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**"Enlarge the place of your tent" (Is 54:2)
Consecrated People in Albania Engage in Dialogue**

Hope in bloom. The eastern shore of the Adriatic Sea is not well very well known by Italians except for tourism, hunting and gambling. There are superb Romanesque cathedrals in Kotor or Zadar for example. Today consecrated religious can claim to be well established in the Land of the Eagles. In Albania, after the fall of the communist regime, every field of activity began to recover slowly. Hope has blossomed again in religious communities, finally able to enjoy full freedom. However, what remains to be treated are the wounds of the soul, because communism wanted and knew how to uproot all trace of religiosity from the heart. The faith of Catholic families was transmitted through the recitation of the Rosary and saved. Parents with their children touched and secretly rubbed the rubble of destroyed churches and sanctuaries at night.

And as happened elsewhere occurred: from the smouldering embers, the fire of religious practice revived. Although the norms of the Second Vatican Council do not seem to be fully accepted yet, deep faith has also produced a host of martyrs, in all thirty-eight; beatified on 5 November 2016 in the Cathedral of Shkodrë. All the local faithful call it the “kisha e madhë”, large mother church. The regime had turned it into a sports hall.

To walk together. In some ways Albania is ahead of Italy today. In fact, the consecrated men and women have joined to form one big association, called K.Sh.Ë.L. It is true that in our peninsula we have the CISM and USMI, two separate organizations, which represent the widest horizon of consecrated life in the world, due to the large number of adherents. But the common purpose, work schedule and engagements make all the consecrated people in Albania feel the beauty of a journey to be accomplished together.

In May each year a meeting is held at the Catholic University of “Our Lady of Good Council” in the heart of Tirana, the capital. That essential project of academic formation with a Christian matrix, which the Society of Jesus had initially entrusted to the late Fr. Rodolfo Bozzi from Bari, was then carried out by the Sons of the Immaculate Conception (*Concezionisti*) of Blessed Fr. Monti, CFIC, from Saronno. The university campus is equipped with various faculties in the medical-health sector, and there are plans for a large civil hospital.

Dialogue and Proclamation. At the end of October 2017, the new President and vice-President of K.Sh.Ë.L. were elected. They are respectively: Fr. Artan Seli, a Salvatorian from Albania, who trained in Poland, and Sister Edvige Carocari, a Salesian from Italy, who lives in Scutari. This was on account of the appointment of three new bishops, as of 15 June. One of whom was formerly a President of K.Sh.Ë.L. Bishop-elect Giovanni Peragine, Barnabite, from Puglia, Italy, a former parish priest of Milot in the Archdiocese of Tiranë-Durrës, now appointed Apostolic Administrator of Southern Albania, was ordained on 7 September in Lushnjë. He has actually been transferred to a

territory in need of ploughing and tilling, a good area for: the first proclamation, where there was little response to the unique celebration; meaningful *dialogue* with the faithful of the Orthodox Tradition and Muslims; the *proclamation* of the newness of Christian joy.

The situation in the South, especially in Lushnjë. The large urban centers in the South, taken in pairs, Saranda-Delvinë, Korça-Bilisht, Berat-Kuçovë, etc., are considered to be pastoral areas. Nine priests live and work there, of whom three are *fidei donum*, besides some women's congregations. Six or seven years ago the nuns left the village of Bubullimë.

The small family of the Assumption of Don Giuseppe Dossetti, five sisters and a priest, works in Uznova, and oversees the apostolate in Berat and Kuçovë as well. They have permission to adopt minors, who are entrusted to them *ad personam*. Since these disabled children are also boarders, their evangelization is rather successful.

Lushnjë counts 58 thousand inhabitants. The district is made up of two municipalities with 14 different communes, and a total population of 144,350. In the main center there are about 26 Catholic families and another 24 in the surrounding district, in total about fifty nuclei, or some 300 baptized Catholics. There are also several women of Catholic tradition married to Muslims or to men of the Orthodox Rite, but they are almost never allowed to take part in the life of the community.

Father Ilir, an Orthodox priest, lives in Lushnjë, where a younger confrère assists him, and some dozen Orthodox priests are scattered about in the surrounding villages. Archbishop Anastasios, Orthodox Archbishop of Tiranë-Durrës and All Albania, is a theologian and a former missionary in Africa. In September 2017 his first book in Italian was published. In addition, there are evangelicals with Alberto, animator of the community. There are good relations with the *bektashim* and the older Muslim leaders, a little less with the new young leaders.

