



## Broken Promises

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“Never forget what happened here!” John Paul II demanded in 1993 when he visited Albania—where, under the dictatorship of Enver Hoxha, the Communists were at their most ferocious in the suppression of religion. More than a dozen years later, the pope’s heartfelt warning seems utterly forgotten. Albanian Catholics were promised help in reconstructing their religious and civic life, but little has been given, and the foundations for a renewal of Catholic traditions do not exist.

In other Leninist-ruled countries, the party-states combined repression with manipulation, recruiting pliable clergy to advance the foreign-policy agenda of Moscow. But Albania was horribly different. Seventy percent of its population was Muslim, divided between moderate Sunnis in the Ottoman Turkish style and spiritual Sufi followers of the Shia sect, the only indigenous Shias in Europe. Some 20

percent were Christians who belonged to Orthodox churches, concentrated in southern Albania, and 10 percent was Catholic, mostly in the north. But when the Communists came to power in 1944, they quickly moved against all religious observance, and by 1967 they declared Albania the world’s first atheist state.

Albanians have consistently put their cultural identity before religion; a nineteenth-century Albanian Catholic who rose to become the Ottoman governor of Lebanon, Pashko Vasa, wrote memorably, in a verse known by all his co-ethnics, “the religion of the Albanians is the Albanian nation.” Although their numbers have been small, Catholics have a distinctive place in the intellectual legacy of the Albanians. They were the vanguard in education, in literary and linguistic efforts, and in promoting national consciousness. In particular, Catholics helped develop Albanian literacy and

the development of an alphabet appropriate for their language. The first novel in Albanian was written by a Catholic priest, Ndoc Nikaj, born in 1864. Another priest, Gjergj Fishta, born in 1871, composed a national epic in verse, *The Mountain Lute*, recently published in English for the first time. Other Albanian Catholic scholar-clerics were crucial in recording ancient oral traditions, including epic ballads.

Conservative believers but committed to social progress, those Catholics produced in Albania a Christian Democratic movement similar to that in Italy. They were also firmly anti-Communist and viewed Bolshevism mainly as an expression of the Slavic imperialism of their hereditary enemies, the Serbs—with the result that nearly the whole Albanian Catholic intellectual leadership was systematically destroyed by Hoxha's Communist regime after the war. Nikaj was tried and executed, as were the outstanding folklorists Monsignor Vinçenc Prennushi and Bernardin Palaj, the social and cultural writer Anton Harapi, and the priest poet Lazër Shantoja.

It was these stories of Albanian martyrdom that John Paul II insisted we not forget. Think of Monsignor Nikolle Deda, who was arrested by Communists in 1946, when he was fifty-six. Beaten and tortured with electricity, his body was a ruin by the time he was finally brought before a judge and sentenced to death. He was executed in 1948 along with Bishop Frano Gjini and seventeen other Catholics.

Or think of Nikoll Gazulli, the fifty-five-year-old pastor of the town of

Shkreli, who was caught and hanged by the Communists after he had fled into the mountains to join resistance forces opposed to the new order. As 1948 came to a close, Peter Çuni, a village priest beginning to gain a reputation among the Catholic faithful, was arrested and perished after two weeks of continuous interrogation, beatings, and electric shock. His corpse was thrown on a garbage heap.

The parish priest Ndre Zadeja was an important playwright killed by the Communists in 1945—to be succeeded in his parish by Ded Maçaj, a twenty-seven-year-old priest who was promptly accused of spying for the Vatican. After two weeks of torture, he knelt before a firing squad, calling, "Long live Christ the King! Long Live the Pope! Long Live Albania!" Father Anton Muzaj, returned from his studies in Rome to be arrested as a Vatican spy. Father Mark Gjani, pastor of the Catholic region of Oroshi, was beaten for a week, his feet burned by hot irons, and his flesh was then pierced and ripped from his body. He died, his body left by the river. Father Jak Bushati was seized in 1946, beaten and hanged upside down for several days. His corpse was thrown into a swamp near the city of Lezha.

