

## BOOK REVIEW

Ines Angeli Murzaku: *Returning Home to Home: The Basilian Monks of Grottaferrata in Albania*. Italy, Grottaferrata, Αναλεκτα Κροπτοφερρησ, 2009. Reviewed by Francesco La Rocca.

“If I have seen further it is by standing on ye shoulders of Giants”, wrote Isaac Newton. This sentence is particularly true even in the field of interreligious dialogue: the great developments of ecumenism in 20<sup>th</sup> century came from ages of attempts, successes and failures previously made by those who wanted to overcome the divisions among faiths and confessions. For instance, from the point of view of the Catholic Church, the creation of Byzantine rite Churches in the East was a way, in the mind of that time, to re-establish the unity of Christ’s Church after the so-called schism of 1054 between Catholicism and Orthodoxy. This “policy” was followed by the Vatican until very recent times, and one of the last attempts to establish a Greek-Catholic community was made in Albania at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ines Angeli Murzaku’s new book, *Returning Home to Home: The Basilian Monks of Grottaferrata in Albania*, reports this interesting and almost unknown episode in the life of Eastern Christianity.

*Returning Home to Home* is a well-documented and complete research on the history of the mission that the Basilian monks of Grottaferrata, a little town near Rome which hosts the last of the Italo-Byzantine monasteries, held in southern Albania from 1938 until the establishment of Enver Hoxha’s regime. The monks were sent there by Propaganda Fide, the Vatican congregation which was charged with the spreading of the Catholic faith (now Congregation for the Evangelization of People), as they were regarded to be the most suitable missionaries to convert the Albanian Orthodox, due to their knowledge of Byzantine spirituality and to the fluency in Albanian of some monks coming from the Italo-Albanian ethnic minority. Once arrived in Albania, the Basilian monks had to cope with hostility among the different religious communities, as well as the diffidence of the political power (first the Ottoman Porte, than the Zog’s kingdom, the Italian and Nazi occupation and eventually the Communists) and even the coldness of the Latin-Catholic community, who regarded the Byzantine spirituality as heretic and alien. In spite of the difficulties, however, the monks managed to obtain the respect of many Albanians, and were on good terms with several religious leaders: Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim Sunni and Bektashi alike.

Murzaku starts her book with a robust theoretical introduction: to evaluate the history of the Basilian mission in Albania, one ought “to see life through the eyes of another century”, taking in consideration the Catholic missionary mentality which existed before the II Vatican Council. Only by avoiding a present-centred point of view can one approach such a delicate issue in the right way.

The first chapter deals with the origin of the schism which divides Western and Eastern Christianity: starting from reciprocal excommunications of the bishops of Rome and Constantinople in 1054, Murzaku analyses the attitude that the pontiffs had towards the “schismatics,” and which strategies they elaborated to regain them. Here the topical issues of Uniatism and of the ecclesiological and soteriological view which led to the Catholic missions in the East are treated exhaustively.

The second chapter is focused on the history of the Byzantine tradition in Italy, where the Basilian missionaries came from, and particularly on its two most important branches: Italo-Byzantine monasticism, which nowadays survives only in the great monastery of Grottaferrata, and the Italo-Albanian or Arbëreshë tradition, which flourished among the communities founded by the Albanians who emigrated to Italy after the Ottoman invasion. The role of the Arbëreshë was crucial, as many of the Grottaferrata monks who were sent to Albania came from that community,

had a special tie with Albania and felt the responsibility to help and evangelize their brethren in the Balkans. Interesting to note, the current tendency of the Italian Basilian monks is to point out their originality with respect to the Arbëreshë Church.

The third chapter reports the events of the first Basilian mission in Albania, which was undertaken between the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>h</sup> century in the southern region of Himarrë. The reconstruction of these events shows the reader some important elements which will recur in the 20<sup>th</sup> century mission in Albania: the hostility of the political power, the innovative attitude of the monks towards Orthodoxy (more respectful and sympathetic in regard to the then Latin mentality) and the ambiguous approach of the Albanians on religion.

The main topic of the book, namely the vicissitudes of the Basilian monks in 20<sup>th</sup> Albania, is the subject of the last five chapters. Here the author describes minutely the succession of events, as well as the personalities of the main characters of the mission. The scholar of Albanian history will be nicely surprised to see how the history of the Basilians crossed the paths of some of the most important exponents of Albanian culture and literature, such as Gjergj Fishta, the writer of the Albanian national epic poem; Fan Noli, head of the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church as well as Prime Minister, writer and translator; Shtjefën Gjeçovi, the Kosovar Franciscan who gathered the oral traditional law of the tribes in Northern Albania. A collection of pictures of the mission selected from the archive of the Grottaferrata monastery closes the book.

Ines Murzaku kept to what she promised in the introduction: avoiding any kind of present-centred mentality, she describes the history of the Basilian mission reporting both vices and virtues of that experience, always bearing in mind (and reminding the reader) the characteristics of the then Catholic missiology. Moreover, together with the history of the Basilians in Albania, Murzaku provides a broad overview of the Catholic attitude towards Orthodoxy until Vatican II, an attitude whose consequences are still harshly debated.

*Returning Home to Home* is a useful book, which will turn out to be helpful for different categories of people: those who are interested in the history of Albania, as well as those who are interested in the history of the Eastern Churches. Last but not least, all those who are engaged in interreligious dialogue will surely find several cues for thinking, by reading the history of Italo-Byzantine monks who dealt with Orthodox in a predominantly Muslim country of the Balkans.

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