

**A SHEPHERD IN DIALOGUE
WITH HIS FLOCK**

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JESUS CHRIST IN THE THEOLOGY AND CULTURE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Shkoder, January 2000

I would like to start this lecture with a quotation from Albert Einstein: “No one can read the Gospels without feeling the presence of Jesus. His personality is present in each of his words. There is no myth in which you can find so much liveliness”.

The twentieth century was a century of contradictions. But it was also the century which has invited humanity to re-read the Gospel in order to rediscover Jesus. This is my personal conviction, and this is also the reason why I decided to speak on this topic today.

Obviously, the argument is very vast, and I do not pretend to speak in an exhaustive way in this single lecture. So I have to limit myself to the more important points.

The Catholic theology of the twentieth century, thanks to the ecumenical movement promoted especially by the Second Vatican Council, but already present before the Council (especially through great theologians like Yves Congar), became much more open to the theological thought of our separated brethren. I am convinced that we have a lot to learn from the Christology of the Orthodox and of the Protestant theologians, and so I will make also a brief reflection on these Christologies before I speak on the Christology of the Catholic theologians. I will also divide this lecture into five short sections which are: Orthodox Christology, Protestant Christology, Catholic Christology, the different theological systems of the second half of the twentieth century and the new and different Christian movements in the same century.

A. ORTHODOX CHRISTOLOGY

It seems to me that there are at least three main aspects of Orthodox Christology that must attract our attention.

First of all, this Christology is intimately linked to the Christian spiritual life. I can quote two Orthodox theologians. Lossky says: “The oriental tradition has never made any sharp distinction between mysticism and theology, nor between the personal experience of the divine mysteries and the dogma proclaimed by the Church”. Secondly, Popovitch affirms: “Without the saints it is not possible to have true teachers and doctors, nor is it possible to have a true education in faith without holiness”. The oriental theology, since the first eastern Fathers of the Church, has always been mostly in line with the Gospel of John (whereas western theology has been more in line with the thought of Saint Paul). And this means that eastern Christology is a *contemplation* of Christ and becomes a personal experience.

Another interesting point to bear in mind concerning Orthodox Christology is the fact that it is intimately related to the liturgy. In fact, another orthodox theologian, Bobrinsky, affirms: “With the sacramental and liturgical language, the Church elaborates a living theology of the spiritual senses, a vision of the divine beauty of the Kingdom, of which worship is but a foretaste”. Thus it is a Christology which is expressed and felt in the liturgy.

And here we see the reason why great importance is attached, in the Orthodox tradition, to the idea of “icon” or image, that is, a visible reality which points to an invisible mystery. The personal experience of Christ, in conjunction with the liturgical celebration of the

Church, becomes a manifestation of the mystery of Christ. In this way, the union between Christ and the Church becomes more apparent. Through the Holy Spirit, Christ is present in his Church. Zizioulas, one of the most renowned orthodox theologians of the twentieth century, states: “Christology and Pneumatology belong to one another, and they cannot be separated”. He also adds: “The Spirit makes of Christ an eschatological being, the last Adam”. Again he says: “Another contribution of the Holy Spirit to the Christ-event is that ... Christ is not only ‘one’ individual, but ‘many’ ... Pneumatology gives its contribution to Christology precisely with this dimension of ‘communion’”, which is to say the Church as the Body of Christ.

B. PROTESTANT CHRISTOLOGY

It is much more difficult to synthesise Protestant Christology. One must only think, for example, of the extremely different protestant Christological trends like those of Bultmann, Barth, Bonhöffer, van Buren, Moltmann, etc. But I think we can trace some of the most relevant points in Protestant theologians.

Through the Incarnation of the Word, says Karl Barth, God became the “companion” of man. And thus, especially with Oscar Cullman, a new Christology was developed, in a historical perspective. Jesus Christ is the centre of human history. And Wolfhart Pannenberg speaks of the resurrection of Christ as the revelation of the direction and meaning that God is giving to human history.

Existentialist philosophy holds that freedom is what constitutes human existence. This conviction has led many theologians to present Jesus Christ as a model of freedom (Paul van Buren), who calls us to an authentic human life and to take a decision (Rudolf Bultmann). Jesus Christ is the one in whom freedom found its basis and significance; and the highest degree of freedom in Jesus Christ is to be found in his freedom to love (Karl Barth). In this way Jesus Christ invites a man to assume with responsibility his destiny and that of humanity.

Another cardinal point in Protestant Christology is the one that views Christ as the revelation of the merciful love of God. The “distinctive quality” of God has been revealed by Jesus Christ as “love” and “self-communication” (Emil Brunner). Creation in itself is already the self-communication of God; but this self-communication finds its fulfilment in the mystery of our redemption (Oscar Cullmann).

And finally, on the footsteps of Martin Luther, Protestant theology has re-emphasized the cross of Christ. Reinhold Niebuhr affirms that true love is not reciprocal, but sacrificial. The cross of Christ is the revelation of sin; but it is also the revelation of the sacrificial love of God. In his book *Christology*, Dietrich Bonhöffer had already spoken of Jesus in relation to man (and so he developed this Christology under the three aspects of Jesus as Word, Sacrament, and Community). Later on he describes Christ as the expression: “the man for others” – an expression which then became very popular among the theologians of secularization.

C. CATHOLIC CHRISTOLOGY

If we now turn our attention to Catholic theology, we will immediately become aware of a new vitality, in comparison with the Christology of the previous four (or perhaps more)

centuries. As a matter of fact, the systematic theology of those centuries had divorced the so-called “ontological Christology” (that is to say, that part of Christology which deals with the very being of Christ) from “functional Christology” (the work of redemption accomplished through the Paschal Mystery). Moreover, ontological Christology was to a great extent reduced to abstract, subtle, and metaphysical discussions: questions concerning what constitutes the person, the principle of individuation, and many other mostly irrelevant disputes between thomists and scotists. On the other hand, functional Christology (or soteriology) was dominated by a very legalistic notion (which western theologians inherited from Tertullian) of the concept of “satisfaction”.

Here I will briefly deal with three points of Catholic Christology of the twentieth century, which in my opinion are of great importance for our consideration.

My first point: Contemporary Catholic Christology duly gives more importance to the mystery of the incarnation as a historical event and the culminating point in the dialogue between God and man. In the words of Karl Rahner, the incarnation is the highest actualization of man’s openness to God and God’s most radical self-giving to man. And this argument has been developed in a very interesting and original way, in a historical and cosmic perspective, by Teilhard de Chardin. According to him, Christ is the apex of natural evolution. The incarnation is the renewal and restoration of all the forces of the universe. It is the instrument, centre, and aim of all creation.

Secondly: As in the case of Protestant Christology, so also Catholic theology, has placed more emphasis on the mystery of the cross, which is the sign of an authentic and complete humanity (Christian Duquoc) and which calls us to be more human (Hans Küng). Why did God desire that our redemption be realized precisely through the death of his Son made man? Karl Rahner provides this answer: precisely because, by assuming our human nature, the Son of God wanted to accept, in a radical way, our human history; and such an acceptance demands also, on the part of the God-Man, the acceptance of the situation of guilt – which is to say of death – as well as the victory of this situation of guilt – which is to say victory over death, the resurrection.

And the third point worth mentioning is the emphasis on Christ as the Sacrament of the encounter between God and man. This point has been developed especially by Edward Schillebeeckx: Christ is the “primordial Sacrament”, God made visible and accessible in Jesus Christ. Yves Congar observes that while in the Old Testament it was stated: “No one can see God and live”, since that moment, when God became one of us, man can live only by seeing God, as he comes into contact with him. But Schillebeeckx further states that the incarnation found its fulfilment in the mystery of the death-resurrection-exaltation of the God-Man; and therefore, echoing the doctrine of the Oriental Fathers of the Church, he concludes that in this sense also the incarnation is a redemptive mystery.

D. THE DIFFERENT “THEOLOGIES”

In the second half of the twentieth century many different “theologies” have emerged, amongst both Catholics and Protestants. None of them pretend to be the one and only valid and possible theology: what distinguishes them is only the emphasis on certain items or the hermeneutics they adopted. Whilst they insist more on praxis (they are “theologies of ‘praxis’”), they are, however, very open to dialogue with the world, with culture, with

contemporary man and with new ideologies and historical situations. For this reason they interpret the Gospel within these contexts. What is of more interest for us here is: a) political theology, b) the theology of hope and c) the theology of liberation.

a. Political Theology

This theology, developed especially by Johannes Baptist Metz, considers Christ as the one who is capable to transform society. The basic promises of the Reign of God, proclaimed by Jesus Christ, are freedom, peace, justice, reconciliation; and these promises cannot be interpreted in an individualistic sense. This is the political dimension of the Christian message, which must be fulfilled through a critical denial of the world as it actually is, a denial which has been expressed on the Cross.

Also, political theology defines the role of the Church vis-à-vis society. The Church must defend man against any manipulation. Man is not simply an object of history. Consequently, the poor and the marginalized are on the first level of this action of the Church. The Church must be prophetically critical of every form of political totalitarianism (whether capitalism or socialism). It must be critical also with regard to herself: She is at the service of universal salvation, she is a “community in exodus” (Jürgen Moltmann).

Paupert holds that the Incarnation of the Son of God urges the Christian to assume a political responsibility. Jesus was always on the side of the poor and the marginalized, he has preached universal love, he rejected the idol of wealth, he defined authority as service, and he defended the oppressed: these are the principles that must inspire politicians.

b. The Theology of Hope

The Protestant theologians of hope, Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, can be considered as the protagonists of this branch of theology, followed by the Catholic theologians Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, and Johannes Baptist Metz. According to this theology, revelation tells us not only who was Jesus Christ, but also who will He be, and what sort of commitment he is demanding from us today.

The theology of hope is inspired by the philosophy of hope of Ernst Bloch, a neo-Marxist German of Hebrew origin. May I refer to this very interesting comment of his: “The sons of Israel who grumble, are the ones who do not accept the world as it is, with its hierarchies, its logics, and its hypocrisies, its arrogance. The Bible of the poor is the one which hurls itself against the lords with their priestly God and who find their support in the kindled word of the prophets”

Moltmann has centred the Christian message on the principle of hope, which, on its part, is founded on the reality of salvation accomplished in Christ and by Christ. And he says: “Christian faith lives through the resurrection of the crucified Christ and extends towards the promises of the universal future of Christ”. And so Christian hope is not an abstract hope: it is a hope based on the truth of the resurrection of Christ, it moves the believer to action, and it gives sense and scope to social action for the transformation of society.

c. The Theology of Liberation

This theology has, as biblical roots, the Hebrew exodus and the Christian Passover; but it is also based on the political theology of Metz and the theology of hope of Moltmann.

Moreover, there is also evidence of the influence of Marxist philosophy. In fact some neo-Marxist scholars like Ernst Bloch and Roger Garaudy have perceived in Jesus Christ an example of true humanity, which urges us to struggle for man's liberation from the various forms of oppression.

The theology of liberation had its origin and development especially in Latin America, through theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, and Jon Sobrino. It, therefore, has its origins in a Catholic continent, but in a situation of oppression and injustices which contradict the demands of the Kingdom of God. Jesus Christ frees us from sin, which is the root of every injustice. Only liberation from sin can render man authentically free and so capable of entering into communion with God and with his brethren. Therefore, it can be said that sin closes man into himself and obstructs the process of liberation. The exodus and the Passover of Christ are the two basic events of this freedom, which, however, must continue.

Jesus proved himself to be entirely free with regard to law, worship, and power. In this way he displayed more solidarity with the poor and oppressed, but clashed with authority. His death was the result of his commitment for liberation, and his resurrection was the anticipation of total freedom.

Christian love is a constant process of conversion towards our neighbour, who, according to Gutiérrez, is not only the individual person. It is the social class, race, the poor, etc.

E. THE NEW CHRISTIAN MOVEMENTS

Gerald O'Collins, in his book *The Theology of Secularity*, makes this interesting comment:

“Men have far from lost their sense of religion. We may be invited to recall the openly religious character of many popular songs, as well as take note of that extraordinary cross between hair and the Oberammergau Passion Play, Jesus Christ Superstar. More discerning critics would mention Godspell. In 1966 the Beatles maintained: ‘We are more popular than Jesus’. But by the end of the decade they had broken up and George Harrison was singing My Sweet Lord. The director of Hair, Tom O’Horgan, not only stages the lavish New York production of Jesus Christ Superstar, but explains to the public: ‘The theatre was at one time a temple; I want to make the theatre once again a temple’”

The paradoxical years of the 1960's, the years of the Death of God Theology, were also the years which saw the flourishing of many different movements inspired by the person and teaching of Christ, movements like *Jesus Freaks*, *Jesus People*, *Straight People*, *Street Christians*, etc., which were then grouped under the common title of *Jesus Revolution*. This *Jesus Revolution* was symptomatic of post-modernism (which was already being strongly felt in that decade): in their endeavour to fill the void created by modernism, the youths of that epoch were showing particular interest in the person, deeds, and words of Christ. But in actual fact these movements were a short-lived enthusiasm, rather an effect of a trend than true manifestations of faith.

But, during this same period (and also before this time: one can just think, for example, of the *Focolarini* movement, which saw its birth immediately after the Second World War) many new movements within the Church cropped up. These were movements born from the conviction that Christ is alive in His Church, and therefore they are movements within, and not outside, of the Church, movements like the neo-Catechumenal (although they would object to the word ‘movement’), Taizé prayer groups, and many others.

To a certain extent one might say some or most of these movements originated as a reaction against the politicizing, humanizing, and secularizing of the Christian message. They emphasize the personal aspect of the Christian experience, such as conversion of heart and interior peace, which experience, however, must also be communicated to others.

Other characteristics of these movements which are worth mentioning are: a deeper familiarity with Sacred Scripture, and a deeper sense of community. Then each group or movement emphasizes one or another particular aspect of biblical spirituality; for example the Focolari, unity; the neo-Catechumens, the Christology of the Servant of Jahweh; the Charismatics, the Pentecostal experience. In general, for these groups, liturgy is the privileged place of encounter with the Redeeming Lord.

All these groups, however, must pay serious attention lest they become sectarian or fundamentalist. Nevertheless I am convinced that they are a sign of the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church today, the Holy Spirit who, in the words of Karl Rahner, is always “a restless Spirit”. I am no less convinced that such groups or movements are an antidote for sects, which are so active worldwide in our own times. Why are many Christians worldwide leaving the Church to which they belonged and embracing a sect? In my opinion, for two main reasons. First, because the sects present, in a very attractive manner, the biblical message. Secondly, because in the sects these people find a place: they are not just numbers, but members of a community. But yet, the Bible is the heritage of the one Church of Christ, and it was thanks to this Church that the Bible has arrived into the hands of these sects. *We* are the true heirs of this Word of God. And *we* ought to be the “experts” of that Christian life as community so aptly and vividly described in the second and fourth chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. Ought we to be less capable than the sects to communicate to our faithful the living Word of God, or to instil in them a deep sense of community? However, thanks to these new groups, there is place, within the Church, for those who want to become more familiar with the Word of God and want to feel more involved in the community life of the Church.

CONCLUSIONS

I agree with Gerald O’Collins: “men have far from lost their sense of religion”. And Jesus Christ is still a very interesting figure for contemporary man. But this interest in the person of Jesus cannot be authentic so long as it is limited to Jesus, the hero, the religious genius, or the superstar. It becomes authentic only when Jesus becomes one’s model. He is the model for each and every one of us under several aspects: in our attitude towards God, in our attitude towards man, in our attitude towards the world, and in our attitude towards life itself (the meaning and purpose of life).

Christianity is not an ideology or a moralism. It is essentially a person: it is Jesus Christ:

“Something which has existed since the beginning, that we have heard and we have seen with our own eyes, that we have watched and touched with our hands: the Word, who is life – this is our subject.... What we have seen and heard we are telling you, so that you too may be in union with us”
(1 Jn 1, 1.3).

And therefore one must speak of Jesus not in an abstract way. He is essentially a model of life. But I would still like to emphasize three other aspects of Christ as model.

He is the model of faithfulness to his mission: without any compromises and without succumbing to the opinions and expectations of the people as regards their idea of “messiahship”, without succumbing to the temptations of Satan.

He is the model of authenticity, and so He could speak with authority. No one could accuse Him of sin (Jn 8, 46); and so he could preach repentance and conversion, forgive sins, show the way of salvation, admonish against dangers, ask forgiveness for his enemies without feeling the need to ask forgiveness for himself, and He remained steadfast in hope also in the face of death.

And finally, he is the model of freedom. This point has been stressed by many diverse currents of twentieth century theology: the theology of the death of God, the theology of secularization, the theology of hope, the theology of liberation, and political theology. But this is a very interesting point for our preaching and catechesis. Christ proved to be entirely free *vis-à-vis* the Torah: “*You have learnt how it was said to our ancestors.... But I say this to you...*” (Mt 5). He proved to be entirely free *vis-à-vis* civil and religious authorities. He proved to be entirely free *vis-à-vis* current ideas, like those concerning divorce, the Sabbath, messiahship, etc. And he proved to be entirely free also *vis-à-vis* his own disciples: after his discourse on the Bread of Life he did not mind that many were finding this language intolerable and did not follow him any longer. This freedom of His teaches us that one must be anxious not with what people say or desire, but with what God expects from him. Thus this freedom was, for Jesus, the source of his total love for his Father and of his unlimited and unconditional love towards others.

May our liturgies be always an expression of the message of Christ, who is the “Good news”. Every liturgy must be inspired by faith, and so it is a devout celebration, and animated by that joy which is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, and thus it is a joyful celebration. These qualities make it more possible to feel the presence of Christ in that liturgical celebration.

Two final observations. Our God is the God of Jesus Christ. Only Christ is the perfect revealer of the true face of God. Karl Barth stated that the God revealed in Christ is the father who rejoices at the return of his son, the creditor who forgives his debtor, the Samaritan who helps the victim of criminals.

Secondly: we must always re-discover the anthropological and ethical implications of the mystery of the Incarnation, which means that the Word of God accepted full solidarity with us, in such a way that Saint Paul could say: “For our sake God made the sinless one into sin” (2 Cor 5, 21); and: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by being cursed for our sake” (Gal 3, 13). The mystery of the Incarnation is the groundwork of the new great dignity of man (Saint Leo the Great), the basis of our fraternity (Michael Schmaus), and the foundation for the basic equality among all humans (Gal 3, 28). It also invites us to enter into personal and intimate communion with Christ (the spirituality of the Fourth Gospel).

Yves Congar said that in the mystery of Jesus Christ we become aware that there is no “theology for man” without an “anthropology for God”. This affirmation has also been stated, in more simple terms, by the Venerable John Paul II, who said: “Jesus is the way to God and the way to man, and as such must he be represented and proposed.”

CHRISTMAS: A MESSAGE FOR HUMANITY

Tirana, December 1997

Most of us come from countries where Christmas is deeply embedded in folklorist, commercial and social traditions. Folklore is present in the crib, the Christmas tree, the carols and the street and home decorations; commerce is evident in the fact that Christmas is always associated with a higher turnover generated by the buying and selling of gifts; and from the social point of view, Christmas can easily be translated into a period for parties and dinners. Hence the question we have so often asked ourselves: has this feast retained any of its original Christian spirit? More often than not, family reunions and social celebrations are nothing but a screen behind which lurk anger, division and indifference.

Albania, a country so different from the ones we come from! Eight years ago I spent Christmas with the Maltese Dominican missionaries in Brazil and what struck me most was that in such a state of extreme poverty, the people of the *favelas* had a genuine understanding of the birth of Christ. The Albanian society is similar to how I encountered Christmas in Brazil though the two are so different from each other. While in the First World one speaks of consumerism and in Brazil of capitalism, in Albania one is surrounded by a subtle silence, not the silence of prosperity and peace, but a silence of death, a silence broken only by rattle of the kalashnikov. It is a silence of a demoralized people who has been suffocated for so many years; a silence of a passive people, who has come to accept a *status quo*. In this society, one has to listen to a voice, or better, a cry: the cry of a child, that of Jesus, the newly-born.

Let us imagine ourselves at the crib, devoid of everything that is superfluous. Our cribs are very artistic indeed but they fail to represent the truth, that made flesh on the first Christmas night. One by one, we remove all the little figures of persons who sing or play musical instruments, of persons - including the magi - who carry gifts, of the cow and the donkey which incidentally is not mentioned in any of the gospels. In doing so we seem to be impoverishing the crib, divesting it of all art and poetry. But at the same time we are discovering the truth. We approach the cave, now almost empty except for Mary, Joseph, the Child and some shepherds, in order to learn. Our teacher will be the child: the child Jesus.

God intervenes in the Story of Man.

In the gospels two genealogies are attributed to Jesus: one in Matthew and the other in Luke. The several discrepancies between them give rise to questions and doubts, but one must understand the theological reason why they were written. They were intended to help us understand that Jesus is a historical person, in whom history reaches its climax, and in whom all the promises made to Abraham and David were realized.

Matthew starts with Abraham, the Father of the chosen People, and ends with Joseph, “the husband of Mary; of her was born Jesus who is called Christ” (Mt 1, 16). The Jewish tradition excluded women from genealogies but the ancestors of Jesus include four: Tamar, Raheb, Ruth and Bathseba. All were pagan and three of them were notorious sinners. Matthew’s underlying message is the same as Paul’s (Gal 3, 28): in Christ “there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female”. Jesus liberates

the woman. He is the saviour of all humanity. Matthew included the visit of the Magi, who were pagan, to emphasize this truth.

All this has a special significance in a society where, especially in rural communities still dominated by female discrimination, the woman is treated like a domestic slave. It has a special significance also in the local catholic communities who are scandalized by the fact that we extend our help to Christians and Muslims alike, as if only Catholics have the right to receive assistance from the Catholic Church. On the other hand, Christ “has broken down the barrier which used to keep us apart” (Ef 2,14).

The genealogy in Luke, contrary to that in Matthew, does not begin with Abraham and finish with Joseph, but begins with Joseph and traces its way backwards to Adam, the father of all humanity. Christ is thus portrayed as the saviour of all the human race.

The Son of God, made flesh, entered the story of mankind, the story of sin, without being blemished by sin, to liberate man from this bondage. Thus in the mystery of the Incarnation the foundations of human brotherhood were laid. Here, we also find the *raison d'être* of our commitment: that of building a new world which is characterized by love and a world more suitable for us to live in.

Christ enters the Family Life.

The gospel of Christ's childhood, both in Matthew and in Luke, is a story of a family, “the sacred family of Nazareth”. Thus the Son of God reveals himself to us through a family, one in which he was the focal point. Both evangelists present a very realistic account of family life, with its moments of joy and also of sadness. The joy of a mother who gives birth to a new life; the joy of Mary and Joseph who listen to the angels' singing and receive the shepherds of Bethlehem and the magi gone to see the child; the joy of Mary and Joseph who hear Simon and Ann praising their boy. On the other hand, moments of sadness are ever present: the sadness of failing to find accommodation at Bethlehem when Mary was about to give birth; the sadness of having to escape to Egypt from Herod's anger; the sadness of having lost Jesus in the temple.

These are experiences which many Albanian families are having. The Albanian people has a long tradition of great hospitality. Maybe Mary and Joseph could have been luckier if they had been in Albania and not in Bethlehem: they could have found a family to welcome and offer them shelter! But many families are living the moments of great uncertainty which beset the family of Nazareth. They are looking for a place where they can live in peace. They too have sons who had to escape or are lost. It is an undeniable fact that the Albanian family, so united and bonded together, misses the son who in search of a better and happier future had to leave to a country foreign to him. Mary and Joseph were sustained by faith in living moments of despair and frustration; so also will the numerous Albanian families who go through these experiences.

The discovery of a condescending God.

Christmas is a mystery teeming with paradoxes. The liturgy invites us to rejoice and makes us listen to that exquisite text from Isaiah: “The people that walked in darkness has seen a great light” (9,1), and all this because “a child is born for us”. One usually asks for advice from a man, not a child. Nevertheless Isaiah says that this boy will be called a “wise

councillor". Likewise, one usually asks favours from a man in power, not a child. But Isaiah says that he will be called "a powerful God". Lastly, to resolve personal, family and social conflicts, one seeks the help of a man of influence to act as a mediator. Still Isaiah concludes by saying that this child will be called a "prince of peace".

Christmas teaches us that happiness is a treasure which we must look for where we least expect it: not in a palace, but in a cave; not in a powerful person, but in a helpless child; not in material luxury, but in the grace that has to shine on us "to give up everything that does not lead to God, and all our worldly ambitions" (Tit 2,12).

The evangelists Matthew and Luke treat the birth of Christ as a prelude to his passion and death. It is the beginning of a journey towards death. Christmas presents us with a weak, fragile and suffering God, who is one with the marginalised, the poor and the oppressed. It is the God who has heard the cry of his people, enslaved in Egypt and is now come to save it. It is Emmanuel, God-with-us, who continues to be by the side of the down-trodden. Who will tell the suffering people of Albania that our God cares and loves and is not indifferent to their hardships? Christmas is a celebration of this message for it reveals the true face of God: a condescending God in search of us, a loving God who always takes the initiative.

The discovery of the man's dignity.

If Christmas is the mystery which reveals the true face of God, it is also the mystery which reveals the true face of humanity. It celebrates humanity because it emphasizes the irreplaceable dignity of God's people for whom God adopted humanity and its frailty. In the Christmas liturgy we read an exquisite invocation from St. Leo the Great: "O Christian, be aware of your dignity". One could change this expression to make it read thus: "O man, be aware of your dignity". Christmas manifests the dignity of man, of each and every man. This dignity is revealed in a child, the God who has become man, a baby, totally dependent on others.

Luke writes about the birth of Christ as taking place away from home and in unusual circumstances. It happens in a cave and in extreme poverty while a population census is going on. In a census, a person is but a number, one immersed in and lost among the masses. Who could be aware of what had taken place in that cave in Bethlehem?

The Albanian people is made up of numbers, because people are gunned down without mercy. People are killed as if they were flies. It is easy for us, foreigners, to condemn this people for what it is doing and pronounce ourselves on what it must suffer, but immediately we find ourselves facing its long and bitter history. It is a history of a nation which for centuries has been dominated and deprived of sovereignty and which has been gradually transformed into a mass of numbers. For half a century, the most extreme form of communism destroyed all initiative for the nation to move ahead; a half a century during which, according to Cardinal Suenens, the world experienced sudden changes more than it had ever experienced in the previous twenty centuries of our era. And when the Albanian nation came out of the cage of communism, there was no strength in its wings with which it could have soared. And worst of all, instead of investing in education and infrastructure which must have been given first priorities in the interest of progress and development, it turned to the kalashnikov and the gun. Now, it is even impossible to hold a

census, a census which would reveal the number of persons killed, the number of persons who have fled the country, the number of persons returned From the manger, Jesus shows us the dignity of each Albanian who is killed, sold or abused in any way.

Jesus was born in a census. He is just a number. On the other hand, he is born into a small but friendly community of two persons, Mary and Joseph. Mary is the ark. She carried within her, not the rolls of the law, but the author of a new alliance. She is the symbol of all those who, with faith and simplicity, receive Christ who has loved the Church, his spouse. She is the symbol of all the women and men who truly love their spouses and dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to the well-being of their children.

The presence of the shepherds, as a marginalised group, anticipate Christ's prayer: "I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children" (Mt 11, 25). The child Jesus is not revealed to Herod or the High Priests, but to the Bethlehem shepherds who left behind them their sheep, their only "treasure", to accept the invitation to meet Jesus, the God who made the first step to reconcile man with God. Thus, the cave at Bethlehem became the first Church where Jesus is adored in Spirit and Truth by people who had nothing to offer but themselves.

By becoming one of us, the Word Incarnate has revealed to us our dignity.

Christ's mission - and ours.

The message of Christmas is not limited to a contemplation of the Word made flesh. Jesus is come to start a fire: he has a mission which can be described in three words: to save, to defend and to build.

Jesus did not come into the world to condemn but to save. Giving a new dimension to human dignity, he has freed us from egoism, from pride, from lust for power, from divisions. It is faith in Jesus that conquers egoism; faith that enables us to see the face of Jesus on every man. Hence, Jesus says: "In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me". Jesus preaches solidarity with everybody in a society which encourages us to think only of themselves. Pride is conquered by contemplation on the humility shown by the Son of God, who has debased himself so much and identified himself with the destitute and sinners. Jesus, in a society which exults pride, shows us the value of simplicity and humility: God bestows his gifts on those who approach him empty-handed.

Jesus was born to defend the marginalised and victims of injustice. He himself was a victim of Herod's ambition. Christ proclaims equality between all men but injustice prevails. When he became man, he identified himself completely with humankind, except for sin. He was without privileges yet he made his way to death, along a path which threatened him continually, even at birth, when Herod wanted to kill him. Even today, in a society marked by injustice and violence, Jesus defends the dignity of the human person, that dignity which insists on the need for fundamental rights which are not violated: the right to lead a decent life, the right to receive a proper education and the right to form a family. It is hypocrisy on the part of society which abounds with declarations defending all sorts of rights - rights of children, of youth, of senior citizens, of the family - but which at the same time makes it even easier for massacres of innocent victims to take place through

abortions which violate the child's right to live; which creates structures intended to disintegrate the matrimonial bond, thus depriving children of their right to live in a stable family unit; which allows or even institutionalizes certain ways of corruption. This has made it possible for bribes to be paid by one who wants to gain entrance to a university or to have an operation performed.

Jesus was born to create a new society built on love; a society which knows no Greek or Hebrew, freeman or slave, Albanian or American, rich or poor. Hence he does not leave any room for any discrimination be it based on race, colour, social class or creed. This is the revolution that Jesus, who had such a humble beginning in the cave of Bethlehem, preached; a revolution meant to change the heart of man, not social structures. It is only thus that true progress and genuine liberty are guaranteed. "God has so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son". Jesus is not at loggerheads with society for it is only he that can transform the chaotic state it is in into the healthy environment that suits humankind.

The good news: "Do not fear".

