

Echoes of the Mission in Albania

On return from Albania

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I went to Albania with an Italian's fellow-feeling and sympathy, Albania being so near and yet so distant, and also with those of a priest who sees such a wide field for missionary work opening up before him, and finally with those of a confrere of the priests and Daughters of Charity who constitute our Vincentian presence in those areas.

As often happens in the centre of great tragedies one's attention is unexpectedly focused on small things. For example, among all my impressions and memories what will remain with me is the contradiction between the small houses lacking everything and the television aerials on their roofs. Not even in Italy have I seen so many dish antennae concentrated in so few square yards. I would have liked to interpret this as a yearning for the transcendent and an image of the prayer of a soul stretching upward, but the more realistic interpretation is that they are a paradoxical sign of total poverty dreaming of a bridge over to a world of material well-being, if only it could be reached magically "via satellite."

The priests and Sisters, helped by a band of good volunteers told me that when they read the biblical words "come, take, eat... without payment" (Isaiah) the "obvious" meaning which Christians and non-Christians alike gather from them is a material non-metaphorical one, and I recalled St Vincent's words: "The hungry can't listen."

The missionary and Vincentian task in Albania today is to know how to combine evangelization and human development in a balanced way. The Christian message which we are called to bring, and to re-launch in a country which for 50 years tried to exterminate it, springs back on us with a boomerang effect and urgently challenges us to give authentic evidence of Christian charity to our evangelization. We will be credible by showing, through deeds rather than words, what being Christian, love, and disinterestedness mean, freed from power and money. And to give, in spite of this, or really because of this freedom, balanced human development.