



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO TIRANA (ALBANIA)

CELEBRATION OF VESPERS WITH PRIESTS, MEN AND WOMEN RELIGIOUS, SEMINARIANS AND VARIOUS LAY MOVEMENTS

ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS *Cathedral of Tirana*
Sunday, 21 September 2014

Video

The Pope spoke extemporaneously:

I had prepared a few words to say to you, and I will give them to the Archbishop, who will make them available for you later. The translation is already done. He will see that you get them.

But right now I would like to tell you something else... In the reading we heard these words: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God" (2 Cor 1:3-4).

This is the text which the Church invites us to reflect upon at this evening's Vespers. Over the past two months I have been preparing for this Visit by reading the history of the persecution in Albania. For me it was surprising: I did not know that your people had suffered so greatly! Then today, on the road from the airport to the square, there were all those pictures of the martyrs. It is clear that this people today continues to remember their martyrs, those who suffered so dearly! A people of martyrs... And today at the beginning of the celebration, I touched two of them.

What I can say to you is what they themselves have said, by their lives, by their plain words... They told their stories simply... yet they spoke of so much pain! We can ask them: "How did you manage to survive such trials?" And they will tell us what we heard in this passage from the

Second Letter to the Corinthians: “God is the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation. He is the one who consoled us!” They have told us so, and in a straightforward way. They suffered greatly. They suffered physically, mentally, with the anguish of uncertainty: they did not know whether they would be shot or not, and so they lived with this anguish. And the Lord consoled them...

I think of Peter, imprisoned and in chains, while the whole Church prayed for him. And the Lord consoled Peter. And the martyrs, including those whom we heard today: the Lord consoled them because there were people in the Church, the People of God – devout and good old women, so many cloistered nuns... – who were praying for them.

This is the mystery of the Church: when the Church asks the Lord to console his people, the Lord consoles them, quietly, even secretly... He consoles them in the depths of the heart and he comforts them with strength. I am certain that they [the martyrs] do not boast of what they have experienced, because they know that it was the Lord who sustained them.

But they have something to tell us! They tell us that we, who have been called by the Lord to follow him closely, must find our consolation in him alone. Woe to us if we seek consolation elsewhere! Woe to priests and religious, sisters and novices, consecrated men and women, when they seek consolation far from the Lord! Today I don't want to be harsh and severe with you, but I want you to realize very clearly that if you look for consolation anywhere else, you will not be happy! Even more, you will be unable to comfort others, for your own heart is closed to the Lord's consolation. You will end up, as the great Elijah said to the people of Israel, “limping with both legs”.

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That is what these two [the martyrs] have done, today. Humbly, without pretense or boasting, they have done a service for us: they have consoled us. They also tell us this: “We are sinners, but the Lord was with us. This is the path. Do not be discouraged!” Excuse me, if I use you as an example, but all of us have to be examples for one another.

Let us go home reflecting on this: today we have touched martyrs.

Prepared address:

Dear brothers and sisters,

It is a great joy for me to meet with you in your beloved homeland; I thank God for the opportunity and I thank you for your hospitality! Here in your midst, I can better express my closeness to your task of evangelization.

Since the moment your country has been free from dictatorship, the ecclesial communities in Albania have begun again to journey onward and to organize themselves for pastoral work, looking to the future with hope. I am particularly grateful to those Pastors who paid a great price for their fidelity to Christ and for their decision to remain united to the Successor of Peter. They were courageous in the face of difficulty and trial! There are still priests and religious among us who have experienced prison and persecution, like the sister and brother who have told us their story. I embrace you warmly, and I praise God for your faithful witness that inspires the whole Church to continue to proclaim the Gospel with joy.

