

For Immediate Release

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“LOVE IS THE ONLY LIGHT”

AID TO THE CHURCH IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

WASHINGTON—When Catholics in the United States contribute to the 2007 Collection for Aid to the Church in Central and Eastern Europe, they will be participating in a spiritual revival unlike any other. With a love that brings radiant light, Catholics in the United States help through the Collection to build parishes in many distant, unknown places, such as Magadan, Russia, a part of the world where prisoners of the Stalinist labor camps once had to fashion rosaries from bits of their bread ration. Generous donations from U.S. Catholics support seminaries, social service programs, youth ministry, pastoral centers, church construction and renovation, and the spreading of the Gospel message through the mass media.

“Love is the only light.” The theme for the **2007 Collection to Aid the Church in Central and Eastern Europe** draws on the Holy Father’s first encyclical. Pope Benedict XVI writes, “Love is the light—and in the end, the only light—that can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage needed to keep living and working” (*God Is Love [Deus Caritas Est]*, no. 39).

The Collection to Aid the Church in Central and Eastern Europe will be conducted in most Catholic parishes across the country on Ash Wednesday or the First Sunday of Lent, 2007. The suggested national date is Ash Wednesday, February 21, 2007.

Shortly after the fall of Communism, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops established the Office to Aid the Church in Central and Eastern Europe as the Church tried to regain its footing in countries where it had been driven underground for decades. Those who had sought to destroy the Church under Communist rule did not succeed, but their attempts left a terrible trail of devastation. Priests, bishops, and lay leaders were imprisoned. Books, religious education materials, and other vehicles of evangelization all but disappeared. Convents, seminaries, and other properties were often left in shambles or were converted to storage depots and barracks.

As a result of this severe repression, the bishops of the region today face the formidable tasks of restoring church structures and, more importantly, of rebuilding the spiritual centers of their communities. Now, more than ever, the ecclesial needs of Catholics in Central and Eastern Europe must be tenderly cultivated.

The Collection for Aid to the Church in Central and Eastern Europe raises funds to address the spiritual reconstruction of this traumatized region—training seminarians and lay leaders, reaching out to young people, reviving Catholic charities, and renewing programs of catechesis and communication.

Since 1991, the Collection has provided more than \$100 million to Catholics in post-Communist Russia and Central and Eastern Europe. These funds have supported more than 3,500 church projects in more than 25 countries: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

Many of these countries continue to experience serious economic problems. Rampant poverty hinders church rebuilding and catechetical efforts. While the people hunger for spiritual sustenance, educational materials are in short supply, seminaries and convents are desperately short of funds to train eager young men and women, and outreach programs are still at an early stage.

Much has been done already, but there is so much more yet to do. The story of the Church in Central and Eastern Europe is a story of vitality and growth, a story of steadfastness, hope, and light.

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