

## **Albania: “The land of the eagles” Prepares to fly again after years of captivity**

*by Cristoforo Palmieri, C.M.*

Albania has a population of three million, about two million of whom are in farming. 50% of the entire population are below the age of 25 years, and one million are below eighteen. It is a country to the east of Italy, fifty miles across the sea from Cape Otranto. It is a country which urgently needs to have Christ brought back to it; it is not easy to say whether this should be “first of all” or “above all”, seeing that it is a Marxist country, the worst among the many which history has known. Christ needs to be brought back to evangelize it, as he did the first time. It tried to eradicate him, in every sense of the word, from people’s hearts and from institutions and structures, but they can recall him to memory.

It is human and Christian to undertake the care of this country which in the past was rich in natural and mineral resources. They were exported to enrich the people in power during fifty years of dictatorship, and this brought the country to such a disastrous situation that it caused their own downfall. Everything now needs to be reconstructed, on the social, economic, structural, and legislative levels. Everything has stayed in the condition quo ante, in spite of the first imperceptible attempts made by the present democratic government, elected in free elections one year after the fall of the old regime in March 1992. The present government, in fact, as may easily be guessed, in view of the extreme poverty of the economic situation, cannot bring this reconstruction to completion with only internal resources.

### **Agriculture**

The farming population, even though they have ownership of their land, in fact have their hands tied because they have no seed, fertilizer or tractors, and the land is cultivated with spades and other implements of more than fifty years ago.

### **Industry**

Industries are also held up and inactive because they do not have the raw materials. They await entrepreneurs from other countries who wish to invest in Albania, who would risk quite a bit before they would reap the advantages. In this matter the government is open minded and available, and at the same time is making notable efforts to obtain political and economic support from foreign countries, especially neighbouring ones such as Italy.

### **Economy**

The standard of living is low, absolutely not comparable with that of Italy. An average family of five or six members needs both spouses to work in order to survive. The average monthly salary is twenty to twenty-five thousand Italian lire (£ 8 to £ 10) for an

industrial or agricultural worker, thirty to thirty-five thousand Italian lire for a professional person, and fifteen thousand for most pensioners. These sums are totally inadequate when two days' wages are necessary to buy a kilo of meat, and a kilo of bread costs three to four hundred Italian lire (about 15 p).

Bread is the most common, and almost the only, food, and although it will not bring the population to death through hunger as in African countries is certainly not a complete diet. Although, in spite of everything, there is order and calm, and even a certain recovery, many young people try to escape, and get into debt to the equivalent of ten years of work if the attempt should fail. They try to get to Greece, to Salonika, in the hope of finding low-paid work, and with an even worse condition: changing their Albanian Moslem name to a Greek Orthodox one.

A remedy is being sought, in a humanitarian and Christian spirit, for this whole situation, with the work of "Operation Pelican," Caritas Italiana, the Sisters of Mother Teresa who is a native of this country, and a huge number of institutions and organizations from various countries.

## **Religion**

Although people today declare themselves Moslem, Orthodox or Catholic, few know the difference, seeing that for fifty years no one spoke about such matters.

Up to 1400 everyone was Catholic. In 1400 came the Orthodox schism. In 1500 came the Turkish invasion and everyone was compelled to become Moslem, just as fifty years ago everyone was obliged to become communist, under pain of repression, confiscation of property, deprivation of all privileges, persecution. But the population was divided along traditional lines: 65% Moslem, 25% Orthodox, 10% Catholic. The government, self-declared atheistic, destroyed mosques and churches, removed the religious leaders, made any practice of faith difficult, bringing the risk of prison, persecution, forced labour; and many faced this.

On the other hand, with the radical political change of the last two years, even the churches are being reborn, re-asserting their presence, in spite of the serious difficulties, and are making contact again with the great and strong Christian tradition witnessed in the life of the nation.

The autocephalous Albanian Orthodox Church was welcomed in 1992 as a member of the European Conference of Churches, now has a new archbishop, His Excellency Yannoulatos, appointed by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, who co-ordinates the different needs of the four dioceses of Tirana, Berati, Gjirokastra and Korca. Because of the re-opening of the seminary in Durazzo eight new priests have been added to the fifteen who survived. Obviously these priests are not sufficient for the estimated 700,000 people and for the size of the territory. In the face of this difficulty there is more and more solidarity with foreign Churches, among which the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy is included.

