



The Holy See

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

MEETING WITH THE CIVIL AUTHORITIES

ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS *Reception Room of the Presidential Palace (Tirana)*

Sunday, 21 September 2014

Video

*Mr President,
Mr Prime Minister,
Distinguished Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

I am very happy to be here with you, in this noble land of Albania, a land of heroes who sacrificed their lives for the independence of the nation, and a land of martyrs, who witnessed to their faith in difficult times of persecution. I am grateful for the invitation to visit your country, called “the Land of the Eagles”, and for your warm welcome.

Almost a quarter of a century has passed since Albania re-embarked upon the arduous but rewarding path of freedom. This experience has allowed Albanian society to take up the process of material and spiritual reconstruction, to foster an increase of enthusiasm and initiatives, and to create a spirit of cooperation and exchange with countries of the Balkans, the Mediterranean, Europe and indeed with the rest of the world. This rediscovered freedom has helped you look to the future with trust and hope, establishing new projects and renewing friendly relations with countries both near and far.

Respect for human rights – for you, “respect” is an essential word – , among which religious freedom and freedom of expression stand out, is the preliminary condition for a country’s social

and economic development. When the dignity of the human person is respected and his or her rights recognized and guaranteed, creativity and interdependence thrive, and the potential of the human personality is unleashed through actions that further the common good.

There is a rather beautiful characteristic of Albania, one which is given great care and attention, and which gives me great joy: I am referring to the *peaceful coexistence and collaboration that exists among followers of different religions*. The climate of respect and mutual trust between Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims is a precious gift to the country. This is especially the case in these times where an authentic religious spirit is being perverted and where religious differences are being distorted and instrumentalized by extremist groups. This creates dangerous circumstances which lead to conflict and violence, rather than being an occasion for open and respectful dialogue, and for a collective reflection on what it means to believe in God and to follow his laws.

Let no one consider themselves to be the “armour” of God while planning and carrying out acts of violence and oppression! May no one use religion as a pretext for actions against human dignity and against the fundamental rights of every man and woman, above all, the right to life and the right of everyone to religious freedom!

What the experience in Albania shows, rather, is that a peaceful and fruitful coexistence between persons and communities of believers of different religions is not only desirable, but possible and realistic. The peaceful coexistence of different religious communities is, in fact, an inestimable benefit to peace and to harmonious human advancement. This is something of value which needs to be protected and nourished each day, by providing an education which respects differences and particular identities, so that dialogue and cooperation for the good of all may be promoted and strengthened by mutual understanding and esteem. It is a gift which we need to implore from God in prayer. May Albania always continue to walk this path, offering to other countries an inspiring example.

Mr President, after a winter of isolation and persecution, the springtime of freedom has finally come. By means of free elections and new institutional structures, a democratic pluralism has been consolidated which is now favouring economic activity. Many people, especially at the beginning, chose to emigrate in search of work and a better standard of living, and in their own way contributed to the advancement of Albanian society. Many others rediscovered reasons for staying in their homeland, wanting to build it up from within. The efforts and sacrifices of all have improved the life of the nation in general.

The Catholic Church, for its part, has resumed a normal existence, re-establishing its hierarchy and taking up once more the line of a long tradition. Places of worship have been built or rebuilt. Among these, the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Good Counsel at Scutari holds a special place. Similarly, schools and centres of education and healthcare have been established for the use of all

citizens. The presence of the Church and its activities are therefore rightly seen as a service, not only to the Catholic community, but rather to the whole nation.

Blessed Mother Teresa, together with the martyrs who witnessed to their faith – to whom we pray and offer our appreciation – most certainly are rejoicing in heaven because of the work of men and women of good will who contribute to the flourishing of civil society and the Church in Albania.

Today, however, new challenges arise which must be faced. In a world that tends to economic and cultural globalization, every effort must be made to ensure that growth and development are put at the service of all and not just limited parts of the population. Furthermore, such development will only be authentic if it is sustainable and just, that is, if it has the rights of the poor and respect for the environment close to heart. Alongside the globalization of the markets there must also be a corresponding globalization of solidarity; together with economic growth there must be a greater respect for creation; alongside the rights of individuals, there must be the guaranteed rights of those who are a bridge between the individual and the state, the family being the first and foremost of such institutions. Today Albania is able to face these challenges in an atmosphere of freedom and stability, two realities which must be strengthened and which form the basis of hope for the future.

I offer my heartfelt gratitude to each of you for your gracious welcome, and, as Saint John Paul II did in April 1993, I invoke upon Albania the protection of Mary, Mother of Good Counsel, entrusting to her the hopes of the entire Albanian people. May God abundantly pour out his grace and blessing upon Albania.