Until a few months ago, I used to believe that certain terms so much characteristic of western Europe, such as materialism, consumerism and pluralism, are not applicable to the Albanian society. But now I have changed my opinion. Here in Albania we can speak of these terms.

In fact, in Albania a very subtle kind of materialism which resolves everything in terms of profit and gain is noticeable. For a large part of the Albanian people, the Church and the clergy are just a means to get clothes, food, medicine and so many are things, which are not always considered as charity. In the meantime, our churches in various localities remain empty. Can one speak of consumerism in Albania? Sure! If the people do not consume, it is because they have nothing to consume. But more often than not, the first thing they learn when they come in contact with other western countries is consumerism and they prefer to spend their money on luxury goods than on necessities. Francis Fukuyama, in his article *The End of History?*, has said that the fall of communism and the rise of liberal democracy does not mean the triumph of an ideal, but the victory of a consumerist culture. It is just that colour television has proved to be more powerful than *The Communist Manifesto!*

Here we face a very serious challenge: that educating the people's sense of natural religiosity, which not even fifty years of atheistic communism has managed to destroy. It is a natural religiosity that has to take a step forwards towards faith in a weak God who was born deprived of everything; a God of peace, who does not promise comfort and well-being but speaks a word that liberates.

Pluralism in Albania is still in its infancy but the "undesirable effects" of this phenomenon, intolerance in a particular way, are already evident. Jonathan Sacks, the chief rabbi of the United Kingdom, in his well-known book *The Persistence of Faith*, observes that this is the irony of pluralism: that while you expect it to make society more tolerant, on the contrary, it gives rise to new forms of intolerance. We have seen this happen in many ex-communist countries, where new forms of racism and nazism have emerged. In Albania, this intolerance has assumed other ways. With weapons readily available, many Albanians can easily get rid of others with whom they do not see eye to eye for either personal, family

or political reasons. The Christian minority in Albania must be more motivated by Jesus Christ, the foundation of our brotherhood. It has to be a light, an example of tolerance for all the nation. The Word Incarnate is the sacrament of dialogue between God and man, and between man and man. This is the good news which the angels proclaimed on the first Christmas night: "Peace on earth to all men of good will".

For quite a time now, Albanians have been living in great fear; fear of other people, fear of going out in the dark, fear of being harassed, fear of being assaulted in one's own house, fear of the future,

"Do not be afraid". These words are so common in the Advent liturgy. Isaiah proclaims them to a desperate nation; the angel repeats them to Mary and again to Joseph; and yet again to the shepherds of Bethlehem. Words that we hear even today, when we imagine that because of progress, we have become self-sufficient; just to realize that we are more fragile than ever before. This society is in need of angels carrying the same message: "Do not be afraid, because God is the Emmanuel, God-with-us". We have to be these angels. Having had a personal experience of God, having met him in his fragile majesty at Bethlehem, we can proclaim the same good news made known two thousand years ago.

THE SPIRITUAL MESSAGES OF THE RESURRECTION

(a schema of Msgr. George Frendo's talk on 13/04/2012)

Many consider lent as time to meditate on passion and death of Christ, while Easter is time to rejoice for Christ's victory. Yet: "(Jesus Christ) was put to death for our trespasses, and *risen for our justification*" (Rom 4, 25).

The resurrection is a supra-historical mystery which transforms us *now*.

St Thomas: it is also *our* resurrection, not only in the future, but also *now*.

Thanks to this mystery it is possible to be united with Christ and become "a new creation" (2 Cor 5, 17).

Accounts of the resurrection appearances help us discover the spiritual messages of this mystery.

And ask ourselves: How is this mystery affecting our lives *personally*? Is our meeting with the Risen Lord a *personal and transforming experience* which invites us to become "a new creation"?

1. ***Died and was buried***. An article of faith. But we have lost the significance of *was buried*. In fact Holy Saturday in practice is almost an anticipation of Easter, preparation for Easter Sunday...

Importance given by all 4 Gospels to the truth: "was buried". Why?

a. Life born in a grave. Ezechiel's vision of life being communicated to dry bones... Paul Tillich (*The Shaking of the Foundations*): in a tomb in Wilna, Poland, where Jews were hiding to avoid Nazis, a woman gave birth to a child. The watchman, a Jew who was watching, exclaimed: "Who, if not the Messiah, can be born in a grave?"

b. The grave means that this person not only died, but is now cut off from history. Yet in risen Christ, history re-starts: "He who is united with Christ becomes a new creation"

c. Grave is sealed; seal is broken not by disciples, but by heavenly powers.

d. The grain of wheat that dies... Rom 6: "buried with Christ..."

2. ***Per crucem ad lucem***. "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (Lk 24, 26). John's Gospel: the cross as exaltation. e.g.: "When I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself". He said this to show by what death he was to die" (12, 32-33); "This he said to show by what death he was to *glorify* God" (21, 19).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (*The Cost of Discipleship*): "Cheap grace is grace without the cross, grace without discipleship"

For Christians, the truth is: "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you" (Mt 5, 11).

3. ***Mary Magdalene and John***. Mary went twice to the tomb... When did she recognize Jesus? When He called her by name. He is the Good Shepherd, who knows his sheep and *calls each one by name* (Jn 10).

Women disappointed upon seeing empty tomb; Peter can't understand.

John is the only one who *saw* the empty tomb and *believed*.

Who was John? (1) the one who *made the right choice*: formerly a disciple of the Baptist, now he chooses Jesus; (2) the one who *reclined his head on the breast of Jesus*, hearing the

beating of his heart; (3) the one who *remained faithful to Jesus till the very end*, till his death on the cross.

The “beloved disciple” is also the *ideal* disciple: the one who, through love, perceives the signs of the Lord’s presence...

Fil 1, 9-10: “This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to *discern* what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ” (*αἰσθησις* – the right diagnosis). Love is wisdom: it makes us capable to perceive others’ situations and needs.

4. ***The victory of Love and Obedience.*** Resurrection shows that **love** is fertile and fruitful. The Father loves his Son and raises him up; the Son loves us and raises us up. We love with the love of Christ, and our love becomes “redemptive”. Love is victorious: “Take heart! I have overcome the world” (Jn 16, 33).

Obedience: Heb. presents Christ’s sacrifice as beginning with the incarnation and continues with his entry into the Sanctuary (i.e. in heaven): “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek” (5, 7-10).

5. ***Love takes the first step:*** There is always the same sequence in accounts of apparitions: Jesus takes initiative, exhorts them to identify him, tells them to be witnesses. That is why, as the risen Lord, he gives them authority to forgive sins.

6. ***New intimacy with Christ:***

a. He calls disciples “brothers” (Mt 28, 10; Jn 20, 17).

b. Question addressed to Peter (Jn 21) – St Augustine: “The risen Lord made no other question except the one addressed to Peter: ‘Do you love me?’” – a question He addresses also to us.

c. Experience of Risen Lord builds community. A great metamorphosis took place among disciples: no longer quarrelling about first places... Acts 2 and 4: one mind and one heart, love, union in prayer and breaking of bread, sharing everything...

Three ways Jesus used to make others recognize him:

With Mary Magdalene: He called her by name (Jn 20, 16)

With the apostles: He showed them His wounds (Jn 20, 20)

With the disciples of Emmaus: He celebrated the Eucharist (Lk 24, 30-31.35)

Conclusion:

Christopher Lasch, Jonathan Sacks, Francis Fukuyama...

PERFECTÆ CARITATIS **AND RENEWAL OF RELIGIOUS LIFE**

Fatima, February 2006

First of all I would like to make it clear that this talk is meant to be a theological meditation rather than a theological lecture. And, taking *Perfectæ Caritatis* as our point of departure, let us see how, throughout these forty years, we have been enlightened to understand ourselves ever more deeply in order to carry out the “appropriate renewal” called for by this Council document.

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

The Council’s Preparatory Commission for Religious, which was instituted by Pope John XXIII on the 5th June 1960, made it clear from the very beginning that the theological foundation of religious life should be elaborated. For this reason it asked the Preparatory Theological Commission that this be included in the Theological Constitution on the Church. The Theological Commission accepted this request, and, as we know, Chapter VI of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, deals with religious life. And so we have two Council documents of particular importance for us as religious: the Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, which was promulgated on the 21st November 1964 and which, in Chapter VI, speaks about religious life; and the Decree *Perfectæ Caritatis*, which was promulgated on the 28th October 1965. But whereas *Lumen Gentium* deals with religious life from the doctrinal point of view, *Perfectæ Caritatis*, while presupposing and developing the doctrinal points of the sixth chapter of that Constitution, is more interested in establishing the principles for the renewal of religious life. But in any case, one must not expect to find a complete theological treatise on religious life in these documents, although, undoubtedly, the Council has laid the foundations for such a treatise.

One other preliminary consideration concerns the very title of the decree which reads, in Latin: *Decretum de Accomodata Renovatione Vitae Religiosae*. “Accomodata renovatio” is normally translated as “Appropriate Renewal”. However, the title embraces two distinct ideas or purposes: adaptation and renewal. While adaptation is concerned with updating religious life, bearing in mind the changed situation of our times, renewal is more concerned with interior conversion in accordance with the essence of religious life and the foundational charism. For this reason art. 2 emphatically states that this *accomodata renovatio* implies two simultaneous processes: “(1) a continuous return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration behind a given community, and (2) an adjustment of the community to the changed conditions of the times”. I was a student of philosophy when *Perfectæ Caritatis* was promulgated and I remember very vividly those years of euphoria during and immediately following the Second Vatican Council. I remember with what enthusiasm we were following every step towards the reform in the Church and particularly in religious life. But not less vividly do I remember the years of tension which ensued, the late sixties and early seventies, and which prompted Pope Paul VI to issue the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelica Testificatio* in 1971, which, as Pope Paul stated almost at the very beginning, was meant “to respond to the anxiety, uncertainty and instability shown by some” and “to encourage those who are seeking the true renewal of the religious life”. Hasty

adaptations to changed social circumstances have sometimes been made at the expense of true renewal.

My final, and perhaps the most important, preliminary remark concerns the very definition of religious life. From the discussions which took place during the 1994 Synod on Consecrated Life we could realize how difficult it is to give a definition of “consecrated life”. This is quite understandable, considering that consecrated life embraces many divergent forms of life: hermits, monks, religious of apostolic life, secular institutes, the order of virgins. It is much easier to define religious life. But, in my opinion, the question: “What is religious life?” is closely linked to, and utterly dependent on, the question: “Why did religious life originate in the Church?” I do not question the affirmation of *Lumen Gentium* (n. 46) and *Perfectæ Caritatis* (n. 1), that religious life has as its source and foundations the teaching and example of Our Lord Jesus Christ. However, there was a particular moment in the history of the Church which saw the emergence of this new form of life. When and why did religious life originate?

Although eremitical monasticism (which implied segregation from the world and a solitary way of life lived in celibacy, poverty and contemplation) had already existed before the fourth century, coenobite life, that is that way of life of people living together while embracing celibacy and poverty had its birth in the first half of the fourth century. This is a very important starting point to discover who we are, as we discover how and why we started to exist. Precisely at the time when the Church got out of her hiding place and the period of persecutions was over thanks to the Edict of Milan proclaimed by Emperors Constantine and Licinius, there and then religious communities began to spring, especially through Pachomius and Basil in the East, and Augustine and Benedict in the West.

But how can we account to the fact that it was precisely at the time when the Church could enjoy that long hoped for peace – it suffices to see with what enthusiasm the Venerable Bede describes this “peace” – yes, precisely at this particular period, the Church would see the birth of the first religious communities? When the Church could get out of the catacombs and, all of a sudden, Christian faith became the religion of the masses, inevitably she had to face two serious dangers. The first one was the danger of a mediocre Christianity – which Dietrich Bonhöffer has termed “cheap grace” and “a Christianity without discipleship” – and where the main concern became “*what is the minimum required in order that one become and remain a member of the Church?*” rather than “*what is the ideal towards which one should aspire in order to become an authentic disciple of Christ?*” The second one, the danger of doing away with the witness of the Church as a community precisely because now the local Church became that big diocese where it was no longer possible to speak of the Church as a community of persons united in fraternal love and in mutual service, sharing among themselves whatever material and spiritual goods they have. And coenobitic life was born as an answer to these two dangers. For this reason Saint Basil, in his Rule, defined monastic life as “a life of fidelity to the Gospel”. And Saint Augustine, at the very beginning of his Rule, states: “The chief motivation for your sharing life together is to live harmoniously in the house and to have one heart and one soul seeking God”.

From this we can conclude that every definition of religious life must include these two basic and common elements: first, religious are Christians who want to live in a more

radical way their Christian call through the three evangelical counsels; second, that religious want to penetrate more deeply in the mystery of the Church as communion, and so they live in community. To these two common and fundamental elements a third one can be added: every religious family (congregation) has a specific mission within the Church, defined by its Founder. Consequently we can speak of the “general charism” of religious life, as a form of life of radical evangelical witness and life in community, and the “particular charism” peculiar to this or that institute. These three elements, therefore, constitute the axis of religious life.

And now I propose first of all to deal with the most salient theological points of *Perfectæ Caritatis*, enlightened, where necessary, by subsequent documents of the Holy See on religious life.

A DIVINE CALL – CONSACRATIO – SEQUELA CHRISTI

Perfectæ Caritatis speaks of religious life as a *divine call*. And it is a divine call not only for the fact that religious life draws its origin “from the teaching and example of the Divine Master” (*Perfectæ Caritatis* 1 §1), but also in the sense that it is God who takes the initiative to call somebody to embrace this way of life (1 §3; 5 §1). From several biblical passages which speak of divine calls, we can conclude that a divine call is a new initiative which gives to the person called a new status within God’s plan. In analogy to these calls, a call to religious life includes two moments: the moment of “being called” by God (which is why Council and subsequent Pontifical documents, from *Lumen Gentium* to *Vita Consacrata*, refer to this call as a “special gift” which God bestows to somebody) and the moment of the personal response to this call (and therefore *Perfectæ Caritatis* speaks of religious as persons who “devote themselves in a special way to the Lord” (1 §3). It is a free and loving response to God’s call. It is a decision to embrace in a radical way the demands of the Gospel: “In response to this call... those who are called entrust themselves to the love of God who wishes them to be exclusively at his service.... This is the meaning of the call to the consecrated life: it is an initiative coming wholly from the Father, who asks those whom he has chosen to respond with complete and exclusive devotion” (*Vita Consacrata* 17).

Hence, based on God’s call, religious life implies a permanent spiritual attitude, a permanent response, in faith and charity, to God’s plan.

Evangelica Testificatio was published more or less at the same time when Alvin Toffler published his best-seller *Future Shock*. One of the chapters in this book is entitled *The Death of Permanence*. Toffler envisaged that, in the future, lasting commitments will no longer be possible. As a matter of fact I think we are aware of the fact that consumerist society has created a culture of instability. Yet, Paul VI affirmed: “The teaching of the Council illustrates well the grandeur of this self-giving, freely made by yourselves, after the pattern of Christ’s self-giving to his Church; like his, yours is total and irreversible” (*Evangelica Testificatio* 7). Yes, the radical choice of Christ demands total faith in our vocation and a daily “yes” to this call, a continuous renewal of our decision.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, in his book *Who is a Christian?* remarks: “*This is where the holding back from true commitment so frequently met with among young Christians today is questionable. They want to commit themselves.... but only for a foreseeable period.*” But

he goes on to say: “All genuine fulfilment of an individual life comes from the commitment that is made once for all.” And Karl Rahner (*Servants of the Lord: Open Letter to a Young Priest*) affirms: “Decision means giving up other alternatives Every choice is a decision about a misty unpredictable future.... It cannot be done without faith, without accepting the incomprehensible folly of the cross.” And again, Timothy Radcliffe (*I call You Friends: Making Promises till Death*), while referring to Peter as an example and his promise: “I will lay down my life for you” (Jn 13, 37), comments: “A vow is not a statement of confidence in our strength, but of hope in God’s providence. Peter is weak and he does fail, but it is Jesus who opens out a way beyond. The rash promise of Peter undermines any vision of our vows as based on strength of will. Peter chooses the charcoal fire in the palace of the high priest (Jn 18, 25), but God provides the charcoal fire on the seashore (Jn 21, 9.15ff).”

Precisely because it is a total, irreversible and unconditional commitment to God and to the Church, religious life has been aptly defined as a “consecration”. Both *Lumen Gentium* chapter 6 and *Perfectæ Caritatis* make emphatic use of the verbs *consecrari*, *emancipari*, *se devovere* when referring to this self-commitment. *Perfectæ Caritatis* succinctly describes religious life in those well-known words: “an act of special consecration which is deeply rooted in their baptismal consecration and which provides an ampler manifestation of it” (5 §1). In this way, while again referring to religious life as a special vocation, and so as a special consecration, the Council is first of all excluding the idea of religious life as if it were a clan of supermen, and this it does by speaking of religious consecration in relation to baptismal consecration. Secondly and consequently, it is also presenting religious life in relation to the Paschal mystery.

So this consecration is “deeply rooted in baptismal consecration”. The New Testament describes this consecration by making use of two metaphors: “birth” and “death”. It is a re-birth through water and the Holy Spirit (Jn 3, 3-5); a new life as son/daughter of God and member of the new People of God. And it is a death with Christ (Rom 6, 3-10).

The idea of religious life as consecration and as a second baptism was already familiar with many Christian authors and theologians in the Middle Ages, although they might have used other terms instead of “consecration”. St Thomas, for example, uses the word “holocaust” (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 186, a. 1). *Vita Consacrata* refers to this text of St Thomas: “With St Thomas, we come to understand the identity of the consecrated person, beginning with his or her complete self-offering, as being comparable to a genuine holocaust” (n. 17). And this term implies both the idea of re-birth, a new life through the profession of the evangelical counsels and entry into a new community, as well as the idea of death, a death not only to sin (as in the case of baptism) but also to those things which might be a hindrance to those who want to give themselves unreservedly to the Lord. That is why religious life is called a *special* consecration.

I think it would be interesting here to note an implication which the idea of the profession of the evangelical counsels as a “spiritual death” or “death to the world” has had in the matrimonial canonical legislation in the twelfth and thirteenth century. When Pope Alexander III, in the twelfth century, introduced the new discipline of severing the bond of marriage in case one of the parties embraces religious life before having had any sexual

intercourse with his or her spouse (what shortly later came to be known as *matrimonium ratum sed non consummatum*), the theologians of the thirteenth century (amongst whom Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas) tried to provide a theological basis to this discipline. They said that before sexual intercourse (“consummation”) between the spouses there exists only “a spiritual bond” and since in religious life one dies to the world, then this spiritual union can be severed through a “spiritual death”, in analogy with “physical death” which severs a “physical bond”.

Consecration implies a double dimension: vertical and horizontal. In its vertical dimension, consecration places that person in a new relationship with God while in its horizontal dimension it places him in a new relationship of service in and for the Church. *Perfectæ Caritatis* speaks about both these dimensions in n. 6. Here it is stated that “those who profess the evangelical counsels love and seek before all else that God who took the initiative in loving us” and “love their neighbour for the world’s salvation and the upbuilding of the Church”.

In an earlier passage (n. 5e) we read: “As they seek God before all things and only Him, the members of each community should combine contemplation with apostolic love. By the former they adhere to God in mind and heart; by the latter they strive to associate themselves with the work of redemption and to spread the Kingdom of God.” It seems to me that this passage is very important to understand that there is no longer any room for that sharp distinction, so favourite with late-medieval theologians, between *vita contemplativa*, *vita activa*, and *vita mixta*. There is no such thing as purely contemplative or purely active life. In *Evangelica Testificatio*, speaking of contemplative life, Paul VI affirms: “You contribute to the building up of the Kingdom of God by the witness of your lives and with a hidden apostolic fruitfulness” (n. 8); and further down he says: “When your vocation destines you for other tasks in the service of men – pastoral life, missions, teaching, works of charity and so on – is it not above all the intensity of your union with the Lord that will make them fruitful, in proportion to that union in secret?” (n. 10)

So, in its vertical dimension, this consecration demands that the religious should first of all seek God, love God and develop a life hidden with Christ in God. The reason for this is explained in *Lumen Gentium* n. 44 §4: “The religious state constitutes a closer imitation and an abiding re-enactment in the Church of the form of life which the Son of God made his own when he came into the world to do the will of the Father and which he propounded to the disciples who followed him.” So religious life is defined in relation to the holiness of Jesus Christ.

Whereas in its horizontal dimension, religious life is described rather in relation to the holiness of the Church – a point highly emphasized in the Council documents – which is why the role of religious life in the life of the Church has been stressed more explicitly. Thus *Perfectæ Caritatis* speaks of the several religious institutes as families within the Church and which adorn the Church (1 §2). And “the more ardently they unite themselves to Christ... the more vigorous becomes the life of the Church and the more abundantly her apostolate bears fruit” (1 §3). *Lumen Gentium* asserts that that the evangelical counsels are “a divine gift, which *the Church* has received from her Lord and which she ever preserves” (43 §1). Further on the same Constitution states that, through their life and work, religious

“adorn the Bride of Christ.... while rendering to all men generous services of every variety” (46 §3).

This same document affirms that “by her approval, the Church not only raises the religious profession to the dignity of a canonical state; by the liturgical setting of that profession she also manifests that it is a state consecrated to God” (45 §3). Indeed, religious life is a state consecrated to God within the Church and for the Church. It is the Church that, through her ministry, “recognizes, welcomes, sustains, and embraces those who within it make an offering of themselves as a living sign” (*Evangelica Testificatio* 7). Whereupon *Perfectæ Caritatis* insists that the renewal of religious life must be carried out under the guidance of the Church (2 §1) and according to the needs of the Church (2 d).

On their part, religious must also understand that, once their self-offering has been accepted by the Church, they are committed to her service as well (*Perfectæ Caritatis* 5 §2). Their apostolate must aim at the salvation of the world and the building-up of the Church (6 §1). More and more they must “live and think with the Church, and dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to its mission” (6 §3).

Therefore, thanks to this ecclesial dimension, religious life does not remain an abstract ideal or an isolated clan, but, on the contrary, it becomes a concrete sign of the holiness of the Church. And this also allows us to realise how important religious life is for the Church. In fact religious life, as a consecrated life, must foster that love which animates the Church, and proclaim in a concrete way the wonderful and saving good news entrusted to the Church. It is that light which, in the words of Paul VI, “announces the kingdom of God with a liberty which knows no obstacles and is daily lived by thousands of sons and daughters of the Church” (*Evangelica Testificatio* 3).

Although the concept of *consacratio* remains fundamental for a theological notion of religious life, the Council has duly deemed it fit to corroborate it with another concept: that of *sequela Christi*, the following of Christ.

An analysis of the passages which speak of this following of Christ in *Perfectæ Caritatis*, leads us to draw four observations.

First, the call to religious life is identified with the call to follow Christ (*Perfectæ Caritatis* 8 §2); in other words, the following of Christ is presented as the aim of religious life. This is founded on the biblical notion of *sequela Christi*. In fact, in the Gospels, the expression “to follow Jesus” has a double meaning. The first one implies the decision to leave everything in order to be united with Jesus, determined to accompany him wherever he goes; this is the sense of the call which Jesus addressed to the apostles and to the rich young man. The second one means bearing one’s cross and renouncing oneself, in the same way Jesus himself accepted the cross. So when the Council documents speak of religious life as a following of Christ more closely, it is adopting a fundamental notion of discipleship based on the New Testament. Religious life finds the archetype of its existence precisely in the life of Jesus, of the apostles and of the primitive Christian community in Jerusalem.

The second observation is a consequence of the first one. Among the criteria established by *Perfectæ Caritatis* for the renewal and adaptation of religious life, the Decree puts this principle in the first place: “Since the final norm of the religious life is the following

of Christ as it is put before us in the Gospel, this must be taken by all institutes as the supreme rule” (2a). We must note that, while in the original draft of this decree (the 1963 schema) the intention of the founder and the traditions of the institute were put in the first place, in the definitive version the *sequela Christi* was placed first, whereas the aims of the founder and the institute’s sound traditions were put in the second place.

A third observation: this following of Christ is realized, in concrete terms, through the practice of the evangelical counsels. This is clear from several texts in the same Decree (e.g. 1 §2; 1 §3; 2e).

And finally let us also note that while the concept of *consacratio* is very important to understand religious life as a total and irreversible self-giving (in actual fact, *Evangelica Testificatio* n. 7 bases the idea of the permanent nature of the religious call precisely on this idea of *consacratio*), the concept of *sequela Christi* is likewise important to demonstrate the dynamic nature of this self-giving. Religious life is a gift from God, a consecration which is realized through the profession of the evangelical counsels. But this consecration is only the beginning: religious life, as a following of Christ, is a continuous process. One *is* a religious, but at the same time one *is becoming* a religious, in a process through which one is gradually, as it were, being absorbed by Christ. We cannot simply say that one has answered once and for all God’s call; we must rather say that one has answered and *must continue to answer* this call with a spirit of determination, generosity, and enthusiasm.

COMMUNITY LIFE

It seems very strange indeed that *Lumen Gentium* chapter VI does not say anything at all about community life. But on this subject *Perfectæ Caritatis* has provided us with perhaps the most beautiful description of community life ever published in any Council or Pontifical document, and one of the most beautiful articles in the whole document. This is the first paragraph of article 15, which abounds in references to New Testament texts, in such a way that the “evangelical quality” of the religious community life becomes obvious: this is a life founded on the life of the first Christian community, who were of one heart and one mind.

From this paragraph we may conclude first of all that the religious community, *as community*, has an ecclesial dimension. We can also say that it is a Church in miniature, a sacrament of the whole ecclesial community, and that it has a very strong witness potential both as a community which radiates Christian love and as a liturgical community. We can even dare say that it should serve as a model to the Church at large. In this sense Johannes Baptist Metz, in his book *Servants of the Lord*, says that religious life should serve as a *shock therapy* to the whole Church. So whereas the primitive Church served as an inspiration for religious life and continues to serve as a model for the latter, religious life originated and continues to exist in order to serve as an inspiration for the Church and to be a model for the life of the Church. It should continue to remind the Church that it is a community united in faith and charity.

Furthermore we can also conclude that community life is far from being a merely juridical superstructure. Rather, we must be on our guard lest this “sacrament of the whole ecclesial community” be absorbed by juridical structures. For this reason the Decree established the practical norm that “those who are called lay brothers, co-operators, or some

such name should be associated more closely with the life and work of the community” whereas the necessary steps should be taken so that in women’s institutes there should be “but one category of sisters” (15 §2). The law of fraternal love in religious communities is far beyond any structure that could generate division or unnecessary distinctions.

At the centre of every religious community life there should be the Paschal Christ, “the man for others” (Dietrich Bonhöffer). Consequently fraternal love is translated into action in mutual service, on the model of Christ, the good Samaritan, who came to serve.

This same article speaks of the religious community as “a true family gathered in the Lord’s name” and so it rejoices because God is in its midst. As a community in constant dialogue with God, a community which, as this same article emphasizes, draws its nourishment from the teaching of the Gospel and from the sacred liturgy, especially from the Holy Eucharist, it is a community of faith. It is made up of men who are convinced of their common call: they did not choose each other, but God chose them and led them to this life in common.

Faith is the foundation of community life, love is its aim. Commenting on the episode of the Transfiguration, and precisely on the words of Peter: “It is well that we are here” (Mt 17, 4), John Paul II makes this beautiful reflection: “The experience of Christ’s glory, though completely filling his mind and heart, does not set him apart, but rather unites him more closely to the ‘we’ of the Apostles” (*Vita Consacrata* 29). Jesus, who is always in the midst of those who are united in his name (Mt 18, 20) and who, as the Risen Lord, called “brothers” (Mt 28, 10) those whom, shortly before, he had called “friends” (Jn 15, 15), fosters true brotherly love among those who are gathered as a community of consecrated persons.

The unity of the brethren is also, according to the same article 15 of *Perfectæ Caritatis*, “a source of great apostolic power”. Paul VI in *Evangelica Testificatio* (39) says: “You intend to create surroundings which are favourable to the spiritual progress of each member of the community..... There is no doubt that *community spirit, relationships of friendship and fraternal cooperation in the same apostolate*, as well as mutual support in a shared life chosen for a better service of Christ, are so many valuable factors in this daily progress”.

As a Dominican, I am sure you will excuse me if I mention just one example from our past history. In a chapel on the island of Hispaniola (now known as Haiti and the Dominican Republic), during mass on the Sunday preceding Christmas, the Spanish Dominican priest Antonio de Montesinos gave a famous sermon condemning the injustice of Spanish noblemen who were seriously mistreating the indigenous population. There were vehement protests by these noblemen, who went to report Antonio to his prior, Pedro de Cordoba. Pedro faced the charges with great courage, saying: “It wasn’t Antonio de Montesinos who gave that sermon: it was the community!” It was an excellent example not only of fraternal solidarity but also of the dynamism of a community united in love and endeavouring to achieve one and the same aim.

One final observation concerning the religious community. Today, perhaps more than ever, religious community life has assumed a strong witness potential not only for the Church, but also for the whole of society at large. Jonathan Sacks duly observes: “As

pluralism has gained ground, there has been a sharp increase in racial tension and anti-Semitism.... At its extreme, it produces a clash of fundamentalisms, some liberal, some conservative, neither with the resources to understand the other” (*The Persistence of Faith*). Moreover, not even the most natural community, which is the union of man and woman in marriage, has been spared the shattering effects of modernism and post-modernism. We are all aware of the great challenges which married life is facing today, with the sharp rise in extra-marital affairs and marriage breakdowns.

All this leads to the inevitable question: How can religious community life manage to survive? First century society asked the question concerning the Christians: “How can they love each other so much?” Twenty-first century society is asking the question concerning religious: “How can they live together?” This reminds me of a married woman who, many years ago, came to me for counselling because her marriage was on the rocks. At one moment she exclaimed: “I wonder how can you manage to live together in community?” Precisely this is the “miracle” of community life! Religious community life is a concrete response to the challenge of egoism which severs even the most intimate relationships, and an invitation to that generosity which is capable to construct deeper relationships. It is not uniformity, but unity; not conformity, but communion.