The Catholic Church has recently been given an Apostolic Nuncio, His Excellency Mgr. Ivan Diaz, who has the task of re-building the Catholic communities which have about 350,000 people, especially in the north of the country. Other organizations share this task, such as the Sant'Egidio Community and Caritas, and religious orders such as the Jesuits,

Orionini, Salesians, the Sisters of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the Daughters of Charity, and perhaps some others not known.

The launching of the courses in the now re-opened seminary in Scutari is to meet the need of preparing new priests for the re-born communities. Only thirty priests survived. The solidarity of Episcopal Conferences, among them the Italian, is a great support for the work of reconstruction. From Christmas 1992, when the Apostolic Nuncio announced at Midnight Mass in the cathedral in Scutari that John Paul II had appointed four bishops for Albania, the Catholic Church has once again its hierarchy in the persons of four martyrs who survived:

Don Franco Zilia, 74, parish priest of Mildi, sentenced to death in 1968, commuted to twenty-five years of forced labour, archbishop of Scutari.

Don Rrok Mirdita, 53, from Yugoslavian Montenegro, who has worked as parish priest for an Albanian congregation in New York since 1970, archbishop of Durazzo.

Fr. Roberto Ashta O.F.M., a worker in hydroelectric schemes during the persecution, bishop of Pulati.

Mgr. Zev Sirnani, 64, arrested in 1976 and sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment of which he served only twelve because of the fall of the regime, auxiliary bishop of Scutari.

So, there are three dioceses, all in the north, while the Nuncio (representing the Pope in this country since 7 December 1991) has been appointed Apostolic Administrator, for an estimated population of 350,000 Catholics.

All this is coming alive again after the suppression of 1967 when 2169 churches, mosques and communities were suppressed, seven bishops, two hundred priests and two hundred religious were scattered or persecuted.

At present there are only one bishop, thirty priests and thirty religious surviving, carrying the weight of long years of persecution on their shoulders.

## **Albania and us**

The area of Albania is 28,844 sq km. Its population is 3,300,000. It is divided into 25 districts. The Apostolic Nuncio, at first through the Provincial of Naples and then directly through the Superior General, asked the Congregation to take on the care of part of the country. He gave us the district of Mirdite, to be evangelized and re-evangelized in our Congregation's style: affectively and effectively.

Mirdite is a district situated in the north-east of Albania, with an area of 895 sq km; it has a population of 55,000. Because of heavy falls of rain and snow it is rich in water. In winter the temperature ranges from 2° to 8°, rising to 21° in the hotter months. There are 81 villages, with three larger centres: Rreshen (the "county town"), Rubiku and Kurbneshi. It is one of the poorest districts, and lives from agriculture, pasturage, and timber and iron works.

It is difficult to reach the villages, both because of the not inconsiderable distances and the non-existence of suitable roads; only part of the journey can be done by car, and much has to be done on the back of a horse or mule. The people, Catholics in a huge majority, are among those who most resisted communism and were therefore more

persecuted, and therefore should be more open to re-evangelization. In the entire district there is no church other than ours.

### **Some facts**

We are responsible for 82 villages, with nearly 60,000 inhabitants, almost all traditionally Catholic, covering an area of more than 800 sq km. 72 villages are served only in rotation.

Vincentian missionaries: 5 Suore Piccole Missionarie Eucharistiche: 3 Daughters of Charity: 4 Lay helpers: 10 Newly baptised (1994-1995): 1,800, from all age groups.

Lay groups: One group of Caritas (adult and youth). One group of liturgy animators (Children and adolescents). Two groups of singers (Adolescents and young adults). Catechists in formation: 9 Groups in on-going formation: 3 of adolescents; 2 of younger persons; 1 of adults.

Continuing help for the immediate needs of families, groups of the handicapped, the blind, those who had suffered persecution, in the form of clothing, medicine, food.

Social and health services: a dispensary; one Daughter of Charity in the hospital; religious sisters and lay people to help families with problems; help at the prison and hospital.

