Trezzani, OFM, - in an interview with Fides - 15 years in Kazakhstan, founder and director of the community, "Village of the Ark" in Talgar near Almaty, a home which welcomes disabled children, orphans or those with family difficulties.

Cardinal Bertone, Vatican Secretary of State, heads the delegation from the Holy See to the summit for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), held on 2 and 3 December in Astana. The Cardinal said he had accepted the invitation of Kazakh authorities with joy, especially for the opportunity to be able to go to a country where there are "ample opportunities for peaceful and fruitful religious coexistence."

In the country of over 15 million inhabitants with a large Muslim majority, lives an Orthodox Christian community which represents about 13% of the population and a Catholic community of about 200,000 faithful, a small minority devoted to pastoral care and social activities, such as that led by Fr Trezzani. "The Catholic community in recent months has underlined the hopes for two important issues that affect our lives: the first is the difficulty in the issue and renewal of visas to foreign missionaries. They are often restricted to three-month tourist visas, having to leave the country and return after another three months, with results of clear precariousness and instability for the pastoral care work. Then there are the limitations to freedom of religion, while understandable from a State that wants to prevent the spread of extremist groups, present in the Central Asian region. But in doing so, you also penalize religious minorities such as our Church, which does not constitute any danger," notes Fr Trezzani to Fides. The State maintains tight control over all religious activities. Religious communities must be registered or remain illegal. No missionary activity is allowed without State authorization.

Despite this situation, notes Fr Trezzani, "the Catholic community is still receiving growing shows of confidence from the civil authorities, and this provides for a glimmer of hope. Our life at the community is proof of that: today there are the same State welfare structures that bring us and entrust us with disabled children or those for whom they can not care." (PA) (Agenzia Fides 01/12/2010)

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