THE EVANGELICAL COUNSELS

As I have already stated, the evangelical counsels are means in order to follow Christ, and expressions of this following. *Lumen Gentium*, at the end of Chapter V, which deals with the universal call to holiness, had already referred to the “manifold counsels which the Lord proposes to his disciples in the Gospel for them to observe” (42). This was due to the fact that these counsels are addressed to all believers, and not to just one section of Christians. However, as *Evangelica Testificatio* points out, for those who follow Christ in religious life, they have become “the law of their existence” (n. 7). They have therefore been fully incorporated into their state of life.

Two Dominican theologians have developed two different aspects of the evangelical counsels. Jean Marie Tillard has considered them as “sacrament of one’s self-offering” (*The Gospel Path*), whereas Jerome Murphy O’Connor has viewed them as sacrament of one’s commitment to the community (*What is Religious Life*). Both aspects are complementary, and both are very important for a deeper understanding of these counsels.

In former times, quite often, spiritual writers have spoken about the evangelical counsels as if these were an end in itself. However, at the very beginning of *Perfectæ Caritatis*, it is stated that “the pursuit of perfect charity *by means of* the evangelical counsels traces its origins to the teaching and the example of the Divine Master” (see *Perfectæ Caritatis* §1). These words make it clear that this is not the case; they are but means for the end, which is perfect charity.

Again, in former times, talk of the evangelical counsels was too negative: it was limited to the idea of renunciation, as expressions of one’s denial of the world. They *are* renunciations, but *not merely* that. *Perfectæ Caritatis* and subsequent pontifical documents speak of them in a more positive way. Although they are negative in act, but they are positive in their origin, in their scope, and in their meaning.

In this perspective, the Council could speak more clearly and more emphatically on an important aspect of the counsels: they set us free. There is hardly any need to refer to the abundant texts in *Lumen Gentium*, *Perfectæ Caritatis*, *Evangelica Testificatio*, and *Vita Consacrata* which speak of the profession of religious vows as a new liberty to follow Christ more closely without any hindrance. This is the great paradox surrounding the profession of the evangelical counsels: at the moment when one is obliging oneself to renounce to fundamental rights, one is becoming freer to attain the end one has set for oneself. Thus it becomes more evident that the reason why religious renounce marriage, wealth, and power is not because these are something evil – not at all – but only in order to become freer to attain their aim.

Two final notes concerning the evangelical counsels. Firstly: perhaps we are still too much accustomed to speak of the evangelical counsels as if they are three separate compartments of our existence. Also Church documents speak of them in this way. J.M. Tillard speaks of the “osmosis” of the evangelical counsels: they are inter-related and inter-dependent. Speaking of the moral virtues, Bernard Häring says: “Splendour and dignity of a particular virtue can exist only in concert with the whole hierarchy of values. Individual virtue is truly authentic as order and beauty only if it is met in the entire order of all virtues” (*The Law of Christ*, Vol. I). *A fortiori* this can be stated about the evangelical counsels. We cannot consider them as three promises or attitudes or states independent of each other, as if one can be perfect in one, even though one is very weak in another. There is an “osmosis”, an inter-dependence and inter-activity among the three counsels. Thus, chastity is also an expression of poverty, obedience means compliance and so it too is another form of poverty in spirit. Poverty, on the other hand, is purity of heart.

Secondly: it is community life which endows the evangelical counsels with a very peculiar dimension: a “communitarian” dimension. *Perfectæ Caritatis* did not refer at all to this dimension of the evangelical counsels. And it was not until 1994 that, for the first time, a document of the Holy See has put to light this very important aspect of the counsels, even though very briefly. This was in article 44 of the document issued by the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, on the 2nd February 1994 (only a few months before the celebration of the Synod of Bishops which was to discuss consecrated life). The document bears the title: *The Life of the Community: Congregavit nos in unum Christi Amor*. The evangelical counsels are not mere means for the perfection of the individual who embraces them. I do not believe I am wrong when I say that there is no religious life without life in common, and that the profession of the evangelical counsels originated within a community. And therefore the aim of religious life, perfect charity, must be achieved in a communitarian dimension, and consequently also the counsels themselves necessarily have a communitarian dimension.

Thus chastity is not only an expression of one’s mystical and eschatological union with Christ as “spouse”; it also means that while the religious has renounced to a family of his own, he has adopted a family (his religious community) for himself, or, rather, he has been adopted by this family. Speaking of chastity, *Perfectæ Caritatis* affirms: “Let all, and especially superiors, remember that chastity is preserved more securely when the members live a common life in true brotherly love” (12 §2). According to this statement, fraternal love in the community is *a means* to provide safety guards for the vow of chastity.

Experience proves right this assertion: many religious cultivated certain friendships, which eventually proved to be dangerous, precisely because a truly fraternal atmosphere was missing in their community. However, the other way round is truer, namely that celibacy is a means to foster true fraternal love within the community. In a community of persons who have professed celibacy, each member's affectivity expresses itself not in the natural institute of marriage, but in reciprocal love in the community, in a supernatural dimension.

So also evangelical poverty. It is not only an expression of one's preference of the goods of the Kingdom; it is also an expression of total solidarity with one's brothers in the community. It means that whatever a religious owns, including his personal talents and even the time at his disposition, is not his own but the community's. The two very beautiful descriptions of the life of the early Church in the Acts of the Apostles (at the end of chapters two and four) prove this right: the early Christians renounced all they had and laid them "at the feet of the apostles" (4, 34-35). In the first schema of Vatican II's Decree on Religious Life, presented in the second session of the Council (1963), it was stated: "Those who live without personal possessions, live in an eminent way that fraternal life of the Christians who, in the primitive Church, were of one heart and soul and shared everything among themselves; they were also witnesses of the fraternal life of the redeemed, while proclaiming the future life of God's family, in which the children of the same Father have all things in common". It is a pity that this paragraph did not find its way into the final version of the Decree, for it illustrated quite well the communitarian dimension of evangelical poverty.

And finally, obedience means that the religious is at the service of the community. No club or group of people can survive without a certain degree of authority and obedience. Now a religious community is not simply a group of people or a club. As a *community* it demands a sharing in all aspects of life. For this reason obedience is essentially embraced in religious life in view of the common good of the community. The community is in need of direction and so it demands that there be a superior for the benefit and service of all the community. It also demands obedience on the part of the members of the community, as expression of their cooperation with the one who is the first responsible for the community.

RELIGIOUS LIFE AS SACRAMENT

Lumen Gentium has stressed that religious life "is not a kind of middle way between the clerical and lay conditions of life" (43 §2). And again: "The state of life which is constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels, while not entering into the hierarchical structure of the Church, belongs undeniably to her life and holiness" (44 §5). Subsequent documents of the Holy See have reaffirmed this same doctrinal view. This is the reason why religious life does not fit into the sevenfold division as defined by the Council of Trent.

And yet religious life has a sacramental dimension. All documents of the Holy See since *Lumen Gentium* have reiterated this point as they spoke of religious (or consecrated) life as *sign* and *witness*.

Religious life is first of all a "moral sign", a sign of that holiness which all Christians are invited to attain, as disciples of Christ and members of the Church. In the words of *Lumen Gentium* (44 §4): "All the members of the Church should unflinchingly fulfil the

duties of their Christian calling. The profession of the evangelical counsels shines before them as a sign which can and should effectively inspire them to do so”.

Secondly, it is an “ecclesial sign”. Besides being entirely at the service of the Church, religious life is a more concrete witness of the union between Christ and his Church. This aspect is stressed in several passages of *Perfectæ Caritatis* and in subsequent documents. Speaking of chastity, for example, *Evangelica Testificatio* refers to Paul’s words where he presents marriage as “the image and sharing of the union of love joining Christ and the Church” but then it adds that consecrated chastity “symbolizes in the most eminent and absolute way the mystery of the union of the Mystical Body with its Head” (13).

And finally, it is an “eschatological sign”. “It reveals more clearly the heavenly goods which are already present in this age” (*Lumen Gentium* 44 §4). The evangelical counsels are a vivid testimony of these “heavenly goods”, for the sake of which one renounces marriage, personal possession of material goods, and the right to make decisions for oneself. And to remind us that this is not the type of Christian eschatology as misinterpreted by Karl Marx, that is, belief in an afterlife as an “escape” from one’s duty to build the temporal city, John Paul II clarifies that this eschatological dimension of consecrated life “is anything but passive: although directed towards the future Kingdom, it expresses itself in work and mission... giving rise in human society to effective aspirations for justice, peace, solidarity and forgiveness” (*Vita Consacrata* 27).

The sacramental dimension of religious life means that religious life is a prophecy. And as such it is, of its very nature, a mission. It is a proclamation of the true human values. Our profession of the evangelical counsels raises the question: “Why?” Why didn’t you marry, once you are a normal man or woman and hence you felt the natural attraction for a heterosexual union and to build up a family? Why did you profess poverty, you who, with all your talents, can make a fortune? Why have you subjected yourself to another person, who may be less competent than yourself, promising obedience? All the above reflection on eschatology reminds me of a conversation which I had many years back with a Libyan businessman who was travelling with me from Malta to Rome. He could not understand that I had a pocket money of \$25 per month, and that whatever I earned from my work I passed it on to my community, while the community provided me with all my needs. But most of all he could not believe me when, to his question whether I was married and whether I had ever been to bed with a woman, I replied in the negative! For those who do not believe, the profession of the evangelical counsels merely arouses curiosity; whereas for those who believe, they convey an important message and are an invitation to open oneself to the transcendent.

And this acquires a fresh importance in contemporary society, as has been masterly affirmed and developed in all Section II of the final Chapter of *Vita Consacrata* under the title *A Prophetic Witness in the Face of Great Challenges* (especially nos. 84-92). Here John Paul II considers the three evangelical counsels as “profound anthropological” responses to the “three major challenges” facing society today: “a *hedonistic culture* which separates sexuality from all objective moral norms” (88), “a *materialism which craves possessions*, heedless of the needs and sufferings of the weakest” (89), and “those *notions of freedom* which separate the fundamental human good from its essential relationship to the truth and

to moral norms” (91). The new idols of contemporary society become challenges for religious but by responding to them as they embrace the evangelical counsels, these religious become themselves challenges to contemporary society.

We have spoken of community life and of the evangelical counsels as sacraments and prophecy. But also the charism proper to each religious institute constitutes a prophecy. Our founders had a special gift to be communicated to the Church and they wanted to communicate it through their disciples. All Church documents have stressed the duty of all religious to be faithful to the founding charism. We must not interpret this fidelity as if it means getting stuck to the past, as if the course of history stopped with the death of the founder. Our founders have shown great sensitivity to the concrete situations of the Church and of society, to the signs of the times. That is why John Paul II speaks of *creative fidelity*: “Institutes of Consecrated Life are invited courageously to propose anew the enterprising initiative, creativity and holiness of their founders and foundresses in response to the signs of the times emerging in today’s world” (*Vita Consacrata* 37).

Consecrated persons share in “the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of contemporary man” (*Gaudium et Spes* 1) because whatever is truly human, finds its echo in the heart of the disciples of Christ. So the charisms of the religious institutes are clear proof of the consecrated persons’ love for the world. It is a world where sin still exists, nevertheless it is a world redeemed by Christ and always loved by Christ, and consequently loved also by the disciples of Christ. It is a world in which religious never tire of searching and saving humankind, as they continuously discover new ways to communicate with humankind and to redeem him from whatever is alienating him.

THE ART OF PRAYER

2007

Prayer is an art. The apostles were aware of this. That is why, in the gospel, we read that, after having watched Jesus praying, they beseeched him: “Lord, teach us how to pray!”

It is now ten years since I first arrived in Albania and now I have settled here as a Maltese Dominican missionary. My experience in this country has helped me in so many ways to deepen my understanding of prayer and to develop the art of prayer. Albania is the poorest country in Europe. Throughout these ten years I have lived very closely to the lives of many poor people and I can honestly say that I am very much indebted to them because it was through these people, more than anybody else, that I have deepened my knowledge of the art of prayer.

Indeed, the experience of beggars turning to us in their needs and the manner in which they beg, has helped me to make these reflections.

First, why do they turn to us, priests and religious? Simply because they know that our doors and our hearts are always open to them, for we are sensitive to their plight. In other words, they turn to us because they believe in us.

Secondly, they don't give up easily even if our first answer was: “I can't help you!” They keep insisting, until they get at least some of the help they had asked for.

Thirdly, most of them are not shy to beg. They are compelled to do it, because they are badly in need of help. But if they are shy to do it themselves, what do they do? They send their children. Maybe one of the reasons why our Lord urged us to become like little children was precisely this: children are very much aware that they are powerless, in need of help, and so they are not shy to beg. They are empty-handed.

Now we can easily apply this to the art of prayer. Why do we turn to God in prayer? Precisely because we believe in Him, we are convinced that He is close to each and everyone of us and we are more than sure of His fatherly love. Some philosophers, like Aristotle, could never dream of a God who is close to humankind. He is utterly transcendent. How can an infinite being be moved by the plight of human frailty? But this is not the God of the Bible, the God who revealed Himself as a loving Father. Similarly, Jesus wants us to address him in the same tone. In answer to the apostles' request: “Teach us how to pray”, Jesus replies by teaching them a prayer which addresses God as “Father”, which here translates the Aramaic word “abba”, a word which perhaps would more appropriately be translated by the word “daddy”. As “abba” is the familiar word with which a Hebrew child would address his father. So prayer creates a particular relationship with God as a loving Father. Jesus continues to emphasize this type of relationship when he says: “Would a father give a stone if asked for a bread, or a snake if asked for a fish, or a scorpion if asked for an egg?”

A second point about prayer is that it is an exercise in faith. But this is not an abstract faith, it is an existential faith which demands perseverance in prayer and a commitment to prayer. Again, in today's gospel, Jesus stresses this need by narrating the parable of the man who goes to his friend in the middle of the night, persistently asking for three loaves. The message which this is also giving is that prayer is efficacious. Over many years St Monica prayed and shed many tears, desiring the conversion of her son, Augustine. These prayers were

answered but many years passed before she could see the fruit of her tears. But she never gave up. Perseverance in prayer expresses our belief in the efficacy of prayer.

And finally, prayer must always be accompanied by a humble and simple attitude. It is the humility of the publican who entered the temple, deeply aware that he was badly in need of God's mercy, which led to his conversion. So, it is when we have the simplicity of a child, who is aware that he is not self-sufficient, that we can learn to pray. We must approach God empty-handed. Yes, God's gifts are for the empty-handed. If they are filled with pebbles, we leave no room for His gifts.

The book of Genesis presents us Abraham who, with great simplicity, enters in dialogue with God, bargaining with God, as he intercedes for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. He admits that he was speaking boldly with God, even though he also says, "I am but dust and ashes". This reminds us of two other great Old Testament figures who dared to speak with the Lord with the same boldness and frankness: Moses and Jeremiah. Prayer opens us in such a way that we can speak familiarly with God.

However, prayer is not simply begging, it is also praise, thanksgiving, and asking for forgiveness. When I speak with children about the different approaches to prayer I find it easy to explain this to them by referring to four words: 'Hello', 'Please', 'Thank you' and 'Sorry'. Prayer is not only 'Please', it is also 'Hello', 'Thank you', and 'Sorry'. That is why the Lord's prayer includes not only the words: "give us each day our daily bread", but also the invocations: "may your name be held holy, your kingdom come.... Forgive us our sins".

The example of Jesus encouraged the apostles to turn to him and to ask him: Please, teach us how to pray! But how do we pray? Do we pray like Abraham or Moses or Jeremiah? Do we pray like Jesus?

May we pray in such a way that others too may be enticed to turn to God in a childlike trust, as they address Him: "Our Father!"

CONVERSION: A PROCESS AND A PROGRESS

The scribes and Pharisees had just witnessed the miracle of the casting of a demon, and they said that it was only thanks to Beelzebul, the chief of the demons, that Jesus had the power to drive out the devils. They had seen many miracles, but, as if these were not enough, they asked for another sign, another miracle. And Jesus does give them another sign, but in another sense: it is the sign of Jonah, which, in other words, is an appeal for conversion. Jonah was a sign for the people of Ninevah. He urged them to change their lives and turn to God. And now it is the Son of man, Jesus himself, who is doing the same appeal.

The theme of conversion recurs constantly in the preaching of Christ and of his Church. It is not a theme reserved only for lent. Conversion is continuous and dynamic. It is a lifelong process. Psalm 51 expresses this very well in many vivid expression. Let me just mention two of them: “Wash me more and more from my sins”; and again: “My sin is always before me”. The first one (“Wash me more and more from my sins”) does not only indicate the fact that we continue to sin and are constantly in need of forgiveness; it also implies the desire to overcome sin and to be always “clean” in front of God. The second expression (“my sin is always before me”) is not a sort of guilt complex: it is sin *forgiven*, for which we must always be grateful to God. It is good to forgive and forget, but let us never forget that we are forgiven.

The gospels emphatically teach us that conversion demands humility. Humility is self-awareness, which therefore makes us aware that we are in need of conversion, and therefore in need of God’s mercy. One of the most shocking statements of Our Lord is when He rebuked the scribes and the Pharisees, telling them that the tax-collectors and the harlots will enter before them in the Kingdom of Heaven. The reason is because they are more disposed to acknowledge that they are in need of God’s mercy and forgiveness. The Pharisee who, according to the parable, entered the temple to boast of his good deeds, in other words was thereby telling God: “I do not need your mercy, for I am good enough”.

In the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila, one of the greatest mystics and spiritual writers of all times, she refers to what she terms her “second conversion”, a profound spiritual experience, a turning point, which opened a new chapter in her spiritual life. St Teresa was not alone in speaking of such a “second conversion”. Many other saints have spoken of similar experiences.

In a letter written while he was in chains, the letter to the Philippians, Saint Paul describes Christian life in a remarkably vivid language. “I am still running, he says, trying to capture the prize for which Christ Jesus captured me.... I strain ahead for what is still to come. I am racing for the finish, for the prize to which God calls us upwards to receive in Christ Jesus”.

Indeed, conversion is a process and a progress, never being satisfied with the *status quo*, it is a movement forward, a pilgrimage of constant conversion experienced in humility and in Christian hope.

CAN YOU SHARE YOUR JOY?

CAN YOU SMILE AT OTHERS AS GOD SMILES AT YOU

I have always been deeply impressed by the joyful spirit expressed by St Paul in his Letter to the Philippians, especially when we consider that he wrote this letter while he was in chains. How can a person, imprisoned unjustly, say that he was joyful, and exhort his readers to rejoice? The only answer is that there is something special that qualifies this type of joy: it is the joy of the Lord. That is why the apostle emphatically repeats: "Rejoice in the Lord".

Friedrich Nietzsche once sarcastically commented: "Jesus' disciples should look more redeemed". And perhaps, in a certain sense, he was right. We have lost the freshness of that message that started a silent revolution in a pagan and divided world, the message that proclaimed Christ as the one in whom there is neither male nor female, neither Jew nor pagan, for He broke down the wall of separation. This was the message that even today can bring hope and joy to a desperate world.

Paul Tillich rightly observed that for the man of the Old and New Testament, the lack of joy is a consequence of man's separation from God, and the presence of joy is a consequence of the reunion with God. As a matter of fact the Word of God is always presented as good news, a promise which stirs hope, and an unquenchable joy. The believer is urged to serve the Lord with gladness. Furthermore, according to St Paul, joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

St Luke's Gospel, in the account of the Visitation, presents us two women who know perfectly well that the joy that comes from the Lord is a gift that must be shared with others. Both had every right and reason to rejoice, for both were miraculously made pregnant, even though, in the case of Elizabeth, she was barren, and, in the case of Mary, she was a virgin. Both had experienced God in a very special way in their lives, as "Emanuel", a God with them, a Lord of their history.

And see how they are greeting each other and sharing their joy, a joy that knows no jealousy. Jealousy blinds us, rendering us incapable to see the good in others and even in ourselves. Jealousy turns joy to sorrow. But Mary and Elizabeth share their joy as they perceive the wonderful love of God operative in each other. And their joy was so great, that it was extended also to John, who was still in his mother's womb: "As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby within me jumped with gladness".

Many years later, Mary will bring joy to a newly-married couple in Cana of Galilee. During the wedding reception, they ran short of wine, and, thanks to Mary's intervention, Jesus performed his first miracle, and provided them with wine, which, in Biblical language, is always the symbol of joy.

On that blessed Christmas night, Mary granted us, desperate humanity, the greatest gift of God: the Word made flesh in her womb. As she hands this gift to us, poor mortals, she instils in us that hope which is grounded in God himself, and she reminds us that no one has the right to rejoice alone. Joy must be shared.

With whom do you share your joy on Christmas? Only with your family and friends? If so, then you have not grasped entirely the message of Christmas joy. Are you thinking of those millions who are craving for a piece of bread? They may be very far from you. But then are

you thinking of many other millions who are craving not so much for bread, but certainly for love? They may be very close to you, your next door neighbour: a widower who is living alone, abandoned even by his own children, a woman recently divorced by her husband, an immigrant who dared his life in search of a better life to support his family.... All these need a smile. Can you smile at them? In his book “The Gospel to every Creature”, Cardinal Suenens defined a smile in these words: “A smile is a luminous ray from the face of God. To smile is to look at others with the eyes of God”.

Can you smile at others in such a way that you look at him or at her with the eyes of God, whose eyes are always clear and wear no tinted glasses?

May every Christmas provide you with many opportunities to share your joy with others.

“JOY” AND “SMILE” IN SAINT THERESA OF CALCUTTA

Friedrich Nietzsche, who, according to the well-known theologian Paul Tillich was “a famous atheist and ardent enemy of religion and Christianity”, made a comment against those Christians who look too serious and bored. He said: “Jesus’ disciples should look more happy”.

Perhaps Nietzsche was right to pass such a comment, because there have been periods in our history when we gave the impression that cheerfulness is something worldly and not worthy for a spiritual person. But there is that English saying: “*Long faces do not make saints*”. Rather, Holy Scripture speaks very frequently of joy (“Serve the Lord with gladness” [Ps 99], “Rejoice in the Lord” [Phil]); Jesus himself called his message “glad tidings” and he invites the down-trodden and the broken-hearted to go to him, “and I will give you rest” (Mt 11, 28). Paul Tillich says: “For the men of the Old and New Testaments, the lack of joy is a consequence of man’s separation from God; the presence of joy is a consequence of one’s union with God”.

The life of Mother Theresa is a typical example of this truth. Her face always irradiated joy, and such a joy that one cannot ask “What did she do?” without at the same time asking: “Why did she do it?” A very well known incident in her life is the answer she gave to an American visitor, who, after watching the delicate way with which she was curing the wounds of the lepers, commented: “Not even for one million dollar would I do such a work”. Her reply was: “Nor would I!” Why, then, was she doing it? Because her faith lay the foundation for that love which she showed toward every man, independently from his faith, colour, citizenship, or social class. Her faith convinced her that every human being enjoys an irreplaceable dignity. This, perhaps, was her greatest contribution for humanity in the twentieth century. This was also the source of her cheerfulness. I quote again Paul Tillich: “Joy is possible only when we are driven towards things and persons because of what they are, and not because of what we can get from them”.

Mother Theresa enjoyed very much seeing that this love left a positive impression on visitors, not out of vanity or pride, but because she was convinced that it was a positive witness to Christ’s Gospel. Once she told a journalist: “I will never forget the glance of a visitor in Kalighat, who was watching a sister who was looking after one of our sick men. The sister was not aware that he was watching her. After some time this man came to me and told me: ‘Mother, when I came here at your house I believed in nothing. But today, in that sister, in the way she was looking after that sick person, I have found God’”.

She used to experience her greatest happiness whenever she had the opportunity to communicate some joy to abandoned persons, to the poor, to old people who had no one to look after them, to the sick, to those living alone. Her own words: “We wash the sick and look after them and try to feed them. In this way we try to show them how important they are to us. We want that these persons, who oftentimes have had nothing throughout their lives, to at least enjoy the last phase of their lives, to see in front of them a face which radiates love for them. While they are leaving this world, we want that at least once in their life they realize what it means to be son of God, and to know that there are persons who are ready to serve them”.

One of the saints that influenced more than any other the spiritual life of Theresa was undoubtedly Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, who, in her writings, has often emphasized that she chose the “little way” of spirituality, which demands that one do little things with great love. Mother Theresa was convinced that the carrying out of merciful works demands two indispensable conditions: love and joy. For this reason she emphatically repeated to her sisters words like these: “To the poor give not only your attention, but at the same time give also your heart”; or: “Without love, our service can never become a gift”; or still: “In order to serve we need two hands and to love we need one heart.”

As a matter of fact, among the requisites that she deemed necessary for a candidate to join her Congregation she included also a cheerful spirit. In the Constitutions of the Congregation, in the chapter that deals with the spirit of the Congregation, there is a very beautiful article about joy, which is described as prayer, love, a net of love, and a need and at the same time a force. Obviously, here she is referring to that joy which is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. So there are four aspects or qualities of cheerfulness which deserve our attention and which undoubtedly express the personal spiritual experience of Blessed Theresa.

Why does she speak of joy as prayer? Theresa knew very well that prayer is not a monologue, but an openness of one’s heart to God, who never grows old and who is the source of that joy which never sets. It is an attitude in which man is more passive than active, thus preparing man to serve the Lord with joy.

Cheerfulness is love, and precisely that type of love which expresses itself in a smile. In many of her writings she speaks about the importance and value of a smile. Very often she used to tell her sisters: “*Give a big smile*”. She wrote: “May your goodness be in your faces, in your eyes and your smiles and in the warmth of your greetings. Always convey to the children, to the poor, and to all those who are suffering or are alone a smile and joy!” Here I would like to refer to you the words of Cardinal Suenens, who says: “To smile is to look at others with the eyes of Christ. A smile is a luminous ray from the face of God”.

Cheerfulness is “a net of love”. Here I quote from the writings of Mother Theresa: “We do not know how much good can be achieved through a smile!” And again: “Let us be always ready to exchange a smile. A smile is the prologue of love”. Indeed, a sincere smile is always a sign that we have accepted that person. Many years ago a Dutch doctor wrote an essay on the first smile of a baby. When a mother is standing by the cradle of her child, she looks at him with a smile, she speaks to him even though the child is not understanding any of her words, yet a moment arrives when the child will answer her with a smile. The first smile of a child is his answer to the attention that his mother is showering at him, as if to say: “Yes, I know that I am accepted, I am loved, I feel I am surrounded by love”.

And finally, joy is a need and at the same time a force. Because, according to Mother Theresa, “it always prepares us to do good”. I think that experience shows us that this is true. When we feel lonely or depressed, we do not feel the desire to work, we feel unreliable, uneasy.

But joy does not mean a life without the experience of sorrow. Joy and sorrow can coexist in the Christian life. Because sorrow and suffering do not exclude hope. Thus we can

understand why Jesus himself, just a few hours before his agony in the garden and before he was arrested, He said to his disciples words of life: “I have told you these things so that my joy will be with you and your joy will be full” (Jn 15, 11); “No one will take your joy away” (16, 22); “I told you these things that you will have peace in me... I have conquered the world” (16, 33). And we can understand why St Paul, tied in chains in prison, repeatedly told the Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord”. And we can understand as well why also Mother Theresa, during her long experience of the “dark night of the soul”, continued to give witness to her joy through her smiles, as she herself wrote in one of her letters. And she continues to say: “If my sorrow can quench your thirst, then here I am, o Lord, I will joyfully accept everything until my death, and will smile at your hidden face”¹.

And I would like to conclude my talk with another quotation from the Constitutions of the Missionaries of Charity, to which I have already referred: “The best way to show our gratitude to God and to the people is to accept everything with joy. A happy sister is like the light of God’s love, the hope of everlasting joy, the flame of burning love”².

¹ Letter to Fr. Picachy, 3 July 1959

² “The best way to show our gratitude to God and people is to accept everything with joy. A joyful sister is like the sunshine of God’s love, the hope of eternal happiness, the flame of burning love”.

LET'S SHARE OUR JOY... LET'S GIVE A SMILE

Tirana, 2012

To be frank, one of my greatest pleasures is when I create a smile on a person who had come to me in tears, but in the end leaves with a smile.

There is an English saying: “*Long faces do not make saints*”. Sacred Scripture speaks continuously about joy (“Serve the Lord with gladness” [Ps 99], “Rejoice in the Lord” [Fil]). Jesus referred to his message as “good news” and invites those who are “weary and burdened” to go to him, “and I will give you rest” (Mt 11, 28).

Caritas is charitable organization, but with that type of charity inspired by the spirit of the Gospel. The Gospel reminds us that we have no right to keep joy only for ourselves: we must also share it with others. At the beginning of the Gospel of Luke we have the example of Mary who, having received a good news, went immediately to Elisabeth, her cousin who despite her age became pregnant. She went to Elisabeth to share her joy with her and to serve her.

This year, in September, we will recall the fifteenth anniversary of the death of Mother Teresa. Her face always reflected joy. Her faith was the foundation of the love she showed towards everyone independently of one's religious belief, skin colour, nationality, social class. Her religion convinced her that in every person there is an irreplaceable dignity. And maybe this is the greatest contribution of Mother Teresa for humanity in the twentieth century.

The greatest pleasure for Mother Teresa was to share joy with other people neglected by society, to the poor, to the old, to the abandoned, to the sick and to the lonely ones. This is what she says: “We wash the sick and look after them and try to feed them. In this way we try to show them how important they are to us. We want that these persons, who oftentimes have had nothing throughout their lives, to at least enjoy the last phase of their lives, to see in front of them a face which radiates love for them. While they are leaving this world, we want that at least once in their life they realize what it means to be son of God, and to know that there are persons who are ready to serve them”.

Joy is love, a love expressed in a smile. In many writings and speeches Mother Teresa spoke about the value of a smile. She often told her Sisters: “*Give a big smile*”. She wrote: “May your goodness be in your faces, in your eyes and your smiles and in the warmth of your greetings. Always convey to the children, to the poor, and to all those who are suffering or are alone a smile and joy!” Here I would like to refer to you the words of Cardinal Suenens, who says: “To smile is to look at others with the eyes of Christ. A smile is a luminous ray from the face of God”.

