



# **INSTITUTE OF THE INCARNATE WORD**

*Province of the Immaculate Conception*

**Name of Religious Institution:**

Institute of the Incarnate Word (IVE)

**Name of Missionary Priest/speaker:**

Fr. Juan Martín Sierra, IVE

**Name of the Mission:**

Our Lady of Assumption. Los Juríes, Argentina. Diocese of Añatuya, known as the poorest in the country.

**Homily:**

Even though right now I am stationed in the poorest rural area of Argentina, I wanted to share with you the most important lesson that I've learned as a missionary priest.

I learned that lesson in Tajikistan, a country in Central Asia, just north of Afghanistan (as a matter of fact, my parish there was only 50 miles from the border with Afghanistan). As soon as I was ordained as a priest in the year 2005, I was sent to Tajikistan and there I understood that it is very little what a missionary can do at any mission on his own.

Believe me, it's very little what one can do out there by one's own means because there are lot of obstacles of different nature.

Let's start with the different circumstances of each mission country. For instance, Tajikistan it's the smallest and poorest country of the former Soviet Union. Besides, it was ravaged by a very bloody civil war that took place right after the Fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 thru 1996.

Since Tajiks are very similar to Afghans, (race, language, version of Islam, etc.) the Talibans from Afghanistan wanted to take over the country. As a result, there was a civil war between the Talibans and the Communist. Consequently, up to 70,000 people died in the span of 6 years before the Tajiks were backed by Russia and defeated them.



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In the '80s, 30% of the population was Christian, and as a result of the war, most left the country. As of now, less than 1% is Christian (i.e. 300 Catholics) and the rest of the 99% is Muslim.

Let's talk about the difficulties of the language. If I were preaching to you Live, you would be laughing at my accent along with my grammar mistakes in a kind and gentle way—but just imagine how the Russians laughed at my Russian... (Please laugh).

At the seminary, you dream about going to the gentiles and preaching The Word of God. Yet, when you must speak in an unfamiliar language—like Russian— you feel like a five-year-old child mumbling and stuttering words trying to make yourself understood, forbidding any room to preach.

Sometimes, people would come to us with simple questions, questions that one would gladly answer in any of the familiar languages. But for me, it was really very difficult to do so in Russian and so I would feel frustrated knowing that a better answer could have been said.

Let's talk about the race. Most of the priests in the former Soviet Union are Polish. Once, I was trying to give the Anointing of the Sick to an old Polish lady who kept refusing, saying that I was not a real priest because I didn't speak Polish, only Russian... (Please laugh). She said that I was a KGB spy...!

Let's also talk about the crazy laws on religion that they enforce. For instance, you cannot go to the hospital and visit the sick and talk to them about God because that would be considered a religious crime. You must be very careful, otherwise the government would take your visa and you'd leave your parishioners without a priest.

You cannot preach without the mayor of the city's approval because you would have the police at mass asking for it. Therefore, they give us a permit that lasts three months. When it expires, we must wait another month until they process the new permit, leaving our parishioners to enjoy a full month of masses without a homily every three months...



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So, as you can see, what a missionary can do at the mission on his own is limited, but here comes the most important thing: the lesson that I wanted to share with you, and that is what I really miss being there at that mission.

That parish is beautiful! It was amazing! Wonderful things happen there! For instance, we had very few parishioners. Most of them go to Sunday Mass, pray the Rosary every day, come to confession at least once a month and some once a week.

Every day for weekday masses we would have adoration to the Blessed Sacrament for an hour before mass and we would have 15 to 20 people joining us. We had a grand group of about 40 children coming to church every day, so one would be occupied organizing activities for them.

We would go often to the mountains with our youth group and many others. It was a lively and vibrant parish with numerous things happening. For instance, two vocations to the priesthood and one for religious life came from that parish.

And then, one came to understand that those wonderful things happened not because of the things we did— since it clearly exceeded all of our abilities or capacities— but they happened, (and this is the thing I wanted to share with you) because around the world there are millions of Catholics that pray for the missions— and you could sense the power of those prayers.

And this is what I really wanted to ask from you today: that you pray for the missions. Believe me that even though you see nothing from your house, God will do wonderful things with your prayers.

Of course, you can aid us with your money and support today and that will help a lot. Our Sunday collection in Kurgan Tube was less than three dollars per weekend. On the other hand, you have the rest of your lives to pray for the missions and this is what really matters. This is what really helps missionaries. God does amazing things with those prayers.



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Let me finish by telling you the story of Orzu.

Orzu was a seven-year-old child from the Pamirs. The Pamirs are a minority there, they belong to another race and speak another language and even belong to a different branch of Islam and live high up in the Pamir Mountain Range.

The thing is, that his family moved to Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan looking for a better future. He heard that there were some Argentinians in town, so he came to the parish because he wanted to play soccer with us. And so, we did.

Eventually he and his mother started to come every single day to the parish and asked to be baptized! He also received his First Communion and Confirmation and when he finished high school, he told us that he wanted to be a priest. Therefore, we prepared him in Dushanbe for a year and a half and then we sent him to our Seminary in Italy where he studied for eight years.

Two years ago, Orzu became the first Pamir Tajik Priest in the history of the Catholic Church! Right now, he is in a Parish in Ulianovsk, Russia and he wants to go to Tajikistan but there are concerns over his safety there, being a priest that converted from Islam.

Thus, believe me when I tell you that God makes awesome things because of your prayers that are said for the missions. Please, pray for the missions because with your prayers you can make a difference in the life of the people!

Thank you!

Fr. Juan M. Sierra, IVE