Three of the most famous victims of the Red terror were Catholic women active in the anti-Communist resistance. Elena Shllaku was arrested, beaten and her hair pulled out; her body was then bound with barbed wire. Sentenced to twenty years, she disappeared into a labor camp. Bianca Krosaj came from the high mountains; at twenty she was beaten, shocked, her skin burned, forced to eat a large quantity of salt and denied water,

subjected to lice, and drugged. All her hair was pulled out and her teeth ripped out with pliers. She perished of tuberculosis.

And then there was Marie Shllaku, killed in Kosovo. A Catholic schoolteacher born in Shkodra, she joined a group of armed fighters after the triumph of the Communists in Yugoslavia. She was seriously wounded during fighting in Drenica, a fabled center of resistance in western Kosovo. Sheltered by a peasant family, she was discovered and arrested. The Yugoslav police ignored her injuries, beating and tormenting her. She was carried into the courtroom in the Kosovo city of Prizren. The judge was Ali Shukrija, the leading Communist among the Kosovar Albanians for many years afterward. He ranted at her during the proceeding, declaring that she was unfit to be shot, and should be burned alive. As she awaited death, she was heard in her prison cell nightly, singing folk songs from Shkodra. She was only twenty-eight when she was executed late in 1946, along with a Franciscan, another schoolteacher, and three others.

After the liberation of Kosovo in 1999, a street in the capital was named for Marie Shllaku. But little more has been done to memorialize these martyrs or to maintain their heritage. Under Albanian Communism, persecution of the Catholic faithful continued long after the convulsion at the end of the Second World War: Father Shtjefen Kurti, for example, was executed in 1971 for the crime of performing a baptism. But no one in the West seems moved by John Paul's call to restore Albanian Catholicism, and the Albanians themselves continue to suffer. They should have a fine reli-

gious university, a flourishing press, and new writings in their language. But Catholic culture remains the object of suppression and harassment by the remnants of the Communist bureaucracy in Albania, which still infest the schools, the courts, and the media.

Paradoxically, the only support the struggling Catholics have found is from the Muslim intelligentsia in northern Albania, who admire the Roman apostolate for its contribution to local and national progress. People like the Muslim journalist Blendi Kraja are more avid in their promotion of Catholic culture than local Church representatives, who seem to have fallen into passivity. Tens of thousands of Albanians have returned from Islam to Catholic Christianity, the faith of their ancestors before the Turkish conquest of the country in the fifteenth century. Local Muslim clerics make no protest against these religious reversions, arguing that the descendants of Catholics have the right to reaffirm their traditional faith.

But although the historic center of Albanian Catholicism is found in the north of the country, the Catholic hierarchy is officially headquartered in the central Albanian port of Durrës, with the pretext that it is closer to the capital, Tirana. In a recent visit to Shkodra, the northern metropolis, I found the city suffering through darkness and cold every night, its electric power supply restricted by the central authorities—in the middle of a snowy winter. According to the Shkodrans, the national leaders thus punish them for their Catholicism and their indomitable hatred of Communism. Shkodra does not have a decent daily newspaper, nor the kind of thri-

ving Catholic media it enjoyed even in the 1930s.

Albanian state discrimination against Catholics extends to their use of the northern, Gheg variant of the Albanian tongue, which the old Catholic intellectuals took as their literary medium. The Albanian state demands that children be instructed and books and media be published in a "Unified Literary Albanian," and authors who write in Gheg are subject to harassment. Even in Kosovo, the name of Shkodra, the Catholic cultural capital, is hurled as a vulgar insult in media, along with Jew-baiting and irrespon-

sible accusations of Muslim fundamentalism.

This is a people whose greatest national hero, Skanderbeg, defended the Christian faith sword in hand—a people whose outstanding modern ideal was Mother Teresa, and a people who gave so many creative minds and martyrs to the Church. They must not be forgotten. We in the West must remember the promise made by John Paul II that we would act speedily and generously to help restore Albanian Catholic culture.