Many photos you see in this Annual Report 2011 tell everything: we want to share our joy with the miserable ones and the lonely ones. We want to give a smile to the old lady in the wheelchair, to those children coming from poor families, to the disabled person ... And we hope that with the help of many benefactors we will be able to implement our program. Because life is beautiful and valuable.

THE JOY OF LIVING

I remember a time, before the Second Vatican Council, when also the liturgical celebrations used to give us the impression that Christian commitment demanded putting on long faces. Which prompted Friedrich Nietzsche to comment that “Jesus’ disciples should look more redeemed”.

Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation on New Evangelization commences precisely with the words *Evangelii Gaudium*. *Evangelium* means precisely “glad tidings”. In this same Exhortation Pope Francis duly observes that “*there are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter.*” However, next Sunday we celebrate *Laetare* Sunday, which reminds us that the core of this season of Lent, with all its insistence on conversion and reconciliation, is good tidings, the return to the house of the Father. And our journey throughout this season of Lent does not finish on Calvary beside the cross of Jesus Christ. It finishes in that garden where, near an open and empty tomb, we shall hear the sweet voice of Jesus Christ who will call us by name as we turn to him and answer: *Rabbuni!*

Thomas Aquinas defines joy as the delight in possession of a present good. And he affirms that joy is not a virtue, but it is the effect of love. I am in no position to correct St Thomas, but I would prefer to say that it is the effect of hope.

In a research carried out by Michael Rutter and David Smith in 1995 (*Psychosocial Disorders in Young People*) they showed a considerable increase, in the 40 years preceding their research, in cases of depression, psycho-social disorders, drugs, alcoholism and suicides among the youths. May I add that the increase in the number of suicides among youths in this country, throughout these past ten years, is alarming. And what is still more distressing is the tragic fact that these suicides have included also children as young as eight to ten years. Why does a person decide to commit suicide? Precisely because he has lost all hope. Hope generates not optimism, but courage, which enables us to face also difficult situations. That is why St Paul could experience joy also when he was in chains in prison, and tell the Philippians to rejoice with him in the Lord.

And I think it will help to read to you a quotation from Paul Tillich’s book *The New Being*: “Emptiness is the lack of relatedness to things and persons and meanings; it is even the lack of being related to oneself. Therefore we try to escape from ourselves and the loneliness of ourselves, but we do not reach the others and their world in a genuine relationship. And we use them for a kind of pleasure which can be called ‘fun’. But it is not the creative kind of fun often connected with play; it is, rather, a shallow, distracting, greedy way of ‘having fun’ And it is not by chance that it is that type of fun which can easily be commercialized, for it is dependent on calculable reactions, without passion, without risk, without love. Of all the dangers that threaten our civilization, this is one of the most dangerous ones: the escape from one’s emptiness through a ‘fun’ which makes joy impossible” (*The New Being*, pp. 146-7).

One final observation I would like to make concerns our duty to communicate our joy. Sometimes the joy that we share with others is a caricature of joy. It is “fun” rather than “joy”.

Our Lady felt the need to share her joy with Elizabeth. St Paul shared his joy with the Philippians. Blessed Theresa constantly insisted with her sisters: “Give a big smile”. Because a smile is always a sign that you are accepting that person and are sharing your joy

with him. Cardinal Suenens wrote that “a smile is a luminous ray from the face of God: to smile is to look at others with the eyes of God”.

May the Holy Spirit enlighten us to discover the treasures of Christian joy and to discover the ways to communicate this joy.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE KING JAMES BIBLE VERSION OF THE BEATITUDES

Nobody doubts that the Sermon on the Mount forms the nucleus of the Christian life, a sermon that left a deep impression on Mahatma Gandhi when, during his long stay in London, he read the whole Bible. The beatitudes form the nucleus of this sermon. They are paradoxical statements, proposing a very strange description of the happy man. He is poor, in mourning, meek, hungry and thirsty, persecuted, and at the same time he is merciful, brings peace, and is pure in heart.

All biblical references in this short talk are from the King James Version, unless otherwise stated.

Mt introduces the Sermon on the Mount with certain subtle details, to emphasize its importance.

First of all, from the very beginning, Mt wants to present Jesus as the new Moses (an idea which runs throughout the whole sermon, and which was already clear in Mt's narrative of the visit of the wise men, the holy family's flight into Egypt, and the slaughter of the innocent). Like Moses, Jesus "went up into a mountain".

A second detail is the assertion: "and when he was set, his disciples came unto him". "When he was set", that is, "when he had sat down". This was the position a Jewish rabbi used to take whenever he wanted to speak more "officially". So Mt want to imply that what follows is a very important teaching.

Another important detail is the phrase: "he opened his mouth". Again here we have an expression used to imply the importance of what is going to be said. In the Acts we have two cases when this phrase is used, and in both cases the author wanted to stress the importance of the discourse that followed. In Acts 8 35 we read: "Philip opened his mouth and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus". And in 10, 34 we read that in the house of Cornelius "Peter opened his mouth, and said: Of a truth I perceive that God has no respect of persons..."

And a final detail is the word ἐδίδασκεν, which in the King James Bible (and in most other translations) is rendered "taught", but a literal translation would be "was teaching" or "used to teach", in the imperfect tense (as in the Vulgate "docebat") – which implies that what follows is in fact the usual and constant teaching of Jesus: what he "used to teach".

Then follow the eight beatitudes, each of which is introduced by: "Blessed *are* ..." The word "are", however, in the Authorized Version, is written in italics – which means that it was supplied by the editors of this version for literary purposes. In fact we do not find this word ("are") in the original Greek. William Barclay³ duly observes that this means that the beatitudes are not statements, but exclamations. They reproduce in Greek a form of expression which is very common in Hebrew" (we may say, and in other Semitic languages). An analogous text is Lk 10, 23: "Blessed *are* the eyes which see the things that ye see" –

³ *The Plain Man Looks at the Beatitudes*, Collins, 1963, p. 11

where again the word “are” is printed in italics. The Jerusalem Bible, in fact, has translated the first beatitude as an exclamation: “How happy are the poor in spirit....”.

As is well known, Mt’s version of the first beatitude is significantly different from Lk’s. Mt’s version: “Blessed are the poor in spirit”, is clearly excluding poverty as a social condition, which is always a symptom of a selfish and unjust society, a sign that God’s providential plan is not being carried out. But Lk’s version, “Blessed be ye, poor” (6, 20) and its corresponding woe: “Woe unto ye that are rich” (6, 24) seems to suggest that it is *social*, material poverty that Jesus had in mind. I exclude *a priori* that Jesus intended material poverty. Poverty is always a social evil that must be done away with, and this is why Jesus stressed the duty we have to feed the hungry and clothe the naked (Mt 25). But here I dare propose another interpretation.

The Greek word which was normally used for “poor” was πένης. But the Greek word used both in Mt’s and in Lk’s version of the first beatitude is πτωχος, which, strictly speaking, does not imply the one who is simply poor, but the one who is destitute, a beggar. We find the same word, for example, in Gal 4, 9, as an adjective in the plural, and which in the King James Version has very rightly been translated “beggarly”: “How turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements...?” William Barclay⁴ observes: “In the eyes of the Greek there was something wretched and pitiable and even shameful in this word πτωχος.

So what I am suggesting here is that this beatitude is in fact referring to the lowly, the despised, the πτωχος who, in James’ Letter (2, 2-3), is contemptuously pushed aside to leave a place of honour to a rich man. In a footnote for the beatitude “Happy the gentle” (King James Version has “Blessed the meek, for they shall inherit the earth”) the Jerusalem Bible states that “the gentle” can be rendered “the lowly”, and adds that this beatitude “is possible only a gloss” on the first beatitude. And the Jerome Biblical Commentary affirms that the “meek” “are the same class as that designated in 5, 3 (the poor in spirit), the lowly who are unable to be aggressive”.

And now I would like to add two brief comments on two beatitudes which quite often are misinterpreted. The first one is: “Blessed (are) they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness”. The Jerusalem Bible has: “Happy those who hunger and thirst for what is right”. δικαιοσύνη – righteousness or justice – has very often been interpreted as social justice, whereas in fact this word has a much wider meaning. It means participation in God’s holiness. This is what Jesus means when he says: “Except your righteousness shall exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5, 20).

However, this beatitude does include both a contemplative and a social dimension. Our hunger and thirst for righteousness is expressed in our communion with God in prayer – hence the contemplative dimension. Basil Hume⁵ speaks of an “experiential” knowledge of God, “a knowledge which comes through prayer ... But it is that knowledge of ‘quasi experience’ which is the one that comes through faith being purified, becoming less and less dependent on human reason”.

⁴ Ibid, p. 18

⁵ *Searching for God*

And Lk's version of this beatitude, "Blessed *are* ye that hunger" – brings forth the social dimension. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus, which we find only in Lk, is an illustration of the social dimension of this beatitude. The Canticum of Mary is perhaps the best commentary on this beatitude.

The other beatitude which, in my opinion, is quite often misinterpreted, is the beatitude: "Blessed *are* the pure in heart for they shall see God". This purity of heart is frequently interpreted as continence or chastity. But again, without excluding the idea of continence, "purity of heart" has a wider meaning. When Jesus, in Mt 15, 18-19 says: "Those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart, and they defile man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, etc", He is using the word "heart" to imply the internal dispositions. So "purity of heart" means simplicity of heart, right intention; and the contrary to this purity of heart is not incontinence, but hypocrisy, insincerity, lack of the right intention. Continence is the fruit of this pure heart.

A passage from Genesis enlightens us to understand this true meaning of "purity of heart". Abraham went to Gerar, and he presented his wife Sarah as if she were his sister. The king of Gerar, Abimelech, "sent and took Sarah". God rebuked him for taking Abraham's wife. Whereupon he answered: "Said he not to me, She is my sister? ... In the integrity (purity) of my heart and innocency of my hands have I done this" (20, 1-5). And in Ps 24, 3-4 we read: "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? ... He that hath clean hands and a pure heart..."

I think that Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*⁶ has understood very well this beatitude in this beautiful paragraph: "With two wings a man is lifted up above earthly things: that is, with simplicity and purity. Simplicity must be in the intention, purity in the affection. Simplicity aims at God, purity takes hold of Him and tastes Him. No good action will hinder you if you are free from inordinate affections. If you intend and seek nothing but the will of God and the profit of your neighbor you shall enjoy interior liberty. If your heart were right, then every creature would be to you a mirror of life and a book of holy doctrine".

And I would like to conclude with a quotation from the Catechism of the Catholic Church, where we find this beautiful definition of the beatitudes: "The beatitudes depict the countenance of Jesus Christ and portray his charity. They express the vocation of the faithful associated with the glory of his passion and resurrection; they shed light on the actions and attitudes characteristic of the Christian life; they are the paradoxical promises that sustain hope in the midst of tribulations; they proclaim the blessings and rewards already secured, however dimly, for Christ's disciples; they have begun in the lives of the Virgin Mary and all the saints" (n. 1717).

Nowhere have I found a more beautiful all-embracing definition of the beatitudes than this one!

⁶ Book 2, Chapter 4

GLOBAL CHRISTIAN FORUM: DISCRIMINATION AND PERSECUTION

WELCOME ADDRESS

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

On behalf of the Catholic community in Albania, I welcome you, while I express my desire that this meeting be for all of us an expression of faith, hope, and charity.

First of all, it is an expression of faith. The slogans of the Secular City, according to Harvey Cox, are: love, fraternity, solidarity, peace, justice, freedom, human dignity, human rights, etc., these, according to Cox himself, are all basically Christian values. But they remain just slogans, and can never become concrete and directive values unless they are inspired by that faith which enlightens us in such a way that we see the face of God in the face of every man. That is why Mother Theresa shook the foundations of the society of anonymity. One cannot ask *what* she did without asking also *why* she did it. She did it, because she believed in Him who said: "Whatever you have done to the least of my brethren, you have done it to me". And this is what distinguishes Christian love from philanthropy.

Secondly, it is an expression of hope. Salvation History teaches us that there is no evil from which the almighty God cannot draw something good. Jacob's sons, driven by the envy toward their brother Joseph, sold him to the Egyptians. Later on when the Pharaoh appointed Joseph as his deputy, Joseph's brothers were obliged to go to Egypt to buy food. When they noticed that Pharaoh's Deputy was their brother Joseph, they all feared he would take revenge of them. Yet Joseph said to them: "You did me harm, but God turned it into something good as you can see...Do not be afraid! I will take care of you and your children" (Gen 50, 20-21). In Rev 6, 10 the souls of the martyrs cry out to God, asking how long it will be before he vindicates them. Such a desire (and refusal to be driven to despair) shows total trust in the power and will of God: "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day" (2 Tim 1, 12).

And finally, it is an expression of charity, which translates itself in love and solidarity with the victims of persecution and with their families. As a young person, I shared the ideas of the young people who, in the 1960's, were reacting against the *status quo* of contemporary society. I remember the Beatniks and the interesting life pattern that they adopted in California, far from the maddening crowd of the cities; their lifestyle was a clear message to that society. I remember the students' revolts in many European cities in 1968. I too shared those dreams at that time. I too imagined that society was badly in need of a radical change of its structures. But I think that what the world has passed through, especially in the past twenty years, has only convinced us that this is far from true. What the world needs is not a change of structures, but a change of hearts. Only love can change hearts. I remember a song which was very popular in my childhood: *Love makes the world go round*. May our love be always an expression of our deep conviction that only love can change the world.

"God is love". This is how St John has defined God. Consequently, no war can ever be waged in the name of God.

BLESSED ARE THEY WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS' SAKE

Tirana, October 2016

The mission of the new People of God was to be exercised in a world hostile to Christ and to his disciples. Jesus himself had warned his disciples: “A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too” (Jn 15, 20). We can, therefore, understand why the Holy Spirit, which the Christian community was due to receive, needed to strengthen this community with the gift of fortitude in order to bear witness to Jesus Christ before the world. This is as Jesus himself had foretold. This gift of fortitude, however, also includes the gift of wisdom. The Acts of the Apostles represent Stephen filled with courage and wisdom (6, 3; 8, 10). Jesus had promised that the Holy Spirit would strengthen the apostles with courage as they bore witness before their persecutors and that they would be taught what to say: “The words you will speak will not be yours,; they will come from the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Mt 10, 20); and again: “When they bring you to be tried in the synagogues or before governors or rulers, do not be worried about how you will defend yourself or what you will say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say” (Lk 12, 11-12).

When the apostles found themselves in the persecution foretold by Jesus, under the leadership of Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, they intrepidly bore witness to the truth (Acts 4, 1-13). So did Stephen, later on, “filled with the Holy Spirit” (7, 55). The Acts of the Apostles mentions a second theophany of the Holy Spirit: “When they finished praying, the place where they were meeting was shaken. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to proclaim God’s message with boldness” (4, 31). This second theophany of the Holy Spirit took place in the context of a persecution against Christians and encouraged them to pursue their mission of proclaiming the Good News.

When, towards the end of the second century, the Emperor Septimius Severus initiated a very harsh and systematically organized persecution against the Christians, Tertullian wrote: “Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust; your injustice is the proof that we are innocent. Therefore God suffers when we suffer; for but very lately, in condemning a Christian woman to the pander (*leno*) rather than to the lion (*leo*) you made confession that a taint on our purity is considered among us something more terrible than any punishment and any death. Nor does your cruelty, however exquisite, avail you; it is rather a temptation to us. The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; *the blood of Christians is seed*” (*Apologeticus*, 50).

Suffering has always been a mystery, especially for the fact that it also affects the innocent. It is still more of a mystery when it is the case of a just person who is made to suffer precisely because he is a just person. Yet Jesus proclaims “blessed” “those who are persecuted in the cause of right” (Mt 5, 10). It is the last of the eight beatitudes because it is the supreme expression of the whole Gospel.

This beatitude reflects the situation of the early Church. Hence we read: “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves... “They will hand you over to sanhedrins and scourge you in their synagogues. You will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear

witness before them and the pagans” Mt 10, 16-18). It is in this sense that we must understand those embarrassing words of Jesus: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth; it is not peace I have come to bring, but a sword...” (Mt 10, 34ff). Jesus’ proclamation, “blessed” the peacemakers, was to become an occasion of rift even amongst members of the same family.

Homer (Iliad 24, 525) wrote: “The sorrowless gods have so spun the thread, that wretched mortals live in pain”. But we can turn to Homer and tell him: “Our God is no ‘sorrowless god’, but the God who, by accepting sorrow unto death, has given a new meaning, a value to suffering”. Jesus himself was a victim of discrimination, slander, injustice and violent persecution. Marginalised in his birth, ridiculed and obstructed in his ministry, he accepted death as if he was a criminal. From the very beginning he encountered misunderstanding and contradiction, then opposition, rejection, and condemnation. But “a servant is not greater than his master” (Jn 15, 20). Moreover, he warned his disciples: “The hour is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is doing a holy duty for God” (Jn 16, 2). Perhaps never has such a prophecy found its realization as in our own days, when Christians are being persecuted and beheaded while their oppressors are shouting: “Allahu akbar”!

Jesus Christ was hopeless at advertising. If he were to come again to seek a job, I can guarantee that no one would dare to employ him as a sales-manager. Nowhere in the Gospels do we find him promising a blank cheque to those who accept to follow him; on the contrary, he warns: “If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mk 8, 34). For Jesus’ followers, the mystery of suffering becomes the “mystery of Transfiguration”. On Mount Tabor Jesus was transfigured at the moment when, according to Luke, Moses and Elijah were speaking with Jesus about his passion and death (Lk 9, 31). Hence, according to John, his last words before his priestly prayer which preceded his agony in the garden, were precisely these: “In the world you will have trouble, but be brave: I have conquered the world” (Jn 16, 33).

Persecution is a constant occurrence in salvation history. It is the attitude of a society that does not want to listen and to change its direction in life. It is a sign that the victim does not belong to this world. When your life is a living Gospel, you become unacceptable to sinners; so you must expect persecution. How true are those words of the Book of Wisdom (2, 12-15), where the godless say: “Let us lie in wait for the virtuous man, since he annoys us and opposes our way of life... Before us he stands, a reproof to our way of thinking, the very sight of him weighs our spirits down...”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his beautiful book *The Cost of Discipleship*, speaks of “cheap grace”, which means: “grace without discipleship, grace without the cross”. Centuries ago Thomas a Kempis stated: “Many want to sit at the table with Jesus, but very few are ready to accompany him up to the cross”. We would like that our life be always a spring, without the deadly heat of summer and the cruel cold of winter. But the prophetic mission of the Christian necessarily implies the experience of heat and cold, the experience of the cross. The Christian is called to fidelity not only when Christ is feeding us when we are hungry or when he is curing our relatives. We are called to be like the close friends of Christ who dared to stand by him at the cross. There we see only his mother, the still immature young lad John, son of Zebedee, and a few devout women. Genuine discipleship, faithful even unto

the experience of death on a cross or of beheading by ISIS, demands that one is constantly fed by the Word of God.

May we be strong enough to suffer torture and beheading, may we never fall victims of persecution mania and self-pity. How often in our past history, or perhaps even today, have we sought privileges and interpreted upside-down that beatitude: “Blessed are you when they persecute you” as if it read: “Blessed are you when they uphold you as a privileged caste”! How often in our past history, or perhaps even today, have we made compromises with wicked and unjust politicians or businessmen and failed to defend the victims of an unjust system. We do this and have done this in the past simply to look comfortable with those who were oppressing the defenceless!

In a discourse of Pope Paul VI in September 1974 he asked: “What does the Church need today?” And he replied that in the present circumstances “the Church needs strong men” that is, people endowed with the virtue of fortitude. We need the virtue of fortitude not only in order to face the threats of Isis and other anti-Christian fundamentalists, but also to face the subtle threats of a secularized society. Today Christianity is a non-culture. With the excuse of not wanting to offend non-Christians, we are even denying our history and heritage, removing crosses from classrooms and refraining from building Christmas cribs in our schools. We need the courage to counter this mentality, then may we be able to show the world that we are happy and that we have known Jesus Christ and have opted to follow him.

The Church was born on the cross. The new man was born on the cross. In a moment of distress and persecution, St Paul has described how this birth took place (2 Cor 4, 8-9): “We are in difficulties on all sides, but never cornered; we see no answer to our problems, but never despair”. Despair is the attitude of a person who has lost all hope; yet Jesus, on his way to his agony, encouraged his disciples telling them: “Trust in me: I have conquered the world”. Paul goes on: “We have been persecuted, but never deserted; knocked down, but never killed”. The prophets were convinced that they had to endure persecution, but nothing would suffocate the word that they were called to proclaim. The apostle continues with these words (vv. 10-11): “Always, wherever we may be, we carry with us in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus, too, may always be seen in our body. Indeed. while we are still alive we are consigned to our death every day, for the sake of Jesus, so that in our mortal flesh the life of Jesus, too, may be openly shown”. In these words, St Paul has described very eloquently the “foolishness of the cross”.

We are on a pilgrimage. It is the pilgrimage of Jesus himself, who, in Luke’s words (9, 51), “resolutely took the road to Jerusalem”. But this pilgrimage does not end on Calvary. No. It ends in a beautiful garden, where we hear the sweet voice of the Risen Lord, who will call us by name as he did with Mary Magdalene. Let us undertake this path, and on the way let us sing a new song to the Lord. And our song will be: “Alleluia!”

MARTYRDOM

DEFINITION OF MARTYRDOM

Thomas Aquinas developed a very interesting theological viewpoint on martyrdom in his *Summa Theologiae*⁷. He considers martyrdom as “the shedding of one’s blood for Christ’s sake”⁸ and “the right endurance of sufferings unjustly inflicted”⁹. These affirmations imply that these unjust sufferings are not just something imposed on the subject, but they are also accepted by him “for Christ’s sake”. Therefore he states that the merit of martyrdom lies “in the voluntary endurance of death, namely in the fact that a person willingly suffers being put to death”¹⁰. Aquinas makes it clear that in order that a person be qualified as “martyr” he must endure death; for “it belongs to martyrdom that a man bear witness to the faith in showing by deed that he despises all things present.... So long as a man retains the life of the body he does not show by deed that he despises all things relating to the body”¹¹.

Pope John Paul II emphasizes two dimensions of martyrdom as witness. First of all, it bears witness to the holiness of God's law insofar as it is an affirmation of the inviolability of the moral order. Secondly, it also shows in a very special way the personal dignity of man. “This dignity may never be called into question, even with good intentions, whatever the difficulties involved”, for “martyrdom rejects as false and illusory whatever human meaning one might claim to attribute, even in exceptional conditions, to an act morally evil in itself”¹².

Thomas Aquinas deals with martyrdom in his treatise on the cardinal virtue of fortitude, because “fortitude strengthens man in the good of virtue” and in martyrdom man is firmly strengthened in the good of virtue, since he cleaves to faith and justice notwithstanding the threatening danger of death”¹³.

But the very word “martyr” means witness, therefore the martyr is the one who bears witness to his faith; and Jesus’ words: “Greater love than this no one has, that a man lay down his life for his friends”¹⁴ lead us to consider martyrdom as the supreme expression of love for Christ. Therefore while considering martyrdom as an act of fortitude, Aquinas relates it also to faith and love. For it is “related to faith as the end in which one is strengthened”¹⁵ and “charity inclines to the act of martyrdom as its first and chief motive cause”¹⁶. Hence “of all virtuous acts martyrdom is the 70greatest proof of the perfection of charity”¹⁷.

THE CAUSE OF MARTYRDOM

Is it true that only faith can be the cause of martyrdom? This is a very important point to consider, since from this depends the criteria whether a person who has been killed for any

⁷ II-II, q. 124

⁸ a. 1, ad 1um

⁹ *ibid.*, ad 3um

¹⁰ a. 4, ad 4um

¹¹ *ibid.*, c

¹² Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor* n. 92

¹³ a. 2, c.

¹⁴ Jn 15, 13

¹⁵ a. 2, ad 1um

¹⁶ *ibid.*, ad 2um

¹⁷ a. 3, c

good cause can be deemed a martyr. Aquinas says that “the truth of faith includes not only inward belief, but also outward profession, which is expressed not only by words, whereby one confesses the faith, but also by deeds, whereby a person shows that he has faith... Thus all virtuous deeds, inasmuch as they are referred to God, are professions of the faith whereby we come to know that God requires these works of us and rewards us for them; and in this way they can be the cause of martyrdom. For this reason the Church celebrates the martyrdom of Blessed John the Baptist, who suffered death not for refusing to deny the faith, but for reproofing adultery”¹⁸. And he continues: “A person is said to be Christ’s not only through having faith in Christ, but also because he is actuated to virtuous deed by the Spirit of Christ... Hence to suffer as a Christian is not only to suffer in confession of the faith, which is done by words, but also to suffer for doing any good work for Christ’s sake”¹⁹. He had already stated that “many holy martyrs, through zeal for the faith *or brotherly love*, gave themselves up to martyrdom of their own accord”²⁰.

Here we have to mention the case of Saint Maximilian Kolbe. For a long period of time the Congregation for the Causes of Saints interpreted martyrdom in a very restricted sense, to include only those who were explicitly killed *in odium fidei*, out of hatred of the Christian faith. For this reason, when Maximilian Kolbe was to be beatified by Pope Paul VI, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints determined that Kolbe was not a true martyr. This was held even though Pope Paul VI, in the ceremony of Kolbe’s beatification in 1971, called him a “martyr of charity”. This term however had no standing in church law. In fact he was not then called officially “martyr”, but “confessor”. When Pope John Paul II decided to canonize him, however, he insisted that the systematic hatred and extermination of peoples, propagated by the Nazis, was in fact an act of hatred of the Christian faith. Consequently Kolbe's death equated to martyrdom.

MARTYRDOM IN TODAY’S WORLD

In the homily on the occasion of the canonization of St Charles Luanga and companions, on October 18th, 1964, Pope Paul VI commented: “This is a page worthy in every way to be added to the annals of Africa as in earlier times which we, living in this era and being men of little faith, never expected to be repeated”. However, Pope John Paul II stated that Christian martyrdom “has always accompanied and continues to accompany the life of the Church even today”²¹. He stated this on August 6th, 1993, long before the birth of ISIS and of other anti-Christian movements that had emerged in the past decade.

In a discourse of Pope Paul VI he asked: “What does the Church need today?” And he replied that in the present circumstances “the Church needs strong men”²², that is, men endowed with the virtue of fortitude. St. Paul had already warned the Christians of Rome: “Do not be conformed to this world”²³, which implies that Christian life always implies a struggle against a worldly mentality. Jesus’ “priestly prayer” shows very clearly this contrast

¹⁸ a. 5, c

¹⁹ *ibid.*, ad 1um

²⁰ a. 3, ad 1um

²¹ *Veritatis Splendor* n. 90

²² General Audience, 18th September 1974

²³ Rom 12, 2

between the spirit of the “world” and the spirit of his disciples²⁴: “I pray not for the world, but for those whom you have given me ... I have given them your word; and the world hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that you should take them from the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world even as I am not of the world”²⁵.

In contemporary society, martyrdom acquires a still greater and particular importance. In a world that is torn by a secularized mentality, martyrdom tells this world that there are true values which make it worthwhile to sacrifice one’s life. The motive of this self-sacrifice, namely love for Christ and for truth, distinguishes radically Christian martyrdom from the kamikaze of fundamentalist Muslims, which is suicidal and aimed at revenge towards those who are different.

Moreover, contemporary society is indoctrinated by a new culture, the “media culture”. As Bishop Crispian Hollis has affirmed: “We are introduced into a plastic world of ‘soap’ and romance, in which gratification is instantly and painlessly attainable; we are inveigled into a world of sex and violence which leaves its devilish imprint on fragile human life”²⁶. Mass media are proposing new models of life. The models proposed by the media are no longer the saints, the great thinkers, the heroes; they are the film stars, the youths of “Big Brother”, the sexiest lads and lasses. In honouring the martyrs, the Church is running counter to this new way of thinking. She tells us that there are true models of life, persons who sought the truth, lived for the truth, and even died for the truth.

Again I quote Pope John Paul II: “The Church proposes the example of numerous Saints who bore witness to and defended moral truth even to the point of enduring martyrdom, or who preferred death to a single mortal sin. In raising them to the honour of the altars, the Church has canonized their witness and declared the truth of their judgment, according to which the love of God entails the obligation to respect his commandments, even in the most dire of circumstances, and the refusal to betray those commandments, even for the sake of saving one's own life”²⁷.

THE ALBANIAN MARTYRS

In Albania, Catholics and Orthodox honour the first Albanian martyr, Saint Asti, who was bishop of Durrës and was tortured to death towards the end of the first or beginning of the second century. However, in this context I am going to refer to those who suffered martyrdom during the communist regime of Enver Hoxha, Enver Hoxha, a paranoid Stalinist, imposed a special form of communism, in the sense that it was not an a-theistic, but rather an anti-theistic communism. A very interesting book in French about the persecution of the Catholic Church under his regime is entitled *Ils ont voulu tuer Dieu*, translated into Italian under the title *Hanno voluto uccidere Dio*, which means “They wanted to kill God”. The very title tells us a lot about Hoxha’s anti-theistic communism.

²⁴ I am fully aware that the word “world” in Jn has three different meanings: (1) the world as God’s creation, part of that plan which God saw that it was “very good” (Jn 1, 10: “The world was made through him”); (2) the sinful world, but still loved and redeemed by God (Jn 3, 16: “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son...”); (3) the world that rejects Christ and his disciples (Jn 15, 18: “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated me before it hated you”).