Social and educational services: one infant school, with thirty pupils; various sorts of help in schools and hostels (rebuilding premises, school furniture, educational material).

Social and cultural-recreational services: a room with a video player; games rooms; Italian language courses; typewriting; cutting, sewing, embroidery; art; organizing youth groups for school camps and work camps; organizing days of recollection and up-dating meetings, etc.

### **The pastoral outlook for Mirdita**

If it is easy to speak of the situation in Mirdita, and in Albania in general, both as regards the past and the present, since by now every thing is known by everybody, it is not the same as regards our presence there and future missionary activity.

It can be said about us that we work on a day-to-day basis, and this will be so for quite a while. We cannot have long-term projects, neither from the pastoral nor community point of view.

We cannot speak even of "diocesanisation," in view of the sparse pastoral guidelines which have been given to us and the lack of confreres, with diocesan priests working in the same pastoral zone whom we run up against. We are, in fact, awaiting a new diocese, that of Mirdita itself.

There are the problems of getting close to the people in order to know and serve them better. They are, for the most part, scattered in about eighty different villages which are far from possible meeting places.

Some of the main problems in forming a common pastoral policy are travel ones. In some places roads are almost non-existent, especially in winter. This also applies to community life; we go and come, we are very tired, we spend a lot of time in the car.

Meanwhile we feel and see the need for a deep and systematic evangelization. We get the impression that faith is only an ethnic label: a person from Mirdita equals a Catholic Christian. Old people keep something of Christian “religiosity,” pre-conciliar, where the line between religion and superstition is very very blurred. Younger people especially, but not only they, tend towards the atheistic paganism of the old regime which, in a frightening way, emptied the human person of his dignity. These people look towards the practical atheism of western consumerism.

Here we could limit ourselves to the evangelization of just some centres, but everyone is asking us: “When are you coming our way?” This second choice, to gather together more or less everybody in a more or less systematic way, seems to be the actual present choice, even if it means our work is going to be less fruitful and more fatiguing.

Everyone is agreed that what is needed is an evangelization in the Vincentian style, “affective and effective,” or as today’s Church puts it, accompanied by concrete charitable work and service. At the moment, that is the only message this world is inclined to heed.

Meanwhile we are getting to know each other better all the time and catering for the immediate needs (with small projects carried out at all levels — education, social health, recreation). We are also, however, doing the work of first evangelization, celebrating the sacraments of Christian initiation, especially baptism.

In the meantime we can single out the “strategic” centres which are being set up (some completed, some under construction), building places where people can meet, at least for the celebration of the liturgy, if we do not want to continue in the great discomfort of being out in the rain, the cold or the heat, beside a so-called cemetery, or under a tree. There is also the rebuilding of churches reduced to rubble by the power of Enver Hoxha. We are looking for places, the simplest possible but effective, for catechesis; perhaps it is going too far to say also for socialization.

We are also looking for a certain amount of decentralization, getting away from the one single centre of our house in Rreshen, with other residences of priests and sisters in some mountain regions in order to have a better presence, a better chance of promoting the faith and of evangelization — a missionaries’ house, a church, sisters, social and health works.

We have also launched at the centre a “shkolla fetare,” a “school of faith.” This means having about twenty young boys, from third class primary upwards, full-time in the house for a more thorough human and Christian formation, as well as their normal schooling. If vocations emerge, they will be fostered.

This may not be much, but at the same time it is not little!

This report has, of necessity, been inadequate, but it gives some idea of the many problems with which we live. Perhaps it might be useful in the meantime to tack on to it an appeal not to forget these Albanian brothers, and to make oneself available not alone by means of one’s personal resources, but also one’s entire self. According to the Latin saying “Divide et impera” (Divide and conquer) it would be easier to proclaim and spread the

kingdom ? God in this, country, called the land of the eagles. But are their wings still too clipped for us to be able to say they have resumed flight?

Whether you like it or not, we have made the appeal and, keep ing to the language of symbols, let us say to anyone who wants to “sprout” that he will not regret it, that he will in this way find a way to renew his youth, just like an eagle.

(Thomas Davitt, C.M., translator)