

Booming oil industry spurs Catholic Church's growth

WASHINGTON - The Catholic Church in the western Asian nation of Kazakhstan is facing unprecedented growth spurred by the country's burgeoning economy and an influx of foreigners working in the oil industry.

But as the economy booms, Catholic leaders face challenges in making sure the country's small Catholic population continues to prioritize spiritual values over financial gains.

"In Kazakhstan so many people have one goal: to have lots of money," said Bishop Janusz Kaleta of Atyrau, Kazakhstan. He spoke to Catholic News Service in a telephone interview Aug. 21.

Years of communist rule in the aftermath of World War II stifled religious freedom in the country, which was part of the Soviet Union.

"It was one big prison for all religions," Bishop Kaleta said.

Most of the Catholics in the country today were exiled from Poland and Germany during the early 1930s and '40s, Bishop Kaleta said.

But since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Kazakhstan has been undergoing change. Bishop Kaleta said that in the last 20 years the number of parishes has grown from 50 to 70. Two more parishes will open by the end of this year, with hopes of two more being built in the coming years, he said.

Foreign energy companies have poured into the country, investing in oil and coal, boosting Kazakhstan's economy and bringing a flood of foreign workers. While living conditions have improved, wealth has trickled down slowly to the general population, including Catholics, the bishop said.

"Everywhere we have big international companies," Bishop Kaleta said. "We can see really big development and progress.

"And now the church is growing," he said.

Foreign workers from the United States, Latin America and the Philippines have provided an unexpected boost to the country's Catholic population, which has traditionally been overshadowed by the Orthodox population. Combined Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Christians make up nearly half of Kazakhstan's 15 million population.

Funding for the new parishes came from bishops' conferences in Europe and the United States, Bishop Kaleta said.