²⁵ Jn 17, 9.14-16

²⁶ *Broadcasting the Word in Priest and People*, May 1994

²⁷ *Veritatis Splendor*, n. 91

Hoxha displayed a special hatred towards Catholics. To illustrate his prejudice against Catholics I think it is wise to read to you a passage from a talk he gave in the Conference of Peza in 1984: “Catholic priests ... were men without a homeland, who depended on the Vatican even for the smallest thing.... Their incomes, their salaries and everything else came from their plunder of the believers in the forms of donations, or even through compelling their believers to bequeath their liquid and fixed assets to the Church. All the clergymen of the Catholic Church ... were learned people who had gone through theological schools with iron discipline, had learned the methods and tricks of suppressing the will of people through the fear of God.... The Catholic Church and its clergy were extremely obscurantist and conservative... always in alliance... with every foreign occupier of Albania, including the Austro-Hungarians, the Italian fascists and the German Nazi.... The senior priests were double agents of the Vatican and the Italian occupiers”²⁸.

At present a process for the beatification of forty Albanian martyrs is under way, all but two killed under the communist regime. All of them were priests (or clerics), with the exception of a twenty-two year old female, Maria Tuci, killed barbarously because she was a catechist. There has been a very attentive and strict selection in the choice of these forty martyrs. In fact priests killed during the regime were far more than thirty eight, but the Episcopal Conference wanted to be sure that the victims were truly martyrs, killed “for Christ’s sake”. For this reason, from the list of martyrs, were excluded those who were executed because of political sympathies with, for example, fascism; that is to say, for reasons other than Christian faith.

First listed among the martyrs is Vinçenc Prendushi, the last Bishop of Durrës. He died in prison, but was not directly killed. I have already quoted St Thomas, who stated that “the perfect notion of martyrdom requires that a man suffer death for Christ's sake”. However, referring to Pope St Marcellus who died in prison, he replies: “A person is not called a martyr merely for suffering imprisonment, or exile, or forfeiture of his wealth, except in so far as these result in death”²⁹. And such was the case of Vinçenc Prendushi. He was accused of being “enemy of the people”, “reactionary”, “spy of the Vatican”, and condemned for twenty years’ imprisonment, where he was tortured, mocked and humiliated in so many different ways, until he died. For which reason he was duly numbered among the other martyrs.

I would like to conclude this talk quoting again Pope John Paul II: “Fidelity to God's holy law, witnessed to by death, is a solemn proclamation and missionary commitment *usque ad sanguinem*, so that the splendour of moral truth may be undimmed in the behaviour and thinking of individuals and society. This witness makes an extraordinarily valuable contribution to warding off, in civil society and within the ecclesial communities themselves, a headlong plunge into the most dangerous crisis which can afflict man: the *confusion between good and evil*, which makes it impossible to build up and to preserve the moral order of individuals and communities. By their eloquent and attractive example of a life completely transfigured by the splendour of moral truth, the martyrs and, in general, all

²⁸ Enver Hoxha, *Selected Works* Vol. VI, Tirana 1987, pp. 784-5

²⁹ *ibid*, a. 4, ad 3um

the Church's Saints, light up every period of history by reawakening its moral sense. By witnessing fully to the good, they are a living reproof to those who transgress the law"³⁰.

³⁰ op. cit., n. 93

LOVE CAN CHANGE THE WORLD

No Christian has the right to say, as Cain said, “I am not my brother’s guardian”. Christian love is solidarity in action. We care. We must care!

Christian love is based on two fundamental Christian truths. Firstly, the truth that man was created in the image and likeness of God, and hence the believer must see this image of God in the face of every man, independent of one’s colour, race, social standing or religion. Secondly, the truth that the Son of God assumed our human nature and thus the incarnation of the Son of God lays the grounds for our fraternity. He became so much part of our human nature, that He could say that whatever we do for a person in need, we do as if for his own person. This is the love that can transform society.

Many great thinkers and heroes throughout history, have dreamt of giving to history a new beginning. In the eighteenth century, Napoleon, with his slogan: *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*, imagined that he was constructing a new Europe. But he did not. Karl Marx, in the nineteenth century, imagined that the Communist Manifesto and the struggle of the proletariat were the groundwork for a more just society, where everyone would relate to another as his equal. But this was far from true. In the twentieth century, Francis Fukuyama foretold “The End of History”, and imagined that, with the fall of the great political ideologies and consequently of ideological conflicts, the world was entering a new phase, a dull but peaceful future. But shortly afterwards he himself realized that this was only wishful thinking.

As a young person, I shared the ideas of the young people who, in the 1960’s, were reacting against the *status quo* of contemporary society. I remember the Beatniks and the interesting life pattern that they adopted in California, far from the maddening crowd of the cities; their lifestyle was a clear message to that society. I remember the students’ revolts in many European cities in 1968. I too shared those dreams at that time. I too imagined that society was badly in need of a radical change of its structures. But I think that what the world has passed through, especially in the past twenty years, has only convinced us that this is far from true.

What the world needs is not a change of structures, but a change of hearts. Only love can change hearts. This is the year declared as the year of struggle against poverty. But this is also the year commemorating the 100th anniversary of a small, great person by the name of Mother Theresa, of Albanian origin. If her Gospel of life had been accepted with the same zeal and eagerness as the gospel of consumerism has been accepted, perhaps the world today would be in a state more worthy for man to live in.

The slogans of the Secular City, according to Harvey Cox, are: love, fraternity, solidarity, peace, justice, freedom, human dignity, human rights, etc., these, according to Cox himself, are all basically Christian values. But they remain just slogans, and can never become concrete and directive values unless they are inspired by that faith which enlightens us in such a way that we see the face of God in the face of every man. That is why Mother Theresa shook the foundations of the society of anonymity. One cannot ask *what* she did without asking also *why* she did it. And this is what distinguishes Christian love from philanthropy.

I remember a song which was very popular in my childhood (unless I am mistaken, it was sung by Perry Como): *Love makes the world go round*. May our love be always an expression of our deep conviction that only love can change the world.

LOVE WORKS MIRACLES

Salvation History teaches us that there is no evil from which the almighty God cannot draw something good. Jacob's sons, driven by the envy toward their brother Joseph, sold him to the Egyptians. Later on when the Pharaoh appointed Joseph as his deputy, Joseph's brothers were obliged to go to Egypt to buy food. When they noticed that Pharaoh's Deputy was their brother Joseph, they all feared he would take revenge of them. Yet Joseph said to them: "You did me harm, but God turned it into something good as you can see...Do not be afraid! I will take care of you and your children". (Zan 50, 20-21).

It is no good news when a disaster occurs: an earthquake, floods or any other tragedy. However these disasters provide us with the opportunity to prove our love by showing our solidarity with the victims. Caritas Albania has had many such cases during 2010. It suffices to mention Caritas' intervention after the earthquake in Shupenza and after the floods in the North of Albania. We can also mention the various aids given to the children who remained orphans after the accident which occurred in Gjegjan, Puka. But we can mention in particular the opening of the daily centre in Arameras, Fushe-Kruja for the children and youth with disabilities in order for them to develop their abilities and be fully integrated in society.

I would also like to express my joy for the number of volunteers who help us realize projects organized by Caritas. They are young girls and boys who, attracted by the noble ideal of Caritas, want to serve as tools in the hands of the One whose name is "Love": "God is love".

And finally I would like to express my deep gratitude and appreciation to the Director and all the staff of Caritas, because they accomplish their duty not like any other job, but with a Christian spirit, convinced that God is found in the face of every person who needs their love. Indeed, love makes miracles!

OPENNESS TO THE NEEDS OF OTHERS

Do you remember the parable, in Luke's Gospel, about the rich man and poor Lazarus? It is a parable. But at the same time it is a true story. A twenty-first century story, an everyday story. It is the story of two men living in two dramatically different situations. There are two different, although complimentary, ways to preach this gospel. The first one emphasizes the first part of the story when the two protagonists of the parable were still alive, the second one emphasizes the latter part, when both protagonists' are seen after their death.

In order to understand more fully the message of this parable, it would be advisable to read it against the background of the whole of chapter sixteen of Luke's Gospel. Before narrating this parable, Jesus affirmed that "no servant can be the slave of two masters, no one can serve God and money at the same time." In the following verse we read that on hearing this, the Pharisees mocked him, because "they loved money" and so Jesus narrated this parable. This parable, therefore, is an answer and a warning to all those who love money.

But who does not love money? When Our Lord said: "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven", in no way was he condemning the rich, still less was he justifying social poverty. Social poverty is always a social evil which all of us are in duty bound to shun and to combat. Where there is social poverty it is always a sign that the plan of God is not being effectively carried out. The phrase "Blessed are the poor" means, first of all, that there can be real joy for those who are in a dire state of poverty in this world once they discover the wealth which consists in living in the Kingdom of heaven. Secondly, this phrase relates to "evangelical poverty" as distinct from "social poverty". That is why Matthew's Gospel adds "Blessed are the poor **in spirit**". Social poverty is a symptom of a selfish, sinful society. Evangelical poverty is openness to God and to our neighbour. It is love in action.

In other words, the beatitude of the poor is an eye opener to all God's children. All must realize that true wealth is the hidden treasure for which one must be ready to sell everything, and true wisdom consists in setting our hearts on this treasure, the Kingdom of God. It is very easy for a rich man to make wealth his one and only aim and idol. How many people become workaholic, at the risk of breaking down, or of putting aside their other duties towards their families, simply because they want to get richer! And it is very difficult for many people to put their hand in their pockets in order to help a poor person.

This parable describes such a situation in an extreme form. The rich man is utterly insensible to the dire destitution of the man who is so near to him at his gate. His world is a very small world: it includes only himself and his riches.

But is this attitude such a rare occurrence? Isn't it true that in this globalized world the gap between rich and poor countries is getting ever wider? And isn't it true that, in many societies, the rich are becoming richer, whereas the poor are getting poorer and poorer?

Lazarus is still alive. Indeed, Jesus himself foretold: "You have the poor with you always". Yes indeed, this is still true. But fortunately it is never too late, we can always heed the Lord's words: "I was hungry, and you gave me food".

Lazarus is among us, reminding us that we have no more right than he has for a decent human life. And fortunately, we can always look at him with a Christian smile, which enables us to see Christ's face in his suffering face.

“WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?” (Lk 10, 29)

2010

“It is in within this organization that respect for life should find its best defence. It is your duty to commit yourselves to a just distribution of food for the table of humankind.” These are the words that Pope Paul VI directed to representatives of the United Nations Organization on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the founding of that organization, on October 4th 1965.

45 years have passed since that day when Paul VI uttered these words. Has the situation of mankind improved since then? It seems not. In that speech, Paul VI reminded the nations of their duty to assist each other in their fight against hunger.

However we are still a long way off from witnessing this international solidarity of which Pope John XXIII spoke in the Encyclical *Mater et Magistra* and which, with still greater insistence, has again been brought to our minds in Pope Benedict XVI’s last Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*.

It suffices to mention that 85% of the world's wealth is controlled by only 15% of the population. And while millions of people are still living in sub-human conditions, many nations, every year, continue to spend billions of dollars on weapons. An Italian missionary priest in India wrote : “If I had the bread that in Italy is given to the chickens, if I had the bread thrown away in restaurants, colleges and workers’ houses, if I had the food thrown away in a big city like Milan, I would satisfy the hunger of thousands of Indians”

But we are still living in a world where there is still the rich man and Lazarus, the poor man (cf. Lk 16, 19-31). With painful eyes, Lazarus looks towards the rich man’s table hoping to at least get satisfied with the crumbs that fall from the rich man’s table.

We are still in the year declared as "the year against poverty", with the hope that human society will become more aware of that sacred principle so much emphasized in the social teaching of the Church, namely, that God has entrusted the world and all its riches to all mankind inclusive of race, creed and colour.

"Who is my neighbour?" This is the question that a scribe once addressed to Jesus. Undoubtedly, he was a clever man, but yet he did not know that his neighbour could be someone who lives near his house and perhaps he is crying for help, but no one is listening to him; or one who is dying of hunger but no one is taking any notice of him.

He was a clever man, but he thought that the sin against love is performed only by killing one’s neighbour with a knife or pistol, without bearing in mind that important affirmation of the Fathers of the Church: “Feed the one who is dying of hunger because if you do not, you are killing him”.

Caritas was founded from the firm conviction that all people constitute one single family. Before being Albanian, English or Pakistani, we are humans. Each of us is created in the likeness of God and each of us has an irreplaceable dignity. Everyone has a duty to respect the dignity of others and everyone is entitled to his dignity and this must be respected by others.

MERCY AND HOPE

Following Matthew's call to discipleship, Jesus was seen eating dinner with sinners and tax-collectors and this had led to an argument with the Pharisees. They were shocked and scandalized. Whereupon Jesus quoted a text from the prophet Hosea: *What I want is mercy, not sacrifice*, a verse he would quote again on another occasion. This all shows how much Jesus wanted to emphasize the supremacy of mercy to the minute observation of the laws.

The Gospel presents us a similar situation. Jesus was criticized because his disciples did not fast. This time the argument was with John's disciples, who, however, invoked the practice of the Pharisees in their support: *We and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not*.

Perhaps more than the other evangelists, Matthew brings to light Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees. One of the reasons being the fact that whereas they were so keen to observe the minutest details of the law, they were neglecting, in Jesus' own words, *the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, good faith*.

For many centuries we have developed a casuistry similar to that of the Pharisees, emphasizing love for the law while forgetting the supremacy of the law of love! Thanks to Pope Francis we are now constantly reminded that *mercy is the name of God*. We read in Matthew's Gospel the Lord's command: *Be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect*. Luke, the "evangelist of mercy", gives us a slightly different version of this command, which is: *Be merciful, just as your heavenly Father is merciful*. Which means that: *your heavenly Father is perfect* is equivalent to: *your heavenly Father is merciful*. God's perfection lies in His mercy. Mercy makes us God-like.

Jesus' reply to John's disciples included the reference to Himself as the bridegroom. This reminds us of the prophet Hosea, who was the first among the prophets to compare God's relationship to His chosen people with the relationship between a bridegroom and a bride. He also foretold his death: *The time will come for the bridegroom to be taken away*. He is the bridegroom who will lay down his life out of love for His bride, the Church. And this led Saint Paul to present Christ's love for His bride as a model of love for married couples.

On that occasion Jesus also spoke about the old cloak and the old wineskins. The old must give way to the new order. In the *Pange Lingua* Thomas Aquinas speaks of the old rites which had to give way to the new one, the Eucharist: *Antiquum documentum novo cedat ritui*. A new doctrine is given in the person of Jesus Christ, and this ought to be received with a new heart and a new attitude, while the way must be opened to let this new doctrine change our hearts and our attitudes. Laws can change structures, but only faith and love can change hearts.

Mercy compels us to this change of heart and attitude. It implies looking at others not with the eyes of yesterday, but with fresh eyes, free from yesterday's prejudices and false judgments. That is why Mother Teresa of Calcutta used to repeat to her sisters: *Give with a big smile*. Because, as Cardinal Suenens sharply observes in one of his books, *To smile is to look at others with the eyes of God*.

The prophets, while reproaching the people who failed to respond to God's love and providence, yet they also inspired hope. Christopher Lasch (*The True and Only Heaven*) duly remarks that hope ought to be sharply distinguished from the idea of *progress* of the

Enlightenment. This idea imagined that progress in the sciences and the maturity of reason, would inevitably lead to infinite progress. Jonathan Sacks (*The Dignity of Difference*), former Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, distinguishes hope from optimism. Optimism is the belief that things will improve, without bearing in mind the difficulties and the challenges; it is a passive attitude and a form of naiveté. Hope, on the contrary, is an active virtue, and expresses the belief that together we can change the situation for the better.

In reality, hope is a virtue in crisis. The first years of the third millennium do not augur a bright future: the 11th September, the wars in the Middle East, ISIS, and what was imagined to be an *Arab spring*, turned out to be worse than a tempestuous winter. More than this, we, as the Catholic Church, are experiencing a crisis of hope. The scandals surrounding paedophile priests and abuses with the management of finances have caused an earthquake which brought with it a crisis of credibility on the part of the Catholic Church. As well as this, the crisis of vocations to the priestly and religious life continue to make us doubt about the future of the Church we love. We feel as if we are in the situation of Thomas in the Last Supper, turning to the Lord and insisting with Him: *We do not know the way! Tell us what we are heading for. Shall there be a 'Brexit' for us too?* Yet we believe, and so we accept the Lord's assurance: ***I** am the way! Believe in me! Just believe in me, for I have conquered the world.*

DEAD OR ALIVE?

I remember, in my childhood, how much I detested the month of November. Pre-Vatican II liturgy urged us, as it were, to put on long faces. In masses for the dead, an empty coffin was placed in the aisle of the church; it was covered with a black cloth and surrounded by four or six huge candles, and on each candle a poster with a skull painted on it. No alleluia, not even the Glory be could be recited in the liturgy for the dead, instead *Requiem aeternam* was repeated over and over again.

Thank God, all this has changed now. No more fake coffins in the aisle; we have, instead, the Easter candle, which reminds us that Christ is alive, he is the Resurrection and life. And the *Aleluia* is sung.

We begin the month of November with two very important liturgical celebrations: the solemnity of All Saints, and the commemoration of All the Faithful Departed. When I said these were two great celebrations, I meant not only from the liturgical point of view, but also from the point of view of theology and of our spiritual life. As a matter of fact, these two days have reminded us that we are one Church, and one People of God. This means that we are a Church in pilgrimage and we are in union with the Church in glory and the Church in purification. Readings for the 2nd November remind us of this important truth. All readings for the mass on that day in fact speak of the afterlife and future resurrection. As we bear in mind this truth about our future, we are also immediately reminded of the practical implications of this truth. Belief in afterlife and in resurrection generate hope and hope compels us to live always in view of this our future destiny.

Faith in the afterlife and in the future resurrection means that, with our feet steadfast on the ground, our eyes are focused on heaven. As St Paul tells the Colossians: “You have been raised with Christ, and so seek the things that are above”. And likewise Jesus exhorts us: “Store up treasures for yourselves in heaven”.

For many, many centuries, the people of the Old Testament believed only in life on earth. The deceased went to Sheol, where there is no God to be revered. At a certain point in time there was a breakthrough. God works in history and through history. In the book of Daniel and in the two books of the Maccabees, we read of the time of harsh persecution of the just and at this time a real belief in afterlife and in bodily resurrection is unambiguously affirmed. In the Second Book of Maccabees, we have a very edifying example of an entire family, consisting of a mother and her seven sons, who were put to death for their faith. Their steadfast faith and the extraordinary courage they displayed astonished even the king and those who were with him. They proclaimed their unwavering faith in the resurrection and this faith gave them the courage they needed to endure torture and death.

In the gospel we read about a dispute between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The former believed in the resurrection, whereas the latter did not. The Sadducees put to Jesus a very strange question about a woman who had successively and lawfully married seven brothers. If this woman and the seven brothers rose from the dead, whose wife would she be? The way they formulated the question indicates the Sadducees’ difficulty with the issue of the resurrection. They thereby wanted to stress and to prove how ridiculous this idea of the resurrection was.

Jesus' reply is on a very different wavelength. God is the Lord of history: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is the God of the covenant, the covenant that gave and still gives hope. He is the living God who makes the resurrection possible, the God who wills life. If we believe in God, we must believe in the fullness of life after death. We are children of the resurrection, because we are children of God. This God is not a God of the dead, but a God of the living. A God for whom all are called to live, in Him, with Him and through Him

The Sadducees represent the views of a large segment of today's mankind. Not only because many today reject any idea of an afterlife, but also because contemporary culture is, in the words of Pope John Paul II, a culture of death. People who live in the contemporary world believe more in death than in life. Against this background we can appreciate more and more the richness and depth of the biblical view of life and death. And Christian faith gives us what contemporary culture cannot give: hope.

SOLEMNITY OF SS. PETER AND PAUL

Today's celebration is not simply a liturgical celebration to honour Saints Peter and Paul. It is a celebration of the great paradox of divine grace.

If Christ had asked our opinion about whom to choose as head of the apostolic college, we would have suggested the name of any other apostle, but certainly not Peter's. He had none of the qualities we would expect from a head of the Church. He was an ignorant fisherman, ambitious, cowardly, and undiplomatic. None of these characteristics would qualify him for the post of head of the Church.

If Christ had asked our opinion about whom to choose as apostle of the gentiles, the least likely person we would have chosen would have been, undoubtedly, Paul. He was a fanatic Pharisee. Today we would have termed him a "fundamentalist", a person who would have easily joined a terrorist group similar to the Talabans'. He was also a person who was very difficult to work with; he was too demanding, and too legalistic. Undoubtedly, such qualities would not put him on the list of candidates for the post of apostle to the gentiles.

Peter and Paul are typical examples of the strange ways of God's Providence. God's logic is in sharp contrast to human logic. He chooses the weak "to put to shame those who are wise".

But something happened in their experience which radically changed the map of their lives. It was their encounter with the risen Lord. Peter encountered him by the Sea of Tiberias, where the risen Lord offered this apostle, who a few days before had denied him three times, the opportunity to proclaim, three times, that he loved the Lord. This was set as a condition for the mission Christ entrusted to him, to feed his lambs. Paul encountered him on the way to Damascus, where the Risen Lord revealed to him that He, Christ, was suffering in the person of those whom Paul was persecuting, and the Lord provided him with the opportunity to proclaim the Good News to the pagan world.

Peter, on the first Christian Pentecost, spoke to the world in a language that could be understood by all. Paul, in his missionary journeys, spoke the languages of different cultures. This is what the Church needs today, especially as we are endeavouring to define the new evangelization and trying to trace the ways and means to achieve this goal: it needs to speak different languages for peoples and to address cultures. Both apostles, in their different ways, serve as an inspiration to us to discover the true meaning and implications of this new evangelization.

Both apostles were victims of violence, prejudice, and intolerance. Both of them remind us that in that famous eighth beatitude Christ did not say: "Blessed are you when you are feared, respected and privileged", but He said: "Blessed are you when you are persecuted". The Church will be saved only so long as it is ready to suffer. And the world is saved not through the sword of the conquerors, but through the sword of those who suffer.

Both apostles opened the doors to a wider world. In Acts, chapter 11 we read that Peter enthusiastically gave an account of his call to baptize the first pagan, Cornelius. Further down, in that same chapter, we read that Paul and Barnabas went to spread the Good News in Antioch, where the disciples were first called "Christians".

However, in the middle of this story of Church expansion, Herod started dispatching the elders. He had already dispatched James. Now he plans to execute Peter. We can imagine the frustration of those first Christians, feeling so uncertain about their future. However, there was a whole community fervently praying for him. Only prayer and trust in God will prevent us from believing that the Church is on the brink of extinction.

Paul rejoices in the fact that he has fought the good fight, and has kept the faith. His real strength lies in the fact that he is ready to let himself be wounded. He is convinced that there is stored up for him the crown of righteousness which the Lord will give him. Undoubtedly, we should all like to share that serene confidence.

G. K. Chesterton wrote that the saint is a sinner who is convinced that he is a sinner. Today we are honouring two sinners, and who were sincere enough to admit they were sinners, and who were humble enough to repent for their sins. Peter and Paul constantly remind us that the law of love has primacy over the love for the law. God's Kingdom can be carried out not only through the agency of sinful collaborators like Peter and Paul and like ourselves, but by those very same people, like Peter and Paul who also believe in the healing power of love.

LEARNING FROM LITTLE CHILDREN

Jesus' words, "Let the little children come to me, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs", as well as his admonition, at the beginning of his discourse on the Church (Matthew's Gospel, chapter 18), "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven", deserve our serious consideration.

First of all, they provoke the question: Why does Jesus want us to become like little children? And why does he say that to such belongs the kingdom of heaven? Whenever I have put this question, I have unmistakably received the same reply: Because little children are sinless, they are still innocent. Indeed, children *are* sinless, but only because they cannot be otherwise! So far they have not faced the real challenges of life, the problems of puberty and adolescence. There must be other reasons for which Jesus sets little children as models for our behaviour. So let us observe the way little children behave.

I remember when, as a child, whenever my teacher asked me to clean the blackboard, or to distribute the copybooks, I was very happy and felt honoured to be asked to do this little service. And Jesus demands that we too feel honoured and happy whenever we have the opportunity do something beautiful for God and for others. After all, as St Bernard duly states, "to serve God means to reign".

Again, observe a child, who has to cross a very busy road, with many vehicles coming from either side. But he is holding his father's hand. He does not worry at all, knowing that he is in the good hands of his father. He is safe, he trusts his father. And Jesus demands from us a childlike trust in our heavenly Father. Wasn't this the message Jesus wanted to convey to us when he said: "Do not worry about your life.... Set your hearts on God's kingdom first, and on his righteousness"?

Moreover, we see children quarrelling over the most trivial matters, but after a while we see them again playing together. They teach us never to allow ourselves become victims of a revengeful spirit.

And finally, children are fully aware that they depend on others. That is why they are not ashamed to beg. And this too is a good quality which we must imitate in little children. We are not self-sufficient. We must approach God fully confident that He will grant us what we really need if only we turn to him with this childlike simplicity.

And it is in this light that we must interpret that beautiful beatitude: "Happy the pure in heart: they shall see God". Purity of heart does not imply merely the virtue of chastity. It has a far deeper significance. It is the purity of intention as we engage ourselves in good works for the Lord: not seeking self-gratification, as the Pharisees did, but the glory of God. It is the simplicity of heart with which we must receive the word and grace of God, on account of which Jesus praised his heavenly Father, "for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children".

EPISCOPAL CONSECRATION OF MONS. GEORGE FREND O.P.

His words at the end of the Mass

Dear brothers and sisters: this is the first time that I am addressing you as a bishop.

When I was informed that the Holy Father Pope Benedict had appointed me Auxiliary Bishop of this archdiocese, my first reaction was expressed by those words of Psalm 116, 12: “What shall I render to the Lord for all his bounty to me?” Then, on that very day when this nomination was made public, I came across those words of David: “Who am I, o Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?” (2 Sam 7, 18).

Since then, the Holy Spirit has enlightened me to understand what He is expecting of me as a bishop. And I continue to pray to the Holy Spirit in all humility that He continues to give me that divine wisdom which will enable me to undertake and carry out faithfully the duties ensuing from the holy order I have just received. In other words may the Holy Spirit bestow on me the grace to understand that:

1. being a bishop is not a career, a job, a profession: it is a new opportunity to serve God and the people in the footsteps of Christ, who came not to be served, but to serve; not to condemn, but to save;
2. being a bishop is not a position to show my own self and my abilities; it is a call to show Jesus Christ operating in me and through me, in spite of my weakness and sinfulness; and may I always say, like John the Baptist: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (Jn 3, 30);
3. being a bishop is not an office which distances me from the people: it is a mission which demands that I be always close to the people and listen to the people.

I am called to follow and to proclaim Jesus Christ, to be a disciple and an apostle of the one who even today addresses to us the same question that, 2000 years ago, he addressed to some simple fishermen from Galilee: “Who do you say I am?”

Friends and foes had put this same question concerning him: “Who is this man?” Some officers were sent by the Pharisees to arrest him, but they had not the courage to do so, because, they said, “no man ever spoke like this man” (Jn 7, 46). He spoke with authority, not because he possessed arms or wealth, but because his words were confirmed by his deeds.

Nobody could convict him of sin. But yet, he approached sinners. An adulterous woman who was about to be stoned, found refuge in Him, who alone had every right to stone her, but did not. “A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench” (Is 42, 3). Lepers, who were supposed to be driven away from inhabited areas, approached him and were healed. Dirty hands grabbed his cloak, and virtue sprang from him. His own hands were dirty with work, but never dirty with stones to be thrown at sinners.

This is the Christ I want to follow and serve, this is the Christ I want to proclaim.

May I be always grateful to God, because He has given me the grace to serve him as bishop, in a Church which proclaims Christ who alone can liberate man from whatever endangers

his dignity; in a Church that binds up wounds, bridges chasms, and restores health in the midst of conflict and oppression.

This is the Church that was born on the cross. At the foot of the cross, in the persons of Mary, John, and some holy women we perceive the embryonic church of the poor, the powerless church, sustained only by the power and wisdom of crucified love.

May I be always close to the people, as I listen to them and learn from them. May the faces of those who are victims of hatred, prejudice, poverty, and injustice be for me, as they were for Saint Dominic, an open book from which I learn the art of loving with the love of Christ. Like Christ, the good shepherd, may I be always ready to lay down my life for the sheep He has entrusted to me.

And finally, I want to express my deep gratitude first of all to God, who has showered upon me, unworthy servant, so many graces. I thank him also for my family: my parents, sisters and brothers. As I look back on the family of my childhood, I feel proud that it was, in the real sense of the word, a domestic church.

I express my gratitude to the Church authorities present here. And first of all to our Archbishop Mons. Rrok Mirdita, with whom I promise to collaborate faithfully as his auxiliary bishop, as I have tried to do throughout the seven years I have been his vicar general. Then the bishops co-consecrators: the Apostolic Nuncio Mons. John Bulaitis and the Archbishop of Malta Mons. Joseph Mercieca. I thank the other archbishop and bishops of Albania, the Archbishop of Bari Mons. Francesco Cacucci and the Bishop of Gozo (Malta) Mons. Mario Grech. A special word of thanks goes to His Beatitude Archbishop Anastas Janoulatos, who has honoured me with his presence. His presence here today is a proof of true brotherhood in Christ. I thank the Maltese Dominican Provincial Fr Paul Gatt, whose constant support has never failed; and the Provincial of the German Dehonian Fathers, Fr August Hulsmann, President of the Union of European Conferences of Major Superiors, with whom I collaborated closely and had very friendly ties during the years I was member of the executive committee of the Union. My thanks to all priests and religious present here.

I express my gratitude to the civil authorities present here

And finally, I thank you all, dear brothers and sisters in Christ. Today's celebration has reminded us those words of the great Doctor of the Church, St Augustine: "For you I am a bishop, with you I am a Christian". I have to proclaim to you the word of the Lord, I have to administer to you the sacraments of Christ, I have to lead you through the way of love. But I must also learn from you, because God can speak to me also through you. And, with the help of God, let us all walk together the way of Christ, who said: "I am the way, the truth, and the life". Christ is not a blind alley: He is the way that reveals to us the truth and leads us to life.

Thank you all.