The first Apostolic Nuncio in Albania after the end of the regime, Archbishop Ivan Dias, started a series of communities in the South of: sisters, priests, faithful. Due to the progressive urbanization, many of the baptized have moved away from Lushnjë to Tiranë and Durrës, or emigrated to Italy, Germany or Greece. The faithful of Lushnjë called the group of people engaged in the works of the Catholic Church, *Caritas*. Today, material aid is very much reduced and is distributed only in cases of real need.

In 1994 the Fathers of the Pious Society of San Gaetano (PSSG) arrived. It was a young Congregation founded in 1961 by Ven. Don Ottorino Zanon, a Vicentian (1915-1972): made up of priests and deacons trained for the pastoral ministry in particularly needy dioceses with few priests. Among the nuns who assist the parish priest, Don Giuseppe Sgarbossa, are some of the Plugu, who opened a reception center for minors, seeing that there was no such structure in the territory of Lushnjë and Fier.

In 1994, some Divine Will (*Divina Volontà*) Sisters were the first to come and work in Lushnjë, dragging the Alpini of Bassano del Grappa with them. A nun who had seen the deplorable situation in the civic hospital in the nineties invited and interested them. The *Alpini* militia has long since gone and the nuns grown old.

Congregational Bishops. For many years Bishop Giovanni Peragine, B., enlivened the life of the consecrated men and women of Albania with his generous service. The religious who come from different geographic areas are often young. — Indeed, the average age of the population in this land is the lowest in Europe. Albania, with its clear and stimulating horizon, seems to lend itself to creating, designing, dreaming many practical projects. Unfortunately, in Italy, in some ways the consecrated either tend to remember or fill the gaps as they open.

Other Congregational Bishops are engaged in guiding the local Churches, such as: Archbishop Angelo Massafra, OFM, from the Province of the Assumption of the Friars Minor of Lecce, Metropolitan Archbishop of Shkodrë-Pult, and Bishop Ottavio Vitale, RCI (Rogationist), of Lezhë, in the North of the country. Bishop Cristoforo Palmieri, CM, retired from the Diocese of Rrëshen in September 2017, due to age, to go to live in the parish of S. Maria dell'Idria, in Lecce city.

The Albanian Friars Minor worked so hard that they were identified with the priests, pastors of the communities, especially in the north. In the hinterland, the idea that priests in general no longer wear a cassock has not yet been completely accepted: They form part of the clergy guided by the Bishop.

The leader of the thirty-eight Blessed Martyrs, Franciscan Archbishop Vinçenc Prennushi of Durrës, was persecuted by the Communists and imprisoned in a lunatic asylum to test his character. In the group of the Blessed, killed between 1945 — 1974, there were seven other Friars Minor, Jesuit Fathers, diocesan priests, a seminarian, some lay people and Marije Tuci, a postulant of the Stigmatine nuns. These Martyrs represent a wonderful, authentic cross-section of the Church and of all vocations, capable of spilling their blood to bear witness to the vitality of the Word and the sacraments.

The current panorama. In Albania today there are 556 consecrated men and women, of whom 108 are men religious and 448 women religious, who are flanked by ecclesial movements. In Elbasan a positive experience of inter-religious dialogue is taking place, especially with Muslims, thanks to Don Emilio Valente, FDP (*San Luigi Orione*), Sister Elda, Fr. Dario, RCJ (*Rogazionisti del Cuore di Gesù*), and others, who have provided a space where the consecrated and young people can interact. The meetings, held in view of specific needs, are aimed above all at mutual knowledge and encouragement. The basic guideline is the word of Isaiah to the desolate woman: “Zgjerojë vendin e tendës sate” (Is 54:2, “enlarge the place of your tent”) in the prospect of prolific progeny.

In the past, once vocations had been recruited it was customary to send the young candidates — men and women — to Italy or elsewhere for their initial formation. The Bishops have also criticized this system. Providentially, today the women candidates to the consecrated life spend time together. Some Novitiate Houses have been opened in Albania and the juniors meet regularly during formation, the schedule includes one-day events and longer residential periods.

General Assembly 2017. In Tiranë, on 6 May 2017, some consecrated members of the Focolare Movement recalled a few of Chiara Lubich’s words to her followers, to everyone: “You exist when you form a body. If you do not form a body, you don't exist at all”. How can we, consecrated, form a body? There is no easy solution to this question. Archbishop George Frendo, OP, of Tiranë, (from Malta), expressed a thought of Father Timothy Radcliffe, former Master of the Order of Preachers:

“the most serious sin against celibacy is to give up love”. And Fr. Emilio Gonzalez Magana, SJ, from Mexico, full of his experience of training Formators at the Gregorian University in Rome, redoubled the dose: “if you are not obedient, you are not poor!”.

