



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS AND APOSTOLIC ADMINISTRATORS
OF ALBANIA ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday, 3 February 2001

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood!

1. I am filled with joy at welcoming you on this first *ad limina* visit since Albania regained its place among the free and democratic nations after the end of the communist dictatorship.

I greet you with great affection and extend to each of you my cordial welcome. I thank Archbishop Angelo Massafra, President of the Episcopal Conference, for expressing the sentiments you all share. I also wish to send my best wishes to Archbishop Rrok Mirdita of Durrës-Tirana, who could not be with us for health reasons.

An especially affectionate greeting goes to the four new Apostolic Administrators of Rrëshen, Lezhë, Sapë and Pult-Bajze, whose appointment, after the reorganization of the ecclesiastical territories, is a promising sign for the life of all the Christian people of Albania.

My thoughts turn to the contacts I have had with your Ecclesial Community. I am thinking of the Pastoral Visit on 25 April 1993 and the ordination of the first four Albanian Bishops celebrated on that same memorable occasion. I especially recall Archbishop Frano Illia and Bishop Robert Ashta, who have returned to the Father's house after living their lives in courageous fidelity to the Gospel. I am also thinking of the elevation to the purple of the late Cardinal Mikel Koliqi, a faithful witness to Christ, whose venerable figure epitomized in a way the sufferings, persecutions and indomitable hope of Christians in your beloved land.

2. The Catholic Church's long journey in Albania has known moments of promising vitality and periods of difficulty, amid obstacles and persecutions. Suffice it to recall the long Turkish

domination that sorely tried the faith of Albanian Catholics for 450 years and, closer to our day, the half century of communist dictatorship which forced it to live in the catacombs. At times it seemed that the Ecclesial Community was doomed to disappear, but the Lord's mysterious presence precisely in that period sowed the seeds of new growth and new fruit.

What Tertullian said also proved true in Albania: "The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians" (*Apologeticum*, 50, 13). This is demonstrated by the many Albanians who kept the faith, despite the harsh oppression they endured for their fidelity to the Gospel. Splendid proof of this are the priests and religious who suffered imprisonment and torture.

On this special occasion I would like to thank the entire Albanian Church for the witness she bore during the years of persecution and to join her in praising the Lord for having been able to celebrate together here in Rome, on 4 November last, the 10th anniversary of the reopening of the churches and the visible return of ecclesial life in the country.

I offer my gratitude as well to the priests and religious, mainly from Italy and Kosovo, but also from Bosnia and Hercegovina, Croatia, Germany, Austria, Slovenia, Malta, India and the Philippines, whose effective work is making a pastoral, cultural and material contribution to the cause of the Gospel.

3. After the long winter of persecution a new season of hope has begun. Various churches have been built and many religious houses have been opened. They are the providential outposts of evangelization and human development. Vocations to the priestly and religious life have increased. The Interdiocesan Major Seminary of Shkodrë has reopened and since 29 June 1999 has already begun to bear fruit with the first five ordinations to the priesthood. Worthy of note too are the social and educational efforts that have led to the building of clinics, outpatient units and schools for children and young people. The poor have also been assisted by the construction of houses for the homeless and the distribution of food and clothing.

In this period your Church has regained its place in the nation's life. During the disorders and fratricidal clashes of 1997, she played a peacemaking role; through the national Caritas and other Catholic non-governmental organizations she worked actively on behalf of refugees from Kosovo; she also undertook significant projects such as "the peace bell", desired by children in the Zadrina area of Lezhë, and the "peace village" built in Shkodrë by the Sons of Divine Providence. Nor can I forget the ongoing dialogue with the Orthodox and Muslim communities.

In addition to my great satisfaction for the work of your Community, I cannot fail to mention the comfort I took in the cultural programmes you have organized, such as the international conference on the theme: "*Christianity among Albanians*" from 16 to 19 November 1999, as well as the participation of many groups representing your Churches in the Jubilee celebrations in Rome.

4. "'I am with you always, to the close of the age' (Mt 28: 20). This assurance ... has accompanied the Church for 2,000 years, and has now been renewed in our hearts by the celebration of the Jubilee. From it we must gain new impetus in Christian living, making it the force which inspires our journey of faith. Conscious of the risen Lord's presence among us, we ask ourselves today the same question put to Peter in Jerusalem immediately after his Pentecost speech: "What must we do?' (Acts 2: 37)" (Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 29).

These words, which express the profound reason for every pastoral project since the Jubilee experience of grace, are especially timely for you, dear Pastors of the Church in Albania. Was it not your assurance of the risen Lord's presence that sustained your martyrs, nourished the hope of Christians and gave your Communities the strength to rise again after the terrible experience of atheistic communism? Should not all your present and future projects be based on this assurance?

In this new season several priorities stand out in relation to the kind of future your Communities will have. I also wrote in the Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte*: "To make the Church the home and the school of communion: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings" (n. 43).

This task must receive an authoritative and assured response from your Episcopal Conference. I am certain that a welcoming manner which respects all charisms will prompt you to make the most of the contribution offered by the missionaries and women religious from other nations who have chosen to serve Christ and their brethren in your land. Their presence and pastoral commitment are a gift for your Communities. Working together, with mutual respect, so that everyone feels part of one Church and at the service of the one Gospel cause: this is the right attitude for effectively developing a programme for the ever deeper inculturation of the Christian message in the Albanian context.

5. It is a task that calls for everyone's contribution and for this reason parishes must become privileged places for listening to God's word, for formation and for Christian experience.

The training of clergy and the pastoral care of vocations also have fundamental importance, because a Church's future depends in large part on her ability to provide spiritual, doctrinal and pastoral resources that are solid and attentive to the signs of the times for those called to the ministerial priesthood and the consecrated life.

In addition to the formation of the clergy, religious and pastoral workers, venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, you must also pay explicit attention to two other indispensable objectives for the Church of the third millennium: the pastoral care of young people and the family. There is an urgent need, in fact, to prepare the younger generation to build a better future in their own country by overcoming the temptation to emigrate and the illusion of achieving easy success abroad. It is

also indispensable to give moral and material support to families and to combat the serious evils that unfortunately afflict your country too, such as abortion, prostitution, drugs, the spirit of revenge, the exploitation of women and violence. Never tire of firmly speaking out in defence of life from its conception and do not be deterred from the commitment to defend the dignity of every human person with courageous determination.

Christ is with you: be not afraid!

6. A vast field of evangelization and human development is opening before your eyes, dear and venerable Brothers in the Episcopate! The sheer weight of the problems may sometimes discourage you. How can you accomplish such a demanding task? How can you build adult communities that take responsibility for the new evangelization? First of all, by keeping your hearts firmly set on Christ: it is from him that you can draw strength and light. His grace will make you strong and patient, ready to receive the many gifts with which he fills his Church. The risen Lord continues to tell you, as he did the prophets sent to proclaim his word in difficult and hostile surroundings: "I will be with you until the end of the ages. I will remain with you. Be not afraid!". Strengthened by the power of the Cross, your Churches, like little seeds in God's field, can become verdant trees abounding in fruit.

May the Mother of the Lord, who was close to the Apostles with her presence and prayer in the Upper Room, accompany you with her maternal protection. May she make all your apostolic projects fruitful and prepare ever new outpourings of the Spirit for the People of God entrusted to you.

In the daily labours of your apostolic ministry may you also be comforted by the Apostolic Blessing which I cordially give you and the faithful of beloved Albania, with a special thought for the sick, the young, families and all who suffer in body or spirit.