**THE FUNERAL MASS OF
MSGR. RROK MIRDITA, Archbishop of Tirana
10 December 2015**

About sixty years ago a famous Marxist, philosopher Ernst Bloch, wrote a book, in which he distances himself from the teachings of Karl Marx regarding religious beliefs. According to Bloch religion is not at all opium for the people. On the contrary it expresses the “protest” of the people, because it elevates the most beautiful dreams of mankind up to heaven: dreams of a better world, a world more worthy of mankind. In Bloch’s opinion, the message of the Gospel directs mankind to a new world.

I believe the history of Albania during the second half of the twentieth century shows clearly how right Ernst Bloch was. After almost half a century, during which the anti-theistic communism in this country tried to “kill” God, the religious sentiment of the Albanian people remained very strong. And our presence today in this Cathedral Church proofs that half a century of militant anti-theism did not suffice to extinguish the religious sentiment of the Albanian people. This Cathedral was erected in front of a monument that was constructed by those who wanted to kill God. Today we celebrate the entrance into eternal life of the one who built this Cathedral!

Two things are uniting us today in this celebration: First, our faith. Second, our respect for a special person.

Faith brings us together, because although we know we all have to die one day, we don’t believe in death, but in the resurrection. The Gospel we just heard is about a person, a special person, a person who was the Son of God, but became man, just like you and me (with the exception only of sin!), and so, he too was to experience the misery of death. Also He, Jesus Christ, accepted death, but this He did only in order to change completely its physiognomy. By defeating death through his resurrection, he changed the physiognomy of death by giving it the form of a passage into a new life! In the first reading, Isaiah, the great prophet of hope, who lived centuries before Christ, today is strengthening our hearts as he says: “The Lord will make disappear death... from every face he will wipe off the tears ... and on that day you will hear: This is our God! In Him we put our trust, He rescued us!”

The other thing that is uniting us today is our respect for a person who loved us and whom we have loved. Our presence here today expresses our gratitude to Monsignor Rrok and at the same time our gratitude to God, who gave us the ‘Monsignor’.

Saint Paul says “Do not ever tire doing good”, because “what one sows, one will also reap.” These are words, which remind us of our responsibility to use well the gift of time, by trying to do good, serving God and His people. We thank God *not only* for the 76 years he gave Monsignor Rrok, *but also* because during this time period God revealed Himself to him as the Lord of his personal history, the Lord who was always very near and always very generous to him.

The life of Monsignor Rrok may be divided in three main periods: The first without doubt is the time with his family in Ulqin, before he became priest. He always felt very happy to have lived in that family environment. His parents were the ones who accompanied him on his way to get to know Jesus Christ.

The second period is the whole time of his priesthood, before he was ordained bishop. Five months ago we celebrated the 50th anniversary of his priesthood. As a very young priest, Dom Rrok served in the diocese of Tivar, in Montenegro, where he was an administrator and a pastor. Somewhat later he was sent by the Archbishop of Tivar to New York, to serve the Catholic Diaspora of Albanians in the Bronx. There he served at the Center “Our Lady of Good Counsel” and among other things he founded the Catholic radio program in the Albanian language “The voice of the Catholic Church” in the Centre “Our Lady of Shkodra” for the New York region.

The third period in the life of Monsignor Rrok covers his last 22 years, in which he served as a bishop. Ordained a bishop by the now Saint Pope John Paul II during his papal visit to Albania in April 1993, he immediately devoted himself to the building of a Catholic community in the diocese that was entrusted to him. We can say that Monsignor Rrok was the right instrument in the hands of God for the resurrection of the Church in this Diocese.

From the historical point of view, the writings of Monsignor Mirdita in three volumes “*Përnjë Shqipëri me Zotin*” (For an Albania in union with God) are very important. Monsignor Rrok Mirdita accompanied the rebirth of the Church in Albania, especially in his Archdiocese of Tirana-Durrës. Today this Archdiocese has come of age. It is 22 years old now. But it is still in the springtime of life. And when a mother sees her offspring at that age, she will remember the pains she went through 22 years before at his birth. This was also Monsignor Rrok Mirdita’s experience at the difficult birth of his diocese.

From the very start of his mandate as the Diocesan Bishop, Monsignor Mirdita insisted on the need for a new evangelization of Albania. For this he wrote: “...*the mission of the Church is to reveal God to the world and to proclaim His saving love that appeared in Jesus Christ... A church that lives in obedience to the Gospel and proclaims it, is a church that serves society.*”

And in fact, during these years as Archbishop, he was happy to receive and accept in his diocese many missionaries, who fulfilled and are still fulfilling this noble missionary work of evangelization.

The bishop leads the Church into that love, which unites us as one people. During the homily on the first anniversary of the dedication of this Cathedral Church (on January 25 in 2003) Monsignor Rrok Mirdita wrote: “With joy and gladness I notice that this living Cathedral, **which is you**, is growing and is becoming every day more beautiful, more welcoming, more dear.” The sermons and writings of Monsignor Rrok Mirdita show his nearness to the herd entrusted to him as well as his commitments to this herd. Jesus’ prayer just before his suffering and death: “That all may be one!” was Jesus’ “spiritual testament”. But it is also the heritage he left us. And they are exactly the words written in the coat of arms of our Archbishop, written in Latin “*Ut omnes unum sint*”. The prayer and wish of Christ became the prayer and wish of the bishop.

When Jesus spoke with Nicodemus and told him that man needs to be reborn, Nicodemus was surprised: “How is that possible?” – he asked. Until then time Nicodemus for sure did not know that there is a physical birth for the natural life and a spiritual birth for the supernatural life. Maybe Nicodemus could not possibly know that those who believe in God do never “grow old”. Only God doesn’t “grow old”: He is always young, because He

is always working and building: He builds and rebuilds the world through his love. I remember an English song, very popular in my childhood, in which is said: *“You will never grow old while there’s love in your heart.”*

How many people, still young in age, are already almost dead in spirit! And on the other hand, how many people whom we have known and encountered, old in age, yet they are still young in spirit! We may thus define also Monsignor Mirdita: advanced in age but always young in spirit. His character, full of joy, brought him closer to the people. And he always had a word of consolation and good counsel, for everyone who approached him with any sort of problems.

I would like to conclude with a personal note. I feel very privileged to have worked very closely and intimately with Monsignor Mirdita during these last 17 years: 8 years as Vicar General and 9 years also as Auxiliary Bishop. I have learned a lot from him and we have always displayed sincere respect for one another. Today I want to say to him: “If inadvertently I have ever caused you any pain, I apologize; and I thank you cordially for all the trust you have always shown me without my deserving it.”

Today you might remind us the same words that Saint Paul, in his old age, said to Timothy, and that we have just heard in the second reading: “I have done my best in the race, I have run the full distance, and I have kept the faith. And now there is waiting for me the victory prize of being put right with God, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day”

And now, rest in peace, dear Rrok. On my behalf and on behalf of all the people present here today, but also on behalf of all the faithful of our Diocese, I greet you and say to you from the bottom of my heart: Thank you! Thank you very much!

HOMILY: MY ENTHRONEMENT AS THE NEW ARCHBISHOP OF TIRANA

Readings: Jer 1,4-9; 2 Cor 5,14-20 Jn 21,15-19

Today's event reminds me of the day, a little more than ten years ago, when Mgr. Rrok Mirdita ordained me as a bishop. Today I want to express again, my gratitude towards him, whom we can rightly call the father of this Archdiocese. Everything in this Cathedral Church reminds us of his person and his commitment. May God reward him for his love for the Church, for the Albanian people and for the Diocese, which God himself had entrusted to him.

Exactly 50 years ago, the communist regime made the following decision: "Let the Catholic Church at the Boulevard 'Stalin' in Tirana be confiscated. Let it be confiscated and destroyed." Today that church, built in 1856, does not exist anymore. But we have this cathedral, built across from the mausoleum, which was built for him who had decided to kill God.

The readings we have heard are the same as the ones I had chosen for the day I was ordained a bishop, but today they have for me a different meaning. The first reading was about the calling of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was afraid, because he told God "I am but a child." I cannot say like Jeremiah "I am but a child." But I admit sincerely, that I am also afraid to accept this new and huge responsibility. Nevertheless the Lord tells me, like He told Jeremiah: "Don't be afraid, I am with you!" In the second reading Saint Paul reminds me, as representative of Christ, that I am the carrier of reconciliation between the people and God and between the people amongst each other. Meanwhile the Gospel speaks about the risen Christ's meeting with Peter. Three times Jesus asks Peter: "Do you love me?" and charges him with the shepherding of his sheep. Today I hear Jesus ask me - calling me by my name - "George, do you love me?" and He charges me with the shepherding of the sheep in this Diocese.

Brothers and Sisters, allow me now to address several different categories here present.

First I address the priests and the religious. I support especially those who validate evangelical simplicity and poverty. And I underline the word 'evangelical'. So I am not talking about simplicity that is naivety. Jesus tells us to be 'clever as snakes'. Neither am I talking about social poverty. We have to fight social poverty, because the existence of the poor in a society is always proof of egoism, injustice and corruption. It is a proof that the plan and the will of God, who entrusted the richness of the earth to human beings, *to all human beings*, is not being done. But evangelical poverty is the wisdom of those who have found the hidden treasure of the Kingdom of God. They have understood that it is wiser to gather treasures in heaven than here on earth. But they have also understood that evangelical simplicity and poverty make us more reliable witnesses of Christ, who was poor himself and who loved the poor. The society is scandalized not just when we sin in the realm of sexuality, but also when it sees us passionate in our desire to become rich.

That's why Saint Francis has - with his simplicity - drawn the admiration of so many people to this very day; that's why Saint Dominic, poor, has - with his preaching - converted so many heretics, back into the Church of Christ; that's why Saint Teresa - whom we continue

to call 'Mother Teresa' - became probably the most popular person of the twentieth century. The Gospel reiterates often that Jesus 'spoke with authority'. Do we speak with that authority? Are our words accompanied by our lives and our works? Do people see in us Christ *in persona*?

I address all our faithful. The Church is not the temple built of lifeless bricks. St. Paul said that every one of us is a temple of God, and St. Peter calls us 'living stones'. How to picture a living stone? The Prophet Ezekiel speaks about dry bones that took on flesh and breath. It is God, who having made us lifeless stones, breaths, so we become 'living stones'. Don't be just disciples of Christ! Be also apostles of Christ! Let us build together the Church of Christ in our Diocese Tirana-Durres. Let us thank God for the miracles He did for our Diocese these last twenty five years. But our journey has not finished: we have to go on. We should not be afraid to make the necessary reforms, we should not be afraid to change the structures. But let us not forget that the most important and the most difficult work is not the changing of the structures, but the changing of our hearts. Reforms alone are not able to change the hearts. Only faith and love can change the hearts. To use a phrase of Pope Francis: "Let us build bridges, not walls." Let us build together a church modeled after Pope Francis' proposal: a church, who serves, close to the people, especially the poor, the abandoned, the marginalized because of their skin color or because of their social status, victims of injustice, a church, who becomes the voice of those who have no voice! Therefore, let us have our smile ready for those who are looking for our solidarity, let us reach out to them, who were denied help, let us widen our hearts, so that the poor and the marginalized find shelter there.

I address the politicians. I respect you a lot, because you serve the people for the common good. The common good takes precedence over the good of the party. Your mission as politicians brings you near to the people. In her first address as Prime Minister of Great Britain, Teresa May spoke about social justice. She claimed that this means: "To fight unbearable injustice where, when you are born poor, you die on average 9 years earlier than others. If you are black the juridical system treats you more harshly than if you were white. If you are white, but working class, you have less chance than others to study at a university. If you are schooled in a public school you are less likely to end up in a high position than if you were in a private school. If you are a woman you are paid less than a man. If you have psychological problems, you will not find sufficient help. And if you are young, it is much more difficult for you than ever to live in your own house." You all know how much the Church loves the poor and the marginalized. But the Church cannot do the work of the government. We are complementary in our struggle against corruption and injustice and in our protection of the poor and marginalized. It is politics that can change the structures for a more honest and more righteous society; but it is religion that can change hearts for a more fraternal and more peaceful society.

Now I address you, the young, the hope of our future. I am well aware, that many of you have only one dream: to go to a foreign country, where you think to find paradise, because you will become rich in a couple of days, that's what you think!

First of all I want to remind you of the teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas, which is, that the virtue of love includes the love for the homeland. Love your homeland! Albania is not only a very beautiful country, but also the mother who taught you many positive values. You are

the heirs of a culture of hospitality, even in a world which lectures us to be anonymous; you are heirs of a culture of solidarity with people who face misfortune; you are heirs of a culture that shows deep respect for the elderly, who today in many other countries are considered a burden on the society. You are heirs of many values that in the financially richest countries are looked upon as rubbish. So love your homeland that has enriched you with these values! Show yourself always brave, keeping in mind how you can make your homeland always better, more righteous and more clean. Also show yourselves brave when God calls you into a life, where you can serve the Church more thoroughly as a priest or as a sister. We need the youth very much, male and female, to be more ready and generous with God and not afraid of telling Him: “Yes, Lord, here I am! I want to serve you as a priest, as a brother, as a sister.”

And finally I address you, dear representatives of the religions in Albania. Like my predecessor, Mgr. Rrok Mirdita, I also want to be an instrument of the interreligious harmony.

A fraternal and heartfelt greeting to the leaders and faithful of the Orthodox Church, our brothers in the Christian faith. May we together be an inspiration for Christians in Albania and throughout the world and pray to the Lord with renewed fervour for the full unity of all His disciples. Our country expects from us a compelling Christian witness in all spheres of personal and social life. Much of the future of humanity will depend on our capacity to give shared witness to the Spirit of truth in these difficult times.

I greet also the representatives of the Evangelical church. I join you in prayer on the commemoration of the five-hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. My Dominican DNA and my formation together with my apostolic zeal, make me strongly believe that we cannot passively and calmly wait in our church buildings; we need to move from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry.

I address our Muslim and Bektashi friends. In the eleventh century Pope Gregory VII wrote a letter to the king of Mauretania, Al Nasir, a Muslim. In that letter the Pope addressed him with these words: “My brother in Abraham, a believer in God, who is the one creator.” In the year 1965 the Second Vatican Council edited the declaration *Nostra Aetate*, which speaks about the relations between the Catholic Church and the non-Christian religions. In that document the Council declares that the Church has great respect for Muslims, who adore one God only, eternal, merciful and omnipotent. These affirmations invite us to appreciate more the truths and values we have in common; we have to engage in building a society more worthy for the human being. Because like the Christian faith, so also the Muslim and the Bektashian faith attribute to the human being a special dignity at the creation. In the Koran we read the words of Allah: “And when your God told the angels: ‘I created a proxy on earth.’” And the famous Bektashian poet Naim Frasherri wrote: “The living human heart – is the dwelling place of God – there is the true God – the great sea of the universe.”

Brothers and sisters, we started this Mass asking God for His mercy. And I would like to end these words asking you for your mercy. Forgive my mistakes. I am not enjoying the gift of infallibility. I know I have made a lot of mistakes in my life. I will do my best not to repeat the same ones, but I cannot give any guarantee that I will not make new mistakes. From this day and further I ask your understanding and your forgiveness.

Pray for me, that the Lord will always be my light for the good of the flock which He has entrusted to me, a weak person that I am. Thank you for your presence and for the great love you have always shown me, for sure without deserving it.

Thank you, thank you very much! I am your brother George.

HOMILY: ON RECEIVING THE "PALLIUM"

2nd July 2017

One of the most amazing features of the Albanian people is hospitality. The Kanun of Dukagjin describes in detail the spirit with which an Albanian should welcome a guest. Among other things, we read: "The home of the Albanian is God's and the guest's" and "the host gives honour by offering bread, salt and his heart." This welcoming spirit - I hope our people will never fail to keep it - has a very important message for today's world. So many people today have lost that sense of hospitality that had been cultivated in the past. So many people live today in anonymity or in what Pope Francis calls the "globalization of indifference".

The First Reading of today presents us with a couple who showed themselves particularly welcoming to a prophet named Elisha. For a while, the couple offered him bread every time he passed over there. Later, the couple noticed that this person was a "man of God, a saint" and decided to build a room on the terrace for him. They have shown a special sense of warmth and generosity and God has rewarded them.

The entire mission of the prophet Elisha also shows his sensitivity to the abandoned and marginalized. I am a widow, a leper and so many hungry and poor people. The prophet does not hesitate to join those who the world has abandoned or judged. Jesus, too, speaks of hospitality in the Gospel. Here are the words that we have heard in the Gospel: "Whoever welcomes a prophet because he is a prophet, will have the reward of the prophet, and whoever welcomes a just one because he is just, will have the reward of the just. Whoever gives to drink one glass of fresh water to one of these little ones because he is a disciple, in truth, I tell you, he will not lose his reward. " It is therefore a more noble form of hospitality because it is a welcome that is given in the name of Christ. Then Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

This Gospel presents us three categories of people who bear similarity with Jesus himself: the prophet, the just and the poor. This helps us understand what Church we must build. Today's occasion - the imposition of the pallium on my shoulders - reminds us that we are a church, the church of Christ, which enjoys the presence of Christ, always experiences that unity that makes a great family.

The words I have just quoted from today's Gospel show us what are the characteristics that the Church of Christ must project in Albania and for which we must commit ourselves. Jesus praised those who accept a prophet, a just man and a poor man. That is how it should be, how it could work and what the Church should commit itself to do in Albania.

I remember the poor first. We are the Church of Christ, Christ incarnate. The incarnation of Christ means that that wealth is hidden in poverty; Or according to what St. Paul says, "while being rich, he has become impoverished to enrich other men." For this reason, Jesus has been sensitive to the poor. Even more, he identified himself with the poor when he said, "Whatever you did to the little ones, you did it to me."

And in today's Gospel: "Whoever has given to drink one glass of fresh water to one of these little ones because he is a disciple, verily I say to you, he will not lose his reward." As a Church of Christ we try to be a voice to those who do not have it, for the person to whom

surgery is needed but he is denied this right because he cannot pay the corrupt doctor; For someone who does not find a job because he does not know any politician who can give him a job; For the one who is denied a fair judgement because the court was bribed by a large sum of money by a very wealthy person.

Secondly, I remember the righteous ones. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who thirst for justice." Today we feel a "hunger" not indifferent to social justice. Who are the righteous people? Those who refuse to sell their vote to a political party during the elections because they know that the common good has to prevail over personal gain. That policeman who does not sell himself by drinking a coffee! It is the deputy who in parliament is not afraid to denounce a bill that contradicts moral principles and has the courage to defend marriage as a union between a man and a woman. It is he who is not greedy of wealth, power, and entertainment.

As a Church, we must engage in the promotion of humanity and the freedom of man: for the dignity of women, respect for the poor, the marginalized, etc. It is a commitment to building a society worthy of man. We commit ourselves not as "trade unionists" or simply as social workers but as witnesses of the Gospel, inspired by God's Word. Woe to us if we lead a trouble free life by arguing: "It is not up to me ...". Our mission requires us to be very close not so much to those who rule as to the victims of injustice.

And thirdly, I mention the prophets. The first reading spoke of a couple who accepted the prophet Elisha. Jesus praised those who accept the prophet because he is such. Who are the prophets? We who are bishops, priests, and all of us who are believers. And what does the prophet do? The prophet is not the one who predicts the future but the one who preaches the present. That is, he proclaims the values of truth, contrary to the false values proclaimed by today's world. The prophet often has to go against the current. Already St. Paul said, "Do not conform to the mentality of this century." With Jeremiah's courage let us "seduce" God. We dare to say "yes" or "no" when it is necessary to say "yes" or "no". With courage you have to make the necessary decisions even when you know they will criticize you. With courage you will allow the Word to be transformed so that you can proclaim the truth that liberates. With the courage of Isaiah, who drew the attention of his people to the orphans, widows and the oppressed, scolding those who continued to eat, drink and have fun, pretending that everything was fine. With the courage of Amos and Hosea, who today draw our attention towards those who are killed in the wars in Syria and Iraq... towards children who are starving in these countries and in many African countries.

In the first part of today's Gospel, Jesus said: "He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." Those who read these words superficially might think that Jesus drives us to ignore our parents and relatives. That is not so! Jesus himself reproached the Pharisees, who said that we have no duty to parents, but only to God. Jesus, on the other hand, shows that his calling has priority over any other call, even that of his parents. How many parents hindered God's design when they did not allow their children to embark on the path of the priesthood! How many parents have prevented their daughters from accepting the plan of God to become religious!

Brothers and sisters, today's world needs to hear the Gospel of Christ. Today's world needs us. There is urgency for each of us, but not just as Christians. Each of us must be not only a "Christian" but an "other Christ". Our presence intimidates those who sow injustice,

corruption and hatred, because they will see in us the figures of the apostles of love who pave the way for a revolution. The only revolution allowed, even mandatory: the revolution of love.

ANNIVERSARY (50th) OF MY PRIESTHOOD (07/04/1969)

Dear friends, I thank you for joining me today as I thank God for the 50 years I have served him as a priest. It was exactly fifty years ago: the 7th of April, 1969. It was Easter Monday, a day on which we sang with great joy and enthusiasm “Alleluia”. Today we don’t sing “Alle-luia” since we are in the season of Lent, which prepares us spiritually for the joy of Easter!

Nevertheless this time of Lent also invites us to rejoice. The Gospel we just heard tells us why we should be joyful during this period. Look at the sinner woman before a holy Jesus: a woman who “was caught while committing the sin of adultery”. The scribes and the Pharisees, who brought her before Jesus, kept hold of her, judged her, accused her and wanted to punish her. In their hands they were holding stones, ready to throw them on her. But Jesus? Did he have the right to throw a stone on her? Certainly, and not just one! Nevertheless Jesus soiled his hands through work, but not by throwing stones on a sinner. The word he directed to this woman was not a word of condemnation, on the contrary it was: “I don’t condemn you, but go and don’t sin anymore!” What sweet words, that Holy Jesus directs to a woman sinner! Whereas to those who were still holding stones in their hands, he said: “Who among you is without sin, let him throw the first stone on her.” These are words that Jesus also directs to us, to me, who present myself to you today as an old priest: who am I to judge, to accuse, to condemn?

And today I thank God, because He made me participate in a special way in His mission. He made me His ambassador, who, like any ambassador speaks on behalf of his leader, in the same way I ought to speak on behalf of the One who sent me, Jesus Christ. He made me His intermediary, like Abraham and Moses, who interceded for the people in difficult situations of their history. He made of me a conciliator, in a way that may reconcile all with God, and that all may be reconciled with each other. I want to confess that the occasions which provided me with great joy were those when I could reconcile two persons with one another, whereas the cases I regretted most were precisely those when I tried to reconcile two people and did not succeed.

In the second reading we heard a beautiful passage from St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians. This reading carries a special meaning for me today. The Apostle states: “Not that I have become perfect yet: I have not yet won, but I am still running, trying to capture the prize for which Christ Jesus captured me... I forget the past and I strain ahead for what is still to come; I am racing for the finish, for the prize to which God calls us”. Look at the verbs Saint Paul is using in this passage: *running*, *strain ahead*, *racing*. These are verbs that express the Apostle’s decisiveness and zeal to win Christ.

But also another verb he used and which deserves our attention is the verb *to capture*, *catch*. It is a verb we use for fishing. I once was myself a fisherman and I admit I was not lucky, because I only caught an old shoe on the hook. But I know that for fishing, a hook is needed, in order not to lose the fish, not to allow it to escape. And precisely for this reason Saint Paul is using this verb *to catch*. He says, in other words, I will catch Jesus in a way I won’t lose him, because he also caught me that way. Today I thank Jesus, because he caught hold of me and chose me to be his steward. But I need to continuously use the “hook” not to lose him; and my hook must be upright and humble prayer.

When Msgr. Mirdita ordained me a Bishop, thirteen years ago, I quoted in my speech at the end of the Mass the words of King David: “Who am I Lord God, and what is my house, that you have led me as far as this?” Repeating these words today, I wish to quote also a word from the Prophet Isaiah. In his book Isaiah speaks about a mysterious person, whom he called “The Servant of the Most High” and which the Christian tradition has identified as Jesus. And about this Servant Isaiah says that he would not break the crushed reed and not quench the wavering flame”. I feel like that crushed reed and like that wavering flame. Nevertheless the Lord used me in spite of my many defects.

Several days before that day of April 7th 1969 I was afflicted by a wicked thought: am I really capable to fully dedicate myself to the Lord, my whole life? Can I say “yes” to His call once and for all? But I received the courage through St. Paul’s word: “I can do all things through Him who gives me strength.” It is true: alone I was not, nor am I today, capable nor worthy to dedicate myself to the Lord once and for all.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a famous Protestant theologian, who was killed at the age of 39 in a concentration camp by the Nazis, in the night of Christmas of 1943, wrote from his prison cell: “There’s a darkness in me, whereas in you there is light. I am alone but you do not abandon me. I have no courage, but you help me. I am restless, but in you there is peace. In me there is bitterness, but in you there is patience. I don’t understand your ways, but you know mine.” Also I, like Bonhoeffer, sometimes feel in the dark, discouraged and restless. But even though I was perhaps not so faithful to the Lord as I should, the Lord has been always faithful to me. He has been my light in the darkness.

There’s nothing the Lord cannot do without me. But there are a lot of things the Lord was pleased to do through me, as long as I accepted to be an instrument in His hands. The authentic physiognomy of a priest consists in his decisiveness to give himself fully to Christ, the great High Priest, in a manner in which we don’t feel or wish to be different from Jesus Christ! Today I would like to repeat the words spoken at the beginning of the seventeenth century by the English writer John Donne: “O Lord, I want to be your music!” But at the same time I also want to repeat the words of Rabbi Elimelek: “I want the Lord to sing inside of me!”

Forgive me, perhaps I spoke too much about myself, but I just could not help it, I am swayed by the emotions of this day, I simply cannot hide what I am feeling within me.

Please allow me to end with two thoughts. The first one is from Father Gjergj Fishta:

Christians and Muslims – they both inhabit Albania

And that’s why we all will stay – we will stay, we will fight

Even if we have to end up like cut to pieces –priests, brothers and imams, for Albania!

The second thought is one I have expressed just a few days ago, at the beginning of this Lenten season. “We are one people, we love our homeland. Our history proves that religion has never divided us, whether Christianity or Islam; nor did language, whether tosk or gege, divide us. Let us not allow to be divided by politics. Let us commit ourselves to be a more righteous and more fraternal Albania. Together let us dream of an Albania more worthy of Albanians. And, yes, we can get there, with God’s help. Amen!

ALBANIA: IN SEARCH OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE EU

Brussels, February 2020

I am very happy that today I have the opportunity to speak to you about my adoptive country, Albania, where I, Maltese by origin, have been living for the past twenty three years. This country has also honoured me by granting to me Albanian citizenship. Albania has therefore become my second country. At present I am the President of the Albanian Episcopal Conference. Also present with me here is the Secretary General of the Conference, Monsignor Gjergj Meta, who is Albanian.

I am very grateful to COMECE for offering me this opportunity, since receiving the news last October (I would say the “bad” news) that Albania has been denied the opening of EU accession negotiations. This was a big disappointment for all the Albanian Republic. Unlike some other countries, which today are members of the European Union, Albania is overwhelmingly in favour of joining the EU. Surveys carried out a few years ago showed that 94% of the population was in favour of joining NATO, whereas 97% were in favour of joining the EU. In an interview with the review *Osservatorio* in December 2017, when Romano Prodi was asked about Albania’s relations with Turkey, he admitted that Turkey has a huge influence in Albania; yet he added: “But I think Albania is a European country and I think that Albanians consider themselves Europeans”.

I am happy that I am here only a few weeks after Croatia, a neighbouring country, has assumed the six-month rotating presidency of the EU Council.

This was at a time when some countries, who were already members of the EU were somewhat reluctant to open the doors of the EU to more member states. This was towards the end of the last century, when Romano Prodi was elected President of the European Commission. In an excellent discourse he delivered at the European Parliament in Strasbourg on the 15th February 2000, entitled “Shaping the New Europe” he made this bold statement: “Today’s scepticism and anxiety cannot be overcome by harking back to yesterday’s successes: ordinary Europeans have to be convinced that Europe’s policymakers and decision-makers are capable of decisive and effective action assuring all that they can modernize Europe and steer it towards a bright future.” And he added: “This task is becoming all the greater and all the more urgent now that enlargement is under way. Enlargement is essential if we are to spread peace, stability and shared values throughout the continent”. He also drew the attention to the countries which were already members of the EU when he affirmed: “We must reassure public opinion in our Member States that enlargement is not just an awkward necessity: it is a unique historical opportunity which is in our joint political and economic interest”.

However, Prodi did not fail to point to these provisos: “Depending on how we and the candidate countries implement the enlargement process, it can weaken or strengthen Europe’s capacity for prosperity and progress”. And again: “The enlarged Europe will certainly need strong institutions. But they must democratically legitimate institutions that operate in a transparent and accountable way and enjoy the full confidence of the citizens.” This implies, I think, that once a country has been granted the opening of EU accession negotiations, it does not mean that it will automatically achieve the right to become a member.

Allow me to refer to some other pertinent points in this same discourse of Romano Prodi, where he refers to the Balkan countries. Referring to Croatia, he said: “The people of Croatia have confounded the pessimists by showing that democratic change is possible. "We will back the new government to the hilt as it embarks on the reform agenda", it has promised to the Croatian people. Croatia became a member of the EU thirteen years after Prodi delivered this discourse, and at present it is undertaking the role of presidency of the EU Council.

After referring to Croatia, Prodi added: “We will back reformers across the region, implementing the Dayton accords in Bosnia and Herzegovina, supporting the democratically elected government in Montenegro, embarking on Stabilisation and Association negotiations with FYROM (today known as Republic of Northern Macedonia) and working towards that objective in Albania”. The last two mentioned countries are the ones that expected to be granted the opening of EU accession negotiations last October, but were left disappointed with the outcome.