Speaking of disorderly affections, we sometimes fall into a real trap: when I leave the Chapel after Prayers, I do not greet anyone. In other words, prayer can also become a type of bondage or inordinate practice. Then work too, which no one could ever define as a sinful reality, can become a sort of slavery. Often in consecrated life the same worldly criterion is adopted, that is, I must be a successful man or woman. If the cross comes, I must try to avoid it. It seems that some Brothers or Sisters persevere in religious life just because they have no other roof. So, unfortunately, it may happen that they convey a sense of frustration and dissatisfaction.

Three hours on the internet every day. Returning to one’s first love is fundamental. Benedict XVI said at the time he was Bishop of Rome: “You religious bear the great challenge of re-founding the charism”. Every religious should ask him/herself: where am I today? Am I what I have been called to be? If Christ is not at the center, I might be very good, very professional, but I would not be faithful. That is reason why I am called to discern every day, without getting tired. A recent study on the subject affirmed that a young religious (man or woman) spends at least three hours a day on the internet.

We have noticed more and more that the young people who approach us lack family-ties. Every young person knows and says: I have the right to everything. Nowadays the world would like to destroy the family, and indeed the religious formation of a child is hardly considered or followed up at all.

The theology or spirituality of each congregation is taught and learned, but little is known about respect for older people or prayer life. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and *Vita Consecrata*/Consecrated Life maintain that no solid religious formation can be built, if there is no preliminary, solid human formation. Of course the training of Formators is fundamental. A Formator cannot qualify all of a sudden, as he/she should have a sound knowledge of Canon Law, Dogmatic or Spiritual Theology and, above all, be ready “to squander” his/her time with young candidates.

Spiritual Accompaniment. Learning to learn for life, throughout one's life: this is the current orientation proposed in on-going formation. On 28 January 2017, during the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (IVCSVA), Pope Francis stressed the importance of spiritual accompaniment:

“There are many factors that condition faithfulness in what is a *change of era* and not merely an *era of change*, in which it becomes difficult to take on serious and definitive commitments. [...] Consecrated life must invest in preparing guides who are qualified for this ministry. I say Consecrated Life, because the charism of spiritual accompaniment, let us say of spiritual direction, is a ‘lay’ charism. Priests have it too, but it is a ‘lay’ charism. [...] We are never persistent enough on this need. It is difficult to remain faithful when walking alone, or walking with the guidance of brothers and sisters who are incapable of listening carefully and patiently, or who do not have adequate experience of consecrated life. We need brothers and sisters who are experts in the ways of God, so as to be able to do what Jesus did with the disciples of Emmaus: to

accompany them on the journey of life and at the moment of disorientation, and to rekindle faith and hope in them through the Word and the Eucharist (*cf.* Lk, 24:13-35)”.

One easily falls into self-deception, that is, think you have done everything right. Because, failure only makes us unhappy and we forget that, if we are doing good work, the Cross will come. We need to have a person next to us to tell us the truth, maybe just to say where we have gone wrong, and help us to understand Who is at the center of our life.

“*Come and see!*”. More than ever today, nothing is certain, as we live in a fluctuating society. Whenever the centrality of Christ is lost, consecrated life is debased and wasted because of downright stupidity. Although San Rafael Arnaiz Barón (1911-1938), a Spanish Trappist, knew he would die of a serious form of diabetes, he never ceased to fulfill all his duties, great and small.

The first challenge of poverty is internal, namely to face up to and solve the poverty of fraternal life in community. This is why Jesus says: “Come and see!” (Jn 1:39). Before learning the *Rule* and *Constitutions* or knowing the charism, consecrated life is Jesus’ invitation to come to know Him, to meet the love of the Father. Let us not deceive ourselves by thinking that a formative Project or a Plan of fraternal life will provide the solution to the various problems of fraternal life in community. The meeting with the two blind men outside Jericho (*cf.* Mt 20:29-34) shows us how Jesus perceives the needs of men, hungry and thirsty for a true relationship with Him.

Keepers of Hope. Living in Albania as consecrated, apart from one’s spiritual family, is a vital, energizing experience. The mission unites much more than other contexts, including the fields of ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue. Suffice it to recall that the ecumenical movement started in Edinburgh in 1910, in the context of the First World Missionary Conference, from the specific queries of the participants.

Working to spread the Gospel and for human advancement with many brothers and sisters from different countries means opening oneself to globalization. Especially by weaving relations among themselves, the consecrated in Albania aim to remain authentic custodians of the hope of a people that has already suffered inordinately: a people of simple but courageous faith, a people of martyrs, a people who wants to be reborn and grow today.

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