Treasuring this experience, the Church in Albania can grow in its missionary and apostolic zeal. I know and appreciate the effort you make to oppose those new forms of "dictatorship" that threaten to enslave individuals and communities. If the atheist regime sought to suffocate the faith, these new forms of dictatorship, in a more insidious way, are able to suffocate charity. I am referring to individualism, rivalry and heated conflicts: these are worldly mentalities that can contaminate even the Christian community. We need not be discouraged by these difficulties; do not be afraid to continue along the path of the Lord. He is always at your side, he gives you his grace and he helps you to sustain one another; to accept one another as you are, with understanding and mercy; he helps you to deepen fraternal communion.

Evangelization is more effective when it is carried out with oneness of spirit and with sincere teamwork among the various ecclesial communities as well as among missionaries and local clergy: this requires courage to seek out ways of working together and offering mutual help in the areas of catechesis and catholic education, as well as integral human development and charity. In these settings, the contribution of the ecclesial movements that know how to work in communion with Pastors is highly valuable. That is precisely what I see before me: bishops, priests, religious and laity: a Church that desires to walk in fraternity and unity.

When love for Christ is placed above all else, even above our legitimate particular needs, then we are able to move outside of ourselves, of our personal or communal pettiness, and move towards Jesus who, in our brothers and sisters, comes to us. His wounds are still visible today on the bodies of so many men and women who are hungry and thirst; who are humiliated; who are in hospital or prison. By touching and caring for these wounds with tenderness, it is possible to fully live the Gospel and to adore God who lives in our midst.

There are many problems that you encounter every day. These problems compel you to immerse yourselves with fervour and generosity in apostolic work. And yet, we know that by ourselves we can do nothing: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain" (*Ps* 127:1).

This awareness calls us to give due space for the Lord every day, to dedicate our time to him, open our hearts to him, so that he may work in our lives and in our mission. That which the Lord promises for the prayer made with trust and perseverance goes beyond what we can imagine (cf *Lk 11:11-12*): beyond that which we ask for, God sends us also the Holy Spirit. The contemplative dimension of our lives becomes indispensable even in the midst of the most urgent and difficult tasks we encounter. The more our mission calls us to go out into the peripheries of life, the more our hearts feel the intimate need to be united to the heart of Christ, which is full of mercy and love.

Considering the fact that the number of priests and religious is not yet sufficient, the Lord Jesus repeats to you today “The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest,” (*Mt 9: 37-38*). We must not forget that this prayer begins with a gaze: the gaze of Jesus, who sees the great harvest. Do we also have this gaze? Do we know how to recognize the abundant fruits that the grace of God has caused to grow and the work that there is to be done in the field of the Lord? It is by gazing with faith on the field of God that prayer spring forth, namely, the daily and pressing invocation to the Lord for priestly and religious vocations. Dear seminarians, postulants and novices, you are the fruit of this prayer of the people of God, which always precedes and accompanies your personal response. The Church in Albania needs your enthusiasm and your generosity. The time that you dedicate today to a solid spiritual, theological, communitarian and pastoral formation, is directed to serving adequately the people of God tomorrow. The people, more than seeking experts, are looking for witnesses: humble witnesses of the mercy and tenderness of God; priests and religious conformed to Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who are capable of communicating the love of Christ to all people.

Together with you and the entire Albanian people, I want to give thanks to God for the many missionaries whose activity was decisive for the renewal of the Church in Albania and which continues to be of great importance to this day. These missionaries have offered significant contribution to the consolidation of the spiritual patrimony that the Albanian bishops, priests, consecrated religious and lay persons have preserved in the midst of difficult trials and tribulations. Let us acknowledge the great work done by the religious institutes for the revival of Catholic education: these efforts are worth recognizing and sustaining.

Dear brothers and sisters, do not be discouraged in the face of difficulties. Following the footsteps of your fathers, be tenacious in giving testimony to Christ, walking “together with God, toward the hope that never disappoints”. In your journey, rest assured that you are accompanied and supported by the love of the whole Church. I thank you from the heart for this meeting, and I entrust each one of you and your communities - your plans and your hopes - to the holy Mother of God. I bless you from my heart and I ask you please to pray for me.