One final word from Romano Prodi. In this same discourse he stated: “The situation in South-Eastern Europe shows how important it is to stabilize our continent and to secure peace, democracy and respect for human rights throughout Europe. That is why it is essential to make a success of enlargement and to develop a coherent policy of cooperation with our neighbours”. These words show the importance that due attention be paid to the Balkan countries and to make possible their accession to the EU.

Illyria (which included present Albania) and Greece are among the oldest civilizations which, together with Rome, provided the basis of European civilization. In his Letter to the Romans Saint Paul states that he preached the Gospel from Jerusalem to Illyria. So Illyria was among the first countries that embraced the Christian faith. Emperor Constantine, who established the Christian religion as the religion of the Empire, was himself Illyrian. As you all know, the Christian religion was one of the main factors that have fashioned European culture.

Is Albania ready to become member of the European Union? Perhaps not yet. But, as I stated before, had Albania been granted the opening of EU accession negotiations, this would not have implied that it would become a member state the following day! Opening of negotiations for Albania’s membership would have been very good news for us, not only in order to facilitate Albania’s rapprochement to the EU, but also to monitor the reforms needed to maintain the rule of law.

In an Albanian review, *Europa* (nr. 16/2017), some Ambassadors for Albania expressed their opinion concerning Albania’s possible EU membership. The ex-Ambassador of the EU for Albania admits that Albania has made big steps forward, even if there is still a long way to go in achieving the required standard. However, she adds, the most important fact is that Albania is on the right track in its efforts to arrive at the necessary reforms, and has the ability to achieve this standard. The Ambassador of Germany, while stating that she is in favour of Albania’s membership, emphasizes the need for reform in the judicial system and the fight against organized crime and corruption. The Italian, Greek, and Polish Ambassadors spoke along the same lines, the latter adding the comment: “You help us, so that we will be able to help you”. In the same review, Dr Eralda Çani, professor of Public Law at the University of Tirana, stated that the reform in the judicial process, the war against

the cultivation and circulation of narcotics and against corruption, are *sine qua non* conditions for the opening of negotiations; but she is optimistic that such measures are already taking place.

Edward Zammit Lewis, Minister for Justice, of my native country (Malta), in an article published last November with the interesting title “Enlargement Delayed, Enlargement Denied”, has written: “The EU believes that an enlargement policy is a geo-strategic investment in peace, stability, security and economic growth within the whole of Europe. Preparing candidate countries to meet all membership requirements continues to be one of the EU’s key political priorities”. Referring to last October’s decision, which blocked the opening of negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, he comments: “Many member states, including Malta, regret this decision and are looking forward to its reversal at the EU-Western Balkans Summit to be held in Zagreb in May. The decision of the October European Council to postpone the opening of negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia has shaken the credibility of the EU among the Balkan candidates. It is imperative to restore this credibility for the sake of stability in this most volatile region in the heart of Europe”.

Finally, I would like to mention the “religious factor”. It is possible that some countries might be afraid of Albania because they think that Albania is a Muslim country, and that makes them imagine that this might pose some danger to the security of the EU. According to the last census of the population held in 2001, 57% of the Albanian population are Muslim. However this does not mean that the Albanian nation is Muslim. One must not identify Islam with terrorism. And it would be a big mistake if we were to compare Islam in Albania with that of radically Muslim states. Moreover, the Constitutions of the country explicitly state that Albania is a secular country, and that all religions are treated as equal.

I have given many talks or interviews on inter-religious peaceful cohabitation in Albania. I can here quote from one of the talks I gave in the European Parliament in Strasburg in 2008, in a meeting on inter-religious relations in South-Eastern Europe:

“Albania has always boasted of its tradition of peaceful inter-religious coexistence, and rightly so. Prior to his visit to Albania, on the 25th April 1993, John Paul II said: “I earnestly desire that this visit will serve to strengthen the traditional bonds of fraternal cohabitation which have characterized the relations among the different religions in your country.”

Religions, by their very nature, are for peace, solidarity, and fraternal love. G. K. Chesterton has very duly observed that toleration “is not the virtue of people who do not believe anything”; on the contrary, it is the virtue of those who believe that fundamental rights (such as the right to religious freedom) are God-given rights. Moreover, Albania has been fortunate in never having an Albanian politician who has instrumentalized or manipulated religion for his own political ambitions. In its history there has been no political leader who made use of religion for political aims. On the contrary, we have seen politicians governing Albania in the post-communist period, who have been very keen in fostering inter-religious relations. I would dare add that it is not just a case of tolerance; it is inter-religious harmony, whilst at the same time I must add that there is still room for collaboration on many social issues.

Alfred Moisiu, ex-President of the Republic, in an address to Albanian Ambassadors on the 30th August 2002, emphatically declared: ‘We cannot ignore the existence of different

religions in our country, nay rather we appreciate their role for the creation of an atmosphere of tolerance in our society. Albania can boast of the harmonious co-existence among religious communities. A fundamental characteristic of Albanian civilization is its religious tolerance, and this leaves no room for fundamentalists of any religion whatsoever.”

CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS IN ALBANIA

Replies to a questionnaire (2018)

1. Relationship between legislation and the predominant direction in public opinion about the Church.

Albania is a non-confessional, secular state, which, however, leaves no room for any antagonism or dichotomy between Church (religion) and State. Perhaps Albania is a typical example of a *secular* state which enjoys that “*legittima sana laicità*” to which Pius XII positively referred to more than half a century ago. As a matter of fact, the Albanian State is very keen on preserving its secular identity, which it considers as a guarantee for the maintenance and fostering of good relations between the different religions existing in the country. Perhaps it is worthwhile here to recall that there are four officially recognized religious communities in Albania: the Muslim community, the Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, and the Bektashi community.

Speaking from the point of view of the Albanian State’s legislation, we must say that the laicisation of the State is to be considered beneficial for the Catholic Church: it guarantees a certain independence for the Church and its institutions and it helps to promote good inter-religious relationships. So it fosters separation between Church (religion) and State, but at the same time leaves room for mutual collaboration on a number of issues, as will be illustrated below.

If, on the other hand, we speak of Albanian society at large, we must admit that it is not immune to the process of secularization that has invaded all or almost all Eastern European ex-communist countries. The first thing that Albanians, like other people from ex-communist countries, have learnt from Western European countries, after the fall of communism was consumerism, which has brought along with it a new culture and a more subtle form of materialism.

The situation of the Catholic Church in the post-communist Albanian society contrasts sharply with its situation under the communist regime. Every practice of any religion, whether in public or in private, was then considered as anti-constitutional, and so a crime against the State. All religions were persecuted. But the Catholic Church was the main target of these persecutions and many priests were jailed, brutally tortured and executed. However we must acknowledge that this might have been a blessing in disguise, because in this way the Church has been considered as a trustful institution, which made no compromise with the regime and this has made the Church more credible.

For this reason, in general, one can say that interventions on the part of the Catholic Church are given due consideration, even in the media. On many ethical issues, Catholic theologians are asked by the media to express the views of the Catholic Church. To give just a few examples, we have been asked to take part in TV programmes on abortion, gay marriages, divorce, suicide, etc.

2. What is the juridical status of the Catholic Church?

Article 10 of the Constitutions of Albania states that:

1. the State has no official religion,

2. it is neutral in matters concerning religion, while it guarantees freedom of conscience and of free expression in public life,
3. it treats all religions as equal,
4. the State and the different religions are to respect each other and collaborate for the good of each and everyone,
5. the State recognizes those religions with which it makes special bilateral agreements.

As a matter of fact, the Catholic Church (together with the other religions referred to above) was immediately recognized officially by the State.

The independence and autonomy of the Catholic Church is adequately respected.

Almost immediately after the fall of communism, diplomatic relations have been set up between the Vatican and the State of Albania, and there is a permanent Nunciature in Tirana. In an interview given by the Apostolic Nuncio Archbishop Ramiro Moliner Ingles and published on the 24th April 2009 (*Albanian Daily News*) the Nuncio stated that “Albania and the Holy See have excellent ties”.

In the course of the past seven years, two very important agreements have been established between the State and the Church, through the Nunciature in Tirana. The first one was signed in March 2002 and in it, many points were stated about the rights of the Church (freedom of expression, possession of mobile and immobile goods, possession and use of mass media, residence permits, running of schools and clinics, etc). Another important agreement was signed in December 2007, which deals with matters of financial and fiscal nature (especially concerning exemption from taxes for non-profit organisations in the Catholic Church). *L'Osservatore Romano* published, on the days when the latter agreement was signed, a statement speaking very positively about it.

Due to the secular nature of Albanian legislation, there are no official forms of relationship or collaboration between the Episcopal Conference and the State. However, non-officially, the Episcopal Conference, through its President, is often consulted on matters which might concern religions, religious practices, or institutions run by religions (e.g. schools).

In the agreement signed in 2002 it is stated: “The Republic of Albania recognizes the juridical capacity of legal persons for such entities of the Catholic Church for which provision is made in the Canon Law, such as Archdiocese, Diocesan or Apostolic Administrations, parishes, religious communities, missions, associations, seminaries, schools and educational institutions at all levels, health institutions, after their registration with the organs of justice”. Thanks to the agreement signed in 2007, as has already been stated above, non-profit organisations engaging these legal persons, are exempted from fiscal duties.

Within the Ministry for Culture there is a special “Committee for Cults” (i.e. for religions), on which sit four representatives for each of the four officially recognized religions, so this includes a representative of the Catholic Church, who is proposed by the President of the Episcopal Conference.

3. State financial support in the context of the country’s economic situation.

A law intended to give financial support to religious institutions has been approved by Parliament on the 15th May 2009. This law provides for the financial aid for projects which

are of special importance for the implementation of the mission of that particular religion, financial aid for our employees, and subsidies for the payment of wages to persons employed as teachers in our schools and in clinics run by religious institutions.

In the draft it was proposed that some form of financial subsidy be also provided for our priests, but we, bishops of Albania, asked that this clause be removed, because we did not want to appear as employees of the State. Moreover, we were afraid lest thus we lose that freedom inherent to our mission as Church of Christ. We preferred instead that this aid would go to educational and health institutions run by our religious.

4. Relationship with the public authorities in specific areas.

a. Schools: In Albania the Church has schools for all ages and levels: kindergartens, primary, secondary, upper secondary, and also one Catholic University. They all meet the requirements demanded by the State, and the certificates granted by them are recognised by the State. In accordance with the law to which we have referred above (n. 3), they will start receiving, in the near future, subsidies from the State, with the exception of the University. Students pay fees for their schooling, even though they are nominal fees (from which many students coming from poor families are exempt).

There is no Church presence in state schools, due to the fact that the State is keen on preserving the secular nature of the educational system. Moreover, it is not allowed to teach religion/religious knowledge in any school, not even in schools run by the Church. Right or wrong, this is deemed to be a means to guarantee peaceful inter-religious cohabitation.

b. Social Welfare: The Church's work in this field (especially through *Caritas Albania*) is very much appreciated by the public authorities. There has been a lot of collaboration in situations of emergency (one can mention, for example, when the war in Kosovo was being waged, during which hundreds of thousands of Kosovo Albanians sought refuge in Albania; or when, in April 2008, there was a series of explosions in a village 40 kms away from Tirana). Many, though not all, Catholic welfare institutes are civilly recognised. The only practical difficulty in this field is the fact that while many Albanians, throughout the last fifteen years, have achieved a comfortable way of life, there is another section of the population which has become still poorer. At the same time financial aid from Western European countries is becoming scantier.

c. Religious assistance: The Constitution of Albania guarantees religious assistance to persons in jail, in hospital, or in the military service, although not in a stable and institutional form. It is allowed that priests give their service to these persons, when requested. There is no form of compulsion for these services: it all depends on the possibility and generosity of the priest or bishop.

d. Family rights: Canonical marriage is not recognized by the State. Same-sex unions are still illegal in Albania. As regards separation of spouses, divorce, and abortions, Albania is facing the same situations and problems that other Western European countries are facing: a great increase in number especially in the last fifteen years.

e. Church buildings: Churches, which during the communist regime had been transformed into museums, sport centres, stores, etc have been returned to the Catholic Church. However, we are still waiting for former property, usurped by the communist regime, to be

returned to the Church. The Church in Albania is very poor and the building of new churches, as well as the restoration and maintenance of former churches, depends on help coming from foreign countries. The greatest problem for the building of new churches (besides the financial one) is that there still exists a great deal of bureaucracy in order to obtain the building permit, since, after the fall of the communist regime, quite often, it is very difficult to check to whom a particular site belongs. Sometimes many private persons claim that a particular property belonged to them.

f. Cultural assets: In general one might say that the rights of the Church in this sphere are respected, although there is no official collaboration between Church and State.

5. What means of intervention are used with the State if the freedom of the Church or natural law are violated?

So far only two types of such interventions have been used: a) pastoral letters of the Episcopal Conference or of individual bishops and b) statements through the media (television, radio, newspapers). The main arguments in these interventions have been concerning life in general (increased numbers of abortion, suicides, homicides), family life (separation and divorce, pre-marital and extra-marital sex), and human dignity (respect for minorities such as Roma and Egyptian communities) and also an attention to the poor, (human trafficking). The Episcopal Conference has also issued pastoral letters before every general election.

6. What has been the impact of the guidelines from the Council of Europe and the European Union on sensitive issues?

In general, one can say that this impact has been very positive. Such guidelines concerned three main issues: (1) corruption by State organs, (2) human trafficking, (3) the independence of the judiciary.

Corruption is far from being eradicated completely, but at least it is more under control. It still exists in a major way within the field of medicine and education creating a huge divide between the rich and the poor in medical care and within the public and private divide in education. It is also prevalent within mafias in Albania and especially in the world of drug trafficking which is probably becoming the most explosive form of trafficking in Albania. This creates a climate of fear within the culture. Human trafficking, which until five years ago was a plague in this country, has been somewhat reduced. The judiciary, unfortunately, is still very corrupt and very dependent on politicians.

7. CCEE, COMECE, CEC

Unfortunately, when one speaks of Europe nowadays one automatically thinks of Europe as of the 27 states that form the EU. One must never forget that Europe is greater than the EU, and among the non-EU states there are those who have been victims for many decades of inhuman and atheistic (or even anti-theist, as in the case of Albania) political systems. Quite often these states have to endure the further humiliation of being considered second-class Europeans – which means adding insult to injury. And sometimes such discrimination occurs also within Church circles. The CCEE and COMECE can help to ameliorate such injustices.

WHEN THE ALBANIAN PRIME MINISTER PROPOSED ‘GAY MARRIAGE’

Towards the end of the month of July 2009, the Prime Minister of Albania announced that he intended to propose a motion in Parliament to approve ‘same sex marriage’. The following day, some journalists decided to gauge the opinion on this topic of the religious groups represented in Albania.

The Reaction

The Catholic Church was the first to be approached, despite the fact that it only forms 15% of the population [it is placed third after Islam and The Orthodox Church], yet it enjoys high credibility and esteem for various reasons. Due to my position, I was the person who was approached first.

Within a week, the Catholic bishops of Albania made a declaration that was published in all newspapers, where we explained the position of the Catholic Church. Very soon after, the Muslims, the Orthodox and the Bektashi Order [a Sufi Muslim sect] also reacted.

So together we published a joint declaration as the Inter-Religious Council of Albania. There was a widespread reaction in the Albanian media, the vast majority sharing our stand against the introduction of the so-called ‘marriage’ between persons of the same sex.

Although Albania is secular, the religious groups are always consulted and listened to whenever a law will impact on religious issues, directly or indirectly such as education in private schools. It bears emphasizing that this takes place in a secular, non-confessional country.

Therefore, I had good reason to be very surprised, when recently, the Prime Minister of Malta, Joseph Muscat, a person who has the good of the family at heart, stated that he is in favour of ‘Gay Marriage’ and that the time is ripe to discuss this possibility. I was equally surprised when Simon Busuttil, leader of the Opposition and leader of a party whose banner once carried the words *Religio et Patria*, also stated that he agrees with the legislation of such a ‘marriage’.

The Prime Minister Berisha took heed of the position taken by the mainstream religions in this country and he soon withdrew from his previous statement. Was this a sign of weakness or was he a *good listener*?

I feel that it is a huge mistake when legislators ignore the religious sentiments of their people. In an interview I was given on the local television regarding ‘marriage’ between homosexuals, the interviewer asked: “Countries that are more emancipated than ours are today approving this type of ‘marriage’; is it possible they are all wrong?”

Surprisingly, there and then, the words of the Desert Fathers came to my mind: A time will come when all people will go crazy, and when they see one who is normal, they will laugh at him and say: ‘Look at that madman’.

Unfortunately, the state that approves of this type of bond, wrongly called ‘marriage’, is today considered a sign of how emancipated the country is. However, we later got to know that an ambassador of one of the first countries to introduce ‘marriage’ between homosexuals was applying pressure on the Albanian government to introduce this type of

‘marriage’ so as to show Europe that it is no less backward than other emancipated countries!

The Statement of the Albanian Episcopal Conference

In the statement we released as the bishops of Albania, we firstly mentioned that both the Church and the State have a sacred duty to defend the dignity and integrity of marriage and the family. Aware of this responsibility, we feel that we have to raise our voice against the proposal of the Prime Minister regarding the legislation of ‘same sex marriage’.

Then, as Christians, we presented the teachings of the Bible regarding marriage as a bond between heterosexuals. In the first pages of Genesis, we read that God created us in his image as male and female. After creating man, God said: “It is not good for the man to live alone; I will make a suitable companion. In metaphorical terms the creation of woman was formed from his rib. When the man saw the woman, he exclaimed: - “At last, here is one of my own kind – bone from my bone and flesh from my flesh. ‘Woman is her name because she was taken out of man.” We then have the definition of marriage, with the following statement: “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united with his wife, and they become one flesh.”

These statements are enough for us to understand what meaning marriage had and still has in God’s plan. Human beings are created in the image of God, male and female. The woman has the same dignity of the man. Both, as two persons, having the same dignity, join together in marriage and become “one body”.

Therefore, the diversity of sex is willed by God, who intended this for marriage which includes the possibility of procreation of children, something that is obviously excluded in the case of ‘marriage’ between homosexuals.’ One has every right, if one does not want to live as a Christian, to reject this; but a Christian cannot play around with the Word of God, which is crystal clear.

We continued by stating that in every era, every culture and religion, marriage was always defined as the full bonding between a man and a woman. No Parliament has the competence to change this definition. For the sake of truth, let us not consider calling ‘marriage’ a bond between two people of the same sex, and neither say that this is a right.

One says this without any lack of respect towards homosexuals, that, as stated by the Catechism of the Catholic Church, must be accepted with respect; and every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.

Finally, the cells that form society are not individuals but families. Not every change inevitably means progress. We should not fool ourselves into thinking that approving such a law places us in the league of the more emancipated nations. Let us therefore defend the ethical values that really guarantee authentic and healthy families.

This statement was very well received by the press and public opinion. Naturally, not everyone agreed with us; but no one insulted us saying we were narrow minded or medieval!

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN ALBANIA

Albania can rightly boast of its tradition of peaceful interreligious coexistence. In Albania we practice different religions. Religions distinguish us: a Catholic can state that he is not a Muslim, and a Muslim can state that he is not a Catholic. Religions distinguish us. But they do not divide us. They unite us in love and in our pursuit for justice and peace.

Prior to his visit to Albania, on the 25th April 1993, Pope John Paul II said: “I earnestly desire that this visit will serve to strengthen the traditional bonds of fraternal cohabitation which have characterized the relations among the different religions in your country.”

Also Pope Francis, during his visit to Albania in September 2014 expressed his appreciation for the fact that we foster a positive inter-religious relationship.

In his address to Albanian Ambassadors serving in different countries, in August 2002, the former President of the Republic Alfred Moisiu stated: “We cannot ignore the existence of different religions in our country, rather we appreciate their role for the creation of an atmosphere of tolerance in our society. Albania can boast of the harmonious co-existence among religious communities. A fundamental characteristic of Albanian civilization is its religious tolerance, and this leaves no room for fundamentalists of any religion whatsoever.” I would dare to add that it is not just a case of tolerance, in the manner of: “I’m OK, you’re OK”. It is deeper than this; it is inter-religious harmony.

There is a long tradition of friendship between the different faiths in Albania. To date, we, Catholics and Orthodox, go to greet Muslims for the feasts of *Bajram* and *Kurban Bajram*. On their part they also come to greet us for Christmas and Easter. We also invite each other for every special occasion including, for example, the dedication of the Catholic and the Orthodox Cathedral Churches in Tirana, and my Episcopal consecration (which by the way, took place only a couple of weeks after Pope Benedict’s talk in Regensburg). Some years ago I was asked to give a talk on “Prayer in the Muslim Religion: A Christian Viewpoint”, in a symposium organized by the *Foundation of Qur’an – Albania*. And I have participated in many conferences on inter-religious relations in Albania. In October 2007 the Inter-Religious Council of Albania was established. I feel happy that, before that date, I formed part of the team set up in preparation for that event and worked on the statutes of the Council.

For what reason have different religions not been a source of conflict in Albania? In my opinion, it is for two reasons.

First, because Albania has been lucky enough not to have had, throughout its history, political leaders who manipulated religions for political purposes (as was the case, in these last decades, with many countries, which then became cradles for Islamic fundamentalism, or with the Balkan countries, where politicians have given a religious appearance on the wars they waged, as if these were conflicts between Muslims and Orthodox Christians). And following the fall of Communism governments were wise enough to emphasize that Albania is a secular state and respects all religions with equal dignity.

Secondly, I think that we must be very grateful to the leaders of the different religions in this country, who, until now, have been very wise and very attentive to control extremist elements within their religious communities. We hope and we pray that we will always have

such leaders for our religious communities, worthy to lead their faithful not towards conflict, but towards peace and fraternity.

Moreover, one of the greatest practical advantages of monotheism is precisely our belief that we belong to one and the same Father-Creator. We all form one single extended family. Those who are different from us are our brothers and sisters; those who are in need of our love and support are our brothers and sisters. Genuine religions are expressions of belief in and communion with God, creator of all mankind. They lay the basis for true brotherhood and genuine peace.

In his book *The Dignity of Difference* Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the Hebrew communities of the British Commonwealth, states: “The test of faith is whether I can make space for difference. Can I recognize God’s image in someone who is not in my image, whose language, faith, ideals, are different from mine? If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing him to remake me in his”. G. K. Chesterton has very duly observed that toleration “is not the virtue of people who do not believe anything”; on the contrary, it is the virtue of those who believe that fundamental rights (such as the right to religious freedom) are a God-given rights.

However, dialogue implies much more than simple peaceful inter-religious co-existence and harmony. I must admit that so far there have been not enough efforts at establishing a formal, official dialogue: we seem satisfied with our peaceful co-existence, and are afraid that maybe, if we go another step forward towards dialogue, this might harm the present peaceful co-existence. There is still room for collaboration on many social issues.

Olivier Clément, a Russian Orthodox theologian, coined the phrase *prophetic partnership*. By this phrase he meant that we must make a common effort to discover the common prophetic role of our religions. Here we need to stress the importance of an inter-religious dialogue. And by “dialogue” I do not mean a road to relativism, ideological or doctrinal compromise, or syncretism, nor just finding a way towards a passive acceptance of our “being different”, a *modus vivendi*.

Discovering our common prophetic role demands first of all an act of faith in the one, true and living God who is love; an act of faith in our common dignity as human beings created by God in God's own image; and an act of faith in our common vocation to know God, to love God and to know God loves us and so to enter into communion with God and listen to God while opening ourselves to others more deeply. In a society that is becoming more and more anonymous, God teaches us to open our hearts to one another in a spirit of solidarity and mutual support. In a society that is becoming more and more consumerist, God teaches us to value life and respect the fundamental human rights.

We must emphasize the need to educate for peace and to lay the grounds for a more secure peaceful inter-religious future. I suggest four important steps.

First, may all of us, in whatever religion we belong, give more importance to the education of our faithful, since early childhood, teaching them to respect the dignity of every human person. Both the Holy Bible as also the Coran assign a special place and dignity of the human person in creation, and describe the human person as a special creature with a special relationship with God the Creator. Human life is sacred, and nobody has the right

to impinge upon any other person's dignity or human rights (including the right to religious freedom).

Secondly, we must, at all costs, avoid all forms of proselitism, that is to say exerting pressure on others so that they accept our religion. One form of proselitism, widely adopted by certain sects, implies knocking at the doors of families trying to persuade them that they are following the wrong religion and thereby presenting them the doctrine of the sect, sometimes presenting it as the religion that can heal them also from physical illnesses.

Thirdly, we ask from civil authorities that they take special care to avoid any form of discrimination among different religious communities. The Constitutions of the Republic of Albanian state: "The State acknowledges the equality among religious communities". Those in authority must scrupulously respect such norms, lest they mistakenly show any discrimination among the religions officially recognized by the State.

Fourthly, on our part, as leaders of religious communities, let each one of us always show full solidarity with any other religious community whenever this suffers some terroristic act or a clear serious injustice. In Albania we have delivered a very positive message to our people when the Inter-Religious Council condemned two very horrible terroristic acts committed one against the Muslims in New Zealand, and the other one against Christians in Sri Lanka. People need to see such good signs of solidarity among us. So let us be not only guardians of peace, but also prophets and apostles of peace worldwide.

I would like to conclude this talk by quoting from the final message of the Inter-religious Assembly held in the Vatican City in October 1999: "We appeal to religious leaders to promote the spirit of dialogue within their respective communities and to be ready to engage in dialogue themselves with civil society at all levels. We appeal to all the leaders of the world, whatever their field of influence, to *refuse* to allow religion to be used to incite hatred and violence; to *refuse* to allow religion to be used to justify discrimination; to *respect* the role of religion in society at international, national and local levels; to *eradicate* poverty and strive for social and economic justice". And these words provide us with an excellent programme for further inter-religious dialogue and collaboration!

INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS AND RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN ALBANIA

I would like to introduce my talk with a short reflection on secularism, pluralism, and religious belief.

We speak a lot about secularism in contemporary society. But does this mean that in actual fact we are living in a world in which God, or rather belief in God, is excluded? Many contemporary sociologists of religion, like Peter Berger, Francis Fukuyama and Grace Davie, argue that this is not the case. It is true that religious practice is dwindling in many western countries, but that does not mean that contemporary man has become a non-believer. At the most we can say that this is a non-practising society, but not a non-believing society. Grace Davie, who first used the phrase “believing without belonging” to depict the religious situation of contemporary Europe, illustrates her point by referring to two events: the 11th September in New York, and the sinking of the Baltic ferry, the *Estonia*, off the shores of Sweden. In both cases, where did the people go? “Straight to their churches”. Sweden is supposedly the most secular society in Europe. Yet the Swedish people went to the churches; “they expected them to be there, they expected the Archbishop to articulate on their behalf the meaning of that terrible event”.³¹

Secondly: we are living in a pluralistic society. But a side-effect of pluralism is what I consider as the great paradox or irony of pluralism: the birth of new forms of conflicts and intolerance. Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the Hebrew communities of the British Commonwealth, in his very interesting book *The Persistence of Faith*, makes this observation: “Pluralism leads us to expect a growth of tolerance, while in fact it lays the ground for new forms of intolerance. By dismantling and privatising the concept of a common good, it means that no one position is forced to come to terms with the reality of any other. It is no accident that as pluralism has gained ground, there has been a sharp increase in racial tension and anti-semitism”. And as a matter of fact, we have seen this happen in many ex-communist, but also in some western European countries, where new forms of fundamentalisms, dangerous nationalisms, and racisms and nazism have emerged.

In the 1990’s, Jacques Delors spoke of the need “to give a soul to Europe”. In the beginning of the third millennium, Nicolas Sarkozy, then Minister for the Interior in France, in his interesting book *La République, les Religions, l’Espérance* spoke of religion as furnishing man with that spiritual hope which the State cannot give. Thus they were both, in my opinion, expressing man’s unquenchable thirst for God and man’s basic need to enter into communion with God. No one and nothing, not even Enver Hoxha’s militant anti-theism, can eradicate man’s spiritual yearning for God.

Man cannot deny God without, at the same time, denying himself. Religions are ways of expressing man’s attempt to enter into relationship with God through prayer (whether in community or in private) and through different rites. Emile Durkheim, who is duly

³¹ *The Significance of the Religious Factor in the Construction of a Humane and Democratic Europe*, in a symposium on The Role of the Communities of Faith and Co-operation for a Common European Future, Brussels 12-13 November 2001.

considered as the founder of the sociology of religion, said that institutional religion is always to be found among the main institutions of any culture.

And now I will try to answer two questions. The first one is: Is it true that different religions are inevitably sources of conflict and intolerance? The second one is: what is the reason why Albania can duly boast of the good and peaceful relationship between the different religions?

A. RELIGIONS AND TOLERANCE

In 1971 John Lennon's popular song *Imagine* dreamt of a world where there will be no religion, and this, he says, will lead to a peaceful society: *Imagine there's ... no religion... Imagine all the people living life in peace*". But would the extinction of all religions open the way to a more peaceful society? Definitely not!

Every true religion does not stop short at establishing religious rites or ceremonies; it also regulates the moral behaviour of its faithful in accordance with their belief in God, the creator of all. I used the words *true religion*, and emphasize the word *true*. Gordon Allport, a renowned writer on the psychology of religion, distinguishes between mature and immature believers. The mature believer is the one who serves God, whereas the immature believer is the one who makes use of God. So, it is very possible that, instead of serving God, one will take advantage of religion for purposes totally in contradiction with genuine belief.

Voltaire affirmed: "I want my lawyer, taylor, valets, even my wife to believe in God. I think that if they do, I shall be robbed less and cheated less". And Dostojevski said: "If God does not exist, then everything is permissible". Both these affirmations show that religions play a very important role for moral order in society. And this moral order includes social justice and peace.

In the Bible we read that God said: "Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves" (Gen 1, 26). And in the Koran we read: "The Lord said to the angels: 'I am creating a successor on earth'" Both texts affirm the special dignity which man enjoys in creation, and therefore also the respect for which every man has a sacred right. Belief in the one God as Creator necessarily includes respecting the dignity of every man.

Therefore religions are not for war: they are for peace, and for that peace which is grounded on justice. There is plenty of space in which religions can collaborate for the common good of human society, this only when they give due importance to those values which they enjoy in common. Addressing a large gathering of young Moroccans in Casablanca Pope John Paul stated: "Christians and Muslims, we have many things in common, as believers and as human beings. We live in the same world, marked by many signs of hope, but also by multiple signs of anguish... We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, the God who created the world and brings his creatures to their perfection".

And when in January 2001 the new ambassador of Iran to the Holy See presented his letters of credence to John Paul II, the Pope said: "In the dialogue between cultures, men and women of good will realize that there are values which are common to all cultures because they are rooted in the very nature of the human person – values which express humanity's most authentic and distinctive features: the value of solidarity and peace, the value of education, the value of forgiveness and reconciliation, the value of life itself".

B. INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS IN ALBANIA

Unfortunately, however, religions can be manipulated by politicians and thus they become sources of conflict.

Prince El Hassan bin Talal was certainly right when he affirmed, in the general assembly of the World Conference on Religion and Peace held in Amman, Jordan, in November 1999: “What are described as ‘religious conflicts’ usually have little to do with religion and even less to do with religious doctrine”.

In that same meeting, the ex-Archbishop of Canterbury Dr George Carey affirmed that “in situations where conflicts arise between communities so defined, politicians and others will often use religion as a way of justifying and even sharpening the conflict.”

And in a similar vein Bodo Hombach made this bold statement, in an address given in Budapest just one year after the conflict in Kosovo, when he was Special Co-Ordinator of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe: “Peace and reconciliation are key religious themes of our times. But we should be conscious that very recently, and not at all far from here, cynical and greedy people instrumentalised religion to help fan the flames of conflict to achieve their brutal – usually in some form, economic – ends”.

Albania can rightly boast of its tradition of peaceful interreligious coexistence. Prior to his visit to Albania, on the 25th April 1993, Pope John Paul II said: “I earnestly desire that this visit will serve to strengthen the traditional bonds of fraternal cohabitation which have characterized the relations among the different religions in your country.” And I would like to conclude by referring to an interesting statement made by His Excellency Alfred Moisiu, President of the Republic, in his address to Albanian Ambassadors serving in different countries, on the 30th August 2002: “We cannot ignore the existence of different religions in our country, rather we appreciate their role for the creation of an atmosphere of tolerance in our society. Albania can boast of the harmonious co-existence among religious communities. A fundamental characteristic of Albanian civilization is its religious tolerance, and this leaves no room for fundamentalists of any religion whatsoever.”

If we were to ask: “Why, to date, different religions have lived together in peace in this country?” – quite often the reply is: “Because the religion of the Albanians is Albanianism”. In a recent publication *Pathways to Inter-Religious Dialogue in Albania* these words of Pashko Vasa are quoted: “*Do not look at churches or mosques, the religion of the Albanians is albanianism*”. Unfortunately, these words of Vasa are quoted out of context, forgetting the historical context and the original intention of these words. In fact they were written “in a particular historical moment, when there was the danger that religions be instrumentalised for political ends” (Ferdinand Leka).

The way these words of Vasa are quoted gives the impression first that Albanians are more nationalist than other peoples – personally I do not believe this is the case – and secondly, that the Albanians are less religious than other peoples – which, in my opinion, is not true at all.

On the contrary, I agree with Ernest Koliqi, who said: “The Albanian feels deeply the need to believe in a Supreme Being ... Popular poetry is an undeniable witness to this ... But while the Albanian feels the need to believe in God and he expresses this belief in every moment

of his daily life, which he shares with fellow countrymen belonging to other religions, however he knows how to preserve the peculiar characteristics of the religion to which he belongs.”

For what reason, then, have different religions not been a source of conflict in Albania? In my opinion, it is for two reasons.

First, because Albania has been lucky enough not to have, throughout its history, political leaders who manipulated religions for political purposes (as was the case, in these last decades, with many countries, which then became cradles for islamic fundamentalism or with the Balkan countries, where politicians have given a religious appearance on the wars they waged, as if these were conflicts between muslims and Orthodox Christians). Nor is Albania in a situation similar to that of Northern Ireland, where conflicts between pro-British and pro-Irish assumed the form of a conflict between Protestants and Catholics.

Secondly, I think that we must be very grateful to the leaders of the different religions in this country, who, until now, have been very wise and very attentive to control extremist elements within their religious communities. We hope and we pray that we will always have such leaders for our religious communities, worthy to lead their faithful not towards conflict, but towards peace and fraternity.

I would like to conclude this talk by quoting from the final message of the Inter-religious Assembly held in the Vatican City in October 1999: “We appeal to religious leaders to promote the spirit of dialogue within their respective communities and to be ready to engage in dialogue themselves with civil society at all levels. We appeal to all the leaders of the world, whatever their field of influence, to *refuse* to allow religion to be used to incite hatred and violence; to *refuse* to allow religion to be used to justify discrimination; to *respect* the role of religion in society at international, national and local levels; to *eradicate* poverty and strive for social and economic justice”.

I think that these words provide us with an excellent programme for further inter-religious dialogue and collaboration!

PASTORAL AND JURIDICAL SITUATION OF MARRIAGE IN ALBANIA

Sophia, October 2007

As everybody knows, for almost half a century, Albania was ruled by the most inhuman and anti-theistic form of communism, in which every type of religious practice whether public or even private, was considered a crime against the state.

Canonical Marriages

With the advent of democracy, religious freedom was restored and so it was possible to celebrate canonical marriages. However, it was important that a *sanatio in radice* be granted by the Holy See, for marriages celebrated under the communist regime and during the first years after the fall of communism. The *Sanatio in radice* was granted by the Holy See on the 15th November, 1998.

It was not easy to convince catholic couples that they were in duty bound to celebrate their marriage in Church. Now the number of couples celebrating a canonical marriage is continuously increasing, and normally a careful preparation precedes the celebration.

The number of marriages celebrated with dispensation from the impediment of disparity of cult, namely, with Muslims, is quite high in central Albania, about 15%, but less than 10% in the north of the country where Catholics are culturally, not likely to marry Muslims. Less common are marriages celebrated with baptised non-Catholics. There is, however, the case of marriages between a baptised Catholic and a nominal Catholic, who may not even be baptised. He/she considers himself Catholic because he/she comes from a traditionally Catholic family. Quite often they ask to be baptised before the wedding, but we always expect that there will be a period of catechumenate before we accept them for baptism. In the case of disparity of cult we always demand that the catholic partner make the declarations and promises requested by can. 1125. The non-Christian partner rarely objects to this, on the contrary, quite often they show a real willingness to become Catholics.

Two serious problems: Divorce and Abortion

Openness to the west inevitably brought along new challenges for the Albanian family. Traditionally extended, patriarchal, but also very much united, the Albanian family was not spared the disastrous effects of western divorce mentality. A renowned sociologist made a very interesting survey on the increasing number of divorces in Albania, especially of those in the two main cities, Tirana and Durrës. She stated that the reasons for this increasing number of marriages filing for divorce are “the socio-economic changes that are taking place in the country, violence in the family, especially towards the woman, emigration, jealousy, infidelity, as well as the emancipation of the Albanian woman, who is becoming ever more aware of her own dignity and seeks to ameliorate her position within and outside of her family”.

As regards abortion, the increasing number of abortions in this country is really amazing. A well-known female journalist has written that Albania is joining the list of countries with the highest number of abortions. Before the 1990's abortion was not only permitted by law: it was a taboo. Now in Tirana there are two maternity clinics and 27 private clinics where thousands of abortions are procured every year, especially by young girls who have become the victims of “uncontrolled” sexual relationships. According to this journalist, many

women resort to abortion when they get to know that the baby to be born is female, and not male! In a study which has just been published (in fact it was published this week, on the 1st October 2007) it was stated that about 32000 babies are born each year in Albania, whereas another 12000 are aborted.

Other Problems

Finally I would like to refer very briefly to two other problems. The first one concerns the condition of the women in Albanian society. In general we might say that the woman is still in a very disadvantaged position in Albania. Especially in villages, she is considered almost as the unpaid maid of the family, the Albanian extended family. Once she is married, she is considered to become the “property” not only of her husband, but of her husband’s entire family. Fortunately, the situation is gradually changing, especially in the main cities. The Catholic Church has contributed a great deal to the emancipation of women at this time especially because of the position and dignity of female religious in Albania.

Another problem which is worth mentioning is poverty which brings with it several repercussions for the Albanian family. These repercussions are not only related to the fact that many families have to content themselves with a daily meal which consists of bread and a tomato or some home-made yoghurt. There are other more serious repercussions. These include the increasing number of cases of mental depression, which sometimes leads to suicide. Another repercussion is alcoholism: many men, confronted with financial problems, try to evade such problems by resorting to alcohol. Raki is a very alcoholic Albanian drink, very cheap and quite often it is home-made, so everyone can afford to drink it. But, what is worse still, is that sometimes, under the effect of alcohol, the husband beats his wife and children and this, sadly, is not a seldom occurrence. Recent surveys have shown that a relatively high percentage of Albanian women are beaten by their husbands.

Suicide is a serious problem, current, in Albania. What is most worrying in relation to this is that there are a relatively high number of children and youth who are resorting to suicide. One can quite understand why a person in a state of severe depression commits suicide. But why children, sometimes as young as ten?

I have dealt with the main problems facing marriage and family life in Albania. Perhaps I have sounded rather pessimistic. And so, for the sake of truth, I can just mention other more positive aspects of family life in Albania.

In spite of everything, the Albanian family, compared with that in many western societies, is still very much united. The extended family displays great solidarity when some member of this family faces calamity. The extended family shows great respect to the elderly unlike situations found in many western countries where they are considered a burden to their children’s families and to society at large, which leads many of the elderly being “disposed of” by being sent to an ‘Old Peoples Home’. The Albanian family always has its’ doors wide open to guests: Albanian hospitality has no equal anywhere else in Europe. And perhaps I can also safely state that Albanian Catholic families display more faith and religious practice than in most countries in what was once Christian Europe.

REMEMBERING THE 11th SEPTEMBER 2001

Twenty years ago! Is it a day to remember, or a day to forget?

Pope John Paul's message for the year 2002 "World Day of Peace", which is commemorated each year on New Year's Day, started with a reference to the tragic event of September 11th 2001, which, in his own words, was "a dramatic event, because on that day a crime of terrible gravity was committed: in the span of a few minutes, thousands of innocent persons, of various ethnic origins, were horrendously massacred."

We still remember that tragic event, not with a spirit of revenge, but with the deep conviction that prejudice and division can only be conquered by unconditional love, and with the firm belief that peace is not a utopia, a beautiful but unrealistic dream; on the contrary, it is possible, once with a strong goodwill we strive to build a society on the solid foundations of justice, which is the gateway to true peace.

Politics, which must always be at the service of the national and international community, can become very dirty when it allows itself to be an instrument of opportunism and macchiavellism. It can become even more dirty when it makes use of religion to achieve certain evil ends. In the message of Pope John Paul II, to which I have already referred, he condemns, in unequivocal terms, every sort of terrorism perpetrated in the name of God, because, he states, terrorism manipulates not only man, but also God Himself. Consequently, he concludes, no person can ever claim the right to have recourse to terroristic acts in the name of God or of religion.

Prince El Hassan Bin Talal, of Jordan, in the Seventh World Assembly on Religion and Peace, held in Amman in November 1999, affirmed: "What are described as religious conflicts have little to do with religion, and even less with religious doctrine." And Bodo Hombach, who, for some years, was the special coordinator for the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe, in a talk he gave in Budapest in a meeting for religious leaders in South-Eastern Europe in May 2000, declared: "Peace and reconciliation are key religious themes of our times. But we should be conscious that very recently, cynical and greedy people instrumentalized religion to help fan the flames of conflict to achieve their brutal ends." I was present for both these events.

Both Prince El Hassan and Bodo Hombach were speaking before the September 11th events. But their statements are more valid today than when they uttered them. The terrorists who perpetrated the crimes of September 11th, and who perhaps sought to justify their claims in the name of Allah, were but making a caricature of the Islamic religion, which is far from being a religion of hatred or which favours terrorism. Tony Blair duly noted that the perpetrators of these terroristic acts must not be termed: "islamic terrorists"; they are "simply terrorists".

We in Albania can duly boast of the excellent relations between different religions. Alfred Moisiu, when he was President of the Republic, in an address to Albanian Ambassadors, emphatically declared: "We cannot ignore the existence of different religions in our country, nay rather we appreciate their role for the creation of an atmosphere of tolerance in our society. Albania can boast of the harmonious co-existence among religious communities. A fundamental characteristic of Albanian civilization is its religious tolerance, and this leaves

no room for fundamentalists of any religion whatsoever.” (“Ne nuk mund të mohojmë ekzistencën e besimeve fetare në vendin tonë, madje e vlerësojmë rolin e tyre në krijimin e një fryme tolerante tek njerëzit tanë. Shqipëria mund të krenohet për harmoninë mes komuniteteve fetare. Shqipëria ka si tipar themelor të civilizimit të saj tolerancën fetare dhe në të nuk ka vend për fondamentistë të asnjë feje.”)

Religion plays a very important role for the establishment of order, justice, and peace in society. We all know the old dictum: “*Si vis pacem, para bellum*” (If you want peace, prepare for war). History, especially the history of the 20th century, has proved this dictum wrong. But if we are concerned for peace, we must work for justice. All religions are fully aware that peace is not inertia, nor is it merely the absence of war. Peace demands that mutual respect for which every human person, created in the image of God, has an inalienable right. Thus true peace presupposes committing ourselves, especially religious and political leaders, to work for justice.

RELIGION IS FOR PEACE

For some years I have given a course on contemporary atheism. So I was quite familiar with the writings of Jean Paul Sartre, a French existentialist, and those of Anthony Flew, a British humanist. Both were staunch, militant atheists. For this reason I was really surprised when later on I read about a U-turn concerning their view on belief in God's existence.

In March 1980, about a month before his death, Jean Paul Sartre was reported to have confessed to his friend Pierre Victor: "I do not feel that I am a product of chance, a speck of dust in the universe, but someone who was expected, prepared, prefigured. In short, a being whom only a Creator could put here; and this idea of a creating hand refers to God". Some years before he had already told his lover, the renowned feminist Simone de Beauvoir, that at times he saw himself "as a being that could only come from a Creator".

Another staunch and outspoken atheist was the British philosopher Anthony Flew. He dismayed his atheist friends when, in 2004, he announced that God probably did exist. Later on, he wrote the book entitled: "There is a God: How the World's most Notorious Atheist changed his Mind". In this book he gives four reasons why he now believed in the existence of "a self-existent, immutable, immaterial, omnipotent and omniscient Being".

This is not meant to be a talk on atheism; it is a talk on Religion as a means for peace. But I introduced this talk with this note on a significant turncoat of two militant atheists because religion necessarily presupposes belief in God.

RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

One of the greatest paradoxes of contemporary society is the strange fact that, in such a secularized world, we are becoming ever more aware of the role of religion in society. Grace Davie, professor of Sociology of Religion at the University of Exeter, stated that to overlook religion amounts to underestimating human life itself. Indeed, religion penetrates all spheres of human life. It was Grace Davie who coined the phrase "believing without belonging", by which she meant that although religious practice, like Church attendance, is dwindling, however this does not mean that people have become non-believers.

In a Symposium organized by the European Union in Brussels in November 2001 she made this interesting observation: "If you are present in or read about European societies, or Europe as a whole, at a time when the normalities of life are stripped away" you will see that "something unthinkable, unimaginable has happened. The 11th September, is a good example. But to stick to a purely European illustration, the best one I think is what happened in Sweden, supposedly the most secular society in Europe, or indeed in the world, when the Baltic ferry, the *Estonia*, sank. Where did the Swedish people go? Straight to their churches. They expected them to be there, they expected the Archbishop to articulate on their behalf the meaning of that terrible event".

In the same Symposium, Gerhard Robbers, professor of European Constitutional Law at Trier University, stated: "Religion is an all-pervasive phenomenon that traverses all circumstances in our lives... Giving Europe a soul means showing Europe where its goals are". May I remind you that it was Jacques Delors who, as President of the European Commission, in the 1980's had spoken of the need to give Europe "a soul".

Almost sixty years ago, Christopher Dawson wrote: “The great civilizations of the world do not produce the great religions as a kind of by-product; in a very real sense, the great religions are the foundations on which the great civilizations rest. A society that has lost its religion becomes, sooner or later, a society that has lost its culture”.

No one, not even the most militant anti-theists like Enver Hoxha, could eradicate man’s spiritual yearning for God. Man cannot deny God without, at the same time, denying himself. An authentic religion teaches us how to construct a world order more worthy for mankind to live in.

AUTHENTIC RELIGIONS ARE FOR PEACE

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica have defined religion as “human beings’ relation to that which they regard as holy, sacred, absolute, spiritual, divine, or worthy of especial reverence. It is also commonly regarded as consisting of the way people deal with ultimate concerns about their lives and their fate after death.”

Since Plato and Aristotle, Western philosophy aligns religion with a concrete reality, “the Holy”, which we call God. However, the religious man was always convinced that belief in God had a bearing on his relationships with his fellowmen. In other words, religion, faith, and ethical behaviour are inter-related. One cannot ameliorate one’s relationship with God without at the same time ameliorating one’s relationship with others. Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, duly observes: “The word ‘religion’ comes from the Latin ‘religare’, meaning ‘to bind’. That is what religions did and still do. They bind people to one another and to God. They form communities”.

From all this we can unhesitatingly affirm that authentic religions are for good relationship between citizens. In principle, religions are for justice and peace. If any religion serves to incite struggles, racism, injustice or discrimination, then it is not a true religion, but only a caricature of the same.

Therefore society needs not only politics. It also needs a moral code, which is provided by religion; a moral code which establishes a sound public order and a harmonious inter-personal relationship. I will not rely on Voltaire’s affirmation, who stated: “I want my lawyer, tailor, valets, even my wife to believe in God. I think that if they do, I shall be robbed less and cheated less”. Voltaire’s view of religions fits the type of what Gordon Allport, who developed psychology of religion, termed “the immature religious”, who, instead of serving God, seeks to “be served” by God, in other words, who takes advantage of religion. But I can quote Dostoevsky, who affirmed: “If God did not exist, all would be permitted”. This means that it is religion that lays the ground for an ethical society.

John Locke taught that religion can survive only in the private sphere of the individual person or of the family or of a limited congregation, but it has no public role at all. John Stuart Mill considered morality as a purely private affair. But this is far from true. Cannot we perhaps compare a private morality with a private language? Of what use would a private language be? What sense would a private morality have?

What can be a unifying factor, especially today, in a post-modern pluralistic society, between rich and poor, black and white, the different religions, the different Balkan states, and so many more divisive categories, more than genuine religion, more than faith in a

loving and caring God, the universal creator? Can politics do more than simply change structures? Definitely not. What, except a genuine religion, is capable of changing hearts?

One of the greatest practical advantages of monotheism is precisely our belief that we belong to one and the same Creator. We all form one single extended family. Those who are different from us are our brothers and sisters; those who are in need of our love and support are our brothers and sisters. Again I quote Jonathan Sacks: “The test of faith is whether I can make space for difference. Can I recognize God’s image in someone who is not in my image, whose language, faith, ideals, are different from mine? If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing God to remake me in God's image”.

Millennia before the drafting of so many charts of human rights, the Hebrew Bible had already presented man and woman as creatures formed in the image of God, endowed with intelligence and freedom; the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy had already presented a long code of ethics concerning inter-human relations; the prophet Isaiah had preached peace among different warring nations; the prophet Amos had denounced corruption and injustice and defended the poor and the marginalized. Jesus taught us that whatever we do to the most marginalized, we do it to him. St James denounced corruption and injustice in very strong terms. In the Koran we read: “He who forgives and undertakes the road to peace will be rewarded by God”; “Repay evil with something better and you will see that one who was far from you because he was your enemy will become a true friend”.

And here we touch a very delicate but no less important requirement of true religion: forgiveness. For also the one who has hurt us is our brother or sister. We are all forgiven sinners, and this truth enables us to be strong enough to forgive. That is why Jesus taught to pray: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”. Only religion can give us the wisdom and strength to forgive. When forgiveness is absent, evil generates evil, violence breeds violence. Only forgiveness can break this chain.

On the other hand, we must also bear in mind that peace is not something that can be attained automatically. Peace is not inertia, nor is it simply the absence of war. If this were the case, then the place which would merit the title of “a peaceful haven” would be the cemetery: corpses are never at war with one another. But I dare say that we are to “struggle” for peace. It might seem paradoxical, or even absurd, to make such a statement: “we have to fight for peace”. But this is the truth! For peace demands being committed to overcome all those elements or situations that prevent the construction of peace.

In his Letter to the Ephesians, Saint Paul makes this interesting affirmation: “[Christ] himself is our peace, who has made the two groups [Jews and gentiles] one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility”. And in the Koran we read: “God will direct humanity towards peace. Let them listen to God: He will lead them from the darkness of war to the light of peace”. Hence a commitment for peace demands that we struggle to overcome whatever might open the way for wars.

And I consider this to be our mission as religious leaders. We boast of our peaceful inter-religious cohabitation in Albania, but let us never take for granted this inter-religious harmony. Let us not have our minds totally at rest because we are living peacefully with one another, for we have no guarantee that we are immune against all dangers.

CAN RELIGIONS BE SOURCES OF CONFLICTS AND INTOLERANCE?

G. K. Chesterton has very duly observed that toleration “is not the virtue of people who do not believe anything”; on the contrary, it is the virtue of those who believe that fundamental rights (such as the right to religious freedom) are a God-given right.

But Jonathan Sacks makes a very serious and important warning concerning the risk of religion becoming a source of conflict. He writes: “As a substitute for politics, (religions) are full of danger – and that, in some parts of the world, is what they have become. ... The greatest tragedies of the twentieth century came when politics was turned into a religion, when the nation (in the case of fascism) or system (communism) was absolutized and turned into a god. The single greatest risk of the twenty-first century is that the opposite may occur: not when politics is religionized, but when religion is politicized”

Pope John Paul’s message for the year 2002 “World Day of Peace”, which is commemorated each year on New Year’s Day, started with a reference to the tragic event which took place in New York barely four months before, precisely on September 11th 2001, which, in his own words, was “a dramatic event, because on that day a crime of terrible gravity was committed: in the span of a few minutes, thousands of innocent persons, of various ethnic origins, were horrendously massacred.”

We still remember that tragic event, not with a spirit of revenge, but with the deep conviction that prejudice and division can only be conquered by unconditional love, and with the firm belief that peace is not a utopia, a beautiful but unrealistic dream; on the contrary, it is possible once, with a strong goodwill, we strive to build a society on the solid foundations of justice, which is the gateway to true peace.

Politics, which must always be at the service of the national and international community, can become very dirty when it allows itself to be an instrument of opportunism and machiavellism. It can become even more dirty when it makes use of religion to achieve certain evil ends. In the message of Pope John Paul II, to which I have already referred, he condemns, in unequivocal terms, every sort of terrorism perpetrated in the name of God, because, he states, terrorism manipulates not only man, but also God Himself. Consequently, he concludes, no person can ever claim the right to have recourse to terroristic acts in the name of God or of religion.

I have been present at two very important meetings dealing with religions and peace, a few months after the war in Kosovo. The first one was organized by the association “Religions for Peace”, in its Seventh World Assembly which was held in Amman in November 1999. The second one was held in Budapest in May 2000, and was organized by the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Hungarian Episcopal Conference, for leaders of different religions in South-Eastern Europe.

In the meeting held in Amman, Prince El Hassan Bin Talal, of Jordan affirmed: “What are described as religious conflicts have little to do with religion, and even less with religious doctrine.” In that same meeting, the ex-Archbishop of Canterbury Dr George Carey affirmed that religion “is often a potent binding agent for societies and cultures ... And in situations where conflicts arise between communities so defined, politicians and others will often use religion as a way of justifying and even sharpening the conflict.” And in Budapest, Bodo

Hombach, who was the special coordinator for the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe, declared: “Peace and reconciliation are key religious themes of our times. We should, however, be conscious that very recently, cynical and greedy people instrumentalized religion to help fan the flames of conflict to achieve their brutal ends.” We have witnessed the truth of this statement in the Balkans, where religion has been instrumentalised by politicians who have given a religious physiognomy to the wars they were waging, as if these were conflicts between Muslims and Orthodox Christians.

Both Prince El Hassan and Bodo Hombach were speaking before the September 11th events. But their statements are more valid today than when they uttered them. The terrorists who perpetrated the crimes of September 11th, as also the ISIS militants, who sought to justify their claims in the name of Allah, were but making a caricature of the Islamic religion, which is far from being a religion of hatred or which favours terrorism.

DISCOVERING THE COMMON PROPHETIC ROLE OF OUR RELIGIONS

Genuine religions (and I stress the qualifying word “genuine”) are expressions of belief in and communion with God, creator of all mankind. They lay the basis for true brotherhood and genuine peace. We must aim at a peaceful inter-religious coexistence which goes beyond mere tolerance: I’m ok, you’re ok; I mind my own business, and you mind yours.

How can we bear witness to a peaceful co-existence that goes beyond mere tolerance? Tolerance is the bare minimum required for a peaceful coexistence. Perhaps so far we have emphasized the need to control fundamentalist elements and got stuck there. But I deem it very important not only to control extremist and dangerous elements within our religious communities. We must emphasize even more the need to educate for peace and to lay the grounds for a more secure peaceful inter-religious future. I suggest four important steps.

First, may all of us, in whatever religion we belong, give more importance to the education of our faithful, since early childhood, teaching them to respect the dignity of every human person. Both the Holy Bible as also the Coran assign a special place and dignity of the human person in creation, and describe the human person as a special creature with a special relationship with God the Creator. Human life is sacred, and nobody has the right to impinge upon any other person’s dignity or human rights (including the right to religious freedom). And this point ought to be understood and appraised also by all teachers in all schools, whether public or private.

Secondly, we must, at all costs, avoid all forms of proselitism, that is to say exerting pressure on others so that they accept our religion. One form of proselitism, which is very widely adopted by certain sects, implies knocking at the doors of families whom they do not even know, trying to persuade them that they are following the wrong religion and thereby presenting them the doctrine of the sect, sometimes presenting it as the religion that can heal them also from physical illnesses.

Thirdly, we ask from civil authorities that they take special care to avoid any form of discrimination among different religious communities. The Constitutions of the Republic of Albanian state: “The State acknowledges the equality among religious communities”. Those in authority must scrupulously respect such norms, lest they mistakenly show any discrimination among the religions officially recognized by the State.

Fourthly, on our part, as leaders of religious communities, let each one of us always show full solidarity with any other religious community whenever this suffers some terroristic act or a clear serious injustice. For example here in Albania we have delivered a very positive message to our people when we, as an Inter-Religious Council, have made common declarations when two very horrible terroristic acts were committed, the first one against the Muslims in New Zealand, and the other one against Christians in Sri Lanka.

People need to see such good signs of solidarity among us. So let us be not only guardians of peace, but also prophets and apostles of peace worldwide.

Olivier Clément, a Russian Orthodox theologian, coined the phrase *prophetic partnership*. By this phrase he meant that we must make a common effort to discover the common prophetic role of our religions. Here we need to stress the importance of an inter-religious dialogue. And by “dialogue” I do not mean a road to relativism, ideological or doctrinal compromise, or syncretism, nor just finding a way towards a passive acceptance of our “being different”, a *modus vivendi*. As J. Ellul has duly observed: “Inter-religious dialogue is based on, not only mutual respect, but also upon sincerity and frankness. Its role is not that of suppressing differences, but at looking at them as a means for creating mutual understanding, respect and enrichment. It implies maintaining one’s religious identity while respecting that of the other, it demands listening as well as speaking”.

Discovering our common prophetic role demands first of all an act of faith in the one, true and living God who is love; an act of faith in our common dignity as human beings created by God in God's own image; and an act of faith in our common vocation to know God, to love God and to know God loves us and so to enter into communion with God and listen to God while opening ourselves to others more deeply. In a society that is becoming more and more anonymous, God teaches us to open our hearts to one another in a spirit of solidarity and mutual support. In a society that is becoming more and more consumerist, God teaches us to value life and respect the fundamental human rights.

Religion plays a very important role for the establishment of order, justice, and peace in society. We all know the old dictum: “*Si vis pacem, para bellum*” (If you want peace, prepare for war). History, especially the history of the 20th century, has proved this dictum wrong. But if we are concerned for peace, we must work for justice. Peace demands that mutual respect for which every human person, created in the image of God, has an inalienable right. Thus true peace presupposes committing ourselves, especially religious and political leaders, to work for justice.

We in Albania can duly boast of the excellent relations between different religions. Alfred Moisiu, when he was President of the Republic, in an address to Albanian Ambassadors, emphatically declared: “We cannot ignore the existence of different religions in our country, nay rather we appreciate their role for the creation of an atmosphere of tolerance in our society. Albania can boast of the harmonious co-existence among religious communities. A fundamental characteristic of Albanian civilization is its religious tolerance, and this leaves no room for fundamentalists of any religion whatsoever.”

In his message for the World Day of Peace, 1st January 2002, Pope John Paul II emphasized the specific responsibility of religious leaders. He said that they must collaborate to eradicate

the social and cultural causes of terrorism whilst at the same time teaching the dignity of the human person and jointly engaging themselves in the promotion of peace.

I would like to conclude this talk by quoting from the final message of the Inter-religious Assembly held in the Vatican City in October 1999: “We appeal to religious leaders to promote the spirit of dialogue within their respective communities and to be ready to engage in dialogue themselves with civil society at all levels. We appeal to all the leaders of the world, whatever their field of influence, to *refuse* to allow religion to be used to incite hatred and violence; to *refuse* to allow religion to be used to justify discrimination; to *respect* the role of religion in society at international, national and local levels; to *eradicate* poverty and strive for social and economic justice”. And these words provide us with an excellent programme for further inter-religious dialogue and collaboration!